Send Me the Miles

by huanzhuyulu (RuanChunXian)

Summary

"I hope that if alternate universes exist, it will still be you and me in the end." A modern romantic comedy.

Notes

I hope
that if alternate universes exist,
it will still be you
and me
in the end. I hope that
there will always be an us.
In every world,
in every story.
— Let us always find each other, Tina Tran

I made up my mind when I was a young girl
I've been given this one world
I won't worry it away
But now and again I lose sight of the good life
I get stuck in a low light
But then Love comes in
How far do I have to go to get to you
Many the miles
But send me the miles and I'll be happy to follow you, Love
— Many the Miles, Sara Bareilles

Rating for swearing, and there will be mentions of pre-marital sex. Re swearing: I'm not going to make it gratuitous, but characters will swear under the appropriate circumstances; Xiao Yan Zi in modern context isn't the kind of character who would shy from it, but again, under the right situation. There is only one character who will be quite vulgar, but he's not going to a terribly nice person. But just be aware there will be f-bombs, among others.
Chapter Notes

We are never ever ever getting back together,
We are never ever ever getting back together,
You go talk to your friends, talk to my friends, talk to me
But we are never ever ever ever getting back together

— We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together, Taylor Swift

Xiao Yan stared at the building in front of her, and wondered if she was out of her mind trying to do this. Perhaps it wasn't worth going back here to get her belongings. But practically everything she owned was in that apartment, if she didn't get them, what would she live with? It wasn't as if she had the option of buying all new things.

She had purposefully chosen a time when she knew Liang Ding, her ex-boyfriend (yes, he was definite ex now), wouldn't be home. She hoped he wouldn't be home. More importantly, she hoped he hadn't changed the lock. He most likely had not, since Liang Ding would never waste money on such thing.

She also hoped after she walked out on him two days ago, he hadn't thrown away all her things in a fit of rage.

The key seemed to burn in her hand as she tried to gather the courage to enter the building that took so much of her just to flee from in the first place.

You can do this, she told herself, though even that voice in her head shook.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt someone place a hand on her shoulder. She whirled around to find that it was only Liu Qing, who had left her on the curb to park his van, usually used for taking supplies from markets back to the restaurant or for deliveries.

"Hey, calm down," he said gently. "I'm here. Even if he is there, I won't let him do anything to you."

"Thank you for coming with me," Xiao Yan said gratefully, resting her head briefly on his shoulder.

The only reason she was doing this was because Liu Qing was willing to accompany her. There would have been no way she would re-enter this building without back-up, without someone who she knew would physically pull her away if needed.

"There is no question of me not coming with you, you know," Liu Qing said, putting his arm around her and squeezing her tight.

"You don't wish I had listened to you and Liu Hong and left earlier?" Xiao Yan asked as they stepped into the building together.

"Oh Xiao Yan, it was very easy for us to tell you what you should do," Liu Qing answered, "but the
actual action had to be yours. I can imagine that it can be hard to pull away from these situations, which is what makes them so tragic. You are very brave for realising that you need to walk away and actually doing it."

"I don't feel brave, or anything remotely close to it," Xiao Yan said, hating how her voice trembled despite her best efforts. "Mostly I just feel very stupid right now."

"Hey, you're not, all right?" Liu Qing said, looking her straight in the eyes. "I'm proud of you for doing this."

She gave him a watery smile and led him to the door of the apartment. Just as she predicted, the lock received her key effortlessly and the door opened to a silent flat.

So he wasn't home. Thank god.

Still, Xiao Yan froze in the doorway for a moment, staring into the apartment as if it were a trap. She was afraid of stepping in, as if the moment she entered these rooms again, she would not be able to leave. This was the first place where she'd lived that wasn't the orphanage, and despite the fact that every part of her heart and mind knew that for a long time, all it did was slowly drain her and chip her of her very life, that she definitely could not continue staying there, it was still painful to think about clearing out and never coming back. She knew instinctively that this reluctance wasn't for any sentimental reason. No, sentimentality had disappeared long ago. She was only scared now, scared that the moment she left this place for the last time, she would be left to drift in the wind, with really no place to call her own – as if this place had ever been her own. Again, she would not know where she belonged in the world, and it was that void of the unknown, of not having any sort of goal, destination or future, that terrified her.

But there was no destination or future here, either. At least, in the small apartment above Liu Qing and Liu Hong's restaurant, she would be sharing a living space with people she loved and trusted… people who would never hurt her…

Liu Qing helped Xiao Yan pack mostly in silence, except when he would ask her where certain things were. There wasn't much else to say, nor much to pack, come to think of it. All that Xiao Yan owned fitted into a large suitcase and a carton box. For once, Xiao Yan was thankful, because they could transport it all in one trip. It was best not to tempt the current absence of the apartment's owner by returning multiple times.

Xiao Yan locked up and slid the key under the door, not out of any consideration for its owner. She only didn't want to give herself any reason or ability to have to venture back here. Not that she would want to, ever, but it was better to be safe than sorry. It could only be better for everyone involved if they never saw each other again.

He would know, of course, that she had been here, before even realising all her things was gone. The moment he saw the key, he'd know. And really, that was why she was leaving it. This was her way of telling him that was what she wanted. Considering his track record in the respecting-her-wishes department, she didn't have high hopes he'd comply. Even now, a voice in her head was already telling her how stupid and naïve it was to still hope that he would have the sense to not seek her out, to take her leaving as the end of all that was ever between them, to leave her alone.

The truth was, she knew at some point, she would still have to face him again, because he would never leave her alone. He would never allow him to humiliate him by leaving him like this. When the confrontation came, she only hoped that she wouldn't be alone, and that Liu Qing would be with her. She learnt to punch and scratch at bullies in the orphanage playground, but there were still some foes that she would not be able to face alone.
After all, if Liang Ding ever knew how to walk away, it would never have had to come to this.

Then again, considering how she had met him, perhaps it was only fitting that everything that ever happened between them thereafter was just one string of one bad decision after another.

At least the world didn't yet completely give her up for lost, since chance brought her into acquaintance with Liu Qing and Liu Hong. Without them, Xiao Yan knew she would probably still have thought it better to stick it out and bear Liang Ding's protection from the world – even if that protection was useless against himself – than walk away on her own.

She wouldn't be on her own now, and she probably would never stop owing Liu Qing and Liu Hong for that. They were both too good to ever expect anything in return for the sanctuary they were offering her now, of course.

They arrived at Liu Qing's van and stowed her things in the back. Xiao Yan was about to climb into the front passenger seat when her arm was seized angrily from behind.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Liang Ding growled, his breath hot and rank near her face, jerking her around to face him. He would have pinned her arms against the van, if Liu Qing had not forcefully pulled him away. The contact lost, and yet she still felt physically ill; her entire body felt feverish with fear and she wondered if Liu Qing and Liang Ding could actually hear her heart beat as she could.

"Hey, get away from her!" Liu Qing yelled, pushing Liang Ding away so hard that he slammed against the car behind him. Meanwhile, Liu Qing stood in front of Xiao Yan protectively.

"Who the fuck are you?" Liang Ding demanded, trying to side-step Liu Qing. He cut a menacing figure, but Liu Qing was as tall and as large as Liang Ding, and there was really no predicting who would win in a fight if it ever came down to it.

"Never you mind who I am. Just don't ever come near Xiao Yan again, and we never will need to lay a hand on each other."

"And why should I listen to you, yeah?" Liang Ding demanded, trying to throw a punch at Liu Qing, but Liu Qing ducked it easy and Liang Ding ended up punching the van instead. He growled with pain which made him look even angrier. Xiao Yan hoped that if it came down to it, between her and Liu Qing, they would be able to subdue Liang Ding, since there was little security in this area, and police would probably take a while to get here. (Why had she stuck her phone in the box that was now in the back of the van? She had thought it convenient then, but now, how she wished she had it to call for help if needed.)

Looking over Liu Qing's shoulder, Liang Ding said roughly to Xiao Yan, "So you think you're going to walk out on me for this fucker here?"

"I'm not leaving you for anyone," Xiao Yan said defiantly, raising her chin and hoping she looked far braver than she was truly feeling. "I told you before I left. We're over. We've been over for a long time. Leave us alone."

She tugged Liu Qing's arm and pulled him away, hoping that Liang Ding would see that it was unwise to get into a fight with Liu Qing, because Xiao Yan didn't want to stand around long enough for this to escalate and turn ugly either.

"You think it's so easy, don't you, you little – " Liang Ding swerved around Liu Qing and grabbed her by the arm roughly again, and Xiao Yan instinctively twisted it out of his reach and his curse was
cut short when Xiao Yan unceremoniously kneed him in the groin. He fell to the ground, howling in pain.

"Did you just – " Liu Qing exclaimed, staring at her, amazed, but she just shoved him and pulled open passenger side door of the van, scrambling in. Taking her lead, Liu Qing hurried to the driver's side and entered, starting the engine.

It was fortunate that Liang Ding had come at them from the side of the van, because if he was blocking their exit in any way, Xiao Yan wasn't sure Liu Qing was above running him over on his way out.

"That was fucking awesome!" Liu Qing exclaimed, looking into the wing mirror at Liang Ding left behind, still struggling to stand up right and cursing loudly behind them.

Xiao Yan finally allowed herself to relax and grin sheepishly. "It was a very instinctive reaction," she said.

Liu Qing laughed and held one hand towards her. She gave it a perfunctory high-five.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side," he said.

Xiao Yan gave a shaky laugh.

"Seriously, though, it's not like I would have let him do anything to you, but it looked like you didn't need my help anyway."

"Still, I'm glad you were there, you know that right?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Of course," he said, looking over at her briefly with a smile. "Well, you're well rid of him now."

"I hope."

"You are. But if he does ever both you again, promise me you'll let me know?"

"I promise."

"Good. You deserve much better than him, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan blinked back tears and smiled wistfully.

Sometimes she wasn't sure she did.

When they arrived at Hui Bin Lou, Liu Qing waved her up the stairs to the private flat that Liu Qing and Liu Hong shared above the restaurant, where Xiao Yan would now be staying, because the siblings insisted.

"Go. I'll take the stuff up," he said.

"You sure – " Xiao Yan asked.

"Of course. I'm not exactly moving a grand piano, am I?"

Xiao Yan gave him a smile and headed up to the apartment.

"Everything went well?" Liu Hong asked as she caught sight of Xiao Yan. "You didn't run into
trouble?"

"We did run into him," Xiao Yan said wearily, sitting down on the couch that had seen better days. "But thankfully we were able to handle it."

"Are you all right?" Liu Hong asked, sitting down next to her.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Xiao Yan said, trying to smile but failing.

"Stop interrogating her, Liu Hong," Liu Qing said as he pulled the suitcase into the room. "Here, take this into your room while I collect the other box."

Liu Hong patted Xiao Yan's shoulder, then took the suitcase from her brother and pulled it into the bedroom Xiao Yan would share with her.

Xiao Yan wished she had presence of mind enough to get up and help, but the entire ordeal, as swiftly as it ended, seemed to have taken enormous toll on her. She felt like her entire body was shaking uncontrollably; her emotions were all jumbled it, and it was difficult to really put into words what she was actually feeling.

She realised she wasn't imagining her body shaking when Liu Hong came out and rushed over to her, alarmed.

"Xiao Yan, are you all right?" Liu Hong put her arms around Xiao Yan's shoulders, and pulled her into a hug. "Hey, it's okay, it's okay, you're with us," Liu Hong murmured, running soothing circles on Xiao Yan's back with her hand.

"I'm sorry, I just – " Xiao Yan tried to say, but the tears she had been holding back all day now overtook her.

"No, don't be sorry, none of this is your fault, all right?" Liu Hong said, cradling her head to her.

Xiao Yan didn't know how long she cried for, but when she finally could look up, Liu Qing had placed a steaming cup of tea down on the table in front of her and was now sitting on her other side, holding her hand tightly.

"I'm such a fucked up mess," she muttered, running a hand over her face, choking on her own tears.

Liu Hong reached for a few tissues and handed them to her; she blew her nose loudly.

"You're not a mess. You're nineteen," Liu Hong said gently. "No one has it figured out at nineteen. Anyone who says otherwise is an idiot."

"No one gets trapped in a stupid, abusive relationship either," she said bitterly.

"Hey, you didn't know that was what he was when it started," Liu Qing said. "And you found the courage to leave. That's what's important."

"It wasn't courage. I just couldn't take it anymore," Xiao Yan said, her voice muffled by the fresh tissues she was holding to her face again.

"And it takes strength to recognise that," Liu Hong said.

Xiao Yan looked up at the sympathetic faces of her friends and nodded. "I really don't know what I would do without you two, you know," she said.
"Well, you don't have to find out," Liu Qing said, patting her on the back. "Go inside and try to get some rest, Xiao Yan. I know you haven't been sleeping."

There wasn't much point in protesting against Liu Qing's suggestion, so Xiao Yan went into the room she would share with Liu Hong, if only to lie down. For the last two nights after she left Liang Ding and turned up at Liu Qing and Liu Hong's doorstep, neither sleep nor rest had come easily to her. Now, she was exhausted and didn't have the strength to contemplate anything about the days that were ahead. She could only hope as tired as she was, her mind would finally give in and allow sleep to overtake her.

For a while, the utter routine of living at above Hui Bin Lou with Liu Qing and Liu Hong, and working there, was exactly what Xiao Yan needed. She needed the security and safety of knowing what was coming the next day, or even in the next hour.

The excitement and the thrill that Liang Ding once offered that she found so attractive was fading away, but to her it felt like relief. Too much excitement and too much thrill, she had found, could be a bad thing.

Now she needed calm.

Not that calm came very easily, at first.

Recovery, she found, was a simple word with laden meanings. It meant restless nights and unpleasant dreams. It also meant memories – both unpleasant and pleasant, but now tainted – were triggered by the strangest of things. It meant reminding herself that she was free of it, that memories were just that, and then second-guessing herself in the middle of the night because sometimes, in the darkness, it felt almost as if she was right back where she started.

She didn't expect she would miss him – miss the idea of them – but she did, in all the twisted ways, because even as the feeling took her all by surprise, she knew more surely than ever that she never wanted to get back together with him, ever. At the same time, the pain of the memories was a balm, because eventually the pain would fade, as it should, and what she was left with was freedom, as glorious as the first gasping breath of air after being held under water, holding her breath, for a long time.

It helped, in the beginning, that working full time at Hui Bin Lou with Liu Qing and Liu Hong required early morning and late nights, which meant that she was often tired enough to be able to fall asleep without having to lie awake, lost in her own thoughts.

After all the tumult of her completely disastrous relationship with Liang Ding and the utter mortification that came after once she realised just how long she let this dead-end relationship carry on for, the remarkable rhythm of life in a tiny three-room apartment above a restaurant was something that Xiao Yan thought she could live with for a long while.

So she had to admit it was a surprise when Liu Hong asked her one day, "Have you thought about what to do after all this is settled and left behind you a little bit?"

"Settled?" Xiao Yan repeated, not understanding. "What do you mean, what do I want to do?"

"Xiao Yan, you don't really want to work here for the rest of your life, do you?" Liu Hong asked, laughing.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"
"No, I'm just saying, you're meant for more than this."

"This, being the restaurant?"

"Yes."

"You're saying this as the owner of that restaurant?"

"Yes. I'm saying as your friend, but also as someone who is employing you and knowing this job here is well beneath your potential. This restaurant, I own it. My parents left it to my brother and me to run. If either or both of us ever wanted to do something else with our lives, we would find a way to have someone run it, but as it is, we don't. But you are different, Xiao Yan. It's a waste of your intelligence if you just stay here like this. This isn't the life for you, and you know it."

"I don't think I know what is for me anymore," Xiao Yan said, sighing. "I don't think I ever did. I mean, all I wanted when I was small was to get out of the orphanage. When I finally did, I fell in with Liang Ding. I guess I never really had any plan that didn't involve him. Before him, I didn't have the foggiest idea what I would do after I got out of the orphanage. Mostly because that was goal enough and it always felt like I would never achieve even that."

"Well, it doesn't matter what plans you didn't have before. You can start planning now. Even if you don't know what you want to do, maybe it's only because you've been cooped up for too long. Liang Ding tried so hard to isolate you from normal relationships; that was bad enough. You don't have to carry on his work for him now that you're rid of him. These past few months, you've hardly left this block, Xiao Yan. I know you want to avoid unpleasant encounters, but it's not healthy to imprison yourself here like this."

"So what do you suggest?"

"I don't know. Take time off. You don't have to spend 24/7 with us, you know. Go out, see people – friends."

"What friends do you imagine I have left?" Xiao Yan asked with a curt laugh. "I couldn't get away from the people I spent my whole life with at the orphanage soon enough. As for school friends, I have theorised that some people I was only friends with because we spent the better part of five days a week together. Anyway, it's hard to keep being friends when they go off to university while I…go off with Liang Ding who then took every chance to discourage me from seeing…anyone."

Despite Xiao Yan's listless tone and gloomy recounts, Liu Hong's voice sounded disproportionately upbeat when she suggested, "Well, go make new friends."

"Why would I need to? I have friends now, still, despite everything."

"Yes, of course you have friends. Me and my brother. And other people who work at the restaurant. I mean, you should have friends who aren't in any way affiliated with Hui Bin Lou. Go make some."

"How?"

"Xiao Yan," Liu Hong said with a laugh, "despite your attempts to be, you are not a nervous introvert who shrinks in the crowd. In fact, trapping yourself here has been giving you serious cabin fever, and don't deny it. You need to socialise. With actual people you don't necessarily see every day. Go out and talk to random strangers on the street – "

Xiao Yan burst out laughing. "Are you trying to get me institutionalised as a crazy person?"
"Well, get another job, then."

"You *are* trying to get rid of me," she teased.

Liu Hong ignored the jab. "Or go to university."

"What?"

"It would do you good, in the long run. At least give you some direction for the future that doesn't involve waitressing jobs at a restaurant. And why not?"

"Because – " Xiao Yan started, then trailed off.

"Because?"

"I don't know. I don't have any money, to start with?"

"Yeah, because you've been spending the money you earn here on international travel and expensive jewellery? I know how much you earn and I can see how little you actually spend, Xiao Yan. And you graduated high school with pretty decent results, right?"

"Only because there really was nothing else to do at the orphanage but study," Xiao Yan muttered.

"So get a scholarship."

"You speak like all of this is so simple."

"Isn't it? It's only a matter of what you want to do, Xiao Yan. I'm just giving a suggestion. You could want to join a circus, for all I know."

"I think circus artists start training since they were like six years old," Xiao Yan said with a smile. "And I've never wanted really fancied the training regimens that that kind of career would demand."

"So what do you want to do?" Liu Hong asked.

For the first time in a long time, Xiao Yan forced herself to face the question and actually consider it. The answer was mind-numbingly clear.

"I…don't know," she said. And that was the mind-numbing part of it. How had she managed to this state of no hope, no dreams, no expectations, no want? She had them once, fanciful and fantastic as they may have been, but she had them. Then…

Then Liang Ding, of course. Had he really taken so much from her?

The realisation filled her with horrible shivers.

She closed her eyes momentarily and shook her head, trying to chase away the chill.

Finally, she looked up at Liu Hong and gave a thin smile. "I suppose, now that you mention it, I should think about it."

Liu Hong smiled and reached over to squeeze her hand. "Yes, you should."
China

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

China (simplified Chinese: 中国; traditional Chinese: 中國; pinyin: Zhōngguó), officially the Empire of Qing China, is a sovereign state located in East Asia. It is the world's most populous country, with a population of over 1.35 billion.

Covering approximately 9.6 million square kilometers, China is the world's second-largest country by land area, and either the third or fourth-largest by total area, depending on the method of measurement. China's landscape is vast and diverse, ranging from forest steppes and the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts in the arid north to subtropical forests in the wetter south. The Himalaya, Karakoram, Pamir and Tian Shan mountain ranges separate China from South and Central Asia. The Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, the third- and sixth-longest in the world, run from the Tibetan Plateau to the densely populated eastern seaboard. China's coastline along the Pacific Ocean is 14,500 kilometres (9,000 mi) long, and is bounded by the Bohai, Yellow, East and South China Seas.

The history of China goes back to the ancient civilization – one of the world's earliest – that flourished in the fertile basin of the Yellow River in the North China Plain. For millennia, China's political system was based on hereditary monarchies, known as dynasties, beginning with the semi-mythological Xia of the Yellow River basin (c. 2000 BCE).

Since 221 BCE, when the Qin Dynasty first conquered several states to form a Chinese empire, the country has expanded, fractured and been reformed numerous times. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the Wuxu Reformation being affected by the Emperor Guangxu of the feudal Qing dynasty, from which China emerged as a unitary constitutional monarchy with an emperor and an elected legislature called the National Parliament.

[...]

Government and politics

Main article: Government of China

China is a constitutional monarchy where the power of the Emperor is very limited. As a ceremonial figurehead, he is defined by the constitution as "the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people." Power is held chiefly by the Prime Minister and other elected members of the National Parliament, while sovereignty is vested in the Chinese people.

Xiangyuan is the current Emperor of China; Yong’an, Crown Prince of China, stands as next in line to the Dragon Throne.

[...]

Capital: Beijing 39°55′N 116°23′E

Largest city: Shanghai (by urban area), Chongqing (by administrative area)
Official languages: Standard Chinese, Manchurian

Recognised regional languages: Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, Zhuang, various others [show]

Official written language: Vernacular Chinese, Manchurian

Official script: Simplified Chinese, Manchu Script

Ethnic groups: 81.51% Han, 10.34% Manchurian, 55 minorities [show]

Demonym: Chinese

Government: Unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy

Emperor: Xiangyuan

Prime Minister: Ji Xiaolan

Deputy Prime Minister: Fu Lun

Legislature: National Parliament

Upper house: Senate

Lower house: House of Representatives

Formation

Unification of China under the Qin Dynasty: 221 BCE

Wuxu Reformation: 1898

First Constitution: 1 January 1908

Current Constitution: 1 October 1950

[...]

Wuxu Reformation

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Guangxu Reforms redirects here.

The Wuxu Reformation (戊戌变法 wùxū biànfǎ) or later also known as the Guangxu Reforms, refers to a series of enormous reforms in China's national cultural, political, educational, industrial and social structure, initiated by Emperor Guangxu in 1898.

Background

In 1875, Emperor Tongzhi died without issue and his cousin was chosen as his successor, ruling under the reign name Guangxu, meaning Prosperous Succession. Being underage, the government was ruled through the joint regency of the Dowager Empresses Ci'an and Cixi.

In the beginning, Cixi took control of most state matters and Ci'an's participation was marginal. In
1881, when Guangxu was 10 years old, Cixi died suddenly of a stroke. As Guangxu at the time was still underage, Ci'an was compelled to take a more active role in matters of states. She would rule behind the curtain for another six years, and proved to be a shrewd ruler.

In 1887, when Guangxu was 16, he was officially given the right to rule independently. In 1889, he married Lady Tatala who became Empress Keshun.

Seeing the weaknesses of the old government system in China and recognizing the time for change, Guangxu set about ordering for a series of reforms aimed at making sweeping social and institutional changes. He did this in response to weaknesses exposed by China's defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, not long after the First (1839-1842) and Second (1856-1860) Opium Wars; this blow came as a major shock to the Chinese, because Japan had been regarded as a tributary state, was much smaller than China, and was regarded as inferior. China also fought France in the Sino-French War from 1884 to 1885. Moreover, the defeat of China by Japan led to a scramble for "privileges" in China by other foreign powers, notably by the German Empire and Russia, further awakening the stubborn conservatives. Before the First Sino-Japanese War, China engaged in technological modernization only, buying modern weapons, ships, artillery, and building modern arsenals to produce these weapons, and only giving their soldiers modern weapons without institutional reform, all while refusing to reform the government or civil society according to western standards - unlike Japan, which adopted western-style government with a Parliament and completely reorganized its army along western lines.

Guangxu was supported in his ideas for reforms by some senior officials, many of whom would end up being given minor but strategic posts in the capital to assist with the reforms. One of his staunchest supporters was also his empress, who would also be known as the first person to introduce photography to the Qing court.

Essential preconditions of reform included:

- modernizing the traditional examination system
- eliminating sinecures (positions that provided little or no work but provided a salary)
- building a modern education system (studying math and science instead of focusing mainly on Confucian texts, etc.)
- changing the government from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy with democracy
- applying principles of capitalism to strengthen the economy
- completely changing the military buildup to strengthen the military
- rapid industrialization of all of China through manufacturing, commerce, and capitalism

The reformers declared that China needed more than "self-strengthening" and that innovation must be accompanied by institutional and ideological change.

The Wuxu Reformation started to be put into practice in 1898 and would continue well into the next century for the remaining thirty years of Guangxu's reign.

[…]

Legacy

To separate the two distinct chapters in Qing dynasty history, the time period from the formation of
the dynasty to the end of the reign of Emperor Guangxu is conventionally referred to as the feudal Qing dynasty. The reign of his successor, Emperor Tongxuan, marks the start of the modern Qing dynasty.

Emperor Guangxu died in 1928 and was succeeded by his son, Emperor Tongxuan.

Emperor Tongxuan died in 1958 and was succeeded by his son, Emperor Qingle.

Emperor Qingle died in 1991 and was succeeded by his son, Emperor Xiangyuan. His heir apparent is Yong'an, Crown Prince Chun. Until the birth of a legitimate son to the Crown Prince, the second in-line to the throne is the Emperor's second son, Yongqi, Prince Rong.

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**List of emperors of the Qing dynasty**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

(一号) Reign name (birth-death) (reign)

1. Nurhaci (1559–1626) (1616-1626)
2. Hong Taiji (1592–1643) (1626-1643)
2.5. Dorgon (1612–1650) (1643-1650)
3. Shunzhi Emperor (1638–1661) (1644-1661)
5. Yongzheng Emperor (1678–1735) (1723-1735)
6. Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799) (1736-1796)
7. Jiaqing Emperor (1760–1820) (1796-1820)
8. Daoguang Emperor (1782–1850) (1821-1850)
9. Xianfeng Emperor (1831–1861) (1851-1861)
10. Tongzhi Emperor (1856–1875) (1862-1875)

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Chapter End Notes

All "excerpts" from Wikipedia articles will be borrowed liberally from real Wikipedia articles, including but not limited to China, Forbidden City, Qing dynasty, List of Qing
dynasty emperors, Hundred Days' Reform, Guangxu Emperor, Consort Zhen, Old Summer Palace, Summer Palace, Buckingham Palace, Balmoral Castle, Japan, Imperial House of Japan, Meiji Restoration.
These are real universities:
- Peking University, aka Bei Da
- Tsinghua (Qing Hua) University
- Shandong University aka Shan Da

Yong Le University is not a real university.

Sitting in this diner with a coffee in my hand
Waiting on a bus to some promise land
I got a one way ticket as far as it goes
And I came out like a rose

It took a while to get here, it's been a long hard road
And I came out like a rose

— Like a Rose, Ashley Monroe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2010

September

The room was empty when Xiao Yan, Liu Qing and Liu Hong got there, which as far as Xiao Yan was concerned, was fine. She didn't want an audience for the goodbye that was following anyway.

Liu Qing and Liu Hong both insisted on helping her move to her dormitory, although during year in which she lived with them, she still hadn't managed to accumulate enough possession to fill the arms of all three of them on the one trip up to her new room.

Now that they had arrived here, Xiao Yan suddenly felt an enormous reluctance to say goodbye, even though that very feeling was entirely absurd. It wasn't like she was moving across the country. She wasn't even moving far enough to be called across the city, and she would still be working at Hui Bin Lou a couple of days a week, so it wasn't as if she would never see them again. This was still, of course, a significant step for her to take, moving out on her own among strangers. She had consciously wanted this move, despite the fact that she could have just easily continued living over Hui Bin Lou with Liu Qing and Liu Hong. They probably wouldn't mind. But she needed this first step towards freedom, towards a life of her own, independent of them. They had been her crutch for long enough.

"Do you want us to stay and unpack with you? Or just to check out the roommate and make sure she's not an axe-murderer?" Liu Qing joked.

"No," Xiao Yan said, laughing. "I'll be fine. You should get going."
"Trying to get rid of us already," Liu Hong teased.

"Yes, I am," she answered with a straight face. "Stop acting like parents in movies. Really, I'm fine."

Liu Hong held out her arms and Xiao Yan hugged them both in turn.

"Good luck!" Liu Qing whispered, ruffling her hair vigorously as he pulled away.

"Urgh! I hate you!" Xiao Yan yelped as she ran her fingers through her hair, trying to smooth it again.

Liu Qing and Liu Hong laughed, and then with a wave, they were off, leaving Xiao Yan in her brand new, as-of-yet roommate-less dormitory.

The room was yet empty of any real character. Immediately off the actual entrance door was the door that led off to the bathroom, in which cramped the sink, toilet and shower and of course, no actual bath. The space left just wider than the entrance door served as an entrance hall, with enough room for occupants of the room to leave off their shoes. Inside the room, you could draw a line down the middle and find two symmetrical sides of to it. On each was a narrow single bed, provided with completely nondescript white pillow, white sheet and white blanket. One bed was against the wall connecting to the bathroom and the other beside the only large window in the room, which currently was covered by thick curtains. Connecting the two sides of the room were two identical desks and at the other end of the room, cut off from the foot of the beds, were two closets and dressers.

Xiao Yan approached the window and pushed the curtains open, revealing the surprisingly nice view of the lawn in front of their building. She had been expecting a view of the car park.

So this was it. She was really doing this. University. It seemed like the most logical thing to do, mostly because she didn't know what else she would do with her life that didn't involve the Liu's restaurant. At least, maybe at university something would spark her interest, right?

She had chosen, for now, to study English, because again, she had no idea what else she wanted to do, and language – and a universal language, at that – seemed like it would come in useful at least in some measure in the future.

Now that she was here, suddenly Xiao Yan couldn't help but feel excited, something that she realised, much to her own consternation, she hadn't really felt in a while. Liu Hong had been right all those months ago when she urged Xiao Yan to think of the future. She really needed to broaden her circle away from the restaurant, and it didn't matter what happened between these campus walls, exposure to this many people could really only be a good thing right now for her.

Xiao Yan was just starting to rummage through her things to unpack when she heard sounds of a heavy object banging against the door. She rushed out and pulled it open to find a girl – obviously her roommate – dragging two large suitcases that both seemed to have lost their wheels. It was clear that she had been struggling with them down the long hallway from the lift.

"Want help with that?" Xiao Yan asked, then not waiting for the other girl to answer, she took the handle of one suitcase and dragged it inside the room.

"Thank you!" the other girl said gratefully, looking up at Xiao Yan with a small smile, brushing her hair out of her eyes with the back of her now-free hand. "This is 1003 right?"
"As you see," Xiao Yan said, smiling and gesturing to the brass number on the door, then dragged the suitcase to the bed by the window.

"I'm Zi Wei," the other girl said.

"Xiao Yan. I guess we're roommates."

Zi Wei smiled and nodded, looking around the room, taking in the place that would be their home for at least the next semester.

"Do you want the bed by the window?" Zi Wei asked, gesturing the bed that Xiao Yan just set her suitcase by. Xiao Yan had actually claimed the bed nearer the door and thought she'd leave the prime spot (as if there was such thing in this tiny room!) for her roommate as a gesture of goodwill and initial friendship-offering. It was clear that Zi Wei had the same idea, because she continued, "I don't mind the place by the door."

"No, it's fine. I'm fine here," Xiao Yan said. "Unless you are afraid of height of something and want to be away from the window."

"Not really. But are you sure?"

Xiao Yan grinned. "Of course."

They sat down on their respective beds and looked at each other from across the room. Before the scene could turn into a staring game of awkward silence, Xiao Yan asked quickly, "So, what year are you in?"

"First," Zi Wei answered.

"Oh, then I'm probably older than you, you will have to call me Jiejie," Xiao Yan said with a grin.

She half expected Zi Wei to be indignant at this assumption based on nothing but the fact that Xiao Yan knew she was starting university later than most – but then, Zi Wei didn't know that. She only smiled pleasantly and said, "No, maybe not. I was actually born in 1990."

Oh. Well. In that case.

"When were you born?" Zi Wei asked.

Xiao Yan laughed sheepishly. "Same."

Zi Wei giggled.

"When in 1990 though?" Xiao Yan asked mischievously.

"Does that matter? I mean does that count when considering whether I have to call you Jiejie?" Zi Wei asked just as good-naturedly as before.

"Of course," Xiao Yan said archly. "I could be born in January and you in December, then it's totally a year between us anyway."

"Were you born in January?"

"No," Xiao Yan admitted. "You?"

"2 August," Zi Wei said.
"Ah hah! You are younger than me!" Xiao Yan exclaimed triumphantly.

Zi Wei raised an eyebrow. "By how much?"

"By…two days," Xiao Yan answered with mock dignity. Zi Wei burst out laughing, which somehow was contagious, because Xiao Yan couldn't hold back her own laughter either.

"So your birthday is 31 July?" Zi Wei asked when they calmed down from the laughter.

"Yeah."

"That's Harry Potter's birthday."

Xiao Yan's eyes lit up. "I like the way your mind works."

And just like that, they knew that this roommate arrangement would work out wonderfully, and that they'd be fast friends.

It seemed that while Zi Wei had more things than Xiao Yan, the total size of her possessions was still rather modest. Still, it took them the better part of the next three hours to unpack, but that was mostly because sometimes they would be too caught up talking to get much done.

"So you're starting university late too?" Xiao Yan said at one point, knowing well that it was pointing out the obvious, but she couldn't find a way to tactfully ask why.

"Yeah," Zi Wei said, her voice slightly muffled as she was hanging up her winter coat in the closet. When she emerged, she said softly, "My mother was sick for a while."

There was something in the way that Zi Wei said it that made Xiao Yan wonder whether the past tense applied to the sickness or the mother.

"I hope your mother's better now?" she asked tentatively.

Zi Wei hesitated. It was long enough to answer Xiao Yan's unasked question. Finally, Zi Wei sighed. "She passed away."

"I'm sorry," Xiao Yan said, reaching over to touch her arm lightly.

Zi Wei tried to put on a smile though it was obvious that the loss was fresh enough that she was tearing up. She was trying to discreetly brush away the tears that were forming. Xiao Yan deliberately glanced away to give her some privacy.

"I'm all right," Zi Wei said, her voice only slightly choked up. "I…I guess I just still can't believe it sometimes. It helps to say it out loud once in a while."

Xiao Yan turned back and smiled sympathetically.

"I guess it must be hard for your dad to let you go off to university so far away after that?" she asked.

Zi Wei bit her lip, turned away and busied herself with putting away clothes for a long moment. The silence that descended and stretched on became rapidly uncomfortable and positively alarming.

"Hey, I – uh – I'm sorry if –" Xiao Yan began, though she wasn't exactly sure what just happened.

Zi Wei looked up at her finally with a pinched look and a tight smile. "No, no, it's okay." She took a
deep breath. "My parents got divorced before I was even born. My father doesn't even know I exist."

Xiao Yan wondered if there was a possibility that the ground could open her up and swallow her whole. Talk about open mouth, insert foot.

"It's fine, really," Zi Wei said, more lightly now. "It's really just always been my mother and me. I'm used to it."

"It must have been really difficult then," Xiao Yan remarked.

"Yeah, that's why I'm not starting university until this year. My mother didn't want me to defer university, but there wasn't anyone else to take care of her while she was sick."

Xiao Yan nodded and fished around for something to say. It was difficult, considering they had just met and already were trying to navigate some very heavy subjects. Thankfully, Zi Wei came to both their rescue.

"What about you?" she asked. "Why do you – I mean, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. We barely know each other."

Xiao Yan laughed. "No, no, my situation is utterly unspectacular. I was left at an orphanage with nothing to identify where I came from. Honestly when I said my birthday is in July, that's not entirely true. That was apparently the day they found me, and they sort of guessed that I was maybe a year old, so that's what they put down onto the birth certificate they registered for me."

"But no one even came looking for you?" Zi Wei asked, her voice soft with concern and sympathy.

Xiao Yan shrugged. "No, never. I mean, no one ever says it, but it's not hard to guess why, really. My parents, whoever they were, probably were disappointed I was a girl and wanted a boy, so they dumped me. During all the years I spent growing up in the orphanage, no one ever came looking for me."

She turned to find that Zi Wei was looking at her far more sorrowfully than she was feeling herself.

"You don't that's really true, right?" Zi Wei asked. "I mean, if that were the case, I don't think they would leave you when you were already a year old. How could they have spent a whole year raising you and then decide to just leave you? Something could have happened. They could be looking for you."

Xiao Yan sighed. She knew that it was easy for Zi Wei to be so optimistic, but Xiao Yan had too many encounters with disappointment and dashed hope to believe in those possibilities anymore.

"The carers at the orphanage always used to tell me that they didn't know how I came to them, and that I didn't have to assume the worse," she said. "But isn't it better to assume the worse than keep up a hope that would never come true? And besides, even if they did want me, they haven't managed to find me after all these years. I've given up hope that I would ever find out who they are by now."

"Hope is never worse than anything," Zi Wei said. Then she added sheepishly, "I know that sounds like a trite motivational quote, but sometimes I find I have to believe that."

"I guess," Xiao Yan said, sighing. "The point is, I spent all my life at the orphanage and when I could leave, I really didn't know what to do with my life. Still kind of don't, come to think of it. I guess that's why I'm studying the completely career-less major of English."

Zi Wei allowed a smile at her self-deprecating tone.
"What are you studying?" Xiao Yan asked. "Don't tell me something scary like physics with honours or something. You look like you could be one of those girls."

"One of what girls?"

"I don't know, one of those really unfairly pretty girls who's basically going to be the only thing with double X chromosomes in an engineering lecture hall for all the guys to drool over like you find in internet novels."

Zi Wei blushed. "I'm not sure about unfairly pretty – " (She was, though, Xiao Yan noted.) " – but my degree is in History."

"Oh thank god, another major with no realistic future," Xiao Yan joked.

Zi Wei thankfully laughed. She was now shoving her suitcases under her bed. When that was finished, she straightened and looked at Xiao Yan. "So do you want to walk around, explore a bit? There's not much to do in here, and we might as well see where we can get something to eat for dinner."

"Sure," Xiao Yan said with a smile.

"So, family name?" Xiao Yan asked as they wandered around campus with a couple of meat skewers from a roadside vendor each in their hands.

"Xia."

"Really? That's the family name they gave me at the orphanage too. I think the person who found me was named that or something?"

"So technically we have the same family name?"

"Legally, at least," Xiao Yan said. "Is it your mother's, or father's?"

"My mother's," Zi Wei confirmed what Xiao Yan had already guessed. "You're from Beijing? I mean, you grew up here?"

"Yeah. You're not though."

Zi Wei smiled. "The accent is that obvious?"

"Not, not really. Just a wild guess."

"Shandong. Jinan."

"Did you ever think about going to university in your hometown?"

"At one point, when I thought I would need to be near my mother. She only put up with me putting aside university plans for her for a couple of years. She put her foot down eventually and made me put in applications for this year's entrance exam no matter what."

"It must have been stressful though, studying for them while your mother was sick."

"Yeah. I still don't know how I managed to pass, to be honest," Zi Wei said with a shaky laugh. "When I applied, my mother made me nominate at least two schools that weren't in Shandong. But at the time, I had no intention of leaving home. Then she died just a month before the exams. I didn't
think I'd make the cut for universities in Shandong, let alone Beijing."

"But you did," Xiao Yan said, smiling.

"I'm sure it was mostly some stroke of luck," Zi Wei replied. Coming from anyone else, it would have been false modesty, but from Zi Wei, it was impossibly sincere.

"You got into Yong Le, you don't need to be so modest," Xiao Yan said with a laugh, and it made Zi Wei blush.

As far as Xiao Yan was concerned, Zi Wei had completely earned her right to be proud of herself. The cut off mark for entrance into Yong Le University this year had been unusually high. Xiao Yan barely got in, and only because she was registered in Beijing. The cut off mark for students from other provinces such as Zi Wei would have been even higher.

"I didn't get into Bei Da, though," Zi Wei added, as if that was supposed to make Xiao Yan feel less impressed.

"With that cut off, I'm sure no one got into Bei Da this year," she said carelessly.

Zi Wei laughed at her blatant exaggeration.

"But if you made Yong Le, you must have made Qing Hua as well?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I didn't nominate Qing Hua," Zi Wei said. "I mean, I sort of blindly put down Yong Le and Bei Da to fulfill that condition from my mother. I thought if I managed to have even a chance at either of them, I'd definitely get Shan Da, so I'd have an excuse to stay home anyway. But that was when I thought my mother would still be alive. After she passed away, I was honestly relieved that she made me put down out of province choices. By then, I needed a reason to leave Shandong."

"I suppose by then, it would have been difficult to stay with all the memories of your mother."

"That was partly the reason, yes," Zi Wei said softly. "But also, there wasn't exactly anyone to stay for, specifically. My maternal grandparents have both passed away. They had no siblings, neither did my mother, so there isn't any close relatives. My mother had a very close friend, a co-worker, and her daughter, Jin Suo, was my best friend growing up. Is, still. She's a first year at Shan Da this year too. They're practically family to my mother and me, especially after my grandmother passed away. I suppose if I stayed home, I could have had support from them. But then I thought, I already got into Yong Le, I should really try to extend my horizon a bit."

"Good call," Xiao Yan said, grinning. Then, jokingly, she added, "I'm surprised the boyfriend wasn't enough reason for you to stay though."

Zi Wei laughed. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Well, don't fret. There are twenty million people in this city, I'm pretty sure you're not going to remain single for long."

"What if I'm perfectly happy being single?" Zi Wei asked.

"All the better for me," Xiao Yan replied with a grin. "We'd have more time to hang out together then."

"So you're not with someone either – "
"No," Xiao Yan said before Zi Wei even finished her question. She winced at her own bluntness, especially when she knew she had brought the inevitable question on herself, since she started this subject in the first place.

Zi Wei was obviously startled, and Xiao Yan wondered whether she should apologise for her sharpness. Before she could, however, her companion said softly, "Bad subject?"

Xiao Yan sighed. "Yeah."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry for snapping."

"No, it's fine. I understand."

She didn't, of course, but it was the sentiment that counted.

"Thanks."

Zi Wei turned and smiled, looping her arm around Xiao Yan's, who couldn't help smiling back. She held her hand out for Zi Wei's bare wooden skewers and threw their rubbish into the trash bin near her.

"So what other heavy, disturbingly personal subjects can we talk about?" she quipped.

Zi Wei laughed and was about to answer, when they were distracted by a significant crowd gathered around the entrance of a building, whispering excitedly to each other.

"What is going on?" Xiao Yan asked. "Who's giving out freebies?"

Zi Wei craned her neck and said, "I don't think anyone's giving out anything. That's the Business and Economics Faculty."

"I would have thought the only reason a bunch of students would clump together sounding this excited would be because someone's giving out something epic, like jackpot lottery tickets," Xiao Yan said.

"Strange," Zi Wei murmured. Neither of could see what was happening at the front of the gaggle of students so they still had no idea what was apparently so fascinating about the Business faculty that had everyone chirping loudly like newly hatched birds in early spring. "I don't think we should wade through this crowd. Let's just go round the back."

"Sure."

As they went around the back of the building, they managed to overhear a conversation that soon made it very clear why such a crowd had decided to gather so excitedly.

"You know going this way is going to take twice as long to get to where we parked," a male voice was complaining.

"You want to swim through that crowd? Be my guest," another male voice answered.

"I don't care, they're not gathered to get a glimpse at me."

"Shut up."
"Honestly why you think it's a good idea to go see the faculty advisor on the day when all the first-years come in is beyond me."

"If I had a choice of any other day, you know I wouldn't, Er Tai, but have you seen my schedule — "

The voices drifted off, and all Xiao Yan and Zi Wei actually saw were the treating backs of the speakers.

"Was that who I thought it was?" Xiao Yan asked.

She was, of course, not exactly surprised that she might see him around campus. As much as Xiao Yan avoided gossip about the imperial family, it was hard to escape the well-known fact that Yong Le University was the university from where Prince Yong Qi received his Bachelor of Politics, Economics and Social Sciences in May and was starting his Masters of Economics this autumn.

(For the records, it wasn't why she chose to go here, at all.)

She just didn't realise her complete lack of interest in actually seeking him out wasn't shared by the majority of her fellow students. If anything, it was now clear that she was in the minority in that regard.

"That explains why there were all those people."

"Does it?" Xiao Yan wondered. "I mean, what were they waiting for exactly? To get an autograph? Do princes give out autographs?"

"I doubt it," Zi Wei said. "They probably just wanted to get a glimpse."

"Yeah, like there's a shortage of photos and footage of him on the internet," Xiao Yan said sarcastically. "If I wanted to gape at him, I'd do it on the privacy of my own laptop."

Zi Wei laughed.

"It's going to be a pain with him around isn't it?" Xiao Yan asked as they started walking again.

"How do you reckon that?"

"Well, if that's going to be a regular thing."

"It's hardly his fault. Even then, do you think it would affect us? It's still a big campus and we'd never have any class with him," Zi Wei reasoned.

Still, Xiao Yan grumbled, "Why couldn't he have done the normal thing and followed his entire family to Bei Da? I mean, why would he want to go to a university named after a Ming emperor?"

"Maybe he didn't get into Bei Da," Zi Wei joked.

Xiao Yan snorted. "Yeah, like the first university in China founded by his I-forget-how-many-great-grandfather is going to turn him down, regardless of score."

"To be fair, Yong Le is a slightly better choice for the Humanities," Zi Wei pointed out. "And I don't think they're supposed to care what emperor any university is named after anymore. Honestly I feel kind of bad for him."

"Why?" Xiao Yan asked suspiciously.
"Well, it can't be easy, right? To not be able to even walk around campus and not get stared at. From that crowd, I'm guessing being stared at is probably the least of it."

"For a moment there I thought you maybe had a crush on him," Xiao Yan said with an exaggerated sigh of relief.

Zi Wei laughed. "No."

"Thank Heaven! I mean, I'd grudgingly admit he's good looking, but…"

"But?"

Xiao Yan shook her head. "Nothing."

"Are you sure?" Zi Wei teased. "Because you know, I have never thought about how good looking he is."

Xiao Yan screwed up her face. "Can we drop the subject?"

Thankfully, Zi Wei was good-natured enough to merely say, "All right," and immediately allowed them to talk about something else.

A little over a week after they moved in, the secretary from dormitory office caught Xiao Yan in the hallway, told her a package had arrived for Zi Wei that was too large to fit into their mailbox and asked if she could pick it up, as they didn't know how to store it.

Xiao Yan followed the woman into the office and was told to sign a form to check the package out. Just as she had done that, the secretary came out of the backroom with a long, rectangular box, with huge 'fragile' stickers on all sides.

"What is it?" Xiao Yan wondered out loud.

"Dunno," the secretary said, shrugging. She checked the signature then nodded. "Okay, that's fine, you're good to go."

It was heavier than Xiao Yan expected, though not unmanageably so. Still, the first time she picked it up, her hands nearly slipped and dropped it, making her heart feel for a moment like it'd jump out of her mouth. It took her several tries to figure out the best way to grip the package that would make it easy to carry back down the hall to the lift.

She managed to get the package up to the door of their dormitory without mishap, and gingerly placed it on the ground at her feet before digging around in her bag for her keys.

"Oh, I didn't know you were home," she said as she stepped inside and found Zi Wei at her desk. "You said you'd be out."

"Yeah, my project group meeting was cancelled," Zi Wei said, turning around from her desk to smile in greeting at Xiao Yan.

"In that case, a package arrived for you at the office. I picked it up."

"Oh great! It's here!" Zi Wei exclaimed, jumping up and squeezed past Xiao Yan to pick up the package at the door. "Thanks for bringing it up. I don't know why they didn't just call me."

"It's more like they just caught me and it was convenient," Xiao Yan said.
She had kicked off her shoes and flopped down at the foot of her bed, and was now watching as Zi Wei placed the package carefully on her own bed.

"What is it?" Xiao Yan asked.

"It's my mother's guqin," Zi Wei said. She took a box cutter from her desk and started cutting the thick packaging tape holding the box together. "I had Jin Suo's mother keep it for me as I moved away and to send it to me once I have a more permanent address. I've only just asked them to send it out at the beginning of the week. I'm surprised it arrived so quickly."

"Do you play?" Xiao Yan asked, watching curiously as Zi Wei gently lifted a stronger wooden box out of the cardboard box that it was transported in. That would probably explain the weight.

"Yes," Zi Wei said. She opened the wooden box to check on the guqin, wrapped in white fabric and nestled in velvet inside. "I mean, my mother played professionally so it's always been a big part of my life."

"Did she ever want you to follow the same path?"

"She certainly asked if I would ever think about it. At one point, I did seriously consider applying for the Conservatory of Music. But then, I don't know, I felt like it's always been more of a hobby. It's not all I want to do with my life, at least."

Xiao Yan nodded, watching Zi Wei unwrap the instrument then pluck at the strings experimentally.

"Hmmm, might need tuning," she murmured to herself. Turning to Xiao Yan, she said, "Honestly I don't know what I'd do with it here, but I couldn't bear to sell it or give it away."

"Of course not." Xiao Yan skipped over to perch on the edge of Zi Wei's bed. "Play something!"

"It's not going to sound very good," Zi Wei said. "I do need to tune it a bit, but that can take a while."

Xiao Yan laughed. "You talk like I can tell the difference."

Zi Wei smiled, placed the guqin on the desk, and started to play a jaunty little ditty, with Xiao Yan curled up happily on her bed, looking at her admiringly. But before Zi Wei could finish the song, however, there suddenly came a loud banging on their door. Zi Wei stopped abruptly; she and Xiao Yan jerked their heads, startled, in the direction of the sound.

"Hey, some of us are trying to study here!" the voice of their next door neighbour shouted, punctuated with another bang on their door.

"Sorry!" Xiao Yan cried. Both girls held their breaths and listened to the sound of footsteps walking away, ending with another door slamming shut.

Xiao Yan looked at Zi Wei and they both burst out laughing.

"I didn't think it was that loud," Xiao Yan managed to say through giggles.

"Well, the sound can carry," Zi Wei said.

"Also, we're stuck with the most noise-sensitive neighbour on earth. You've only been playing for two minutes. Normal, polite people would at least endure half an hour before complaining. Besides, it's literally the first week of class, how much study could she have to do on a Friday?"
Zi Wei laughed again. "Well, maybe we should be better neighbours and not provoke her."

Xiao Yan sighed loudly and dramatically. "I guess."

Her roommate picked up the instrument and was trying to put it back into its wooden box. However, she must have moved something previously wedged against the side of the box under the velvet cloth in the process of taking the guqin out, because there was a bulge that meant it was no longer a comfortable fit.

Zi Wei frowned and pushed aside the velvet, to reveal a large, thick, slightly bigger than A4-sized, brown envelope. Only her name was written neatly on the front. She put the envelope on the bed, and carefully packed up the guqin again then placed the whole box down on the floor at the foot of her bed before turning back to the letter she just found.

"What's that?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I don't know," Zi Wei said, sitting down next to her. "This is my mother's handwriting though. I – Oh Heaven, I think – is this – "

It was clear to Xiao Yan that by now, Zi Wei was talking more to herself than to her. She only looked at her friend curiously as Zi Wei turned the envelope over in her hand. Her expression had turned into one of a curious mix of dread and shock.

Her hands clearly shaking, Zi Wei tore the brown paper open, and pulled out a flash drive taped to a post-it note, and another, smaller but still bulky, almost identical envelope.

The note on the flash drive read: Watch this first.

On the inside envelope, was another name, and date: Bao Li, November 1989.

Zi Wei sucked in a breath at the name.

"What's Bao Li? Or who?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I – I don't know, but I think – " Zi Wei took a gulping breath. "I was born in August 1990."

"I know."

"Do the math, Xiao Yan. November 1989."

Xiao Yan stared at her friend. "You think this is about your father?"

Zi Wei nodded. "I – I've always wondered about my father, about who he is," she said shakily. "It's hard not to, you know, but my mother would never say anything about him to me. I stopped asking, after a while, but she always knew I never managed to let go of the question. When she started to become sick, and the doctors said – when it became clear that she wouldn't survive, she told me she had prepared the answer for me, and I'd find it after she die. She wouldn't tell me where, and I sort of pushed the whole thing out of my mind. I mean, it's not as if it was the most important thing…But I think this is it."

They were both quiet, for entirely different reasons, for a long moment. Xiao Yan hardly knew how to feel, and she couldn't tell what Zi Wei was thinking under that carefully blank expression she had come to adopt.

Finally, when she couldn't bear the silence anymore, Xiao Yan said tentatively, "Why don't you look
to see what's in it?"

"You think I should?"

"Well, of course," Xiao Yan said, startled at Zi Wei's question. "You've always wondered, right? Now you have the answer."

Zi Wei sat still, not doing anything but stare at the flash drive and the envelope in her hand. After several more moments, she murmured, "It's so strange. I have always wanted an answer, but now that I might have it, suddenly, I'm afraid."

"Of what?" Xiao Yan asked softly.

"Of what I'd find inside. Have you ever thought that maybe some questions aren't meant to be answered?"

"Well, some questions aren't, perhaps, but maybe this doesn't fall into that category? I mean, it's about your father. You said yourself you don't have any family left. He could be your only family now. Maybe it's time you find out about him. Maybe that's what your mother realised as well, if she is finally going to reveal his identity to you after all these years."

"Maybe," Zi Wei said vaguely.

"If you want some privacy, I could – " Xiao Yan started to say.

"No!" Zi Wei exclaimed, looking up abruptly. "I – "

The lost, bewildered look in Zi Wei's eyes made Xiao Yan lean over and put her arms around her friend. "It's going to be all right. I'll be here if you need me to be."

Zi Wei nodded weakly. Then, she proceeded to drop the flash drive and the small envelope into the bigger one that they had come in.

"I – I can't deal with this right now," she announced, standing up and holding the package out to Xiao Yan.

"What?" Xiao Yan asked, confused. "What are you doing?"

"Please put it away."

"What do you mean?"

"Just – I don't know – put it in your closet, hide it away, lock it up, hide the keys, or something. Just make sure I can't take it out in the middle of the night – "

"Why would you want me to do that?"

"Xiao Yan, I can't," Zi Wei said in a shaky, high-pitched voice. "Whatever this contains, I'm sure it's something that's going to change everything I've ever known – "

"Of course it is," Xiao Yan said gently. "It's information about your father."

"Exactly! I've – I've lived all my life without him. I've always wanted to know about him more because other kids had always had a father and I never did…but now…now I just think, there must be a reason my mother never talked about him, not even to her best friend or to her parents. No one knows anything about him. And maybe I shouldn't find out."
"Zi Wei – " Xiao Yan started to say, but was cut off.

"Xiao Yan, please, please just do this for me. Maybe – maybe later I could, but right now, right now I need to focus on other things, on school, on being on my own, on anything but trying to replace my mother with some man I've never known when she hasn't been dead for half a year, all right?"

For a moment, Xiao Yan was prepared to protest, but there was something about the way Zi Wei was looking at her that made the words freeze in her throat.

She gave Zi Wei a comforting smile and nodded. "All right. I'll put it away. You are right, maybe it is too soon. But you have to promise me you'll at least think about finding out the contents of this, at some other point down the road."

Zi Wei laughed shakily. "I doubt I'd be able to not think about it."

"Okay."

Xiao Yan stood up and hugged Zi Wei tightly. Then, with Zi Wei still staring out the window, lost in thought, she put the envelope in a plastic bag. Then, she pulled out her suitcase under her bed, unlocked it, dropped the package inside and locking it again.

"Done," she announced.

Zi Wei turned slowly around. "You sure I can't get to it?"

"Nope. I mean, unless you slice my suitcase open. Only I know the combination code otherwise."

"Thank you, Xiao Yan."

"Zi Wei, for what it's worth, I know what it's like, to want to know something but at the same time, being terrified of the answer."

Zi Wei smiled weakly and sat down on her bed again. Xiao Yan came over to join her.

"If anyone ever told me, I could find out who my parents were, I'd be petrified as well. But that doesn't mean I won't give in to the curiosity and allow myself to find out, at some point."

"I know," Zi Wei said hoarsely. "I just realised, as much as I do want to find out, I'm not ready. Not yet."

"That's okay."

"But I hope you'll be there with me when I am," Zi Wei said, looking at Xiao Yan with utmost sincerity and solemnity.

Her answer was equally sincere. "If you need me to be, I will be."

October

"What are you doing? It's vacation," Xiao Yan asked.

Zi Wei was already up and staring at the screen of her laptop when Xiao Yan rolled over in bed at six o'clock in the morning, the first day of their week off for National Day. It wasn't late enough in the semester for it to be logical that Zi Wei would spend the first morning of her vacation on the computer working at such a ridiculous hour. If it wasn't for the fact that their room faced the rising
sun, Xiao Yan would still be asleep.

"Looking for a job," Zi Wei answered. "I'm sorry, do you want me to close the curtains?"

"No, it's fine. I might as well get up."

Xiao Yan yawned and kicked off the covers, swinging her legs off the bed. She winced as her bare feet touched the cold floor. She silently cursed the fact that the weather had turned cold, but the building's central heating was not turned on yet. Where was the logic in having a permanent date every year when the heating would be turned on and when it would be turned off, without any regard or care of what the actual weather and temperature were?

"What kind of job?" she asked, bending over to drag a pair of mismatched socks out from under her bed and pulling them on.

"Anything. Well, not literally anything. But you know, open to suggestion."

"Come work with me!" Xiao Yan said enthusiastically. At the same time, she stole a sip of Zi Wei's coffee, just to wake herself up enough to be bothered making her own.

Zi Wei looked up at her, smiling. "At the restaurant?"

"Yeah. The pay is decent and someone's just left recently so they do need another person. Besides, Liu Qing and Liu Hong are like family to me. They probably saved my life at one point."

Zi Wei widened her eyes and frowned. "What?" she asked, alarmed. "Why would your life – "

Xiao Yan nearly brushed the subject off. It was too early for this type of conversation. But Zi Wei just looked so concerned, that she couldn't help but want to confide. Xiao Yan pulled her chair closer to Zi Wei and sat down.

"After I left the orphanage, I was with this guy…He's not very nice, it turned out, in the end. He isolated me from everyone I knew and there came a point where my life literally revolved around him. Then I met Liu Qing and Liu Hong. They saw through what he was, and convinced me to leave him. They gave me a place to stay while I got my life back together. Without them, I don't think I'd ever have had the courage or the support I needed to get out of that. And I desperately needed to get out."

She tried to speak nonchalantly, and surprised even herself when she nearly managed it. There was still that twinge of pain and the heat of shame, but she batted both back determinedly by focusing on Zi Wei's expression, one of thoughtful concern.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah." Xiao Yan shrugged, and thought that she sounded far more confident than she really was. "It's been over for a while now."

Zi Wei nodded, but Xiao Yan wasn't sure whether she really believed the reassurance.

The next question was not probing about Liang Ding, but on slightly more neutral ground, for which Xiao Yan was enormously grateful.

"This guy, is he why you've turned down the five guys who'd asked you out so far this semester?"

"Oh come on," Xiao Yan started to scoff. "It wasn't five – "
"It was definitely at least five," Zi Wei countered.

"Well, yeah," Xiao Yan reluctantly admitted. "Anyway, Liu Qing and Liu Hong came to me at a
time when I needed them to most. They made me realise how much that relationship was taking from
me and I wasn't getting anything good back out of it.'

She gave a quiet sigh. Thankfully, Zi Wei didn't feel the need to comment immediately. She only
reached over to squeeze Xiao Yan's hand comfortingly. Somehow, that touch undid her, and Xiao
Yan suddenly found herself telling Zi Wei some of the things that happened between her and Liang
Ding.

"I first met him, I did believe that he was nice and good," she eventually concluded. "After a while,
though, whatever the reason was that I came to be with him in the first place, it became very rapidly
irrelevant when he just started to take me away from everything else that was important. For a long
time, I never could admit to myself that I wanted different things from him and that he didn't care
about that. I wanted to believe that the person I thought I knew existed somewhere in him. I kept on
trying my best to be whatever it was that I thought he wanted, hoping that would allow things to
work out in the end. Now I can't even remember why I tried so hard. It took a long time and
perspective that Liu Qing and Liu Hong provided for me to realise I've turned myself into something
so false and not me that I can't even stand myself, and to admit to myself that he was never worth any
of this. It's hard to describe how foolish I feel now when I think about how stupid I was then."

"Xiao Yan, wanting to keep your faith in people's goodness isn't being stupid, you know," Zi Wei
said softly. "Even if, admittedly, it doesn't always pay off. In those cases, it's their fault, not yours.
You tried your best, and you shouldn't blame yourself for that."

Xiao Yan smiled weakly. "Have I ever told you, you are possibly the nicest person I've ever met?
Not that I've told anyone, but I think, most people on hearing this story would probably just have
called him an abusive dick."

"Well, he is that," Zi Wei said with a hint of a smile. "But you already know that, apparently." Her
expression turned more serious. "Your problem isn't him any longer. Your problem is that you can't
forgive yourself."

Xiao Yan bit her lower lip, unsure how she was supposed to react to Zi Wei's much too perceptive
comment. "I just never thought I'd be one of those girls who get trapped in a situation with no way
out, you know?" she said finally, desolately. "I never thought I'd get myself in situation where I want
to trust someone only for it to blow up in my face. I always thought I'd be stronger than that."

"Xiao Yan, your strength isn't measured how little other people can hurt you, or how little you want
to and could trust people around you," Zi Wei said. "In fact, it's the opposite. Otherwise, the world
would be a very scary place."

Xiao Yan sighed, but then nodded to acknowledge Zi Wei's point. "Well. Yeah. Anyway. After it
ended with Liang Ding, I stayed with Liu Qing and Liu Hong. They put up with me for far longer
than they should have, really."

"And do you trust them?"

"Of course."

"Good."

What Zi Wei said, and the tone with which she said it, were both simple and matter of fact, but
somehow, it made Xiao Yan smile. After that, there was little else that could be said about the past or Liang Ding.

"So about that job, would you consider it?" Xiao Yan asked instead.

"Probably. I'd like to meet your friends anyhow."

Xiao Yan grinned. "Okay, come to work with me tomorrow."

"You're working tomorrow?" Zi Wei asked. "What happened to the holidays?"

"Oh please, it's double pay in the holidays. I'm a broke student, I jump at holiday shifts. Well, no, that's a lie. I could do without the rush and the crowds. You get the point."

Zi Wei laughed.

"Anyway, I should probably go brush my teeth or something," Xiao Yan said. "But after that, we should take advantage of the nice day and spend it somewhere a little more exciting than our dorm room. What do you say?"

Zi Wei smiled and closed her laptop down. "Sure. You know, I haven't been to the Great Wall yet. Want to be my tour guide?"

"That's you assuming I've been before," Xiao Yan said. "But yeah, sure, sounds like a plan. Give me ten minutes."

"Okay."

Of course, they would very soon come to regret attempting to make for the Great Wall on a Sunday that was also the first day of a national public holiday, but that was a story for another time.

Chapter End Notes

This is a true story: I visited a friend who was a student in China the first week of October 2010 when obviously school was out for her because of Chinese National Day holiday. We did indeed go to the Great Wall on a Sunday during the holidays. Epic failure of judgement. Horrible idea. We left the house at seven in the morning, spent literally the next five hours crammed like sardines on various buses and finally got to the Great Wall at noon. At one point, the bus automatically announced the next stop to be the Great Wall and the whole bus cheered, but then the ticket woman just laughed and said it's half an hour away and everyone felt like dying I'm sure, and it was the most painfully hilarious moment of the entire trip. I mean, by the time we got there, things were fine and the trip back wasn't bad, but just the getting there was a nightmare.
2010, November

Chapter Notes

Maybe it's the way she walked
Straight into my heart and stole it
Through the doors and passed the guards
Just like she already owned it

— Best Song Ever, One Direction

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2010

November

Xiao Yan was very close to regretting her choice of major. Granted, when she chose it, she was under the impression that she would be studying English linguistics, not Manchurian. Which was the worst language in the world and if it wasn't for the fact that a bunch of them conquered this country a few hundred years ago and by some bizarre turn of politics still retained their throne to this day – granted as a constitution monarchy which was to say not much more than a theatre act – Xiao Yan wouldn't ever have to study their impossible language in the first place.

Why did her degree in English and Linguistics (English!) require six credits of Manchurian?

Like, just why?

There really shouldn't be anything that could make this situation worse. She had gotten to the library at the unearthly hour of seven o'clock in the morning and since then, buried herself in a corner of the library with a huge stack of dictionaries and books trying to wade through this ridiculously dense translation assignment.

More than once, she found herself literally headdesking.

What did make the whole farce definitely worse, though, was him.

Yes, him.

This area of the library was a favourite of his. She could tell, because the table where she was currently sitting was her preferred spot in the library too. Whenever she came here, more often than not, she would find him occupying the same spot he now sat, a few tables away from her.

It was clear that they both had a routine that often coincided.

They had never spoken a word to each other.

Then again, Xiao Yan never thought he would take well to random conversation from…well, anyone. The first brief glimpse she ever had of him in person had proved that well enough. Besides, he clearly favoured this secluded corner of the library for a reason.
He had never made enough noise or disturbed her to the point that she needed to tell him to shut up. So they had never spoken.

Except, today, he was laughing at her.

He wasn't looking at her or anything, but they were close enough that she could hear him laughing, despite his attempts to smoother it.

And it was definitely at her.

It was obvious, because every time she wanted to tear her hair out and actually hit her head with a thump on the book in front of her, he would start to laugh.

Maybe she should just shove the entire assignment at him and make him do it for her. It was his language, after all, and it was his ancestors' fault she had to do this. It wasn't as if she could be charged with treason for insulting his ancestors anymore, right?

…She didn't make him do her homework for her.

She did, however, glare at him, which only made him give a suppressed snicker, but after that, he thankfully stayed quiet.

She didn't get much headway with her translation, even when he stopped laughing at her.

By one o'clock, she was famished, and she was going to be in lectures all afternoon until seven (why did she do this to herself, anyway?), so though she was only half done with the infernal mess of Manchurian, she packed up her things and purposefully marched past his table, shooting him a glowering pout. He barely bothered to conceal his laugh and gave her a mock salute.

They still hadn't spoken a word to each other.

By the time Xiao Yan made it out of classes, it was not so much raining as pouring. Of course it was. And of course she didn't bring an umbrella. And of course her dorm was on the other side of campus.

She stood on the small strip of covered hallway just outside the door of the building and glared up at the sky, which continued to let down water like someone punched holes in it. It definitely wouldn't let up any time this week, let alone soon enough for her to get back to her dorm in a dry state that night.

There was nothing for it then. Maybe if she ran and took the right route, she'd make it back to her room before the rain turned all her books and notes into mush?

Yeah, and maybe she'd pass her Manchurian subject with flying colours through no studying and no effort.

Heaving a huge sigh, Xiao Yan tentatively stepped off the curb and winced as cold rain hit her face, feeling more like ice than water.

She hated when weather was still too warm for snow but too cold for rain to feel comfortable. Hey, perhaps she should count her blessing that it wasn't sleet.

The downpour was so thick that it covered her vision; she could not see more than a few meters in front of her. The street lights did nothing for the gloomy, nondescript landscape in the icy rain.
She trudged along, hopping every few steps to avoid deep puddles and dodging under trees, as if that helped at all…

It was hard to watch the road in the darkness and in the rain, so suddenly, piercing sound of a car horn blasted through her ears, and she turned just in time to see a black car trying to veer sharply away from her. She fumbled and tried to get out of its way, and only managed to twist her ankle painfully on the slippery road and fell in a heap in the rain.

So it was clearly not her day.

Maybe if she just stayed where she was for the rest of the night, her luck would finally turn and misery would stop pouring down on her.

It wasn't as if she could get any wetter, sitting in the middle of the road in the rain. She already nearly got ran over by a car. Maybe the next one would actually manage to avoid her if she wasn't moving.

A car door slammed, though Xiao Yan hardly paid attention. It was rapidly becoming even less comfortable in the freezing rain (what a surprise!) so she was trying to pull herself up, though her heavy book bag and water-logged clothes made it difficult. Her body felt numb and she wasn't sure whether it was because of the cold or the vague pain in her ankle.

Then suddenly, the rain stopped pouring on her and a hand gripped her upper arm, gently helping her stand up. Someone was holding an umbrella over her, and a male voice was saying frantically, "Are you all right? Oh Heaven, I'm so sorry. I honestly didn't see you – "

"I'm fine, thank – ouch!" she groaned in pain as she tried to stand on her left ankle. The cold was making her lose more nerve-endings than she was even aware of if it took her until standing up to notice that her ankle was definitely not fine. It probably wasn't sprained, though; Xiao Yan had had enough of sprains to know what that felt like. It was, however, badly twisted and hurt like hell.

"You're hurt," whoever nearly ran her over was saying worriedly. "And you're soaked through!"

"I have noticed that,funnily enough," she snapped, more irritably than was polite, but considering the day she'd had, she gave herself the luxury of being rude to the guy who just nearly killed her.

"Come into the car, at least we can get out of the rain and then I can take you home. You're in no condition to walk anywhere on that ankle," he said.

Xiao Yan considered her options. On the one hand, she could refuse his help, though she doubted he would take her refusal easily, considering the situation. On the other, she could get into a stranger's car.

Her phone was stashed somewhere between two of her books, which meant that it probably survived the downpour, but it also meant it would be a hassle to try and fish it out to call for help if she needed to.

Then again… she was in a predicament. He was probably right, she could not walk on that ankle and the slippery road meant that she would probably end up breaking bones if she tried to hobble the length of campus back to her dorm. He probably didn't run over her on purpose, and she was rather reckless in crossing the street…

But still.

And yet, here they were, in the pouring rain, with a warm car just a few steps away. The umbrella somewhat shielded them, but the wind was still blowing cold air and rain into their faces. He didn't
urge her; instead, he just stood supporting her while she considered her options.

"Okay," she finally said, "but you have to give me your phone."

"My phone?"

"So I can call the police if you try anything. Mine is in my bag somewhere."

She half expected him to march off, offended, but he merely chuckled and tentatively released her arm. Then he juggled the umbrella and shrugged off his jacket, then draped it around her shoulder. "It's in the inside pocket."

The jacket wasn't much use considering she was soaked through, but still Xiao Yan pulled it gratefully on, appreciating the gesture for what it was. She felt the inside pocket perfunctorily, making out a phone – from the size and shape of it, it was most likely a smartphone.

Then, she turned in the direction of the car and nodded. He leaned down to pick up her forgotten book bag for her, and took her arm again to help her to the passenger seat of his car.

It was blissfully warm inside. She really should hesitate at sitting her soaked self down on the leather seat, but he solved that problem for her by pushing her gently down and setting her bag at her feet.

As she waited for him to walk around to the other side and enter the driver's seat, she pulled off his jacket so that it wouldn't get even more soaked by the rest of her clothes. The warmth of the car heater did help a little to bring some feeling back to her hands and feet. Now, she had to pay attention to the fact that her shoes were completely water-logged and deeply uncomfortable. She would have taken them off, if it was worth taking them off and then putting them on again in the minutes it would take for a car to take her to her dormitory building.

His phone rang just as he slid into the seat, stowed the umbrella in the backseat and flicked the light inside the car on.

The ring tone was the national anthem.

_Xiao Yan turned, and saw his face properly for the first time. She hoped she managed to avoid gaping, but honestly she couldn't be sure. She wasn't sure how she felt about the fact that after their odd interaction in the library earlier that day, she would meet him again that day, and like this. She didn't know how to feel about meeting him properly, at all. If this could even be called a proper meeting._

"Can you – it's my brother," he said, gesturing the phone in the pocket of the jacket she still held.


(Did it? Not really.)

_Xiao Yan mutely handed over the jacket and watched him fish out his phone – of course it was an iPhone 4, the newest model. She realised a moment too late that she was staring, and hastily averted her eyes and dug into her bag for her own brick of a Nokia phone._

_Xiao Yan tried to avoid looking redundant in her seat by peering out the window. It was probably_
fortunate the car wasn't stopped in the middle of the road, or they'd be holding up traffic by now. There weren't many cars about in this weather, and any that came by just chose to drive around them. Even then, it was obvious that they were in a rather inconvenient spot, so after hanging up the phone, he didn't immediately speak to Xiao Yan, but pulled over into a nearby parking space instead.

"So, uh, I'm Yong Qi," he said tentatively, turning to look at her finally.

Xiao Yan couldn't help smiling, despite the situation. "I've gathered. Xia Xiao Yan."

He didn't comment on the part about how she obviously knew his name before he knew hers. "I'm really sorry, I really didn't see you just now," he said instead, sounding sincerely contrite. "It's really partially my fault," Xiao Yan admitted. "I should have watched where I was going."

"Are you really all right? Your ankle?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Well, just cold. The ankle's starting to hurt less now."

"Are you sure? I could take you to a hospital," he said, looking over at her as if trying to decide whether she was telling the truth.

"No, it's fine, it's not that serious," Xiao Yan said, and she was actually sincere, rather than being coy. "Really. Don't worry about it."

"If you are sure. I really should take you home though. Where do you live?"

"A3 dormitory?" she said archly, wondering if he knew where that was.

"Oh."

He obviously did not expect anything so near, but didn't give any other comment than that.

She was about to give him directions, but then he put the car into gear and backed out of the parking space, apparently not needing them, because he didn't ask.

So, she was in a car with Yong Qi, Rong Qin Wang, and he just nearly ran her over with his car. How many girls would sell their souls to be her!

The giggle made it out of her before she could hold it back.

"Yes?" Yong Qi asked, though he kept his eyes on the road.

"Uh…I was just thinking, it's a bit unpatriotic, isn't it?" she fibbed quickly, feeling rather proud of herself for escaping a potentially awkward situation. "That you have an iPhone?"

She thought something like relief passed over his face as he laughed. Yeah, it was definitely a good thing she lied and didn't tell him what she had been really thinking.

"You expect me to have an Oppo or Lenovo phone?" he asked.

"It would go better with that ringtone," she replied playfully.

Yong Qi smirked. "That's my brother's own ringtone. Let's just say he lost a bet and he hates it."

"So obviously you keep it."
"Of course," he said. "On the question of the phone, honestly sometimes it's easier to be seen endorsing a foreign brand rather than to be seen playing favourite with a local brand. Not that that's the reason why I have an iPhone, of course. But you know, if I had to give a reason."

By then, they had arrived at her building. She expected him to drop her off at the door, and drive off without the hassle of finding a parking space in this weather. Instead, he drove past the entrance and into the car park, with the obvious intention of parking and seeing her up to her room himself.

"Really, you could have just dropped me off. I can manage up the lift myself."

"Considering I just nearly hit you with my car, I should make sure you get to your room all right," he said, turning off the engine.

He reached to the backseat for the umbrella again; she gratefully waited for him to walk around to her side and held the door open for her to struggle out. He reached for her bag again, but she shrugged and swung it onto her shoulders. He reached for her bag again, but she shrugged and swung it onto her shoulders. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but she was thankful when, in the end, his urge for chivalry was defeated by his willingness to respect her obvious need for independence considering the situation. She did gladly accept his support as she limped from the car park into the building; she didn't trust herself with the slippery road just now.

"I'd have thought you'd be eager to get home considering you've been on campus all day," Xiao Yan commented as they stood waiting for the lift. She didn't know why, but she was feeling oddly relieved that there wasn't anyone else but them about. Whatever the real circumstances might be, it would be awkward to be seen with Yong Qi, and in this state.

"Yes, well, I was in a hurry, which didn't do you any favour," he said with an apologetic smile.

"I should consider you a mortal enemy," she joked. "First you laughed at me this morning, and now you hit me with your car."

"Nearly hit you with my car," he pointed out, smiling nonetheless. "As for this morning, sorry, you made quite the amusing picture."

He didn't look sorry at all. Xiao Yan glared. The lift opened and they entered. She punched the number for her floor with a huff.

"Did you get anywhere at all with that Manchurian translation?" he asked, not at all offended by her attitude. Then again, she wasn't really that angry at him.

"How did you know that was what I was working on?"

He laughed. "Xiao Yan, you had a huge Manchurian dictionary on your desk. That thing is monstrous. I would recognise it from across the room, let alone a few tables away. Besides, that was partly why I couldn't help laughing. To be honest, it took some of my own stress off me, so thank you for that."

She ignored the teasing jab and merely grumbled, "I don't suppose you ever had to take Manchurian credits for your undergrad."

"Actually, I did, sort of. I took Mongolian and Manchurian comparative literature."

"That's a thing?" she asked, incredulous.

He smiled. "Yes."
"Sounds horrid."

"It actually wasn't that bad," Yong Qi said with a chuckle.

They had reached her floor and he now took her lead walking towards her room. Xiao Yan hoped that Zi Wei was still at work and wouldn't be home yet. She would tell Zi Wei of this meeting, eventually, but she would rather have the luxury of time and hindsight, and not be trying to explain why she showed up in their dorm room soaked with rain with a prince by her side.

Meanwhile, Yong Qi was speaking. "You know, as penance for almost running you over, I could help you with that Manchurian assignment?"

She looked up from rummaging in her pocket for keys. "Prince of the empire condones academic dishonesty? I'm shocked."

"I said help. I didn't say I'd do the assignment for you," he said, rolling his eyes.

By now she had opened her door and stepped inside. She turned to face him.

This was when the awkwardness started, right? Well, she could certainly feel it coming.

"Thanks for the offer," she said with what she hoped as a nonchalant smile. "But I guarantee you'll regret your offer to tutor me in Manchurian. The language and I are mortal enemies. My roommate is much better at it than I am, and also the most patient human being I've ever met. Let's leave her to work out a stalemate between me and your language."

He smiled and nodded. "As you wish."

He hesitated for a moment, and Xiao Yan wondered if she was supposed to say something now.

She finally settled on, "Thanks for the ride home," feeling all of the sudden very shy now that he was standing at her door.

"I'd say it was my pleasure, but that would sound like I liked nearly running you over," he said with a smile. "I hope your ankle really is fine. I'll see you in the library soon?"

"I guess – ? Yes?"

"If I don't I'll assume you tripped on the way to your bed and actually broke your ankle. I know where you live now, I'll bang on your door to make sure you're still mobile."

His tone clearly indicated he was joking, and it made her smile.

"Perish the thought."

"Goodnight," he said.

"You too."

Then, Yong Qi saved her the awkwardness of having to close the door in his face by walking away with a last nod and smile. She waited until the door of the lift opened again and waved to him as he entered it, before closing the door.

An hour and a half later, Zi Wei came home, and by then enough time had passed for Xiao Yan to rest enough that her ankle stopped throbbing, and then gingerly go through the motions of a hot
shower, being extra careful in the wet bathroom.

She was blow-drying her hair when the door of their dorm opened and Zi Wei stepped in.

"I'm surprised you got back this early considering the weather," Xiao Yan commented instead of a greeting.

"Liu Hong told me to take off early," Zi Wei said. "There wasn't any work to be done anyway."

"Slow night?"

"Hmmm." Zi Wei dumped her bag, coat and umbrella at the foot of her bed before collapsing down on top of it, closing her eyes.

Xiao Yan turned off her blow-dryer and put it away.

"So something happened today," she said casually.

Zi Wei opened her eyes and merely looked at Xiao Yan, waiting for her to continue.

"I met Yong Qi today."

Zi Wei sat up, intrigued. "Yong Qi…the prince?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"Okay, so you know I usually commandeered that corner on the seventh floor of the library, right? Well, usually he sits there too. I mean, I can practically predict when he might show up. We've been there at the same time more often than not since this semester started. It's weird how we have this schedule that apparently just coincides."

"Maybe it's fate," Zi Wei said, only half teasing.

"Oh haha," Xiao Yan answered, rolling her eyes.

"So you got talking because you realised that your schedules coincide?"

"Nope. We were both in the library again today, but we didn't talk there. I mean, we've never talked or even interacted there. Mostly we just accidentally look over at each other and then avert our eyes and that's it."

Zi Wei giggled. "You know this just screams the start of a romantic comedy?"

"Will you stop?" Xiao Yan asked, but she was also laughing.

"Well, you just said you met him, and then you start telling this story of how you two fatefully have the same library schedule."

"I never said fateful!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "And that's not even the point of the story. The library, I mean. We didn't meet meet there."

"So where did you meet meet?"

With a perfectly straight face, Xiao Yan said, "When I was leaving class and heading back, he nearly
hit me with his car."

"Are you all right?" Zi Wei cried, jumping up and went over to sit down next Xiao Yan on her bed. For a moment, teasing and Yong Qi were forgotten. She was looking over at Xiao Yan critically, checking for injuries.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Ankle is a bit sore from where I slipped but it's fine," Xiao Yan said, waving her hand dismissively. "The point is, he drove me back here."

Zi Wei waited, and when Xiao Yan didn't go on speaking, she asked, "Is that it?"

"Yeah. I mean, he was very nice about it."

Zi Wei raised a sceptical eyebrow. "He nearly ran you over with his car."

"Well, yes, accidentally, and he was very apologetic afterwards. Besides, it was...dark," Xiao Yan said. "And I wasn't really watching the road. It's mutually both our faults, really. He was decent enough to drive me back and take me up here before leaving, after all."

"Hmmm...So, what did you talk about?"

"Well, there wasn't much to talk about during the time it took to drive back here. But like, he was really nice."

"You said that already."

"Well, it's true," Xiao Yan said, pointedly ignoring Zi Wei's smirk. "I mean, he could have dropped me off at the door and drove off but he took me up and made sure I got to the room safe, and at no point during our conversation did he sound condescending, though at the beginning I was wet and grumpy and being really rather rude."

"You like him," Zi Wei said, giving Xiao Yan a searching look. This time, there was no trace of teasing in her tone or her expression.

"I spoke to him for ten minutes," she replied. "I don't know if I like him or not. I'm just saying, he's...not what I expected. Even if I didn't know what I expected. I mean, I wouldn't mind speaking to him again."

"Well, you have that library schedule to count on," Zi Wei said, smiling.

"You don't think it'd be weird, do you?" Xiao Yan asked, suddenly feeling oddly anxious.

"What would be weird?"

"I don't know. Showing up at the same time at the library again."

"No, why would it be? It's not like you're going out of your way to look for him."

"I guess."

"So you are going to speak to him next time?"

"I dunno. He might have forgotten who I am by then."

Zi Wei laughed. "I sincerely doubt that, Xiao Yan. You do tend to make an impression. Regardless, he nearly ran you over. He'd better remember you."
"Well, we'll see."

"Hi."

Xiao Yan looked up from her laptop to find Yong Qi standing in front of her table, instead of making his way to his usual table.

"Hi," she replied, smiling.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing the chair opposite her.

She shrugged and he sat down.

"I am glad to see you. You usually are here Wednesday mornings, but then you were a bit hesitant the other day when I asked whether I'd see you," he said. "Then you weren't here like usual, I thought you were actually avoiding me."

"No," she said, laughing lightly. "I usually work Tuesday mornings, but I switched shifts to this Wednesday morning because my ankle was still pretty tender Tuesday. It's fine now."

He leaned closer in concern. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, keeping off it for a day cleared it up. Don't worry, I wouldn't be demanding you pay for my medical bill or anything," she joked.

"I actually would, you know," he said, smiling. "But I'm glad you're all right now."

"You really thought I was avoiding you?" she asked curiously.

"Well, usually you're here. Suddenly you're not…"

"I thought you'd be banging on my door if that was the case?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"I was joking. If you did want to avoid me, believe me, Xiao Yan, I know how to take a hint," he said seriously.

Xiao Yan couldn't find the words to describe the strange feelings that the sincerity of his words created. After Liang Ding, and a handful of guys around campus who had acted huffy and annoyed when she turned their offers of coffee down, the blessing of knowledge that there were still men who would take her potential refusals for what they were, and with generous spirit, was as a great balm of relief that she didn't even realise she needed until she had it.

"Thanks," she said. "I do appreciate that." There was a pause, then she added, "It would be a pity to give up this place, so I'm glad I don't feel like I need to avoid you."

"This place is pretty ideal," he agreed.

The layout of this particular floor of the library meant that the place they were currently occupying was secluded and obscured by the stacks. Not many people ever ventured into this section, and if they ever did, they usually left the moment they found the books they needed.

"I suppose it helps for you that it's easy to avoid prying eyes here," Xiao Yan commented.

"Yes," Yong Qi admitted. "It's a good place to hide if I was wanted to avoid people and actually get work done."
"People can...lack tact?" she asked, the corner of her lips twitching up into a smile.

"You have no idea," he said. Then, with a mischievous smile, he added, "To be honest I was rather miffed when you started showing up this year."

"Were you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow playfully. "So was I, when I realised that you came here frequently too. I had hoped I could have the place to myself."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Say what?" she asked, laughing. "If you had actually disturbed me, I would have. But otherwise, speaking to you would just be admitting I recognise you and somehow I don't think you'd appreciate that."

"I usually don't," he admitted. "But you never sang, hummed, snored or talked to yourself or on your phone in a loud voice, so it's not as if I could tell you to go away either."

Xiao Yan laughed. Then, she asked, "Why were you here so early on Monday anyway? Usually you don't come in until mid-morning, but you were here at eight the other day and it was Monday morning; I didn't know anyone except me was that crazy."

"I was trying to catch up. I missed a week the week before because of prior, impossible to cancel commitments. I was here practically all day, which was sort of driving me barmy, which probably contributed to my nearly running over you later that night."

"Next time you try to pull off a day at the library, let me know so I can look out to avoid you," she teased.

"Sure," Yong Qi said. "I suppose I'll leave you alone?"

Xiao Yan hesitated for a moment, and almost couldn't understand what made her say what she said next. "You can stay here, if you don't do any of the aforementioned singing, humming, snoring or talking loudly."

"Are you sure?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. "Why not?"

"Okay." There was a pause. Then: "No Manchurian today?"

She was thankful he changed the subject, because she had a feeling if they had talked longer about whether or not he should share her table, their conversation would have turned uncomfortable and awkward, fast.

"No," she answered, chuckling. "I beat it into submission when I had to stay off my feet on Tuesday. Well, I hope I did. I only need to pass that subject for the credits, anyway."

After a few more inconsequential comments about classes, both of them fell silent to their own work.

"Do you want to go get lunch?" Yong Qi asked a couple of hours later. "I think I owe you lunch after what happened the other day."

"Really? You want me to go to lunch with you?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Why not?"
"Uh, aren't we going to end up on the front page of a tabloid or on someone's viral Weibo post?"

Xiao Yan wasn't sure what reaction she would get after such a question but she was thankful when he chuckled. "No, most likely we won't."

"Really?"

"Xiao Yan, I do have to walk around campus. I have done for all the years I took for my undergrad. You can't imagine how pictures of me – with or without female company – around campus get boring rather fast on social media. The press is under contract to not publish any kind of photos or footage of us while we are at school. Even if that wasn't the case, the Imperial Security Service has a team to take down indiscreet exposures of us posted on social media without our knowledge or permission."

"Does that happen often?" she asked.

"More than we'd like, yes. Actually, most of the time, any appearance of us on social media is without permission."

"Because you don't do social media, right."

"That's not a crime, you know," Yong Qi said, smiling.

"It must take you away from the rest of this generation, surely?" Xiao Yan asked curiously.

"Surprisingly, not really," he said. "I mean, it would really be depressing if our generation is literally unable to function without social media."

"Well, maybe not literally," Xiao Yan said. "The fact that you're not on social media probably ruins half the point of having a smartphone, though."

"There are more points to a smartphone than that, you know."

"I don't know," she said, grinning. "since I have a stupid phone."

Yong Qi laughed.

"Are you allowed to be on social media?" she asked curiously.

"Well, the official word is 'discouraged'," he answered with a smile. "Not that I, or any of my siblings, actually want to be. As if we aren't exposed enough as it is. Anyway, we are also discouraged to even allow consensual appearance on our friends' social media just for the fun of it. It's for our safety as much as that of the people around us, honestly."

"I see."

"So you'll let me buy you lunch?" he asked warmly.

Xiao Yan nodded. They stood up and packed up their things, and just as they were about to leave, Xiao Yan patted her pockets, turning on the spot.

"Hang on, let me – where's my phone – " she murmured.

She put her backpack down and rummaged through it, feeling the pockets and linings without any luck.
"Is the ringer on?" Yong Qi asked, taking his own phone out of his pocket. "We could call it and see if it rings."

"Uh, sure, would you please?" Xiao Yan said distractedly before reciting off her number.

Her phone rang and the outside pocket of her bag buzzed. She frowned in confusion, because she could have sworn she looked there just now and did not find it. Now that it was ringing and buzzing, of course it was easy to locate. She huffed exasperatedly at herself and pulled it out, stuffing it into the pocket of her parka. She probably would forget that was where she put it fifteen minutes later and they'd go through this all over again at least once more before lunch was over.

"Crisis averted," Yong Qi said, grinning.

"I swear, if I got a kuai for every time this happens…" she muttered.

Yong Qi laughed, then asked, "Can I keep the number?"

She looked up at him, slightly startled and said, ducking her head, "Uh, okay."

"So the other night, I assume aside from our little mishap, you got home in one piece and didn't run over any other unsuspecting girl, considering I didn't have Imperial Security banging on my dorm door at midnight?" Xiao Yan asked playfully, as they made their way out of the library.

Yong Qi laughed. "I'll have you know that my driving is perfectly adequate, thank you very much, unlike my older brother who failed his driving test the first time. Of course he spent the next week protesting that there was something funky going on with the car's brake and it wasn't his fault."

"And who was responsible for failing the Crown Prince on his driving test? Surely that is a treasonous offense punishable by beheading or – what's the other one – execution of nine family clans?"

"Usually, but in this case he got an imperial pardon from our father," he replied with a perfectly straight face.

Xiao Yan laughed.

"But that was actually how my brother lost the bet that shackled him with his current ringtone on my phone."

"Really?" Xiao Yan exclaimed gleefully. "But he must have taken his driving test years ago!"

"It's been…seven years?"

"You've kept the same obnoxious ringtone for him for seven years through who knows how many phones models just to not let him live that down?"

"Yup," Yong Qi said, looking ridiculously smug, and Xiao Yan laughed even harder. "And this was in the early 2000s when you were just beginning to be able to customise MIDI ringtones on mobile phones so it was all novelty then. When I got an iPhone, he was so sure he was off the hook because at first glance it seemed like you couldn't add customised ringtones to the iPhone. I would have let it go then, but of course he had to gloat about that, and so naturally I spent an hour Googling how to add new ringtones to the iPhone."

"Naturally," Xiao Yan agreed, chortling.
"This is how we channel rivalry between brothers which in olden days probably would have involved battles for the throne, you know," Yong Qi said, smiling.

"Oh yes, because this is exactly the same thing," Xiao Yan quipped. "Well, I don't have siblings so I can't vouch for whether that is how it would be for normal people."

"No?"

Xiao Yan wanted to laugh at that. Who in this country did he think had siblings aside from rich people and his family?

"Well, that's not exactly true," Xiao Yan said. "I mean, I grew up in an orphanage so there were always other kids around, but most of them were bullies and/or not very interesting. Weird, if I managed to make friends with anyone, they were usually adopted soon after that. After a while, I sort of stopped trying."

"Oh, I'm sorry?" he said hesitantly.

"Nah, I'm over it," she said airily.

And yet still, he looked concerned. "Do you know why – I'm sorry, that's indelicate. Never mind."

She shrugged and finished his question for him. "Why I grew up there? Not necessarily, though I have guesses, mostly involving the fact that my parents probably dumped me at the door of the orphanage because I'm a girl and there's this one child policy that applies to everyone in this country except people with loads of money to pay the fines or your family."

Immediately, she wondered whether the way she said that was too flippant, but he didn't look offended at all. If anything, he still look concerned for her, saying, "I feel like I should apologise for that, too, but it feels like apologising for being alive."

"Don't," she replied, smiling to show that she wasn't actually resentful of him or of his circumstances. "As I said, I'm over it."

Xiao Yan had very little filter in her conversation, Yong Qi found. She was forthright and unafraid to voice her opinion, even though they were less than diplomatic, or mostly just phrased in ways that would make it easy to take offense.

Honestly, if Yong Qi wanted, he could have ended this second encounter very put off of her. It was clear – though she never actually said it in so many words – she was not exactly the biggest supporter of the monarchy. Or that she supported it at all, for that matter. Then again, from what he gleaned from the conversation of her situation growing up, he couldn't exactly blame her for being dismissive of the way he and his siblings were born with silver spoons in their mouths, have had things handed to them on a plate and would continue to receive opportunities and privileges that someone like her would have to work their whole life for, and then some.

Of course, his life was never as rosy, wonderful and carefree like she blithely assumed it to be, but he couldn't deny that comparing his situation to hers, what he had to what she never had, made the two circumstances seemed so very unfair. It was the fault of neither of them, of course, and even she grudgingly admitted that.

Still, there was something in the brash and irreverent way she spoke that made the conversation surprisingly liberating for Yong Qi. He had known what it was like to stand in a room full of diplomats and politicians, making small talks through minced words and careful smiles. He had also
faced brutal, personal attacks from anti-monarchists that sometimes made sense and at other times had nothing to do with the issue of the monarchy at all. And now, here was Xiao Yan, clearly believing that he was far more fortunate than he deserved or had the right to be, but not holding that freak of nature against him and appearing – if he was reading her right, and he honestly hoped he was – to actually like him for himself and not for the unfairness he represented that she agreed he could not help.

It sounded like a contradiction now that he put it out there, but somehow she did not make it so.

He had a feeling he would never get away with anything around Xia Xiao Yan, and that, he was almost surprised to find, a delightful thing to consider.

Chapter End Notes

The bit with Xiao Yan misplacing her phone is me making fun of myself because I do this all the time. I'd not be able to find my phone, look for it everywhere and not find it, then have to use another phone to call it to find it and inevitably I'd find it in a place I could have sworn I've just looked and didn't find it. Of course, that is on a good day, when the ringer is on and I'd be spared a little stress. 90% of the time though my phone's on silent and if it's somewhere that's hard to detect the vibration, then that's when the fun starts.

…Or you could read it as Yong Qi hiding Xiao Yan's phone and then putting it back in a sly attempt to get her number :P
Imperial Family of China

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The Imperial Family of China comprises those members of the extended family of the reigning Emperor of China.

Under the present Constitution of China, the emperor is the symbol of the state and unity of the people. Other members of the Imperial Family perform ceremonial and social duties, but have no role in the affairs of government. The duties as an emperor are passed down the line to children and their children's children and so on.

History

The Qing dynasty was founded by the Jurchen Aisin Gioro clan in Northeastern China. In the late sixteenth century, Nurhaci, originally a Ming vassal, began organizing Jurchen clans into "Banners", military-social units. Nurhaci formed them into a Manchu people, a term used, especially by foreigners, to call Northeast China Manchuria. By 1636, his son Hong Taiji began driving Ming forces out of Liaodong and declared a new dynasty, the Qing. In 1644, peasant rebels led by Li Zicheng conquered the Ming capital Beijing. Rather than serve them, Ming general Wu Sangui made an alliance with the Manchus and opened the Shanhai Pass to the Banner Armies led by Prince Dorgon, who defeated the rebels and seized Beijing. The conquest of China proper was not completed until 1683 under the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722). The Ten Great Campaigns of the Qianlong Emperor from the 1750s to the 1790s extended Qing control into Central Asia.

Starting with Nurhaci, there have been, to date, fourteen Qing rulers (not counting Dorgon). Following the capture of Beijing in 1644, the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1643–1661) became the first of the twelve Qing sovereigns to rule over China proper. At 61 years, the reign of the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722) was the longest, though his grandson Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) would have reigned even longer if he had not purposely ceded the throne to the Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796–1820) in order not to reign longer than Kangxi.

Qing emperors practice agnatic primogeniture, where the throne is passed father to son, and explicitly excludes princesses from the succession. During the years before the Wuxu Reformation, an emperor was free to choose an heir among his son and the eldest son does not automatically gain the right to inherit the throne. One of the reforms under Guangxu Emperor included creating regulation to the succession by order of princes' births.

The current emperor is Xiangyuan.

List of current members

Article 3 of the Imperial Household Law defines the Imperial Family (皇室 huángshì) as the empress (皇后 huánghòu); the empress dowager (皇太后 huáng tàihòu); the grand empress dowager (太皇太后 tàihuáng tàihòu); the emperor's legitimate sons (亲王/阿哥 qīnwáng/āgē) and legitimate grandsons (君王 jūnwáng) in the legitimate male-line and their consorts (福晋 fújìn); the emperor's legitimate daughters (公主 gōngzhǔ) and legitimate unmarried granddaughters in the legitimate male-line (君主 jūnzhǔ); the emperor's other male descendants in the legitimate male-line (宗人 zōngrén) and their consorts (夫人 fūrén); and the emperor's other unmarried female descendants in the legitimate male-line (格格 gégé). In English, qīnwáng and jūnwáng are both translated as...
"prince", as well as gōngzhǔ and jūnzhǔ as "princess". The titles zōngrén and gégé are translated as "lord" and "lady" respectively.

A gōngzhǔ is entitled to keep her status as a member of the Imperial Family after marriage, however her husband and children are not automatically considered members of the Imperial Family. After a jūnzhǔ or gégé is married, she leaves the Imperial Family, her title is dropped and she becomes a commoner. A jūnzhǔ, however, may be reinstated to the Imperial Family if her father succeeds to the throne and she thus automatically holds the title gōngzhǔ.

There are presently 18 members of the Imperial Family:

The Emperor was born Hongli, Prince Bao, at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 19 September 1957. At the time of his birth, he was the second son of the late Emperor Qingle and as such was not expected to become Emperor. His older brother Crown Prince Hongshi died of kidney failure in 1972 at the age of seventeen, making the then fifteen-year-old Prince Hongli the first in line to the throne. The Emperor has two younger brothers and a younger sister. He married firstly Fu Lan on 1 March 1980 and in her lifetime she held the title Princess Bao. She died in an airplane accident on 9 March 1989. Prince Hongli succeeded his father as emperor on 29 September 1991, taking the reign name Xiangyuan （祥元）. Upon his accession, his first wife was posthumously created Empress Xiaoxianchun. (Style: Your Imperial Majesty.)

The Empress, born Wei Xiaoling in Beijing on 26 January 1965, is the daughter of Wei Hao, Ambassador of China to Japan (terms 1982-1990), and sister-in-law of Fu Lun, China's current Deputy Prime Minister. She married the Emperor and became Empress of China on 7 June 1992. (Style: Your Imperial Majesty.)

The Emperor's children by the late Empress Xiaoxianchun:

– **Hejing, Princess Kangding**, eldest child and daughter of the Emperor and Empress Xiaoxianchun, was born at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 18 April 1982. She married Deng Zhuquan on 9 September 2009. (Style: Your Imperial Highness.)

– **Yong'an, The Crown Prince Chun**, eldest son of the Emperor and Empress Xiaoxianchun, was born at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 20 August 1985. He became heir apparent upon his father's accession to the throne. If he succeeds his father as expected, his biological mother Empress Xiaoxianchun is expected to be created "Holy Mother Empress Dowager" (聖母皇太后) posthumously, and if the current Empress Wei survives her husband, she will be entitled, as the deceased sovereign's widow and the reigning emperor's step-mother, to the title "Empress Mother Empress Dowager" (母后皇太后). (Style: Your Imperial Highness.)

– **Yongqi, Prince Rong**, second son of the Emperor and Empress Xiaoxianchun, was born at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 17 February 1987. From his birth, he was known as the Second Prince (二阿哥) but on his eighteenth birthday, he was granted the title Rong Qin Wang (荣亲王; generally translated into English as Prince Rong). (Style: Your Imperial Highness.)

The Emperor's children by the current Empress Wei:

– **Heke, Princess Kang'an**, the elder child of Empress Wei and the Emperor, was born at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 23 November 1994. (Style: Your Imperial Highness.)

– **Yongyan**, the younger child of Empress Wei and the Emperor, was born at the Imperial Hospital in Beijing on 28 April 1997. (Style: Your Imperial Highness.)

[...]
Xiao Yan was half way through an essay one day when the door to their dorm room flung open so hard it slammed loudly against the wall. She looked up, startled, to see Zi Wei rushing in, looking both elated and nervous.

"Woah, where's the fire?" Xiao Yan asked.

Zi Wei usually was too calm and collected to be slamming doors. Today, however, she looked like she was bursting with news. Instead of sitting down, she paced impatiently around their room.

"I just got back from a meeting with the Orchestra," she said breathlessly. After finding out that Zi Wei played the *guqin*, it didn't take much for Xiao Yan to convince her to join the university's Chinese Orchestra. "Anyway, you know the International Cultural Festival in a couple of weeks?"

"Yeah," Xiao Yan replied.

Posters and fliers about the week-long cultural exchange event, hosted annually, meant to showcase both the cultures of Yong Le's international student population, and different aspects of Chinese culture, had been plastered everywhere for at least two weeks so it was hard not to know about it.

"Well, the Orchestra always has a performance night in that week, of course –"

"Are you performing?" Xiao Yan exclaimed, jumping up and taking Zi Wei's hand excitedly.

"Yeah," Zi Wei said, all dimples, her eyes lighting up with delight. "Well, at first I didn't think I would be, since the *guqin* is a solo instrument. Most of the night they will be doing ensemble pieces, and there are only three solo performance slots in the entire show, only one for the *guqin*. Initially they already had the *guqin* performer chosen, before I joined. But she's a nursing student, and her clinical rotation got shuffled up, and basically long story short she can't make the performance. So I'll be performing in her place!"

"Congratulations!" Xiao Yan said, grinning and hugging her friend enthusiastically. "That's great!"

"Yeah," Zi Wei said, smiling more widely than Xiao Yan had ever seen. "I mean, I have a week and a half to prepare, but it's an amazing honour and I just hope it'll be okay."

"Of course it'll be okay. You'll be brilliant!"

"Well, I haven't performed in front of an actual audience since high school. I think the scale of this is only sinking in now and yeah, I'm sort of terrified?" Zi Wei was still smiling but by now, she was also shaking slightly with a combination of nerves and excitement.

Xiao Yan pressed Zi Wei down onto her bed. "You'll be absolutely fine. Everyone else must think so if they agreed to give you the solo slot right?"
Zi Wei laughed nervously. "I guess."

"And of course I'll be there."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Zi Wei said, sighing with relief. "Thank you."

Xiao Yan smiled. "Like I'd miss it."

Zi Wei spent the next ten days in a flutter of rather uncharacteristic restlessness, but she seemed calm enough when she left their dorm a couple of hours ago with her guqin to prepare for the performance. Now, Xiao Yan was slipping to a seat in the centre of the concert hall, waiting for the performances to start, feeling as nervous as Zi Wei had been all week for her friend when she realised just how large the hall was and how many people it held.

Absorbed in reading the program, she didn't pay much attention to the people filling the seats around her until she was startled by someone tapping her on the shoulder. Turning, she found that Yong Qi had slid into the seat beside her.

"Hey, Xiao Yan."

"Hi," she replied, smiling. "What are you doing here?"

For the last month, almost, their previously-separate library routine had merged into a joint routine. They would meet in their corner of the library and share a table, most of the time working silently, and occasionally taking turns to distract each other for breaks. Aside from the few lunches after their study sessions, however, they hadn't really seen much of each other outside the library.

"Same as you, I suppose," he said. "To see the performance."

Before she could make a reply, or brag about Zi Wei, the man sitting next Yong Qi leaned over him and held a hand out to her.

"Since our mutual friend hasn't bothered to introduce us, I'm Er Tai," he said cheerfully. "What's your name?"

"Xiao Yan. Hi," she said, laughing.

"I was getting to that, Er Tai," Yong Qi said, shoving his friend back to his seat.

Er Tai merely laughed good-naturedly and stood up, moving away from Yong Qi to take the seat on Xiao Yan's other side. To her, he said, "You don't mind me sitting here, do you? Princeling here just tries to take the seat between us so he doesn't actually have to deal with mere mortals, but it's good for him to have to sit next to strangers sometimes."

From what Xiao Yan observed of Yong Qi so far, there didn't seem to be any merit in this claim by his friend. Turning with questioning eyes to Yong Qi, she found he did not look at all offended and only rolled his eyes, which assured her enough to chuckle. It was clear this sort of ribbing was normal between the two of them.

Yong Qi said to Er Tai, "Sure, as if you need a reason to ditch me for a pretty girl."

His voice was light, and to the entire world, it seemed like a throwaway remark. Yet Xiao Yan couldn't help shooting him a look, wondering why he said it at all. He met her eyes with a gaze that was neither abashed nor intimidated, but she found hard to otherwise decipher. For some reason, it forced her to turn quickly away; her cheeks suddenly felt very warm. She hoped the quiet chuckle...
she was hearing from Er Tai was aimed at Yong Qi rather than at her, but couldn't tell for sure when her eyes seemed determined to be plastered on the program in her hands.

"So, you like this kind of music, Xiao Yan?" Er Tai asked.

Relieved at the change in subject, she looked up. "Well, honestly I can't be sure. This is actually the first live performance of anything like this I've been to. I'm mostly here because my roommate has a solo performance."

"Oh really?" Yong Qi asked, flipping through his own program. "What does she play?"

"Guqin," she replied.

"My father loves the guqin," Yong Qi said. "That's why we're here, actually."

"What do you mean that's why you're here?" she asked. "What are you going to do, record the performance for your father?"

"No, of course not," Yong Qi said, chuckling. "What I meant was, because he loves the instrument so much, over the years he's managed to drill an at-times reluctant appreciation for it, and for traditional Chinese music in general, into his children. So we are here only for the performance. Well, it's why I'm here. Er Tai just doesn't have anything better to do tonight."

"Hey, there's no need to try to make me sound entirely uncultured," Er Tai grumbled.

Nevertheless, Er Tai caught Xiao Yan's eyes and winked, making her smile involuntarily.

At that moment, the lights in the hall dimmed slightly, signaling that the performance was about to start, bringing an end to their conversation.

The extent to which Xiao Yan's untrained ears could truly appreciate the nuances of all the performances of the night was limited, but when the time came, she proudly and enthusiastically pointed out to Yong Qi and Er Tai that Zi Wei was her friend.

"Do you want to go get something to eat?" Er Tai asked when the show as over and they stood up, making their way out of the hall.

"Oh, I was going to wait for Zi Wei," Xiao Yan answered.

"We can wait with you and we can go together," Yong Qi suggested. "Obviously, if you and Zi Wei want to, of course."

"Okay," Xiao Yan said. With a grin, she added, "We were planning to go grab a bite after anyway, I don't think Zi Wei would mind you two tagging along."

"We'd happily tag along," Er Tai said, "even if it means my brother will hate us."

"Your brother?" she asked, confused, unsure if she understood why Er Tai's brother may be annoyed with his simply going out for dinner with friends.

By now they left the concert hall and were standing to the side to avoid blocking the exit from which people were still pouring out. Er Tai nodded ahead of them, towards a man making his way down the steps. He stopped by a lamp post nearby and turned to lean against it. He was dressed in jeans, a button-up shirt and an unbuttoned blazer. If he hadn't been pointed out to her, and she simply caught sight of him now, Xiao Yan would peg him as just another student, though granted, a very serious
looking one. Now, she realised there was something to be said about the solemn, alert way he was holding himself. Though at first glance, he seemed engrossed in the phone in his hand, as Xiao Yan watched him for a few moments, she realised from his occasional glances that he was also keeping an eye on them.

It probably wasn't Er Tai that his brother was on the lookout for, Xiao Yan decided. It would be just odd that a grown man need his brother to follow him around for protection. No, if Xiao Yan had to guess, the only person who merited protection here at all, it was Yong Qi.

"That's my brother, Er Kang," Er Tai said, before Xiao Yan could ask to confirm her theory. "He is Head of Imperial Security Service to Their Imperial Highnesses Kang Ding Gong Zhu and Rong Qin Wang."

There was a playfully irreverent tone to the way Er Tai said this that made Yong Qi laugh. It took Xiao Yan several seconds to realise that this whole string was the actual title and then to put the words together understand what that meant. It became clear then that Er Tai was purposefully reciting it to poke fun, though she wondered whether at his brother or at his friend. Likely, both.

"Basically, in normal people speak, he's your bodyguard?" Xiao Yan asked Yong Qi.

"Well, technically he's in charge of them," Yong Qi explained, "because honestly there is more than one. As it says on the tin, he is in charge of my older sister's protection as well. Er Kang basically coordinates their work, they report to him, and he occasionally goes out on field shifts like tonight."

Xiao Yan was aware that, being second in line to the throne, Yong Qi had round-the-clock protection, though until now she had never actually glimpsed any of his actual bodyguards in person – or at least, was made aware of who they were. He mentioned once to her in the library that they were present around him on campus, but they were so hidden that she'd given up trying to discover where they were located. Clearly discretion was part of the point.

"And here I was, expecting men in black suits or something," she mused.

"Around campus, they dress to blend in," Yong Qi said, pointing out what was now obvious to Xiao Yan. "What Er Tai meant earlier is that restaurants are complicated places, and it does make his job slightly harder whenever we go eat anywhere off campus. Anything on campus is easier to assess security threats, but at this hour it's not an option."

"Oh, well, if it's going to be a problem – " Xiao Yan started.

Er Tai waved it off, shrugging. "Nah, it'll be good for him, keep him on his toes. It's bad for someone in his line of work to have spent so much time at managerial desk post waiting on people to report to him, as he's done lately since his promotion."

Xiao Yan nodded, still slightly apprehensive, but at that moment, she spotted Zi Wei making her way outside with her guqin in her arms. Fu Er Kang forgotten, she bounded over to her friend.

"You were wonderful! That was so beautiful! I am so proud of you!" Xiao Yan said all in a rush and pulled Zi Wei into a bear hug so suddenly that she nearly dropped the guqin down on both their feet.

Zi Wei was flushed with the still remaining adrenaline of the performance and the pleasure of Xiao Yan's praise. Even as she struggled to get a better grip of her guqin, she was beaming at Xiao Yan.

"Thanks, Xiao Yan. I'm glad you like it."

"Can I help with that?" Yong Qi stepped over to the two and addressed Zi Wei.
Her eyes widened slightly as she realised Xiao Yan wasn't alone and she shook her head shyly. "No, I'm fine, thank you." To demonstrate her point, she stood the guqin down onto the ground, letting it rest against her body, so that she only had to support it by one end with one hand.

"Oh, this is Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said with all the remaining enthusiasm of an elated and proud best friend. "Zi Wei, this is Yong Qi, and his friend, Er Tai."

Zi Wei greeted both and received their own compliments with her usual sweetness. After the pleasantries, the men repeated their invitations for dinner. Zi Wei only exchanged a look with Xiao Yan and they both accepted.

"But I need to take my guqin back to my dorm first," Zi Wei said.

"It will fit in the trunk of my car," Yong Qi said. "Will that be all right? That way we don't have to double around to your dorm now. We can just drop you off later."

"All right, sure," Zi Wei said, smiling.

Yong Qi offered to carry the instrument for her again, and Zi Wei only hesitated slightly before handing it over to him with a smile of thank.

As the four of them finally made their way down the steps of the concert hall, Fu Er Kang approached them.

"We're going to get something to eat," Yong Qi told him as soon as they were near enough to hear each other.

Despite Yong Qi and Er Tai's earlier claims, Er Kang looked completely unfazed at the announcement. He only said, "Very good, sir," then exchanged brief greetings with Zi Wei and Xiao Yan when Yong Qi introduced them. Then, it was back to the matter at hand. Er Kang asked. "Where are you going, sir?"

Er Tai turned to Xiao Yan and Zi Wei. "Okay, do either of you have any burning preferences?"

Both shrugged and indicated that they didn't.

"Great!" Er Tai said cheerfully. "Then I'm totally calling it."

"I don't get any say in this?" Yong Qi asked.

Er Tai scoffed. "Dude, the last time we stood around debating where to eat, it was 'I don't care, wherever you want, but not that place, nor that place, not that other place either, but yeah, sure, wherever you want'. In the end, we ended up with drive-thru McDonald's, remember? Never again."

Yong Qi laughed and muttered, "You always say that."

Even Er Kang cracked a smile at this.

"Okay, so where are we going, oh man of action?" Yong Qi asked.

"There's this crossing-bridge-noodle place that I want to try out."

The destination thus decided, the four of them made their way to Yong Qi's car. Er Kang, meanwhile, would go with them, but separately.

The four of them spent much of the drive discussing the concert, and heaping praise on Zi Wei,
which she received with shy blushing pleasure.

The radio played innocently in the background with an evening music program, playing mostly top of the chart songs. None of them paid the music much mind, until the first words to Taylor Swift's *You Belong With Me* started to play.

*You're on the phone with your girlfriend*
She's upset
She's going off about something that you said
'Cause she doesn't get your humor like I do

Xiao Yan sighed loudly. "Urgh."

"What's wrong?" Yong Qi asked.

"That song," she replied.

"What about it?"

"Just the lyrics get on my nerves."

"Which of the lyrics do you find objectionable?"

"All of it," she said with a long-suffering sigh.

Zi Wei laughed. "Xiao Yan hates Taylor Swift."

"Really?" Yong Qi said with an amused expression. "If you ever meet my little sister, don't tell her that. She loves Taylor Swift, so she'd hate you."

"I do not hate Taylor Swift," Xiao Yan argued. "She and I just have a very difficult relationship."

"Well, considering her fan base is mostly around He Ke's age, I think you're slightly out of her demographic," Er Tai said blithely. He was sitting in the front seat, leaving Xiao Yan and Zi Wei to share the back, but had turned around in his seat so he could face them in conversation.

Xiao Yan rolled her eyes and scoffed. "I don't dislike Taylor Swift simply because she's geared towards teenage girls. Not liking something because it's what teenage girls like is a horrible reason to dislike something."

"So why don't you like her?" Er Tai asked curiously. "I mean, I've always just thought her songs are like, breakup songs."

"Oh, you had to ask. Here we go," Zi Wei murmured, but was also smiling fondly at Xiao Yan, who just shoved her lightly.

To Er Tai, she said, "Well, they are, and most people criticise her on that, like it's a crime that she's writing about her sadness after breaking up with her boyfriends. And yeah she does tend to come off as self-righteous in how she always makes it seem like it's all the guys' fault that things go wrong. But that's not necessarily my biggest problem with her."

This time, it was Yong Qi who asked, "What is your problem with her then?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, yeah," he said, "I'm curious."
"Are you a fan too?"

Yong Qi laughed. "Of Taylor Swift? Hardly. The very limited extent of my knowledge of Taylor Swift was preached to me by my little sister."

"So why do you even want to talk about a singer you don't care about and I don't like?" Xiao Yan asked.

He shrugged. "I find knowing the reason why someone doesn't like something can say a lot about them. Assuming you have a legitimate reason."

"Of course I do," Xiao Yan said. Then, seeing that the other three were all looking expectantly at her, she sighed. "Okay, it's not exactly that I don't like her, or that I think she's not a good singer or song writer. In fact, I think she's a fine singer, she's got a great way with words and she's sort of dorky and adorable. But like that song just now, it really bothers me."

"It's kind of catchy," Er Tai pointed out.

"Well, yeah," Xiao Yan reluctantly admitted. "It is, and honestly, sometimes I listen to it and find myself singing along, and I hate myself for it."

"Why?"

"The message of the lyrics really...irks me."

"How so?"

Xiao Yan sighed. "She wears short skirts, I wear t-shirt, she's cheer captain and I'm on the bleachers." She didn't sing the lyrics, of course, because she didn't sing in public, not in this set up, and definitely not in English. "That's the part of the song that annoys me the most."

"What's wrong with it?" Er Tai asked.

Xiao Yan stared at him incredulously. "You don't see anything wrong with it?"

"I'm not saying that, I'm asking you what you think is wrong with it," he said, smiling. "But maybe wait until we get inside. We're here."

The four of them got out of the car and approached the restaurant. Er Kang met them at the door, apparently having arrived before them to do an advance check on the place.

"All clear, sir," they made their way in.

"Thank you."

Yong Qi, Er Tai, Xiao Yan and Zi Wei took a table in the corner, while Er Kang occupied a table apart from them, alone. Neither Yong Qi nor Er Tai seemed surprised or bothered by this arrangement, and Xiao Yan couldn't tell whether she should just play along or say something about this needless segregation.

Zi Wei solved the dilemma for her.

"Surely he should just sit with us?" she asked, discreetly observing Er Kang through a curtain of hair.

Er Tai laughed. "Don't worry, Zi Wei, this isn't like a personal snub. He's not sitting with us because
he's working. There are just strict procedures he has to follow when he's on duty. If he sits with us, he obviously can't observe beyond our table, so it renders his job entirely superfluous."

"Oh, I see," Zi Wei said.

"Is he allowed to eat?" Xiao Yan asked slowly after they had ordered their own noodle.

"Oh, of course," Yong Qi replied. "And I'm paying for it, so..."

Er Tai laughed. "Yeah, I'd worry more for my brother if his salary doesn't allow him to afford a bowl of noodle, Yong Qi."

"I'm just saying," Yong Qi said lightly.

Surprisingly quickly, their noodle appeared, and the next few minutes were spent in assembling the soup and avoiding brushing against hot bowls.

"So Xiao Yan," Er Tai said while they waited for the noodle ingredients to steep, "what were you going to say about that Taylor Swift song?"

"You're not going to let it go, are you?" Xiao Yan asked.

Er Tai shrugged.

With another exasperated sigh, Xiao Yan explained. "Okay, fine. If you listen to the whole song, then it's about this girl is singing to this guy, right? She's telling him that he shouldn't be with his current girlfriend, mostly because she thinks the girlfriend doesn't get him like she does, and that the girlfriend is this girly cheerleader type while she's the nerdy, t-shirt, sneakers wearing type with huge glasses sitting on the bleachers and she's obviously better than the tarty cheerleaders. Except, you know, in the music video the nerd girl is played by Taylor Swift in all her blonde curls glory, and the only thing that is supposed to make her the awkward nerd is the huge glasses which of course actually does nothing to make her look ugly at all."

Yong Qi laughed. "Yeah, I've seen the video for this song. Usually Hollywood is bad enough in making pretty girls ugly but like that video wasn't even bothering to try."

"Well, the broad brush strokes are probably deliberate," Er Tai argued. "And you're talking about the video, and the whole point of a music video is to look pretty. That doesn't justify why you don't like the song."

"Well, break down the lyrics," Xiao Yan said. "The song is basically saying that the nerd girl is somehow better than the cheerleader simply on the merit that she doesn't dress in short skirts and high heels. Yeah, she keeps saying the relationship between the cheerleader and the guy isn't working out because his girlfriend doesn't get him, but how does she even know that? Who is she to tell him what his relationship is like? But according to this girl, the cheerleader doesn't deserve the guy's time because, basically, she's a slut. Like, the lyrics stops just short of actually saying that, but the message could not be clearer even if you decked it out in neon lights."

"But isn't the song just saying that the guy shouldn't choose the shallow option of a hot, popular cheerleader and that it's worth considering also the quiet nerdy girls?" Er Tai asked.

Xiao Yan couldn't be sure he really couldn't see the problem in that at all, or he was just deliberately trying to play devil's advocate.

"I'll never understand how cheerleaders become this stereotype of a total spoiled brat princess who
wails when her nails break," Zi Wei mused before Xiao Yan could say anything. "I mean, the
gymnastics they do is really very impressive and take a lot of commitment to more than just make up
and nail polish."

"I'm sure we can blame Hollywood for that too," Yong Qi said, laughing. "But, Xiao Yan, go on."

"Well, what gets me is that this whole song is practically saying there are only two types of girls in
the world – the nerd and the cheerleader," Xiao Yan said. "But at the same time, it's not about the
nerd and the cheerleader, at all. It's about the whole stupid dichotomy that the world insists on
dividing women into. You're either the virgin or the whore. And society contradicts itself, okay? It
tells girls that you need to be feminine and submissive and gentle and all that BS, but just enough,
because if you dress too feminine you're a slut. Case in point: the short skirts and t-shirt line."

"So you think a girl should be able to wear however short a skirt she wants and t-shirt when she feels
like it, fair enough," Yong Qi said. "But I don't think songs written by teenage popstars are really
supposed to be big on social commentary on the state of feminism in our depraved world."

He was grinning at Xiao Yan, and she sniffed. Er Tai exchanged a look with Zi Wei, both looking
amused but chose to not join in the conversation and focused on their noodle instead.

"You're being deliberately dismissive to provoke me and don't think I can't tell," Xiao Yan said. "But
why can't I expect them to hold those kinds of messages?"

"Because it's boring and it's not what Taylor Swift's target market wants to hear her sing about?"

Yong Qi asked.

"So you're staying teenagers are stupid and incapable of enjoying aspects of culture that doesn't
revolve around romantic love?"

"Okay, now who's being provocative?" Yong Qi exclaimed, actually putting his chopsticks down.
"That was totally not what I said, or what I mean, at all. Just because Taylor Swift sings in a certain
genre, for a certain market, but that doesn't mean those who enjoy her music for its apparent
frivolities, can't enjoy more…thought-provoking messages from music of other artists or from other
forms of art altogether. Just because Taylor Swift sings about something that is shallow, doesn't mean
she herself is only capable of such thoughts. Also, you can't expect social activism in an artist whose
brand image does not concern that at all. That's like going to an Italian restaurant and expecting to get
sushi."

"Okay, fine. I'm not expecting to find, like, the answer to the universe in Taylor Swift songs," Xiao
Yan agreed, "but pop culture shapes and affects the way people approach the world. You say that
her fans are capable of enjoying more than just her music, and that's certainly true, if only those other
things are accessible to them and that's not necessarily the case. You can't deny that Taylor Swift
fans are mostly at a very impressionable age, like your sister. So regardless of what else they
consume, at some subliminal level, her messages still do sink through, and perhaps they might find it
easier to internalise them because she's more accessible to them."

"So basically you're saying that you're holding Taylor Swift responsible for the future potential
collapse of society?" Yong Qi asked, laughing.

Xiao Yan huffed. "Of course not, but she's still perpetuating very anti-feminist messages. I mean, her
newest album, Speak Now, is named after a song where she basically barges in on some girl's
wedding and convinces the groom to run away with her because she thinks the bride doesn't deserve
him and paints her as this really stereotypical bridezilla. That song and You Belong With Me just
basically assume that the girl this guy has chosen to be in a relationship with, chosen to marry, is not
good enough for him, and only Taylor, or the character she's projecting, deserves the guy's love because she's the nice girl. It's the complete turnaround of the nice guy figure, where because this guy is nice, he deserves this girl's love despite the fact that girl doesn't want to be with him at all and whether he's nice or not has nothing to do with it."

"In some odd way, I do kind of see your point, but not enough to totally agree that that's the only interpretation of the artist," Yong Qi said, before finally picking up his chopsticks to start eating again.

Xiao Yan shrugged and returned to her noodle as well. "Double standards do work both ways, you know."

"But isn't there a certain element of fiction in songwriting?" Er Tai asked. "As you say, the singer is projecting a certain image, a character to form the story she wants to tell in this song. It's not like she's saying she's the character."

Yong Qi chuckled. "Based on the extent of my entirely indifferent knowledge of Taylor Swift, if it was she, herself, turning her nose up at girls in short skirts and bragging about how she only wears t-shirt and sneakers, that must be the most ironic thing that ever ironed."

Xiao Yan couldn't help but join in the laughter. Nevertheless, she argued, "Sure, she's writing a character and a story, and I'm not saying that the writers of fiction – songs or anything else – are necessarily their characters. Most often times they are not, otherwise we'd have a ridiculous number of sociopaths running around. But in casting herself as this character, she is sending a message that she at least sympathises more with the nerd girl."

Zi Wei looked thoughtful for a moment, before asking, "Doesn't she play both the nerd girl and the cheerleader in the video?"

Xiao Yan blinked. "Does she?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure how I know this, but I'm pretty sure she does," Zi Wei said.

"Well," Er Tai said shortly, pulling out his phone. After a few taps, he showed the rest the Youtube video of the song in question on his phone. "What do you know, she does."

"Oh," Xiao Yan said, suddenly losing steam. "So…"

"So your point just suddenly fell apart?" Yong Qi asked, laughing.

"Not necessarily," Xiao Yan said stubbornly. "I mean, the point is that there is a certain message in this song, and that isn't affected by who plays either character in the video. I don't want to say that this message applies to her music in general, but there is a…a trend there. And as I said, culture doesn't exist in a vacuum, it creates ripples whether the perpetuators of said culture intend to or not, so she's influencing her audience whether she wants to or not."

"I would like to be a little less pessimistic than you and propose that we don't absorb culture blindly. The point of exposing ourselves to the world is to determine for ourselves the good influences and the bad, pointing out things where they are problematic, right?" Yong Qi said.

"And you're doing a marvelous job of that right now," Er Tai said with a smile.

Xiao Yan gave an indulgent smile back. To Yong Qi, she asked, "So what's your point?"

"My point is that just because something is problematic doesn't mean that people can't enjoy it in
spite of that, especially when they recognise it for what it is."

"I suppose," Xiao Yan reluctantly agreed.

"If you think about it, the emotional appeal of Taylor Swift's music is that her songs talk about the feelings that come after a break up, or felt with unrequited love," Zi Wei said. "If you've just been in a break up bad enough to write songs about, are you really rational enough to not blame the other person? Or can you really stop yourself from unreasonably hating the person who is standing in the way of your unrequited feelings? So if you're going for realism, it's not quite so off-point."

"Sometimes there's enough realism in the world without adding to it," Xiao Yan grumbled.

"Relatability, then," Zi Wei said. "You did say you didn't blame her for writing songs about her breakups."

"I guess," Xiao Yan admitted. "But at the same time, I still feel like maybe she should have more to sing about than that? I don't know. Maybe it says something that I have this ridiculously high expectation for her. I want to like her, I do, but she's making it very hard for me to do that."

"Well, going back to my earlier point, regardless of your expectations, why should she sing about anything else, when what she's doing right now sells?" Yong Qi asked. "While you are thinking of high standards and social utopia, maybe for her it doesn't have to be so complicated. Her job is to sell, and she's doing that, so unless she consciously wants a change of style, there's no need."

Xiao Yan sighed. "I get your point. I do. It just annoys me, and I can't help it. Maybe it comes down to the fact that I don't like how she's writing in service of a society that tells people that no matter what you do, there is no value to you unless you are in a relationship. And honestly this is speaking about both sexes, really, though I am arrogant enough to claim that women have it worse."

"That's not a point I would disagree with you on," Yong Qi said.

"Why?" Xiao Yan asked challengingly. "Because you think that's true, or do you just want to agree with me now?"

"Actually, the former, despite your accusing tone," Yong Qi said dryly. "Though, would it be so bad if it were the latter?"

"Well, yeah," she said, shrugging. "I'd rather you don't condescend me. Speaking of condescending, have any of you heard that new boyband, One Direction?"

"Yes, actually," Yong Qi said.

"Do you have a problem with them, too?" Er Tai asked.

"She doesn't like their single, What Makes You Beautiful," Zi Wei said.

"Okay, why?" Yong Qi asked, stretching out each syllable into its own challenge.

Xiao Yan rolled her eyes. "You don't know you're beautiful, that's what makes you beautiful, or how I see it, how to insult a woman in ten words."

"Seriously?" Yong Qi asked, laughing but also incredulous. "It's supposed to be a compliment."

Xiao Yan scoffed. "Yong Qi, I know there are plenty of girls who would swoon at chance to be called beautiful by you — "
"Hey, how is this now about me?" he retorted but good-naturedly, while Er Tai chortled and clapped him on the back.

"I'm just saying," Xiao Yan said, "it's insulting and pathetic when the only way a girl can be beautiful is if a guy tells her she is and she is oblivious. Oh, a woman is supposed to be insecure and hate everything about herself, only so that men can come along and deign to raise her self-esteem by telling her she's beautiful, but of course she's not really supposed to believe it, because that would be akin to actually having self-esteem. I mean, why are we encouraging teenagers to not like themselves and take validation from someone else?"

Er Tai laughed. "So you're saying teenage boys singing about girls they have a crush on shouldn't be trying to tell them they're beautiful? Honestly I can without a doubt tell you that in that case, they'd run out of topic to sing about in a week."

"Is it really that hard for guys to not objectify women?" Xiao Yan asked, appalled.

"For boys, maybe."

Xiao Yan sniffed disdainfully.

"You have to admit, this song is an attempt at a compliment, though it may be clumsy to your taste. At least the attempt is…I don't know, wholesome, compared to something like hip-hop," Yong Qi said.

"Oh, that was not your best reply," Zi Wei said, shaking her head in amusement at the same time as Xiao Yan said sarcastically, "Oh wow, so they're not actually outright calling us sluts. Let's rejoice at that!"

"I am aware it is a bad argument and a huge slippery slope," Yong Qi added.

"I hope you do!" Then Xiao Yan added, less confrontationally, "I'm not saying pop music is evil, honestly. I grew up pinching boyband mixtapes from my classmates, for Heaven's sake. I'm just saying that I'm not interested in people expecting me to feel flattered that they're telling me something I already know in a way that implies they think I shouldn't think that of myself."

"In other words, you don't need some guy telling you you're beautiful, you are already know that you are?" Yong Qi asked cheekily.

Er Tai sniggered.

"Hell yeah!"

Xiao Yan's exclamation was met with laughter from all three of her companions. She ended up chuckling along as well.

"Or, more realistically," she said after they'd quieted down, "I don't know anyone who doesn't hate the way they look most of the time, but it's not like that's anyone else's business. Wouldn't you want to think there is more to yourself than that? In the end, maybe regardless of what I think of my own looks, I don't need you to tell me what you think to feel good about myself?"

"I will make a note of that and never try to compliment you on your looks, just to prevent myself offending you," Yong Qi said.

She huffed. "I'm speaking general 'you'."
"Sure."

"So basically what I'm taking from this is that Xiao Yan hates teen pop," Er Tai said jovially.

"I just said I didn't!" Xiao Yan said with a mock-offended expression.

Er Tai pretended like he didn't hear. "Are you sure you're of this generation?"

"Quite," Xiao Yan replied, smirking. Then, more seriously, she added, "Honestly, I do just have problems with certain lyrics and messages in the songs. I am totally not against people liking either Taylor Swift or One Direction. I don't want to be that person who looks down on something someone likes just because. Similarly, I will never get the appeal for K-pop, but I will defend anyone's right to like it, as long as the liking is not doing anyone any harm."

"Will you defend my sister's right to liking Taylor Swift?" Yong Qi asked.

"Of course, as long as, like you said, she is aware of the problematic features," she said sincerely. "She's what, 16? I'd be concerned if she didn't have interests that are predictable for her age."

"To be honest, I do understand Xiao Yan's frustration with Taylor Swift. It's not really about the singer, it's more like frustration with society in general," Zi Wei said.

"How so?" Er Tai asked.

"If you think about it, songs like You Belong With Me just confirms that the world has this insatiable need to pit girls together in competition, as if one woman's success, goodness and beauty must immediately take away from another. It's like the world's way of telling us that you can't just be friends and be proud of each other, that you must always be jealous of each other. That's toxic and can be very damaging."

"Exactly," Xiao Yan agreed.

Er Tai chuckled. "Well, just from what I've seen tonight, I think both of you have managed to disabuse the world of that notion."

Xiao Yan and Zi Wei exchanged a fond look and a smile.

"Have you guys known each other for long, or did you just meet this year?" Yong Qi asked.

"We just knew each other when we became roommates," Zi Wei answered.

"It's only been a few months," Xiao Yan added, "but honestly sometimes it seems like it's been forever. How did you two know each other?"

"Our families have always known each other, so we grew up together, actually," Er Tai said. "I can tell you there are many perks to being practically like brothers with princes."

"Oh I wouldn't say we're practically brothers," Yong Qi said. His expression was almost solemn, but the twinkle in his eyes indicated that he wasn't being heartlessly serious.

Still, Er Tai replied with a mock expression of hurt. He actually clutched his heart, as if mortally wounded. "Oh Yong Qi, how could you say such a callous and cruel thing, after everything we've been through together – "

Yong Qi just shoved him to the side, and Er Tai had to stop his dramatic act to grab at the table, stopping himself from toppling off his stool.
"I meant," Yong Qi said through a laugh, "it's an entirely different dynamic. My brothers and I share this weariness of the life we were born into and have to live. We indulge each other's ego in that respect. Whereas you, Er Tai – "

"I just smack you over the head and laugh at your first world problems?"

Yong Qi grinned. "Exactly."

"You need it sometimes," Er Tai said.

"I do," Yong Qi agreed.

They had lingered at the table long after their meal was finished, talking, until Zi Wei finally admitted that she was worn out and needed to go home.

Yong Qi dropped Xiao Yan and Zi Wei off at their dormitory building, and there, Er Tai got out too, to join his brother in his car.

"You know, you could have just asked for his phone number," Xiao Yan told Zi Wei as they waited for the lift up to their room.

"What?" Zi Wei yelped, which was evidence that Xiao Yan's hunch had been right, because Zi Wei didn't yelp. "Who?"

"Fu Er Kang."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, Zi Wei!" Xiao Yan exclaimed with a fond smile. "You let me do all the talking with Yong Qi and Er Tai while you were too busy making eyes at Er Kang."

"I was not," Zi Wei protested weakly.

Xiao Yan laughed. "Okay, you weren't. You did still look over at him an awful lot."

"The whole sitting arrangement was just weird, that's all."

"Yeah, it was," Xiao Yan agreed, "but the explanation did make sense. Who are we to question imperial protocols, right?"

Zi Wei smiled distractedly, lost in thought. Then, she scrunched up her nose a little and shook herself, as if trying to drive away the remnants of a dream.

"But you totally think he's attractive."

"Xiao Yan," Zi Wei almost begged.

For an instant, she thought about pressing the issue, but then thought better of it. She only grinned and threw her arm around Zi Wei.

"Okay, drop the subject, I get it. Moving on. You played beautifully earlier."

This succeeded in making Zi Wei smile. "Thank you for being there."

The lift had arrived, and they stepped in. As Xiao Yan pressed the button for their floor, she said
with a grin, "You'd better tell me the next time you perform somewhere, because I'd totally come to all of them."

Yong Qi had to admit, sometimes he went to the library more to see Xiao Yan than because he actually had much work to do. A few days after the concert, he arrived to find Xiao Yan already there, talking to Zi Wei.

After the greetings, Zi Wei added as an explanation for her unexpected presence, "My class was cancelled so I thought I'd join Xiao Yan."

She was smiling at him, but was also looking around, as if expecting someone else behind him. Yong Qi wondered if she was looking for Er Tai or Er Kang. From what he saw at the noodle place the other night, Yong Qi put his wager on the latter. Zi Wei had been subtle, and Yong Qi probably wouldn't have noticed it if it wasn't for the fact that he caught Er Kang returning her glances as well.

Er Kang had always been notoriously careful and meticulous, so it spoke much when he let his focus slide from Yong Qi to someone else, even for just such brief moments. Of course, Yong Qi would never, out of respect for the man and the friendship between them, make Er Kang admit to such thing. He didn't plan on bringing the subject up to Zi Wei now either, not wishing to put her on the spot or embarrass her.

Xiao Yan, however, didn't seem to think the situation was quite so delicate. Once Yong Qi sat down, she asked, "You know, I've been wondering. You said you always have someone minding you around the clock but I never see any hovering around you while you're here."

Her lips were curled up in a playful smile as she spoke, though for a moment, she winced. From sounds of movement under the table and the swift glare Zi Wei shot her, Yong Qi guessed that Zi Wei probably just kicked her. Xiao Yan merely grinned at her friend.

"That's because agents aren't supposed to hover," Yong Qi said, as if he noticed none of this. "The whole in-your-face men-in-black thing is only in movies. In real life, they only dress that way when they're at official functions or other places where it would be appropriate. With us, at school, they're supposed blend in. If you were in one of my lectures you shouldn't be able to pick them out."

"But they do sit in on your lectures?"

"Yeah, just because lecture halls contain many people. Still, the general point is they don't intrude on anyone's privacy unless absolutely necessary, and don't draw attention. I do have to tell them where I'm going but the why, the how, the with whom isn't really supposed to matter unless it interferes with security. Anyway, this is boring talk."

"No, no," Xiao Yan said, seeming genuinely intrigued. "It's interesting, though to be honest, in a sort of vaguely morbid way. You don't mind talking about this?"

"No," Yong Qi said, "not at all. I don't see how you would find these things fascinating. It's mostly just, I don't know, red tape and protocols."

"I find it intriguing that you can put up with that kind of surveillance though," Zi Wei said thoughtfully when he looked her way, trying to judge whether it would be comfortable for all of them to carry on the conversation. "I can't imagine what it's like to have people following me around all the time."

Yong Qi smiled lightly. Sometimes, he wondered the opposite. What would it be like to know that you don't need to lock yourself at home to be totally alone? (Even then, the hours when he'd be
entirely alone, even at home, were brief.) What was it like to able to spontaneously decide to drive off somewhere to be by yourself, and not having to call someone to inform them and allow them to follow at a discreet distance?

Of course, he could take an impromptu drive out to nowhere, but it would inevitably end in a lecture about security risks and being responsible. That kind of rebellion stopped being fun, or even worthwhile, a long time ago.

Still, he couldn't help but give the more diplomatic answer to Xiao Yan's question. "It's not like I always feel their stares at the back of my neck or they're always literally by my side," he said. "They might sit in lectures, but when I'm in smaller settings on campus, mostly they just hang around the outside of the building or somewhere on the same floor. They also have a command post in the uni security office where they have access to feeds of all security cameras anyway, so they just need to know which building I'm in."

"But still, they are there, all the time?" Xiao Yan asked. "I mean, take the other night, we didn't do anything more alarming than eat noodle. I didn't think you'd need someone to be there for that."

"Well, that night was security-lite, so there was just Er Kang, but yes, there will always be at least one. I won't always see them, but I know if I give a signal they'd appear out of thin air. They're not there for the times when nothing happen. They're there for the time that something maybe happens. From the moment I step outside of home, there is someone following me because of that maybe," Yong Qi said.

"Does it ever bother you?" Zi Wei asked.

Of course it bothered him, but probably in the way that having to sit in morning traffic every day bothered other people. He gave a crooked smile and answered, "Having lived with it all my life, it's become sort of a matter of course. And you run the risk of appearing ungrateful if you scorn it or don't appreciate what these people are doing."

"Wait, so if you're followed all the time, how to you talk to girls? What happens if, like, you have a date?" Xiao Yan asked, eyes lit up with fascinated glee and curiosity.

This time, Yong Qi didn't bother answering and only raised an eyebrow sardonically.

"No!" Xiao Yan exclaimed, practically sparkling with amazed amusement. "Seriously? They go on dates with you?"

"Well, it's not like they spend the entire date staring and whispering gossip to each other into their sleeves. They're just close enough to observe. They don't interfere."

"Do you tell the girl that they're there?" Zi Wei asked curiously, but managing to look a little more sedate than Xiao Yan.

"It's the polite thing to do, especially when they usually want to do a background and police check before the date." He paused and then added as an afterthought, "Granted, sometimes it scares them off."

"Oh, why would any girl be freaked out by being background checked for a date and then being followed around by armed men in disguise?" Xiao Yan said sarcastically.

Yong Qi smiled.

"That must also really kill the romantic mood, though," Xiao Yan continued. "Is it like that for all of
"You? You and your brothers and sisters?"

"Yeah."

"And they expect you to get married like that?"

Yong Qi laughed. "My sister is married. But then I suppose it doesn't particularly count, since the guy she married is the son of my father's university friend."

Xiao Yan scrunched up her nose in disbelief. "I just can't get over how much it'd disturb me if I go out on a first date knowing that there would be all these other people who know about it. How do you even know the first date would work out? And if it doesn't, you don't get plausible deniability or the freedom to just keep it to yourself and pretend it never happened."

"I think to the agents themselves, our dating lives aren't all that interesting," Yong Qi laughed. "I mean, they have to know who we're seeing, but otherwise, I don't think they care to gossip whether it worked out. Their job is demanding enough without worrying about our love lives."

"How exactly demanding is it? The other night, Er Kang just more or less followed us and waited for us to finish eating and followed us some more," Xiao Yan said. Then, more defensively, she added, "I mean, yeah, I get your point that he's there for the maybe, but most of the time the maybe doesn't happen, so it should be pretty relaxing? I don't know, maybe I'm being churlish, saying this. Just not really seeing where the demanding part comes in."

"It is demanding," Yong Qi explained, "mostly because of how their shift scheduling works. They'd do two weeks morning shift, two weeks evening, two week midnight, then two weeks training. It rolls over like that every two months, and it can put your routines and body clocks into a right mess. On top of that, they're also expected to travel, and jetlag can be a bitch. And the troubles they encounter aren't always assassins with big guns or terrorists, but nuisances like people taking photos and videos, and shenanigans we get into ourselves. Er Kang had a calm evening the other night because I'm nice and didn't drag him to a bar, get drunk, need to be pulled away from a fight, which would be recorded and become wildly viral videos."

"I thought you had people to remove those videos?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Of course, but that would require the videos going up first. The agents do interfere if they see people taking photos and videos of things that they aren't supposed to, either to make sure they're deleted or to confiscate the device altogether, but in crowded places where everyone might have a phone or two, it's not hard to miss some."

"Do they interfere and stop you getting drunk in the first place?" Zi Wei asked.

"Well, how much they interfere with stupid things we do, and when, is really a matter of case-by-case, agent-by-agent. They probably wouldn't interfere with getting drunk, but they would interfere before we kill ourselves with alcohol poisoning."

"What I'm getting from this is that this can be a very annoying job, following a bunch of entitled kids around," Xiao Yan said, grinning. "I can imagine you and your siblings as kids totally making their lives miserable. Sorry, but I mean, kids can be mean like that."

Yong Qi smiled at how easily and flippantly she said this. Despite this, Zi Wei still shot her friend a worried look, clearly unsure whether he would be offended at Xiao Yan's words. He just shook his head at Zi Wei to reassure her.

"Yeah, annoying is one way of summing it up," he said to Xiao Yan. "You are right, we do at least
have the power to make the job even more miserable for them. Can you imagine signing up to be a secret agent, expecting to be like James Bond, but in the end what you're really doing is following a bunch of teenagers around, hoping they don't get into trouble and even if they did but nothing happened to harm them, you can't even tattle back to their parents about it?"

"They can't do that?"

"They're not required to do a minute-by-minute recount of our days, that would just be boring. What they do report is sometimes left to their discretion. Of course, if we were under-aged and slipped away only for them to later find us in a bar, they'd have to report that. But they're not our parents, they're not our nanny. They're supposed to protect us, and for that to happen, we have to be able to trust them. Tattling on our every mistake doesn't help that. The expectation is the co-operation works both ways. Even if I got a wild desire to hop on a plane and fly off to, I don't know, Hong Kong and spend a week in a casino, I'd still have to tell them, and generally they'll try to make it work if they can."

"And by make it work, do you mean they pray you don't max out your credit cards?" Xiao Yan asked cheekily.

"Yeah, basically," Yong Qi answered with a laugh. "Obviously it can be very inconvenient for them if they show up for a shift and then suddenly find themselves on a plane for a week-long trip. We do have to be mindful of that, though as a teenagers, that kind of consideration for other people sometimes feel more like a burden and a source of annoyance than anything else. But generally, everything is a source of annoyance as a teenager being followed around by a security detail."

Xiao Yan nodded knowingly, "Like the fact that you can't sneak into a bar."

"Well, it's more than that," Yong Qi said, chuckling. "Having people following me on dates as an adult will never be as mortifying as having them around for high school dating."

Xiao Yan burst out laughing so loudly that Zi Wei, though also smiling, had to hush her and remind her that they were in a library.

"Oh boy," Xiao Yan said. "I won't be so mean as to make you recount stories."

Yong Qi smiled wryly. "I reckon if Er Tai is ever desperate for money, he can always make a fortune by selling to gossip magazines stories of my and my brother's attempts to get a girl in high school with agents at our heels."

Xiao Yan ended up giggling so hard at this that she had to excuse herself to get a drink of water to calm herself down, thus bringing their conversation on this subject to an effective end.

Zi Wei came back to their dorm room one day, shaking from her bones the chills of steady snowfall outside and heaving a contented sigh of relief stepping inside the warm room. She leaned against the door to toe off her shoes and waved at Xiao Yan, who was lying on her bed, kicking her legs up at the wall, engrossed in a conversation on the phone which was clamped between her cheek and her shoulder. With only a vague wave and a swift smile of greeting to Zi Wei, Xiao Yan kept on being perfectly focused on the person on the other end of the line.

"Look, hating on pop culture merely on the argument that 'because it's popular therefore it's trash' is the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Xiao Yan said into the phone while waving her hands about for emphasis. "Hating things doesn't make you deeper than people who unironically enjoy things."

Whatever reaction she got to that announcement apparently was enough to make Xiao Yan appear
irritated.

"See, that's exactly the point! The problem with the dismissal of internet novel culture in general is that it's founded on merely the fact that these novels are written and enjoyed by women, and they then become enough of a phenomenon to be dubbed the apparently-sinful name of pop culture. It assumes that popular culture and high culture are somehow mutually exclusive when in reality it's this arbitrary distinction based on how people access it and the standards for this distinction are still stuck somewhere in the age of the dinosaur."

Xiao Yan scowled at the wall as she listened to the other person's answer.

Then with a loud, annoyed exhale, she said, "It's not like all there is to literature are Tang poems and then internet porn. And speaking of classics, I would argue that many so-called like Dream of the Red Chamber and Water Margin, considering they were once banned and only read surreptitiously by the common people who enabled the novels' existence to this day, could be categorised as pop culture of their times. Especially Dream of the Red Chamber, since it ditched the classic style and was written in vernacular language."

She paused again and listened for a considerable amount of time. It was clear to Zi Wei by now that her friend was completely ignoring her. She only chuckled and went about her own routines, vaguely listening to Xiao Yan's side of the conversation.

"Of course I agree that the quality varies, but we're not talking about quality here, we're talking blanket appreciation," Xiao Yan said exasperatedly. "And quite frankly how is the varying quality different in any other point in publishing history? Hell, taking on Dream of the Red Chamber alone, quality varies even in that, because the last bit wasn't even written by Cao Xue Qin, which makes those parts, by definition, practically fanfiction anyway! I'm just saying it's obnoxious to dismiss an entire genre because it's neither written by nor talk about stuffy old men and just because some of it does happen to suck."

Whatever the other person – and by now, Zi Wei was almost certain it was Yong Qi – said it was enough to make Xiao Yan huff again in annoyance.

"Well, for a while you sounded a lot like you didn't agree! If you did, why did you even pick this argument?" She spluttered indignantly at the answer. "That's just – urgh, I hate you!...Look, Zi Wei just got home, so I have to go all right?...Yeah, sure. Okay, bye."

"That was Yong Qi?" Zi Wei asked with an amused smile when Xiao Yan finally put the phone down.

"Yeah," Xiao Yan said. She immediately picked up the phone again to check the time. "Oh god."

"What?"

"I just realised how long we spent talking. I lost track of the time."

"How long did you talk?" Zi Wei asked curiously.

"Over an hour," Xiao Yan said sheepishly. "It didn't feel that long though."

"Clearly," Zi Wei teased, but Xiao Yan either totally missed it, or pretended to not notice. It merited a more direct approach. "You like him, don't you?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. "Of course I like him."
"No, you like him," Zi Wei pressed.

Xiao Yan had been picking up her presumably now-cold cup of tea for a drink. At Zi Wei’s words, she froze with the cup half way to her mouth and simply stared, wide-eyed, before hastily putting the mug back down, spilling a considerable amount of liquid on her desk. She didn’t seem to even notice this. "What?" she cried. "Zi Wei, no!"

"Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said exasperatedly. "It's fine if you do, you know."

Xiao Yan blinked rapidly and shook her head vigorously. "No! I mean, no! No! He's – no!"

Zi Wei laughed. "Another no and I might believe you."

Xiao Yan opened her mouth, surely to say 'no' again, but then she immediately clamped it shut and pouted.

Zi Wei shook her head. Though she managed to not laugh at her friend again, she couldn't help holding back a wide smile either.

"I am not in any way feeling what you are implying," Xiao Yan said sulkily.

Zi Wei nodded as if indulging the whims of a five-year-old, which sometimes wasn't too far off the mark when it came to Xiao Yan. "If you insist on believing that, sure, suit yourself. It looks very different from where I'm sitting."

"Zi Wei! I couldn't possibly! He's a prince!"

"So?"

"So it's impossible!"

"Have you heard of Kate Middleton? Or seen the movie The Prince and Me?"

"But that's a movie!"

"I'm pretty sure Will/Kate aren't a movie," Zi Wei pointed out, smiling.

"But – " Xiao Yan jumped out of her bed and paced around the room. "This is ridiculous. There is no basis – he doesn't even – I mean – "

"I just asked a question, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said softly. "You inferred from it all sorts of things I wasn't even implying."

"You brought up Kate Middleton!" Xiao Yan wailed. "I don't want to be Kate Middleton!"

"Good, because I'm pretty sure Prince William is taken," Zi Wei teased.

"Stop!" Xiao Yan cried. "Why did you have to make me think about this?"

"It seemed like a pretty helpful thing to consider, seeing as you just spend an hour talking on the phone with him without realising, discussing, apparently, internet novels and who knows what else," Zi Wei said.

"It's just a discussion. It doesn't mean anything." Xiao Yan stood in the middle of their room, staring at nothing in particular for a long time, unconsciously swaying on her feet. Zi Wei watched her with a smile to herself and waited until Xiao Yan snapped herself out of her reverie. "Urgh, this is stupid,"
she grumbled. For some reason, she was refusing to meet Zi Wei’s eyes again. She turned abruptly around and threw herself back onto her bed, slapping a pillow over her face. Her voice was muffled as she said, "This conversation is over. I am not thinking about it. Nope, never, not relevant."

Zi Wei just smiled even more widely and shook her head before disappearing into the bathroom to prepare for bed.

Chapter End Notes

I don't mind Taylor Swift, as clearly shown by the amount of gifsets set to TS lyrics I have made on tumblr. Xiao Yan vs Taylor Swift started off as a character-defining plot device, but then eventually it grew into this recurring subplot that amuses me, so expect it to make an appearance occasionally.

Up next, "the gentleman seeks the fair maiden": Yong Qi, you are not the only gentleman around.
2011, January - February

2011

January

"How do you feel about Jin Suo coming here and becoming our illegal third tenant for the second half of Spring Festival?" Zi Wei asked one day. Snow crunched softly under their shoes as they walked back to their room holding celebratory coffees after they have both finished their last exams.

"What?" Xiao Yan asked, laughing at Zi Wei's uncharacteristic turn of phrase.

"Jin Suo wants to come up to see me the second week of the holidays, and it'll just be easier if she stays with us. She'll be here for a week at most and she can sleep on my bed," Zi Wei explained.

"Sure, it's not a problem," Xiao Yan said. "You're not going back to Shandong for the holidays then?"

Zi Wei shook her head. "No, there's too little waiting for me there to be worth the hassle of braving the travel. Besides, Jin Suo wants to come visit anyway."

There was no sense of regret in the way she said this, and Xiao Yan couldn't help but feel glad for it.

"She'd spend the new year with her family first, though, right?"

"Yeah," Zi Wei said. "She's planning to take the train up on the fifth. What are your plans for new year?"

"Liu Qing, Liu Hong and I have a tradition – well, if you can call what we did last year and promise to try to do again every year after a tradition. Anyway, I'll have New Year's Eve dinner at their place. You should join us, it'll just be the three of us, otherwise, and Liu Hong would love someone to help her cook."

"Don't you and Liu Qing do that?"

Xiao Yan laughed. "Neither of us can cook anything to save our lives, except rolling and filling the dumplings. Otherwise, we just help clean up and do the dishes after."

"You don't think they'd mind that I come along?"

"Of course not!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Tell Liu Hong the next time you're at work that you'll be around for the new year. She'd make you come. And it's not like we do anything but eat and watch the Gala anyway. They at least have a TV over at their place, so we won't have to watch on a laptop screen."

"Sounds like a good plan!" Zi Wei said, smiling. "Here I was, half afraid we'd be improvising some sort of celebration between us in the dorm."

"That would just be depressing," Xiao Yan replied with a grin. "And let's face it, Liu Hong's feast will be better than anything we can cook up with the portable induction stove and rice cooker in our room."
February

New Year's Eve

Xiao Yan and Zi Wei arrived early in the afternoon, shaking snow from their hoods and stomping it out of their soles before entering Liu Qing and Liu Hong’s heavenly warm flat.

"Did you manage to get everything?" Liu Hong asked in lieu of greeting, referring to the last-minute groceries items she had desperately texted them as they left their dormitory that she was still missing, hoping that they might actually find a market open to get them.

"Yeah," Xiao Yan said, holding out the plastic bag she held in her hand.

Zi Wei was blowing warmth into her hand, then shrugged out of her coat. Liu Qing took it from her and held his other arm out, waiting for Xiao Yan's. They both smiled at him in thank.

It was clear as they tried to get the cooking started that there was no room in the kitchen for Liu Qing and Xiao Yan to help even if they all wanted to crowd in there. In the end, Zi Wei and Liu Hong commandeered the kitchen, and any preparation that needed Liu Qing and Xiao Yan's help were brought to the living room.

The combined forces of Liu Hong and Zi Wei managed to bring the four of them an abundant feast with a distinct Shandong flavour, reminding Xiao Yan that Zi Wei and Liu Qing, Liu Hong hailed from the same province. The white wine Liu Qing broke out, which Xiao Yan heartily endorsed, and Zi Wei gamely allowed herself to nurse a small cup throughout the whole meal, filled their dinner with uproarious laughter, which was most welcome.

They sat back in their chairs at nearly seven thirty, all grinning and feeling the coming on of a food coma.

"Well, let's clear up and put the food away," Liu Hong said.

"You and Zi Wei cooked," Xiao Yan said, standing up. "Liu Qing and I will clean up."

"Just put away the leftovers," Liu Hong said. "The dishes can wait till after the Emperor's speech."

"But then they'd miss part of the Gala," Zi Wei pointed out.

"There are always commercial breaks and boring speeches long enough for us to get away to deal with the dishes, Zi Wei," Liu Qing said with a grin. "Besides, there'll be more things to wash up after we finish making the dumplings away. I'd just prefer to tackle it all at once."

It took quite a lot of maneuvering for Liu Qing and Xiao Yan to avoid elbowing each other in the small kitchen, and she wondered how Liu Hong and Zi Wei managed it earlier with so many dishes, hot pots and pans.

"So we'll be seeing your prince tonight on the TV," Liu Qing said.

Xiao Yan had to resist the rather strong urge to whack him with the bunch of chopsticks she held in her hands. If she didn't know any better, she'd have assumed Zi Wei had been talking to Liu Qing and Liu Hong about her absurd speculations that there was more to Xiao Yan and Yong Qi than what it really was. It wasn't like that. Really.

She tried glaring, but knowing Liu Qing, he probably wouldn't shut up until he got a reaction from her, and surely the sooner she put a stop to this conversation, the better. "He's definitely not my
anything."
"Not even your friend?"

"Okay, maybe that," she allowed. "But that, only."

Liu Qing laughed, apparently not bothered by her huffiness at all. "Well, I have to say I'm looking forward to tonight's speech," he said, shrugging. "Mostly to see Yong Qi."

"Why?" Xiao Yan asked, incredulous. "He's there every year, you never cared before."

"That was before you started cavorting with him - "

Xiao Yan snorted at the word choice but pointedly ignored him, busying herself with trying to fit the Tupperware of the left-over fish into his already full fridge.

"Maybe I'd like a better look now when he's no longer just a random public figure to me," Liu Qing said.

"He's not going to do anything," she said. "He'd just be there listening to the Emperor's speech and that's not going to be different from the speeches of any other years."

"Except now, the degrees of separation between me and him had reduced from a million down to one," Liu Qing said.

Xiao Yan rolled her eyes, but wouldn't say anything else.

For a minute, there were only the movements and sounds of them putting food away. Xiao Yan hoped that meant that the conversation was over, and she would be glad for it.

However, before she could nudge open the kitchen door and join Liu Hong and Zi Wei again, Liu Qing reached out to take her arm and held her back.

"What?" she asked, sighing.

All traces of teasing or humour were gone from his face now, and he only said, as solemnly as Xiao Yan had ever seen him, "Promise me you'll be careful?"

"With what?"

"With him."

Xiao Yan exhaled loudly, exasperated. "Liu Qing, I told you - "

"I know, I know," he said. His voice seemed calm, but she could still detect the hint of anxiety in it. "He's just your friend and he's nice and down-to-earth and totally normal. I get all that you want to believe that, and maybe to a certain extent, at school, he is. But he's not normal, Xiao Yan, and maybe you should realise that. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I think you are giving him way too much credit," Xiao Yan said, scoffing. "For me to get hurt would mean I have given him that power to hurt me. I haven't."

"I think you are giving him way too much credit," Xiao Yan said, scoffing. "For me to get hurt would mean I have given him that power to hurt me. I haven't."

"I'm not sure we ever consciously give people power to hurt us, Xiao Yan," he replied. "And I'm not saying that he will go out of his way to purposefully hurt you. You see him as a person you want to be friends with, and he is, but he's not only that guy. He's also the prince. Maybe you're not setting yourself up to be hurt, that doesn't mean it's not possible, in whatever capacity, or that it will be very
private."

She wanted to continue to pull stubbornly against him, but the sincere concern in his voice made her mellow a little. She sighed.

"I know being his friend means putting up with a lot," she said seriously, "but then he has to put up with it all as well. I don't think he'd appreciate the idea that I have to comb through the calculated risks of being his friends, and I am not comfortable with that either."

"I know you think the height of indecent selfishness and disloyalty to think of him in terms of anything more or less than your friendship – or your whatever-ship – with him." Xiao Yan couldn't help frowning at the fact that he clearly thought there was the chance of something more, of a 'whatever-ship', when she had just said otherwise. He seemed to know what she would say in protest, however, and pressed on. "He does come with baggage, Xiao Yan, no matter what he is to you. I'm not saying you have to let that define your relationship with him, but you can't just shove it under the rug either."

"I'm not," Xiao Yan said curtly. Then, softer, she added, "I know you want to protect me, but you don't have to think I'm still so vulnerable after Liang Ding, either. I know even friendship isn't simple with Yong Qi, even if it seems deceptively so when we're at school. I don't take that simplicity for granted, at all."

Liu Qing nodded. "I don't want to big-brother you either," he said, somewhat sheepishly. "I just can't help it."

"Don't worry, all right?" she said, smiling now, and leaning on his arm. "Prince or not, if I ever do need a big brother to get me out of a fix, I'd call on you, all right?"

Liu Qing smiled and patted her shoulder. "See that you remember that."

Liu Hong chose that moment to call, "Hey, what's taking you two so long in there? It's starting!"

The four of them piled on the couch to watch the speech that the Emperor gave each year before the start of the broadcast of the New Year's Gala.

As usual, every year, the broadcast of the speech started with establishing shots of the Palace, and then replaced by a view of the solemnly silent throne room of Tai He Dian, from where the Emperor would make his speech. Even when empty, the room, sufficiently and spectacularly decorated for the occasion, always looked grand and regal.

The silence of the empty room was broken first by the entrance of the Emperor's Chief Personal Secretary, who would by turn announce the members of the Imperial Family, to the press, to the public watching via live broadcast. The Emperor always sat at his throne, with the rest of his family standing around him.

After a few moments of solemn silence, the Emperor would begin his speech:

"As we approach the end of one year, and the beginning of another, we once again find ourselves in a mood of sober reflection, but one of hope. From Tai He Dian here in Beijing, my family and I would firstly wish each and every one of you a prosperous year Xin Mao…"

"It is at this time of reunion, more than any other, that we all think of those loved ones who are absent, without whom our celebration cannot be complete. As our country continues to recover from successive natural disasters, the aftershocks of which continued well into this past year, I would also
like to honour…

"Despite shadows of losses, or perhaps, because of them, we feel more keenly than ever the spirit of family reunion, which is eternal and unchanged, which teaches us to be thankful and optimistic…

"As we prepare to greet the new year, full of exciting possibilities, I wish to join you in celebrating our country's accomplishments in the past year…

"This year Xin Mao, it is my humble pleasure but also profound privilege to invite all my people to celebrate with myself and my family the twentieth anniversary of my accession to the throne…

"Upon this occasion, I would like to offer sincere thanks for the countless kindnesses shown to me by the people of this country, and I will continue to treasure and draw inspiration from them in the years to come…

"Once again, on this eve of a new year, I wish all of you health, tranquility and happiness beside your loved ones.

After the speech to the nation, the Imperial Family took turns to come forward and convey their own New Year's wishes to the Emperor himself. When that was over, the broadcast switched to the start of the New Year's Gala.

Meanwhile, Liu Hong and Zi Wei went into the kitchen to retrieve the dumpling dough and bowl of fillings they had prepared earlier. When they came out, Liu Hong also clutched a handful of aprons, and she gave one each to Liu Qing and Xiao Yan. "You two roll the wrappers; Zi Wei and I will fill."

"Okay, I admit, that was slightly disconcerting," Xiao Yan said, as they got into making the dumplings while the Gala played in the background.

"What was?" Zi Wei asked.

"Watching that speech, now that I actually know Yong Qi. I mean, before, I always felt like I was watching a…I don't know…a scene from a movie. I never could even wrap my head around the fact that it's happening in real time, let alone with real people. Now, it feels different. I can't explain why."

"I find it weird, every year, that half the country gathers around and listen to this speech when we know it must be written for the emperor by other people. And yet we treat it as words spoken off-the-cuff and from the heart," Liu Qing said.

"I'm not sure just because it's pre-written by someone else means that it wasn't delivered from the heart," Zi Wei said. "I'm sure in something like a New Year speech, the emperor would get to veto what he doesn't want to say."

"Why do you watch it every year if you find it weird?" Xiao Yan asked.

Liu Qing shrugged. "Everyone's sentimental around this time and it's all so infectious. I can never tell if I watch because I want to watch, or just because everyone else is watching and there's nothing else on anyway."

"You could have just done the dishes to avoid the speech," Xiao Yan pointed out. Both Zi Wei and Liu Hong laughed.

"And saved you the work?" Liu Hong asked. Xiao Yan grinned.
Liu Qing rolled his eyes and refused to rise to their baits. Instead, he wondered, "Do you think the family's wishes are pre-written too?"

"Probably," his sister said. "They always follow a theme, every year, and both the messages and the wording are always almost impersonal."

"I'm not sure I'd call it impersonal," Zi Wei said thoughtfully.

"Of course it's impersonal," Xiao Yan scoffed. "I mean, this is just duty, right? They're a symbol of the nation, so here they are, on the most important holiday of the nation, being symbolic. I mean, what kid nowadays stand solemnly in front of their father and wish him longevity?"

"I think you're being a little cynical," Zi Wei said. "Normal people do prepare wishes for their family for New Year."

"I think Xiao Yan's point is that normal people don't do it in this staged a manner," Liu Qing said.

"Well, they are on camera and it's a ceremony," Zi Wei pointed out. "I'm sure in private they offer each other more intimate wishes. Obviously there are things that can't be said when there's a camera pointed at them and a feed going out live to a billion people."

"I do feel bad for them, actually," Liu Hong said. "It's got to suck to give up part of your own celebration every year like that."

"Well, it's only fifteen minutes, and then they're released to their private celebrations," Xiao Yan said blithely. "It's not like they have to cook their own dinner."

Liu Hong gave her a sideway look. "I'm surprised you didn't get yourself an invitation to that private celebration, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan snorted. "Okay, you're really barking up the wrong tree here!"

"Maybe next year," Zi Wei said cheekily.

Xiao Yan glared and impulsively threw the handful of flour in her hand at Zi Wei, who screamed and tried to dodge; the flour hit Liu Qing beside her instead. As Zi Wei turned away and coughed discreetly, Liu Qing decided to retaliate.

Needless to say, it took a good long while, all four of them being covered in flour, much laughter and Xiao Yan nearly knocking the entire tray of dumplings to the floor before they could resume their earlier tasks and move on to another topic of conversation.

Later, they went up to the roof of the building to watch the firework display, which would be shot from a bridge nearby. It was cold; Xiao Yan had to shift from foot to foot and blow into her hands to keep warm, but the display would be worth it. Besides, the temperature wasn't important when she was up here with the three people who meant the most to her in the world.

As the display started, she felt her phone vibrate in the pocket of her jeans. Pulling it out, she found a text from Yong Qi, sent barely two minutes after midnight. The message was simple enough – Happy new year! We should meet up soon. Just let me know when you're free and I'll see if I can get out of boring duty calls – but it made her feel stupidly elated.

Glancing up, she saw that Zi Wei was looking at her knowingly, but this time, Xiao Yan couldn't be bothered to be annoyed. She just grinned and Zi Wei laughed, throwing her arm around Xiao Yan's
As fireworks popped, boomed and crackled, Xiao Yan typed a quick reply to Yong Qi. Then, stuffing the phone back into her pocket, she put one arm around Zi Wei's waist and the other around Liu Hong on her other side. As she looked up at the glowing sky to see a fire flower bloom then fall like shooting stars in the darkness, she realised that this was the happiest she'd felt in a long time. She was immensely grateful for this night, for Liu Qing, Liu Hong, Zi Wei, and oddly, Yong Qi, too.

Her heart felt like it was bursting into a thousand warm sparks like the fireworks were doing overhead and she couldn't help shouting into the black of the night: "Happy new year!"

"Where are we going?" Xiao Yan asked, as Yong Qi and Er Tai lead her into an alleyway. "You know, they tell cautionary stories to girls about following two guys into a deep, dark alley."

Er Tai laughed. "Don't worry, you won't regret coming with us."

"Where?" she pressed. She was only really following the sound of their footsteps by now, and resisted the urge to use her phone as a flashlight. She got the feeling that neither Yong Qi nor Er Tai needed to see to know where they were going. It didn't seem like there was anyone following them, and Xiao Yan wondered where Yong Qi's guards were. Or maybe they were just that quiet? She hadn't seen Er Kang anywhere near them, so it didn't seem like he was on today's duty roster though.

"To the best shui jiao you'll ever eat," Yong Qi said.

"Shui jiao?" she asked. "It's Lunar New Year. Haven't you had enough of shui jiao?"

"You can't ever get enough of this shui jiao," Er Tai announced, reaching out and pulling open a door that, in the dark, Xiao Yan couldn't even see.

The door opened to an assault on the senses. Despite it still being the holidays and there weren't many students left on campus, the smallish room behind the door was jammed packed with people sitting at wobbly, unpolished wooden tables on metal stools. It took Xiao Yan one blink to adjust to the light in the room, and another to realise that the place could, under extreme circumstances, be called a restaurant. There was something about the way the room was set up and how crowded it was that made it seem like the din was more deafening than it actually was.

"Welcome to the best, worst kept secret around Yong Le," Yong Qi said, pulling her into the crowded room. With Yong Qi leading and Er Tai behind her, they weaved through tables and avoided the light-footed waitress, who didn't bat an eyelash at the sight of the prince, to find an empty table at the back of the room.

"It's frankly a crime that you have been at university for so long and haven't discovered this place yet," Er Tai added.

"How does anyone ever discover a place like this?" she asked, bewildered. She sat down, facing the door while Yong Qi and Er Tai took seats on either side of her. She looked around, and realised that it wasn't just the waitress, but everyone else paid them no mind at all. All the customers in the room were perfectly focused on their individual bowls of dumpling soup and acted as if a prince didn't just casually stroll into this really quite unglamorous establishment.

"Word of mouth, mostly," Yong Qi explained. "You sort of have to know where it is to find it. Obviously."

"Obviously, because it's a hole in the wall at the end of a deep, dark, scary alleyway?" Xiao Yan
Er Tai grinned. "Exactly."

Xiao Yan shrugged, resisting the urge to mention that she was feeling quite impressed that they obviously frequented a place like this. Instead, she turned to Yong Qi and asked. "Where are your usual tails?"

"There's no room in here for them to move, so they're outside." He nodded to a corner of the room. "Security camera," he said, giving a playful smile and a little wave.

Xiao Yan twisted in her seat to find that there were indeed cameras installed in the four corners of the room. They looked somehow wildly out of place for this otherwise very humble place. It was obvious that they were installed for imperial security benefits, because what would anyone steal in this place? Chopsticks? With the cashier standing guard by the narrow door, there was little chance anyone could eat and run.

The waitress appeared by their table, looking expectant. Xiao Yan wondered how she was supposed to know what to order, when no actual menu had been given to them, or available on the table or the walls, which were exposed bricks, bare of even plaster or a paint job.

Neither Yong Qi nor Er Tai seemed to need a menu, and both apparently felt it was necessary that they ordered for her. Er Tai held up three fingers and spoke loudly over the noise, "Three large, please."

Before Xiao Yan could ask how large was large – by now she gathered that she was eating dumpling soup – the waitress already floated away after a curt nod.

"You guys come here often?" Xiao Yan asked, deciding to trust Yong Qi and Er Tai for the moment. They had to lean towards to each other to be able to hear each other clearly.

"As I said, the best dumplings you'll ever eat," Yong Qi said, pulling chopsticks out of the container on the table and wiping them on the paper napkins from a woven basket. It was an entirely perfunctory action; if the chopsticks were dirty in a way that would actually cause any harm, obviously no level of vigorous wiping them on paper was going to actually prevent that.

He handed a pair to Xiao Yan. She smiled in thank.

"Sometimes I think Yong Qi likes it here because hardly cares who he is here," Er Tai said, taking another pair of chopstick from Yong Qi.

"But they're all students, aren't they?" she asked.

"Yeah but since this place is pretty much only findable by people who know where it is," Er Tai said, "most people who come here are regulars, so the novelty of seeing Yong Qi wears off."

"There are odd looks every now and then, but honestly, would you start speaking to a stranger in this ruckus?" Yong Qi asked, grinning.

"Probably not," Xiao Yan admitted.

"It's a good place to discuss things you don't want other people to overhear," Er Tai said. "It's a little hard to concentrate on eavesdropping in here."

Xiao Yan laughed.
The waitress appeared again with a tray, laden with three large, steaming bowls.

At first glance, what was placed before Xiao Yan was an entirely unremarkable-looking bowl of dumplings and bok choy in broth, except that it was the biggest bowl of soup she'd ever seen.

"You didn't tell me large was this large!" she exclaimed. She turned some of the dumplings over with her chopstick and counted at least fifteen.

Er Tai laughed while Yong Qi said, grinning, "This really isn't the time and place to worry about your diet, Xiao Yan."

"Oh ha ha," she said sarcastically. "Not on a diet. I just really don't think I can finish this much."

"Want to bet?" Yong Qi asked challengingly.

Er Tai was happily ignoring both of them, his mouth already full of dumplings.

Xiao Yan merely raised an eyebrow at Yong Qi and asked, "What's the bet?"

"Eat before it gets cold," he said. "We can sort out the bet later. But I guarantee you'll finish that bowl."

She gave him another sceptical look, but nonetheless picked up a dumpling with her chopsticks.

The first bite was so good, Xiao Yan actually moaned and wanted to melt into the soup altogether.

"Told you it was good," Er Tai said.

Xiao Yan swallowed the bite. "To be fair, I never said I didn't believe you it would be good."

After that, their attention was occupied by their respective bowls of dumplings. Xiao Yan ended up finishing it all, broth and all. At first, she thought she'd leave one dumpling just to prove a point, but they were so good that in the end, she couldn't bear to. She was so full when she finished that there was danger of sinking blissfully into a food coma, and yet Xiao Yan couldn't help but think that she wanted more. Or, at the very least, she needed to come back here again.

"So what's the bet?" Er Tai asked after he waved the waitress over again and asked for a pot of tea. Yong Qi was grinning at Xiao Yan like the Cheshire cat.

She was saved from actually answering, however, when her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out and said apologetically, "I should probably take this."

"Take it outside," Yong Qi advised, which Xiao Yan didn't need, because it was clearly going to be impossible to have a phone conversation amid the noise. With a swift smile, she tried to make her way out of the crowded room without bumping into tables, people or raised trays full of hot broth.

"So, are you actually going to ask her out at some point, or can I?" Er Tai asked.

Yong Qi had been watching Xiao Yan leave, and even now, when she already disappeared behind the door, he was still staring intently in its direction. It was as if he was handing Er Tai an opening for the conversation he had been particularly eager to have on a plate.

Turning to face Er Tai, Yong Qi looked startled. "What?" he exclaimed. Er Tai hid a smile when his friend winced because his voice came out louder than was even necessary and probably more so than he intended.
"Xiao Yan," Er Tai clarified needlessly.

"I – that's – " he stammered. Er Tai just kept a perfectly straight face, which made Yong Qi look even more flustered. He seemed suddenly very interested in the empty tea cup in front of him, and there was something like dread in his voice as he asked, "Do you like her?"

"Yeah," Er Tai replied, shrugging. "She's cool."

"Oh." Yong Qi looked away, suddenly unable to meet Er Tai's eyes. "Okay."

Er Tai watched as his friend clenched one hand into a fist briefly, before reaching out and pouring himself a cup of now lukewarm tea, which he then proceeded to ignore. It made Er Tai simultaneously wanted to laugh and sigh in exasperation. He leaned in closer and pressed, "'Okay'? What does that mean?"

"So ask her out," Yong Qi replied, shrugging in a way that was too deliberately casual to be sincere.

Er Tai raised an incredulous eyebrow. "You don't mind?"

Yong Qi was still avoiding looking at him. "No. Why would I mind?"

Er Tai snorted with laughter. "You are so pathetic."

"What?" Yong Qi snapped, finally looking up, annoyed.

A less intimate friend would probably have recognised the implied boundaries now and stopped the interrogation. Unfortunately for Yong Qi, Er Tai wasn't, and the more defensive he tried to act, the more Er Tai wanted to pursue the subject. It wasn't that he was enjoying Yong Qi's discomfort, exactly, and looking back later, Yong Qi would definitely see what Er Tai was seeing. Yong Qi's interest in Xiao Yan was just too marked, and it was puzzling that he hadn't indicated any intention of doing something about it.

Er Tai could try to beat around the bush a little more, hoping that Yong Qi would get the hint. Alternatively, he could just be blunt. "If you like her that much, why haven't you asked her out yet?"

Yong Qi finally turned to stare at Er Tai suspiciously. "What is this about?"

"Honestly I don't know if Xiao Yan is deliberately being oblivious, because it's so obvious that you fancy her," Er Tai said, keeping his voice deliberately light.

"I do not –"

But Yong Qi's weak protest only confirmed the opposite, and made Er Tai laugh even harder. "I saw it, you know. How you totally froze up when she moaned over her food."

"Er Tai!" Yong Qi hissed. He looked up, panic in his eyes, as if he expected Xiao Yan to have suddenly appeared behind him and overheard. Er Tai wondered whether Yong Qi thought he wouldn't notice that. Though reassured Xiao Yan wasn't there to hear their discussion, from the way he was looking increasingly flushed, it had obviously also occurred to Yong Qi that she could have noticed his reaction earlier.

Er Tai suppressed his own amusement and offered, before his friend could die of mortification on the spot, "I think she was too caught in the food to notice, though." He had to admit that his attempt at a reassuring tone was probably not effective when accompanied by a mischievous grin. Also, he couldn't help adding, "For you, it's probably a good thing. I was a bit disappointed; it'd have been
funny to see her reaction."

"Just stop talking," Yong Qi growled through clenched teeth.

Er Tai cheerfully ignored his warning tone. "Just ask her out, already."

"You just said you wanted to – "

For someone not unintelligent, Yong Qi was being very obtuse. Still, for the sake of his friend's happiness, Er Tai was willing to be patient. "I was trying to goad you into admitting that you like her."

Yong Qi glowered but didn't say anything.

Er Tai tried another tactic. Tilting his head curiously, he asked, "If I do ask her out, what would you do, exactly?"

"Nothing."

"You actually won't try to stop me, would you?"

"Why would I?"

"Because you do like her. Even if you wouldn't admit it."

"Er Tai, you can do whatever you want, and Xiao Yan can do whatever she wants. So ask her out, if she say yes, that's her choice. I'm not going to get in the way of either of that," Yong Qi said, sounding sincere but also profoundly unhappy.

Er Tai wondered if it was time to just spell it out. Then again, the fact that Xiao Yan reduced him to this state probably said a lot.

"You would actually encourage me to go after the girl you like?"

Yong Qi gave a decidedly doleful smile. "You are more important to me than her. So, yes."

Feeling enormously touched, Er Tai drew a sharp, involuntary breath. And yet, he wondered how Yong Qi still couldn't get it.

"You know I'd totally wingman for you, right?" he finally said quietly, voice free of any trace of teasing now.

Yong Qi stared at him. "But – "

Er Tai sighed. "Look, do I like Xiao Yan? Yes. Do I fancy her? Possibly. And maybe it's really only a matter of time before we start fancying the same girl. But you are more important to me than her, too, you know."

"What are you saying?" Yong Qi asked slowly.

"That I'd totally wingman for you. I wasn't seriously considering asking her out."

Yong Qi looked, of all expressions, guilty. "Er Tai – "

Er Tai laughed easily. "Yong Qi, as I believe I've said, it's so very obvious that you are far more gone than me. I'm not going to break your heart for a girl I might, maybe, vaguely fancy, not when
she doesn't even realise how much she smiles and blushes around you or at mentions of you.”

Yong Qi frowned. "Is that true?"

"What, that she smiles and blushes around you?" Er Tai shrugged. "Yeah."

Still, Yong Qi was suspicious. "You're just saying that, right?"

Er Tai rolled his eyes. "Oh, for Heaven's sake! Just – you like her, so do something about it! Why do you need to think about me?"

"Because now that you've brought it up, of course I have to!"

"Yong Qi, I don't know how I could make it clearer. I was just teasing you. I don't mind if you ask her out. In fact, I'd prefer you put all of us out our misery and do it."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You are half way to being in love with her and it's wearying to see you try and futilely resist that for some insane reason that probably only makes sense to you right now. Honestly, when you said you were taking her here, I didn't think you'd ask me to tag along, but then I thought maybe you didn't think this was a very ideal first date location, and it may not actually be conventional, but nothing about the two of you is conventional. So, I don't get it."

It took a long moment, but finally Yong Qi admitted, "I don't want to ruin it if – when – she says no."

"When?" Even as frustrating as Yong Qi had been during this entire conversation, Er Tai couldn't find a reason to justify this new height of uncharacteristic pessimism. "Since when are you suddenly so insecure?"

"I don't know. I just…She doesn't seem like the type to be particularly...in awe of what I have to offer. Materially, I mean."

Er Tai was still confused. "Last I checked, you don't want a girl who would be in awe of what you have to offer materially."

"I don't," Yong Qi said. "But in that case, what reason does she have to accept me?"

"What reason?" Er Tai asked, incredulous. "Because she likes you? That is possible, you know. I wasn't just teasing you. From where I stand, there is a definitely possibility that she likes you back."

"That's not the only issue though."

"Of course it's not," was the dismissive reply, "but all those come after, don't they? Why are you suddenly putting the cart before the horse? I'm suggesting that you ask her out on a date, not marry her!"

"But it's still going to complicated enough and if it happens at all, I want it to work."

Er Tai stared at him for a long moment. "So basically, you want it to work so badly that you'd not even try for fear that it won't? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"I never said it's not stupid," Yong Qi replied with a sigh. "And maybe you're right, that she likes me enough to say yes, but no matter what it'd be massively complicated. Maybe I just want to enjoy her company and be her friend for now."
"Until when? You know, even you are capable of missing the boat."

"I'm not going to ask her out just to prevent someone else doing the same thing!"

That was, of course, not what Er Tai was trying to say at all. But before he could answer, Xiao Yan reappeared in at the door and made her way back to their table.

"Hey, sorry, I should go. Zi Wei's friend is coming to visit and I promised to go pick her up with Zi Wei. She took an earlier train, apparently, so we have to go to the station earlier than I expected," she said as soon as they were near enough to hear each other.

Er Tai looked from Xiao Yan to Yong Qi, who shot him a warning glare which, unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one's perspective, Xiao Yan completely missed.

"Yong Qi can walk you back to your dorm. I have to meet someone soon anyway," Er Tai announced.

Yong Qi's eyebrows drew together so slightly, but apparently not wanting to bring attention to the giant unfinished conversational elephant between him and Er Tai, he didn't argue, which suited Er Tai just fine. Xiao Yan nodded in distracted agreement. They went over to the counter at the front of the room to pay, and there was the unavoidable tussle over whether to split the bill or not.

In the end, Yong Qi announced, "I won the bet, I get to pay."

Xiao Yan laughed. "I thought you win the bet, you don't have to pay?"

"Don't argue," Er Tai said, making a show at looking at his watch. "I'm in a hurry. You can pay next time you two go out if you want, but I never turn him down when he wants to pay for me. He's only doing that now because you're here."

Er Tai felt a sharp pain in his instep, and though glaring at Yong Qi, he had to admit being quite impressed that Yong Qi managed stomping on his foot so hard in such a cramped place without drawing obvious attention. If Xiao Yan noticed, she probably thought Er Tai's comment about paying merited that, rather than there being any hidden meaning to what he said. *Pity.*

Yong Qi glanced at the cashier, who was growing impatient, and finally Xiao Yan reluctantly gave in just so they could clear the space.

When the three of them were clear of the alley, before either Yong Qi or Xiao Yan could protest or hold him back, Er Tai made quick excuses and swiftly took off.

"You really don't have to walk me back," Xiao Yan said.

"I'd like to," Yong Qi said with a smile.

"Okay."

"I'm surprised you didn't ask Zi Wei to come along with you today," Yong Qi said. "I usually see you guys together more than not."

"Yeah, but even considering the fact that we live together, we've been seeing too much of each other all through the holidays. All our other friends have hometowns and family to come back to and spend time with, leaving us two hapless orphans to spend all our time together."

"Zi Wei didn't go back to Jinan?"
"She doesn't have anyone close enough left over there to want to deal with the hassle of traveling in the holidays," Xiao Yan explained. "Of course, that means that with practically everything closed and everyone at home, we are stuck in our room with nothing on TV but reruns of old Qiong Yao series and coverage of spring time imperial engagements. So thanks for that. Made me think we probably shouldn't have bothered borrowing the TV from Ling Xin from next door."

They both laughed.

"It's really strange," she added in a tone of wonder.

"The TV program this time of year?" Yong Qi asked, confused. "It's always been like that."

Xiao Yan chuckled. "No, not the program. I mean, just the fact that I've seen you more on TV the last couple of weeks than in real life."

He smiled. "You see, I really wasn't kidding about boring duty calls."

"I never thought you were. It can be disconcerting, though."

"How so?"

She thought about a moment about how to put it all into words. "Well, you know the broadcast of your father's speech on new year's eve? I've seen many of them, but in previous years, that scene never quite seemed real. I mean, logically I know everything is supposed to be happening in real time and was being broadcast live, but I've always felt like I was watching the whole speech ceremony through a curtain, or I was sneaking a look into some past century. I think it's something to do with the fact that there's nothing modern to see."

Yong Qi laughed. "Through a TV screen, maybe there isn't. But if you've ever seen the preparations for one of those broadcast...Every year, the crew arrives at Tai He Dian at three and spends the entire afternoon setting up lights and microphones and cameras for that fifteen minutes broadcast."

"Yeah, that's what I meant. I know I'm watching this through a live TV broadcast, so there must be modern equipment involved. But I guess from the safe distance of a TV, all I see are...are, I don't know, relics. I mean, obviously I don't see the lights or cameras. I just see the ridiculously carved tables and chairs and the freaking throne with cushions that are probably five times as old as I am."

"They are, actually," Yong Qi said. "The cushions, I mean. But everything else as well."

"It also doesn't help that you and your family are all in full length court robes complete with dragon embroidery, looking like you've just walked out of a painting."

Yong Qi looked amused at Xiao Yan's expression of bewilderment.

"Well, it is the most important traditional celebration of the year, so of course we do have to be in full traditional ceremonial wear," he said. "Although, even the most traditional celebration can't bring back the queue hairstyle."

"The modern hairstyle is hidden by your hats anyway. Which, I might add, are still fur and velvet, peacock-feathered and ruby-topped. I guess what I mean is, before I knew you, that whole fifteen minutes, to me, never seemed anything more than theatrics. Now, it's weird, because I look at it, and I know you, so it is a little more real, but at the same time, the whole thing still feels like it should belong in a movie, or a period series, or a page of a history book. The mismatch is mind-boggling."

She shook her head slightly. "Though I suppose, you are what history is made of."
It took Yong Qi several thoughtful beats to be able to answer. "Honestly, it doesn't feel like that," he said. "I suppose, that is what it is, in reality, but it never feels like it when you're living it. Of course, I understand how the costumes and the prop add to the feeling that the whole thing is not of this world. A couple of decades ago, the illusion would have been somewhat ruined by large microphones. But now microphones are small enough to be hidden in our clothes. But I can guarantee you, in that throne room and dressed in all that heavy gold-thread embroidery, every single one of my siblings and I have, at some point, daydreamed of the moment when all the ceremonies were over and we can go some place where we can wear jeans again."

Xiao Yan laughed. "You know what I always expect to happen in these ceremonies, but never actually does?"

"What?"

"I don't know, maybe I watch too many dramas, but I can't shake the feeling that all the ceremonies should start off with 'wan sui, wan sui, wan wan sui' and end with the same."

Yong Qi joined in her laughter. "We can keep our half-millennium-old throne and the dragon robes, but wishing the emperor to live ten thousand years is a little excessive in the twenty-first century, Xiao Yan."

"You wished him longevity on New Year's Eve," she pointed out.

"Yes, attainable old age, not unrealistic expectations of ten thousand years," he replied dryly. "The wan sui and qian sui went the way of court-related honourifics like zhen, chen and qing years ago." With a grin, he added, "Of course, that doesn't stop our younger generation from using all of it in some ironic form when we want to rile each other up. Never to our parents, though."

"Your ancestors must be turning in their graves," Xiao Yan said, giggling.

"I'm pretty sure they did that the moment my great-great-grandfather cut off his queue."

By this time, they had reached Xiao Yan's dormitory building.

"Well, thank you for sharing your secret eating place with me," she said.

"It's only a secret if you don't know where it is," Yong Qi replied. "If anything, thank you for agreeing to have lunch with me, so that I have an excuse to go eat somewhere I don't actually have to put on a tie. There's way too much of that around this time of year."

She gave him a toothy grin. "In that case, if you ever need rescuing you from tie-mandatory meals again, I'm totally your person."
After Yong Qi left, Xiao Yan didn't bother to go up to her room and only sent Zi Wei a text telling her to come downstairs.

"Sorry, somehow I totally misread the arrival time Jin Suo sent me the other day," Zi Wei said as she arrived.

"Relax, it's fine," Xiao Yan said. "We'll still make it in time."

As they made their way to the underground station that would take them to the train station, Xiao Yan asked, "Are you going to tell Jin Suo about that package we found in your mother's guqin box?"

Zi Wei hesitated. "I don't know. Should I?"

"What do you want to do? I know you've been thinking about it, Zi Wei."

"I just – I just feel like it's this enormous Pandora's box that I'm just going to regret opening," Zi Wei said with a sigh.

"But it can't be that destructive, if your mother left it for you to find. She knew you've always wanted to know, and she must have decided that whatever that package contained, it was okay for you to know after she died?" Xiao Yan tried to reason.

"You don't understand how much of a change in policy this is for my mother. All my life, she never talked about my father if she could help it. I literally didn't know his name until I saw that envelope. And honestly I assume Bao Li is his name based on the date. It could be about something entirely unrelated for all I know. So whatever that envelope contains, if it's about my father, it must explain why she'd been so silent all these years when it came to him. The sheer scale of the information terrifies me."

"Well, maybe that's why you shouldn't look at it alone. That's why you should tell Jin Suo about it. I think she could give you insights that I probably can't. You guys grew up together, this is something you could confide in her about, right?"

"Yes, but honestly…Jin Suo would just tell me to get over myself and find out what my mother wants to tell me. I love her, but she's always thought my mother was unfair to me to keep that kind of information secret, and that I should have known years ago."

"And you want someone to tell you that you should just forget about it, burn it and never find out what it says? That's why you gave the envelope to me?"

"Maybe," Zi Wei reluctantly admitted.

"Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said gently. "You know I can't do that, right? I don't know enough about the situation to be able to give that kind of advice or make that decision for you."

"I know," Zi Wei replied, letting out a slow breath.
Xiao Yan didn't press to continue the conversation much beyond this, but Zi Wei spent the rest of the way to the train station in a pre-occupied state. By the time they got the crowded station, Xiao Yan assumed that there was no way Zi Wei could keep her mind on the matter of her parents, as they had to keep their wits about them to not lose each other in the crowd.

"Are you sure we can find her like this?" Xiao Yan asked, sounding and feeling winded as just a moment earlier, someone had elbowed her hard in the head. "Maybe we should have just stayed in one place and let her come find us."

"Jin Suo texted me the carriage number," Zi Wei said, weaving through throngs of people. "Here, number ten. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah," Xiao Yan answered, staying close to Zi Wei. "I'll be fine."

Their vision was constantly obstructed by the crowd, so Zi Wei had to crane her neck about to look for her friend. Xiao Yan, not knowing who to look for, occupied herself with rubbing the sore spot on her head and clutching her bag to herself and keeping an eye on Zi Wei's.

"Zi Wei!" a voice called.

"Jin Suo!"

A girl about their age pushed through the crowd and threw her arms around Zi Wei. The suitcase, which she just let go of abruptly, wobbled behind her, and Xiao Yan reached out to steady it, before it fell into someone.

"Finally! It's so great to see you!" Jin Suo pulled away and looked Zi Wei up and down. "Beijing suits you, apparently."

"Missed you too!" Zi Wei laughed.

Jin Suo's attention finally diverted from Zi Wei and noticed Xiao Yan beside them.

"Jin Suo, this is my roommate, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said.

"Hi," Xiao Yan said brightly.

"Hi. Thank you for letting me crash in your room," Jin Suo said, less exuberantly, but with a polite smile nonetheless.

Xiao Yan waved her hand easily. "Nah, anything for Zi Wei. Or Zi Wei's friend, as is the case. We should probably try and get out of this crowd, though."

"Yes, let's," Zi Wei agreed.

Jin Suo was reaching for her suitcase again, but Xiao Yan still had a hold on it.

"I've got it," she said.

"No, really you don't have to – "

"It's fine, really," Xiao Yan said with a smile. "You two need to catch up. Let me handle it."

Jin Suo's smile widened appreciatively. Despite this, there wasn't much talking done as the three of them struggled their way out of the crowd and into the streets again.
"I have to ask though, are you staying a week or a year?" Xiao Yan asked breathlessly, looking down the suitcase she was dragging, which was comically large for a one-week trip. "Not that I mind if you are staying longer, and I'm sure Zi Wei would be thrilled, but don't you go to school in Jinan?"

"That's not all my stuff," Jin Suo said with a laugh. Turning to Zi Wei, she said, "You know how my mother asked if you had a fridge, or at least somewhere to store food? Well, either she thinks you're living on instant noodle or that you can't get all this stuff in Beijing, but she's sent me with probably enough Shandong food to feed you for a year."

"That can't all be food," Zi Wei said, eyeing the suitcase dubiously.

"It is," Jin Suo intoned gravely. "It's my mother, of course it is."

"I guess we should take a detour to Hui Bin Lou to poach on their fridge?" Xiao Yan asked cheerfully.

In the end, this was what they ended up doing. On the way, they laid down plans of how to best show Jin Suo around all the places that needed to be visited in Beijing during her week-long stay.

The next couple of days were full of carrying out those plans, dragging themselves out of bed early in the morning to enjoy the sights and sounds of Beijing, wandering its streets, which was beginning to fill with people again, but still far less crowded than normal days in the year.

Both Zi Wei and Xiao Yan tried to ignore their previous discussion about whether to mention anything about the possible information on Zi Wei's father to Jin Suo until the third day, when a heavy snow storm made them stay inside.

All three were restless, being trapped in the small room, which admittedly looked slightly even more claustrophobic in its current set up. Originally, the plan had been that Zi Wei and Jin Suo would squeeze into Zi Wei's single bed, but then it became far more sensible to move the desks out of the way, and push the two beds together in the middle of the room to make a big double-ish-sized bed for all three of them. The drawback of this obviously was the loss of the space in the middle of the room, which made it feel more cramped.

Currently, Xiao Yan was sitting on Zi Wei's desk, which had swapped places with her bed and was now placed against the window sill. She stared out at the heavy snow fall outside the window while Zi Wei and Jin Suo sat on the bed, going through their photos of the last few days on Zi Wei's laptop.

"Oh god, I can't believe you took this photo," Jin Suo was saying. "I look like a complete mess, the wind was blowing in my eyes and ... Zi Wei?"

Xiao Yan turned her head to them, to find that Jin Suo was peering at Zi Wei with a frown on her face. Zi Wei, meanwhile, seemed to be lost in thought and not listening at all.

"Zi Wei!"

Jin Suo's call broke Zi Wei out of her reverie. "Huh? Oh, I'm sorry, I was just – "

She trailed off, chewing on her bottom lip nervously.

"Are you all right?" Jin Suo asked. "You've been really distracted all morning."

"Yeah, yeah," Zi Wei said, still sounding as if her mind was miles away, "I'm just – "
Again, Zi Wei didn't finish her sentence. Jin Suo looked over at Xiao Yan questioningly, and she could only shrug. She could easily guess what was on Zi Wei's mind, but to mention it at all had to be Zi Wei's decision.

After a long stretch of silence, Zi Wei finally took a deep breath and looked at Jin Suo. "I've been thinking a lot about something. You know how my mother never told me who my father was?"

"Yes," Jin Suo answered warily, her eyes flicking to Xiao Yan, as if wondering how much of Zi Wei's past she was aware of.

Xiao Yan didn't say anything. She only slid off the desk and walked over to sit on the edge of the bed beside Zi Wei.

"Well, my mother may have left me something that may finally answer all my questions about my father," Zi Wei said in a voice that was shaking slightly. "I haven't been able to open it since I found it, but...maybe it's time I faced it."

"Your mother actually left you answers about your father?" Jin Suo repeated, amazed.

"I'm not sure. I found a package in her guqin with, I think, papers that might have information, but I haven't looked at any of it," Zi Wei answered, clenching her fist once as if to give herself strength. "But you're here...with the two of you here, I think maybe...maybe I finally can, now."

Jin Suo stared in shock for a moment, before gasping as the meaning of Zi Wei's words finally sunk in. "Oh, you want to look into that package with you?"

"Yes, would you, please?"

There was something quite desperate in Zi Wei's small voice, that also indicated she was scared one or both of them would refuse, and that she would not be able to face whatever her mother left for her if that were the case. Xiao Yan exchanged a swift look with Jin Suo; even though they didn't know each other as well as they both would have liked when faced with a situation like this, they silently understood that Zi Wei's need for support from both of them was the most important thing. It was easy to reach a mutual decision.

"Oh, Zi Wei, of course, of course. If you need us, of course we'd be there for you," Jin Suo said, squeezing her arm, though she still looked rather shocked by the whole development.

Zi Wei looked over to Xiao Yan with a nervous smile. "Xiao Yan, will you get the package we found in my mother's guqin, please?"

Xiao Yan took the package from where she hid it in her suitcase, then settled on the bed next to Zi Wei, who was now sandwiched between her and Jin Suo.

As she handed the envelope to Zi Wei, she couldn't help asking, "You sure you want to do this?"

Zi Wei took a deep breath. "Yes," she said, before opening the package and, with shaking hands, unstuck the flash drive from its post-it note and plugged it into the computer.

Jin Suo reached over to squeeze her hand.

There was a single file on the drive: a video. For a moment, Zi Wei simply stared at it on the computer screen, frozen.
"I'm not sure what I expected, exactly," she said, her voice cracking. "But –"

Jin Suo pulled the laptop away from Zi Wei and looked at her seriously. "Zi Wei, this might be a video of your mum. Do you want – Are you sure you want to look at it with us?"

"Yes," Zi Wei said, nodding. Her voice was still unstable, but she looked determined. "I mean, I've gone through photos of her – of us – since then…I know this will be different, but I think I can handle it. I think I'll be able to handle it better with the two of you here."

"We can always stop if it becomes too much," Xiao Yan pointed out. "Or Jin Suo and I could leave if you need to be by yourself."

Zi Wei nodded. Jin Suo observed her intensely for another moment, as if trying to judge if Zi Wei was really was up to this, before placing the laptop back down on the mattress in front of Zi Wei. She crossed her legs to get into a more comfortable position, and took a deep breath.

"Here goes," Zi Wei murmured, clicking on the file.

The face of a woman in her late forties, looking remarkably like Zi Wei, bloomed on the screen. She was sitting at a table, with what was probably a laptop in front of her, whose webcam was filming this. She looked worn out and pale. Xiao Yan wondered whether this was due to her illness or dread of the subject she was about to speak of.

As her mother's face appeared, Zi Wei sucked in a noisy breath, obviously still taken off-guard. Before her mother could begin to speak, she hastily paused the video, drawing her hand away from the computer just as quickly, as if burnt.

Silently, both Jin Suo and Xiao Yan each took one of her hand and held it tightly.

"I'm all right," Zi Wei whispered, closing her eyes and trying to calm her breathing. Xiao Yan could tell she wasn't really speaking to either of them, but more to herself. "Really."

Xiao Yan only let go of Zi Wei's hand to reach behind them and rub soothing circles on her back.

It took several more moments before Zi Wei was in enough control of herself to press 'Play'. On the screen, it took several moments of bracing herself, too, before Xia Yu He could bring herself to speak. When she finally did, she said, "Zi Wei, I made this to tell you about your father."

Xiao Yan could feel Zi Wei's shoulders tense up and she was clenching her fists. It was unclear whether it was due to hearing her mother's voice again, or because of her actual words. Still, she let the video play on.

On her other side, Jin Suo had also let go of Zi Wei's hand, and was leaning her head on Zi Wei's shoulder in order to see into the screen more easily.

"Perhaps I shouldn't, perhaps I should just take this to the grave with me, but you have always asked, and it always pained me that I have never been able to tell you the truth…" Yu He continued.

There was a pause, in which Xia Yu He clearly tried to gather herself for what was coming. Xiao Yan kept her eyes pasted on the woman on the screen, feeling that Zi Wei probably didn't want to be observed now. Still, she could hear Zi Wei swallowing hard in anticipation.

"I met your father at an after-party of one of the Orchestra's concerts," in the video, Yu He recounted. "At the time, he told me he was a businessman from Beijing and I didn't think to doubt him. The thing about seeing public figures on TV and newspapers is that even if he stood in front of
you in the flesh, unless you were expecting to be told that he is the person you once glimpsed on the news, you would never think to assume that that was who he actually was. Or maybe I was just ignorant enough to not recognise him, and I'm trying to justify it now, I don't know. The point is... what I didn't realise then, the man who told me his name was Ai Bao Li, was actually the Crown Prince, son of Emperor Qingle."

"What?" was the identical reaction from all three girls, though in completely different tones. Xiao Yan's was loud enough a yell that immediately after, she wondered if the girl who lived in the room next door would bang on their door and tell them to be quiet again. Jin Suo's was a high-pitched yelp. As for Zi Wei, she could only mouth the word at the screen, staring in disbelief.

In the video, Yu He had stopped speaking and was resting her forehead down on her clasped hands on the table. Xiao Yan wondered if she stopped speaking because she was sure it would take a moment for Zi Wei to be able to digest this information and she was giving her daughter that time, or because the weight of the information she just imparted was that overwhelming for her too. It was most likely both.

Knowing Zi Wei would need much more time than the video allowed, Xiao Yan reached out and paused it.

"Zi Wei?" she called tentatively, because her roommate had yet to do anything other than just staring at the image of her mother's bowed head on the screen.

Zi Wei turned to Xiao Yan, her eyes glazed over as if she was in a dream. "What does that mean?" she asked, her voice breathless. "It can't – What does she mean?"

"I think..." Jin Suo answered on Zi Wei's other side, her every word hesitant, because she clearly was still figuring out each word she was saying, "that your mum is saying that your father is the current emperor!" Even as she said it, Jin Suo was shaking her head hard in disbelief and amazement; she clearly thought the idea was as insane as it sounded.

Just hearing Jin Suo put the obvious meaning into words made a storm of confused shock appear in Zi Wei's eyes and she snapped her head back to stare at the image of her mother. "No, no, no, no," she whispered in a shaking voice. Xiao Yan had never heard Zi Wei sound quite so scared before. "That's impossible! It can't be possible!"

Xiao Yan, too, felt as if she was trapped in a constant loop of logic and disbelief. It was impossible to not draw the same conclusion as Jin Suo, but at the same time the very idea was crazy and impossible. It could only be a figment of their imagination! Surely they had all misheard what Yu He said! That couldn't be what she meant! Surely they were all dreaming the same dream somehow...

Xiao Yan Zi's voice sounded disembodied from herself as she said the only thing she could in that moment. "Let's just keep watching."

But Zi Wei seemed unable to start the video again; she was simply staring at the computer screen, open-mouthed, her eyebrows knitted together in incredulity. In the end, Jin Suo reached out and placed her finger on the spacebar, as if waiting for Zi Wei to stop her. When she didn't, Jin Suo pressed it. The video resumed.

"He was in Jinan for something that required him to be incognito. I don't think I ever got past the cover story," Zi Wei's mother continued.

Yu Hue stopped abruptly and ran a weary hand across her face. There was a long silence, in which Xiao Yan glanced at Zi Wei. She was still staring blankly at the screen, unmoving, unblinking. She
didn't even react when Xiao Yan reached over to take her hand and entwine their fingers together. Beside her, Jin Suo shot Xiao Yan a pinched, fretful look, but neither of them knew what to say – or whether Zi Wei needed them to say anything.

In the video, Yu He spoke again. "It all happened so fast. But he was charming, and sincere… and intense. I really didn't expect it to last, because he made it clear from the beginning that he wasn't in Jinan for the long haul. But then a month later, he was telling me we should get married."

Yu He gave a shuddering breath and leaned forward on the table, burying her face in her hands. She only pulled them slightly away a moment later, still cupping her palms vertically to cover her nose and mouth.

A heavy sigh. It was echoed by her observers outside the computer screen.

"I wasn't expecting him to be the one to suggest marriage at all. Clearly affluent men like him have flings, but they don't ever want to get married. So the fact that it was he who suggested we get married somehow convinced me that maybe he felt as much as I did, or at least he wanted this to work in the long run. At that moment, if he had asked me to move to Beijing or wherever with him, I would have. So we got married."

"Oh. My. God," Xiao Yan murmured softly. She paused the video again, and exchanged another wide-eyed look of shock with Jin Suo. Zi Wei, between them, didn't move. The only sign that showed she heard her mother's words was the soundless movement of her throat when she swallowed hard. Xiao Yan opened her mouth, preparing to say something – she didn't know what – in an attempt to somehow comfort Zi Wei but this time, her friend didn't allow her to get even a word out.

"Let's just keep it going," Zi Wei said through gritted teeth, and she reached out herself to restart the video. Then, she drew her knees up close to her, tucking them under her chin and resting her cheek on the kneecaps, looking as if all the strength had been drained out of her with the information she received thus far. She was biting down on her bottom lip, and Xiao Yan thought she must be hurting herself. Maybe that was the only way Zi Wei could convince herself that what she was hearing was real and not simply some crazy dream.

"We went and registered for the marriage. He used the name Ai Bao Li, which I learnt, under certain circumstances, could be used as a legal name in lieu of his actual real name and titles. I'm not sure if this is one of those circumstances, so even now I'm not even sure whether that marriage was ever really legal," Yu He said.

Was Xia Yu He in possession of all her wits when she made this video? Xiao Yan knew nothing about medicine, but she had to wonder, this wasn't the illness talking, making this entire scenario up, was it? This entire video wasn't the result of an overdose of some pain-killer? Xiao Yan could hardly help these callous thoughts, even when she rebuked herself immediately for having them.

This was, simply put, an impossible thing. The very idea that someone could accidentally get married to the Crown Prince surely was insane. It seemed like something that could only ever be possible in a movie or a story book, but even then would still threaten to destroy the audience's suspension of disbelief. It was impossible to think something like this could happen in real life. And yet, here they were…

Out loud, Xiao Yan could say nothing. It seemed, neither could Jin Suo nor Zi Wei. The video played on. Xia Yu He's words continued to cause waves of shock to crash over them like the tide coming in.
"He told me who he really was, about a week after we registered for marriage. I – I didn't react very well."

"No kidding," Xiao Yan couldn't help but mutter. The dry tone earned her a sharp look from Jin Suo. Zi Wei didn't seem to even notice that Xiao Yan had spoken. She simply continued to stare at the screen in front of them.

"I was angry that he didn't tell me the truth, of course, and that he more or less deceived me into this situation. He gave many reasons, about how he wanted to begin a relationship that wasn't based on awe and status, but there was so much more at stake than that. It had been hardly six months since his wife died! I knew he had a wife and that she'd died, because he gave out his wife's death certificate to prove his marital status when we registered for marriage, but I didn't get a good look at it. I suppose I didn't think I needed to know. I admit now that I wasn't thinking very clearly when this all happened, so really I should have been angry at myself as much as I was angry at him."

Yu He, in the video, briefly closed her eyes in defeated exhaustion. When she opened them again, such sorrow shined in her eyes, it almost physically hurt to look at. Xiao Yan found herself looking away towards the window. This expression surely wasn't one she was meant to see. Zi Wei's mother was confiding this in her daughter, and she never intended for even Jin Suo to see all this raw emotion and hurt, let alone some girl she never met. She heard Zi Wei sniffle softly. Not knowing what she could say that would be comforting, Xiao Yan only turned back and squeezed her friend's hand tightly. She felt slightly less worried when Zi Wei managed to turn and give her a small, grateful smile.

"It wasn't even that he was the Crown Prince and would be Emperor," Yu He said, weary. "The thing that terrified me then was that he had children, very young children, and I was barely twenty-two but I'd just walked into a situation where I'd be their stepmother and yet I know nothing about them, whether they'd even accept me, or whether I could do anything for them considering they've just lost their mother. Also they all have expectations and responsibilities of their titles in the future, ones that I wouldn't know the first thing about to even help them manage. And one realisation of responsibility just drew on more...I don't think anyone could ever really imagine the mess of horrifying feelings that come when you realise you just accidentally became the Crown Princess of a nation."

"I guess this is what fairy tales never tell you," Xiao Yan murmured to no one in particular. She thought Jin Suo looked a little disapproving of her flippancy, but unexpectedly, it made Zi Wei give a short, shaking, tearful laugh.

Zi Wei must have seen Jin Suo's expression, too, because she said, "I'm all right, Jin Suo."

"Are you?" Jin Suo asked sceptically.

Zi Wei gave a rather forced-looking smile and didn't answer. She simply turned her attention back to the image of her mother on the screen.

"To this day, I still don't know what he was thinking when he said he wanted to marry me," Yu He said, her head bowed down onto her hands which were clasped as if in prayer. "Maybe he was projecting his grief of losing his wife into the need to do something spontaneous and crazy. I don't know." She raised her head and looked into the camera again. "I don't know why I thought it a good idea to marry a man I'd known for a month, either. Even if I could forgive him for his lies, being married to him had such enormous meaning now and I didn't want any of its implications. This wasn't just some small incompatibility that we could just try to work past. It was a lifetime of duty and service and responsibilities and I – "
She trailed off, her voice shaking too much to continue. It took several moments before she could regather enough of her composure to continue speaking. In that pause, the members of her audience were all lost in their separate thoughts, and were silent as well.

"I didn't know this then, of course, but obviously barely two years later, his father died and he became the Emperor. I can't tell you how relieved I was that things between us were long over then. But anyway, back to when he was still in Jinan. It was three weeks after we got married when it became utterly clear that the only logical thing to do then was that we should get a divorce. To be honest, both of us fought against that idea but what else was there to do? Because it began so suddenly and was over even more suddenly, I never felt the need to tell your grandparents who he really was."

Xiao Yan looked up in surprise. "Your grandparents didn't know who your father is either?"

Zi Wei sighed and reached out to pause the video. "No. My mother was living on her own then, and my grandparents were living in the countryside. They thought she just had a relationship with someone that she broke off with and got pregnant with me. She never filled in the information about my father on my birth certificate. After my mother told my grandparents that she was pregnant, they came to the city to live with my mother, so my grandmother could take care of her, and me, mostly, while my mother went back to work."

"Your mum can't have told mine, either," Jin Suo said slowly. "If she did, my mother has done a great job at keeping the secret."

"She would have to, wouldn't she?" Zi Wei asked. "But I really think my mum managed to keep this a secret from everyone all these years. It makes my heart hurt to think about it, that she had to keep all this to herself all these years. No wonder she made this video. I don't think it was so much about finally telling me as it was because she needed to get all of this off her chest, before…"

Her voice, which until the last sentence, had been unexpectedly steady, finally wavered and Zi Wei trailed off, staring at the still image of her mother. Before either Jin Suo or Xiao Yan could decide what to say in comfort, Zi Wei had pressed 'Play' on the video again. Xiao Yan suspected that she did just that to stop them from saying anything, since despite their best intentions, it was rather hard to not sound redundant and be truly comforting considering the current situation. Beside, the video was almost over.

"Your father left Jinan soon after we finalised the divorce, before I realised I was pregnant. I never told him about you. Your grandmother used to tell me that I needed to track him down and make sure he does his duty by you and provide for you. If he were a normal man, it would probably have been the normal thing to do. Considering everything...it was impossible. I didn't think we needed anything he could have offered, regardless. As I said, I'm not even sure our marriage could be considered legal. I don't think it was so much about finally telling me as it was because she needed to get all of this off her chest, before…"

Unexpectedly to Xiao Yan, it was these last words that finally broke Zi Wei and made her cry in earnest. The sound of a sob tore from her. Jin Suo was apparently as startled by it as Xiao Yan, because she reached out to pause the video and hastily put an arm around Zi Wei, looking slightly panicked.

It took some minutes before Zi Wei was calm enough to form coherent words. "I'm all right, I'm all right," she said through hiccups, though tears were still streaming down her face. Xiao Yan stood up
to grab a box of tissues from her desk. "Really, just give me a minute."

"You don't have to be all right, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said, handing her the tissues. "You're not supposed to be all right just after finding out about something like this!"

"The thing is...this is what I've wanted to know all my life – not...not this, the fact that my father is...oh I can't even say it – but I've always wanted to know who he is...and now I can't even decide whether it's a relief to know," Zi Wei said, choking back a sob. "Now I just feel guilty."

Xiao Yan frowned and looked at Jin Suo, who apparently didn't understand either.

Zi Wei didn't let either of them voice their confusion. "I mean, it's quite clear that this was a relationship that my mother wanted to just forget and move on from, but clearly she never could, because – "

"Really, Zi Wei, stop it!" Jin Suo interrupted, finally understanding what Zi Wei meant. "Your mum loved you!"

"I know," Zi Wei answered, slightly more meekly, but there was still something stubborn in her eyes. "But you can't say I wasn't a – a mistake, that she didn't sacrifice everything else for me...and she shouldn't have had to!"

"You know, Zi Wei, at least your mother didn't dump you on the doorsteps of an orphanage," Xiao Yan said while pointedly ignoring Jin Suo's glare. So she knew she was being so blunt it was bordering on brutal, but she didn't mean it cruelly at all. Zi Wei must have understood that, because, to even Xiao Yan's slight surprise, she didn't look angry or upset. Instead, she actually smiled a little. For some reason, Jin Suo looked even more concerned at that.

"It's all right, Jin Suo," Zi Wei said, her voice only shaking a little. "Xiao Yan does have a point."

"I'm not really trying to play the 'other people have it worse' card," Xiao Yan said more gently. "It's just that I think the least productive thing you can do, ever, is wallow in regret for your own existence because you think you're inconveniencing someone else just by being alive. Especially when that someone is your mother who obviously never regretted your existence. That much is obvious in this video. I'm sure if we keep on watching till the end, she'll tell you just that."

Zi Wei nodded quietly and dried her eyes. She still looked like she would burst out crying at any moment, but that was only to be expected. If anything, Xiao Yan was rather surprised she managed to hold back the tears for so long.

"I knew from the moment he left Jinan that I would never see him again," Zi Wei's mother resumed speaking when they pressed 'Play' again. "Since then, I have never told anyone about him, Zi Wei, not even your grandparents. But now, I owe you the truth, and I suppose, this is the only way I could bring myself to tell you. I don't know if I could possibly tell you face to face. It might be too difficult..."

"The truth is, you and I, we have managed many years without him, without anyone knowing. This is a secret that, if it ever comes out, will bring so many repercussions and not all of it will be pleasant. For this reason, part of me wants to tell you to keep it to yourself as well. But I also know that you are not me, and dearest Zi Wei, I know your sensitive heart will tear at you if you are unable to confide in anyone about this. I will not ask you keep this secret only to yourself, but that you should be careful whom you confide in...I don't believe there will ever be a reason for you to ever meet your father, or anyone connected with him. I cannot tell you what you must do, if ever you do. I can only say, if that does ever happen, you must consider your best interest above all. I love
you for your soft heart, dearest, but you must also realise you do not owe anyone anything because of this truth. I only ever want you to be happy and content with the choices you make, and that is the life you must pursue.

"Lastly, I will always say this, because I know you will always question this if you don't hear me say it explicitly. Zi Wei, believe me, I will always be glad that this relationship brought you to me. I may have days when I regretted your father and resented him, but I have never regretted you. Don't ever think that you were anything but precious to me."

The video ended there.

At first, the three of them didn't know what to do after Zi Wei had closed the window, except to stare at her desktop wallpaper. Xiao Yan didn't know what was going through Zi Wei and Jin Suo's minds, but there were certain conclusions and implications of what they had just heard. They all seemed to be crashing down on Xiao Yan at once, and all seemed so tied together, she didn't know where to begin to speak of them.

In the end, it was Jin Suo who broke the silence. "So, you're a princess." Even as the words left her lips, it was clear that she was still struggling to really believe them. It was as if she only spoke them in hope that, out loud, they would make more sense than in her head. The way she then shook her head incredulously indicated that they apparently did not.

The words made Zi Wei snap her head to stare at her childhood friend. "No!" she gasped. "Don't tease, Jin Suo!"

"I'm not teasing!" Jin Suo said, her brows creasing together in an earnest expression. "Isn't that what your mother just said? Your father is the emperor! Therefore – "

"Therefore, nothing! I can't be a – " Zi Wei trailed off anxiously, apparently unable to even say the word. She turned to stare pleadingly at Xiao Yan, as if waiting for Xiao Yan to tell her that Jin Suo was simply letting her imagination run away with her.

"Zi Wei, isn't that the truth, though?" Xiao Yan said, taking care to keep her voice was soothing as possible. "I mean, maybe not officially or whatever, but consider what we've just heard, about who your father is. It does imply – "

"No!" Zi Wei interrupted, shaking her head. She slid off the bed and walked towards the window, staring out into the snowy lawn outside. Softly, almost inaudibly, and not sounding particularly convinced by her own words, she added, "You both are jumping to outrageous conclusions."

Both Xiao Yan and Jin Suo looked helplessly at Zi Wei's turned back, unsure what to say. Xiao Yan wanted to contradict her friend. She wanted to tell Zi Wei that if they were to accept her mother's words in the video as true, then, as crazy as it sounded, the obvious implication was basically Zi Wei was a princess. But before she could decide how to word this in a way that would not freak Zi Wei out, Jin Suo shook her head emphatically, indicating trying to hammer that idea into Zi Wei's head right now was neither productive nor comforting.

After a few minutes, when Zi Wei didn't give any indication she would ever turn around to face them again, Jin Suo cleared her throat pointedly. "Have you looked to see what's in this envelope?" she asked, holding out the said envelope.

The reminder that her mother stashed more than just this life-changing flash drive into her guqin box, Zi Wei finally turned around and took the envelope from Jin Suo with shaking hand. Xiao Yan shifted on the bed and tugged Zi Wei to sit down beside her.
What they found inside, once Zi Wei had finally gathered the courage to open the envelope, could only be called evidence.

Inside, carefully preserved in individual plastic sleeves, were the marriage certificate, divorce certificate, copies of the birth certificates and household registers of both Zi Wei’s parents, as well as Zi Wei’s own birth certificate. In the last document, the information of the father was left blank, but on all others, the name in use was Ai Bao Li. Considering they knew that the emperor was trying to keep his identity a secret in Jinan, Xiao Yan wasn’t sure why it surprised her so much that what was supposedly his household register didn’t give his address as the Imperial Palace. Instead, it used an address that was near the palace, and Xiao Yan wouldn’t be surprised if it was simply a dummy address and in fact, didn’t actually exist.

While Zi Wei shuffled through the papers as if in a daze, Jin Suo took one look at the marriage certificate before pulling the laptop towards her. Xiao Yan could see that she was opening up a search engine.

"Oh Heaven!" she breathed, staring at the screen.

"What are you searching for?" Xiao Yan asked, when Zi Wei showed no indication she had heard Jin Suo’s exclamation.

Jin Suo turned the laptop so that Xiao Yan could see the screen. She had done an image search for the emperor in 1989. Even if the documents were somehow still not enough proof that Zi Wei’s mother’s words were true, there could be no doubt now. There was no disputing that the images of the emperor on the screen showed him to be the exact same man whose photo was on the marriage certificate. Twenty years hadn’t changed him so much to the point where it was impossible for them to recognise him as the man they now see regularly on the news and in the media, either.

Zi Wei’s eyes were darting from the marriage certificate to the computer screen, her lips moving soundlessly.

"It's actually true," she finally whispered, almost to herself.

"I don't understand, though," Jin Suo said, taking back the laptop and putting it down on the bed. "How was it even possible? I mean, I can kind of understand way back then, media coverage wasn't as wide and there wasn't internet so that nothing remains a secret, so maybe the face of the emperor isn't so widely known, or at least, so pervasive that you would definitely recognise him the moment you see him. It might explain how he got away with traveling incognito and nobody, from Zi Wei’s mother to all the people who must have been involved in processing their marriage and divorce, recognised him. But all these papers say Ai Bao Li, and that's a fake name. What was he doing with all these documents with his fake name in Jinan? An ID, I can see, but birth certificate, household registry…At one point in the video, there was mention he had his wife's death certificate, which can't have had her real name and title or whatever. What was he doing, carrying those around?"

"What are you saying?" Xiao Yan asked. "Are you implying that he went to Jinan with the intent of randomly hooking up with someone and marry them while keeping the truth about his identity hidden away from them? 'Cause that's sort of messed up."

"I don't know," Jin Suo answered. "That's why I'm wondering. It doesn't make sense."

Xiao Yan sighed, because Jin Suo was right. It also seemed quite unlikely that the three of them, with the information they had, would be able to somehow deduce the explanation behind these mysteries. Xiao Yan was sure the only way to get to the bottom of those questions was to ask the owner of these documents himself. Though now that she thought about the idea…that was…not
impossible as it would first seem. In fact, not quite so impossible at all.

She glanced over at Zi Wei, wondering if the same idea had occurred to her. Zi Wei was still looking through the papers in her hands, but Xiao Yan was ready to bet that she was not seeing anything at all, being so lost in thoughts.

"Zi Wei?"

"What?" Zi Wei looked up abruptly at Xiao Yan, sound startled. On meeting the look of concerned, she smiled weakly. "I'm...I'm all right. Just overwhelmed."

Xiao Yan nodded and reached over and squeezed her hand.

"What are you going to do?" Jin Suo asked.

"I don't know," Zi Wei answered with a heavy sigh.

"Zi Wei..." Xiao Yan said hesitantly, "I know you can't have time to even think about this yet, but maybe you should talk to Yong Qi about this?"

Zi Wei's eyes became wide with sudden anxiety. "No!" she exclaimed. "No, I can't!"

Before Xiao Yan could ask why not, Jin Suo asked with a frown, "Yong Qi? Who's Yong Qi?"

"The prince," Xiao Yan said simply, though she was sure to Jin Suo, that explained nothing.


"Yes. He goes to this uni, you know," Xiao Yan said.

"I know, but why would that mean Zi Wei would just go and speak to him, and about something like this?"

"Well, we might know him."

"Might?"

"Xiao Yan, I can't possibly talk to him about this!" Zi Wei interrupted, her voice high with distress. "You know I can't!"

"Why not?" Xiao Yan asked. It seemed to her that this was the only obvious solution to all the questions Zi Wei surely had and the only real course of action that made sense, considering what they now knew. "He is, quite obviously, your brother."

Even as Xiao Yan and Zi Wei were having this conversation, Jin Suo wasn't content to just let her query go unanswered. "What do you mean," she pressed, "you may know Yong Qi, the prince?"

At the same time, Zi Wei cried, "Xiao Yan, really, be serious!"

"I am!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "I am very serious, Zi Wei. You can't possibly think you can possibly not tell him."

"On the contrary, I can't possibly! What is he going to think?"

"I don't know," Xiao Yan said slowly. "What I do know is that you can hardly see him again without this being foremost on your mind. You can't think you can keep this a secret forever."
"Why can't I?" Zi Wei asked, looking away from Xiao Yan, which was sure sign that she wasn't quite convinced by what she was about to say next. "I mean, it's not as if I have to ever see him again. He's more your friend, not mine."

Xiao Yan snorted. "Except you fancy his bodyguard," she taunted.

Unexpectedly, Zi Wei reached over and shoved Xiao Yan hard enough that she back onto the bed. "Stop it! It's not funny!"

"I never said it was," Xiao Yan said simply, looking up at Zi Wei. Then she sat up, waiting for Zi Wei to say something in response, but her friend simply reddened and turned away. Xiao Yan had to bite back the urge to point out that Zi Wei didn't exactly contradict the claim that she fancied Fu Er Kang.

Now that neither Xiao Yan nor Zi Wei was speaking anymore, Jin Suo asked again, exasperatedly, "Will you please explain what you mean by the fact that you know the prince? And don't think I didn't hear that bit about his bodyguard. I'm just going to curb my curiosity on that for now."

Zi Wei let out a loud sigh at that, and Xiao Yan bit down on her lower lip to stop herself smiling. To Jin Suo, Xiao Yan said, "Really, on that last bit, there's nothing to say that I haven't said already. As for Yong Qi himself, there's really not that much to explain, either. I mean, I met him in the library. We hang out sometimes. I introduced him to Zi Wei once. She's hung out with us a couple more times since. He's nice. And apparently he's Zi Wei's brother now…so…"

Jin Suo stared at Xiao Yan, looking as if she couldn't quite decide whether Xiao Yan was joking. Then she turned to Zi Wei, who, though having gone very still during Xiao Yan's explanation, was refusing to look at either of them, simply staring ahead and staying silent.

"You're not making this up, are you?" Jin Suo asked.

"No, why would I?" Xiao Yan asked.

While Jin Suo was trying to wrap her head around this new information, Zi Wei finally turned to Xiao Yan.

"You know I can't tell him, Xiao Yan," she said, almost pleading. "And you can't, either."

"Why not?"

"What exactly would I say? Do you think Yong Qi would appreciate me dragging this into his life? Oh, congratulations, you have a half-sister who you and none of your siblings ever asked for, probably never wanted, simply because twenty odd years ago, your father decided to have a fling with someone he's known for a month and that affair resulted in my birth, aren't you so glad?"

Xiao Yan winced. Sarcasm wasn't something that Zi Wei indulged in very often, but when she did, somehow it was always quite bitter. No, Xiao Yan decided, this required another tactic.

"Okay, so why did you always want to know who your father is?" she asked.

Zi Wei frowned. "What?"

"You said you've always wanted to know about your father, who he is. Over the course of your life, you must have asked your mother, clearly more than once. You must have asked often enough that, though she couldn't tell you in life, she left you this video so that you might know after she was
gone. She could have just taken the truth to the grave with her. Instead, she made this video, because she felt you deserved to know. But she only did that because you wanted to know in the first place. Why?"

Zi Wei struggled for a few moments before she could put her thoughts into words. "Well – other people always know their father, or at least know who he was, who he is. I wanted the same. I wanted to know...I guess...where I come from..."

"If he had been anyone else, someone more normal, what would you do with the information now that you know?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I don't know," Zi Wei admitted.

"Tell me that in that case, you would still be as you are now, refusing to even consider finding a way to meet him."

"I –"

"Some part of you wants to be known to him, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said softly. "You can't deny that."

"Of course I want to be known to him!" Zi Wei exclaimed. Her voice sounded suddenly quite wobbly. "But that doesn't change the fact that I can't! Not when this is who he is!"

"Why not? What's different now?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Of course it's different, Xiao Yan! Can't you see that?" Zi Wei cried. She was blinking back tears and her face began to crumble in pain. "You might speculate about what might happen if he were an everyday man all you want, but the truth is, he isn't! And my mother already said, there will be consequences of this secret being known. I can't just go throwing it around!"

"That is hardly what I'm suggesting," Xiao Yan said matter-of-factly.

Jin Suo, who, until now, was watching their conversation silently, suddenly added, "Have you considered that if your father knows you exist, he might want to know you? That if you have the means of coming into contact with him – and I gather you do – that he would want you to make that contact?"

"Or alternatively he might not want anything to do with me at all. He might think I tried to make Yong Qi's acquaintance simply to make that contact in order to extort something from him," Zi Wei said flatly.

Xiao Yan couldn't quite believe Zi Wei actually just said that. It was simply ridiculous because this image of a Zi Wei so coarse, so calculating, was simply not Zi Wei at all. Anyone who knew her even just a little would know this. Xiao Yan was sure Yong Qi would know it and therefore disabuse his father of the notion even if the emperor were inclined to think so badly of Zi Wei. Also, this determination to assume the worst went against everything Xiao Yan thought she knew of Zi Wei, and she couldn't help but feel blindsided by it.

For a moment, it appeared that Jin Suo didn't know how to meet this pessimism, either.

Xiao Yan deliberated before speaking again. "I guess I'm just thinking about what you said to me earlier when I told you about how my parents probably abandoned me at the orphanage. I've always assumed that they did that on purpose, but you were quick to tell me that maybe something happened, and maybe they could be looking for me. It could be that your situation isn't quite as bleak as you are so ready to think it, either. I think, when considering our own situations, we're both more
willing to assume the worst because then it would probably hurt less when it turns out to be true, and neither of us dare to think of the good case scenario. But maybe we should. Maybe you should."

"The good case scenario in my situation being what, exactly?" Zi Wei asked despondently.

Xiao Yan and Jin Suo exchanged a look, both trying to decide how to phrase their answer in a way that would be encouraging. Jin Suo answered, "Maybe whatever happened between your parents wasn't the most sensible of relationships, and they probably parted on bad terms but aren't we supposed to believe that a couple could break up and divorce and whatever but they would still love their shared children?"

"In those cases they probably knew they had shared children," Zi Wei pointed out. "But you heard my mother, my father never knew I was even a possibility."

"And from that you draw the conclusion that he is incapable of loving you should he know you exist?" Xiao Yan asked with a frown.

"Isn't it better to just not find out either way?" Zi Wei asked, her voice uncharacteristically harsh.

Xiao Yan stared, disbelieving and lost for words.

Jin Suo, too, was so taken back by Zi Wei's tone that she sounded like her heart had broken for her friend, "Zi Wei – "

Zi Wei pressed on, determined to not consider what either of them was about to say. "I mean, so maybe I let him know I exist and maybe he accepts me, and then what? Do we tell the world? Do we not tell the world? Do we try to build a relationship in secret hoping that the public and the media never find out? Is that even possible? And if it gets out then where does that leave me? What does that make me? At best someone who tried to tear his family apart with this secret, at worst some sort of social-climbing – "

"Woah, woah, woah, aren't you being a little dramatic?" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "I mean, it's not as if he cheated on his wife with your mother and you were born or something, okay? Yeah, their timing is a little unfortunate, considering how soon after his wife's death that their relationship took place, but it's not as if they did anything actually illegal. Besides if your mother didn't know who he really was, that's because he lied and didn't tell her, not because she did anything wrong, and it was she who ended it. As for social-climbing, it's not even about that, he's your father!"

"Of course, what you're saying is the logical way to look at with the information that we have, but Xiao Yan do you think anyone will look at it that way?" Zi Wei asked, sounding increasingly choked up. "All the world will see is the secret relationship, the timing, the fact that it ended and the fact I exist. And based on that, they will assume the worst. If this ever gets out, there will still be all sorts of unpleasant gossip about, I don't know, how my mother seduced him or something. What's what people do! They will speculate and if there's a question of who instigated it, of whose fault it is, of course it's my mother's fault. Of course she was in the wrong, okay, because Heaven forbids the world blames a man for his actions in a clandestine relationship!"

Xiao Yan stared at Zi Wei, slightly shocked but also oddly proud. A few months living together and Xiao Yan could already tell that normally Zi Wei tended to want to keep her negative emotions to herself, mostly because she felt it would be an inconvenience to other people to express them. Xiao Yan was sure she didn't intend to say so much so vehemently, but considering the confusing flood of emotions Zi Wei must be feeling now, Xiao Yan wasn't surprised some of it decided to burst out against her will.
"Oh, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said softly, moving to hug her friend, but Zi Wei leaned away from her touch.

"Sorry," Zi Wei murmured.

Xiao Yan wasn't sure whether she was apologising for avoiding the hug or for her outburst. Either way, it was unnecessary.

"No, don't apologise," she said with a shaky laugh. Then, a heavy sigh escaped her before she could hold it back. "I do kind of see what you mean, though."

More quietly, Zi Wei said, "I have lived twenty years without a father. And having one or not having one is not going to change anything now."

Jin Suo looked at her friend, her eyes nearly twitching in disbelief. "Do you honestly think that?"

Xiao Yan couldn't help noticing that Zi Wei refused to answer that question directly. Instead, she only said, "The point is, things are...fine the way they are. I am fine the way I am. I'm just not sure whatever good thing that may or may not come out of letting him know this secret could ever be enough to make up for all the chaos and drama and intrusion that would ensue."

Xiao Yan nodded but at the same she couldn't help but wonder whether Zi Wei really believed that things were fine in her life. Xiao Yan had spent her whole life fighting off the wish for a family – because wishing would only force her to also bitterly remember that she was never wanted – so she knew the traces denial left on the tongue. It was one thing to tell yourself you did not need something – or someone – but often, what the heart felt was rarely what the mind dictated.

The whole situation was insane. Now that it has started to sink in a little, Xiao Yan could see how Zi Wei could look at it so pessimistically. Certainly some part of the public and media might choose to blithely portray this story like a fairy tale, but fairy tales were never as interesting and never sold so many newspapers and dominated so much screen time as a scandal. No, certainly there would be many more who would take the story of Zi Wei's parents and twist it into something infinitely more convoluted than it really was. The world sucked like that, and Xiao Yan would be the last person to deny that, but then was that reason for Zi Wei to give in to it and deprive herself? Then wasn't that the most unfair thing of all?

Still, Xiao Yan could see how, for now, when all this knowledge was so new to her, Zi Wei was so determined to stubbornly run away from the possibility of her father knowing she existed. If anything, Xiao Yan did not disagree with the risks, both emotional and social, that Zi Wei already saw so clearly. The risks existed, oh did they ever, and to Zi Wei, right now, they were as insurmountable as a mountain. Even as time went on and Zi Wei perhaps got more used to this truth about her father, Xiao Yan had no doubt she would still find it hard to get over this mindset. Xiao Yan couldn't help but feel that one of the few ways Zi Wei could get over these fears was for someone to tell her of the good things that could come from this truth. After all, what Zi Wei feared right now was perhaps not necessarily the scary consequences, but rather the scary consequences on top of the possibility of being rejected by this father – this family – she never knew, that she wanted but dared not express.

Xiao Yan reached over and took Zi Wei's hand; she was half afraid that Zi Wei would pull away this time as well, but she didn't.

"Zi Wei," she said, "I realise that making you become open to the idea of telling Yong Qi about this right now is unrealistic. You've only just found out this truth, and it's going to take some time for you to process it. For all of us to process it. I'm also just suggesting it more or less off the top of my head
right now. But it is an option, Zi Wei. *It is*, especially if you want to meet your father and ask questions, because you must have questions, questions that now only he can answer. So when things start to settle a little and make more sense, would you think about it? I mean, really think about it as a possible next step. Think about both the pros and cons, and don't just focus on the scary negatives. Please?"

Zi Wei looked grim, but she did nod, and not entirely reluctantly either. That was as good a sign as Xiao Yan could expect at that moment.

"You can also talk to my mum if you need someone to talk to right now, Zi Wei," Jin Suo said. "You know that, right? I know your mum probably never told her any of this, but they have been friends since even before your parents met each other. I think my mum would be able to give you at least some outside perspective and actual insight to how your mum dealt with all of this all these years."

"I know, Jin Suo," Zi Wei said with a sigh. "I will probably give your mum a call once this starts to sink in a little. But don't say anything to her in the meantime, all right? I need to do this in my own time."

"Of course," Jin Suo answered. Xiao Yan could tell from her expression that she tried to keep the obvious worry out of her voice, but failed. Zi Wei must have heard it too, because she gave them both a weak smile that was probably meant to reassure them that she was fine, even if of course she couldn't be.

Xiao Yan reached over to put her arm around her friend to give her a warm squeeze. Zi Wei let out a soft sigh that thankfully did not sound quite so melancholic anymore and leaned her forehead against Xiao Yan's. Then, she reached out and pulled Jin Suo together into the group hug with her free arm.

"Thank you both," she whispered, wiping at the corner of her eyes when they all parted. "I am glad I found this out with the two of you here. I really don't know what I would have done or how I would have taken it if I had watched this alone."

Xiao Yan thought for a moment about making a half-hearted joke to lighten the mood, but in the end what came out of her mouth was couldn't have been more sincere if she tried. "You are never alone, Zi Wei. You know that, right? You'll always have us. Both of us."

Zi Wei gave a small laugh through tears and hugged them both again. Before her vision was obscured by Zi Wei's arms, Xiao Yan was gladdened to see Jin Suo's earnest, thankful smile for her words and their cheering effect on Zi Wei.
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It took Zi Wei three days before she finally could bring herself to pick up the phone to call Jin Suo's mother, who had been her mother's closest friend. Even then, it was simply because Jin Suo was due to return to Jinan the next day. Jin Suo would not be able to keep this kind of knowledge from her mother once she was back home, but the reveal had to come from Zi Wei herself.

Even as she listened to the dial tone, Zi Wei was sure as close as they had been, her mother never told Jin Suo's mother anything about who her father had been. It wasn't due to lack of trust or closeness or sincerity. After all, Yu He had been friends with Jin Suo's mother for more than half of her life, and they had only grown closer after Jin Suo's father died when she was only eight. Still, this kind of secret – kept from even her own daughter – wasn't the kind of information that Yu He would have told even her closest friend.

It turned out that Zi Wei was right, of course. It took an hour of recounting what she had discovered in the things her mother left behind, and many alternating exclamations then silences of shock from Jin Suo's mother, before they could even begin to talk about what Zi Wei should do.

(Zi Wei found that even as she recounted the story out loud in her own word, the details still sounded as fantastic as the plot of a novel, and she still couldn't quite wrap her head around the fact that she had been speaking of herself, of her mother, of her father.)

It didn't take long for Jin Suo's mother to give the advice that Zi Wei should try to get to know her father, of course, especially when she had the opportunity. Zi Wei's fears and dreads were listened to, and Jin Suo's mother certain emphasised that she didn't exactly have to go charging into the palace with the truth right at that moment, but now, with her mother gone, in the long run, wouldn't it provide Zi Wei with some comfort to be known to her father?

Zi Wei couldn't deny the allure of this prospect, of course, but even as she listened, she wondered whether Jin Suo's mother said this because to her, Zi Wei was the shy little child who was now stranded in the big, scary city and in need someone to take care of her. She did not resent being seen as a child by the woman who had been a loving aunt to her for her whole life, but half a year in Beijing, with Xiao Yan in her life, had allowed Zi Wei to discover strengths she didn't realise she had. She had begun to see that sometimes one's limits could only be revealed when those limits were tested.

She didn't confide this to Jin Suo's mother, since even she could see that by that logic, she should be taking the risk and reach out to the man whom she now knew was her father and to the family that he offered. None of them denied that there would be difficulties and plenty of drama, but then that was the price of gaining a family – something she never really quite had, and could not deny that she wanted.

Zi Wei just wished she knew how heavy that price was, and how deeply it would affect her. And even if she did and was willing to pay it, her biggest fear now still was that they would not value her as much as she was sure she would value them.

Xiao Yan and Jin Suo both kept telling her that if they were good people, they would welcome her no matter what difficulties her existence might throw in their way. And if they turned their backs on
her – something Xiao Yan was sure that Yong Qi, at least, would not do; Zi Wei wasn't in enough control of her wits to decide whether she agreed – then it would turn out that they weren't worth her time in the first place. It would hurt, undoubtedly, but at least she'd know and not wonder for the rest of her life.

It was all very easy for her friends to make these conjectures, of course, and Zi Wei couldn't find the words to properly articulate, to either Jin Suo and Xiao Yan, or to Jin Suo's mother, that it wasn't just the uncertainty of whether they would accept her that made her hesitate to even consider the idea of making contact with them at all. She didn't know how to explain how much she loathed making herself a subject of conversation and discussion, of gossip, as this certain would lead to. One of reasons she eventually stopped asking her mother about her father's identity was not only to spare her pain. As she grew older, she understood why looks – designed to be discreet but never managed it – followed them even among her mother's colleagues or casual acquaintances, why conversations in the room would halt sometimes, when she and her mother entered a room. The question of her paternity had always been the constant hum in the air for all her life; she didn't think she could bear having it all start up again, here, in Beijing, where she had intended to make a fresh start. Now, especially, with this new information, the hum wouldn't just be confined to the small circle of people who knew Xia Yu He and her daughter. No, this would be a boom that would echo to distances Zi Wei could never imagine and did not want to imagine.

Xiao Yan would say, of course, that neither she nor her mother could be blamed for the notoriety of this news, and that it had been the emperor who concealed the truth, leading to her mother making a decision based on false and incomplete information which she came to regret. Of course, Xiao Yan understood Zi Wei's point that it didn't matter whose fault – or if anyone was at fault – it really was; the woman always got the shorter end of the stick in situations like this. But as far as Xiao Yan was concerned, if the world was insisting on being so medieval, Zi Wei really didn't need to help them along by internalising the messages.

It wasn't as simple as that. In a way, gossip, Zi Wei could handle; it hurt, as it always did, but she knew how to deal with it. Would she know how to deal with a country's worth of it? She wasn't sure, but it was still somewhat familiar ground. What filled Zi Wei with horror and choked her up with dread to think was the fact that by the very act of reaching out to these newly discovered relations, she would be shining that unbearable spotlight upon them as well. Surely they had enough of that as it was, they didn't need more. Regardless of whether they accepted her or not, she did not cherish the thought of turning herself into a ticking time bomb from the moment she revealed herself.

And the thing about declaring one's wishes was that one had to consider those wishes being rejected. She might have never met her father, never had any reason to care about his approval – if anything, all the reasons in the world to disapprove of him – but she didn't think she could bear opening herself up to the idea of a relationship with him and having that gesture firmly rejected.

A part of her reasoned that the man who was Yong Qi's father could not be so cold. On the other hand, he wasn't just Yong Qi's father, or just her father. He was also the emperor. She wasn't a fool enough to think that there wouldn't be other considerations at play. What if by acknowledging her, she brought the entire system of monarchy down with her? Would her father risk that?

Xiao Yan would tell her she let her imagination run away with her, which was supposed to be funny,
since it was usually Zi Wei saying that to Xiao Yan.

The conversation with Jin Suo's mother did not really help Zi Wei decide on a solution for her conundrum, but somehow a couple of hours of just speaking out loud about the situation and turning the options over and over made the whole situation seem less mad and dreamlike than before. It made Zi Wei see more sense in Xiao Yan's suggestion the day they found out about all of this – that she should really consider the option of letting her father be aware of her existence, and to face all her hopes as well as her fears that come with that idea.

When Jin Suo left to return to Jinan the next day, she did so in a wave of worry. Zi Wei had to admit her emotions did not particularly lend credence to her weak attempts to reassure her friend that she would be fine. It was probably a good thing that Jin Suo had liked Xiao Yan during the week they had known each other. Zi Wei thought that without the assurance that Xiao Yan would be there to support her, Jin Suo would probably just either stay in Beijing or drag Zi Wei back to Jinan where she could be kept an eye on.

Jin Suo did eventually reluctantly board her train, after having extracted from Zi Wei a promise that she would be kept updated on the father front. Zi Wei was quite sure she had made Xiao Yan promise similarly as well. Zi Wei was not unhappy in complying with Jin Suo's request but she felt Xiao Yan probably gave her promise with a lighter and easier heart nevertheless.

Even if she wanted to, it was impossible for Zi Wei to not think about the father question. As the holidays dwindled to a close, Zi Wei found herself losing count of how many times she rewatched her mother's video. It became easier to see her face and listen to her voice with each rewatch, and Zi Wei was no longer in denial about the information the video presented, but she still could not resolve the conflict inside her.

On the one hand, she knew what she, in her heart of heart, wanted.

On the other, she was afraid.

If she were to sum it up, it really was that simple.

In situations like this, she wished she were more like Xiao Yan. It was not only because Xiao Yan was often bold and fearless enough to face anything, but also because she had the ability to put on pretense of bravado even when she felt none of it. Sometimes, pretend for long enough and you might come to believe it yourself. Even you could not, Zi Wei would make do with even pretense right now.

She wished there was some kind of case study or precedence in any country that she could look into and judge how something like this might be received in this day and age, but apparently there was not. Or maybe there was, and it was all hushed up, which helped her not at all. Apparently, the only time-appropriate story resembling her predicament was to be found, perhaps mockingly, in a Disney movie, where, apparently, "courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgement that something is more important than fear", which was to say she should just take the leap. But this wasn't a Disney movie, this was real life. She wasn't a country's only hope for an heir. Reveal herself now and she would find herself something like sixth in line for the throne and surely going lower as time went on. She would not solve anyone's crisis, but create it. In that case, was courage then measured in willingness to stay in the shadows?

Or was she simply trying to convince herself that so that she might never need to face her fear?

She was glad the workload was light in the first couple of weeks of the new semester, as she hardly
could concentrate on school at all. But even as February drew to a close and March dawned, the weather remained horrid enough that aside from classes and work, there was little to lure her outside. This meant she had more time than she anticipated sitting in her room and sometimes watching, sometimes only staring at a paused screen of the video of her mother.

On one such day, Zi Wei was in the dorm room alone when there was a knock on the door. It was rare that anyone knocked on their door. Xiao Yan had a key, and if anyone of their classmates on the same floor somehow fancied a visit, they'd have given a text or a phone call as a warning.

Zi Wei looked around and wondered whether Xiao Yan had forgotten her keys at home.

With that thought in mind, Zi Wei took off her headphone and pushed her computer away so that the screen faced the wall. When she came to the door and opened it, her heart skipped a beat (or several) to see Yong Qi standing before her.

She, of course, was not expecting him at all. She wondered whether Xiao Yan was, and if yes, why her roommate hadn't mentioned anything.

Zi Wei had not seen Yong Qi at all since before…the revelation. If Xiao Yan had in the meantime, she never mentioned it to Zi Wei, for which she was feeling a strange mixed sensation of both relief and anxiety.

Realising, probably a tad too late, that she was simply staring at Yong Qi, Zi Wei cleared her throat. "Hi." She tried hard not to visibly wince at how her voice squeaked.

If he noticed that she was flustered, he politely ignored it, though that really didn't make Zi Wei feel more at ease. If anything, his friendly smile made her feel even more jumpy. It made her wonder if Xiao Yan had occasion to see Yong Qi since after hearing Xia Yu He's story. She wondered if there was a change in the way Xiao Yan looked at him too. Did the truth about who Zi Wei was in relation to Yong Qi drive Xiao Yan to having conflicted loyalties? Zi Wei sincerely hoped not, because she knew, if it ever came down to it, Xiao Yan would choose her. She liked Yong Qi too much to wish Xiao Yan would ever have to make that choice.

"Hey, Zi Wei," Yong Qi said. "Is Xiao Yan home?"

Despite the turbulence of feelings inside her, Zi Wei almost laughed at how he only managed one word to her before mentioning Xiao Yan. It really was quite adorable and she wondered if Yong Qi even realised how much he was giving himself away. Oh, how she wished things were different, and she was free to put all her efforts to helping Yong Qi in his obvious pursuit.

"No, she's at work," Zi Wei replied. There was a beat. "Do you want to come in and wait for her?"

She was sure he noticed her slight hesitation. "Oh, er…sure, if I'm not disturbing you – "

"No, not at all," Zi Wei said, hoping she sounded more confident and nonchalant than she really felt. She stepped back to let him in. "Come in."

As he stepped inside, Yong Qi peered at Zi Wei with a mixture of curiosity and anxiety. There was something in his eyes that told her his attention wasn't due to her odd behaviour. No, she realised, he wanted to ask her something, and didn't know how to begin.

Of course, Zi Wei, too, had many things she wished to talk to him about, to ask him, and no idea either how to broach the subject, or even if she should, at all. Even as the thought occurred to her, she realised how cruel it would be to lay siege on him thus.
Yong Qi's voice broke her out of her reverie. "Zi Wei, can I ask you something?" He sounded determined, but still nervous.

"Of course," she said. She was glad to find that her voice came out calm and friendly, despite her inner conflicts. She supposed it was a good thing that it didn't take effort to be pleasant to Yong Qi.

He was defensive before he even began speaking. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to." He paused, but she merely gave him an encouraging smile and waited for him to continue. "It's just...is Xiao Yan...all right?"

"Yes, of course. Why do you ask?"

"I...I'm getting the impression that maybe she's been avoiding me. I mean, I haven't seen her in a while, and...I don't know, she hasn't talked to you about maybe overhearing something that could lead to that?"

"No she hasn't said anything like that."

Zi Wei felt a wave of anxiety wash over her. Had Xiao Yan been avoiding Yong Qi? If she had, Zi Wei knew very well what the reason might be, even if she couldn't tell him. His speculation, whatever it might be, was probably wide off the mark, though Zi Wei couldn't help wondering what it was that Yong Qi was worried Xiao Yan might have overheard.

"Why do you think she's avoiding you?" Zi Wei asked to fill the silence. "I gather you're rather busy during the holidays and weren't on campus much. The semester's only just begun."

"She hasn't been answering my calls or my texts."

He looked extraordinarily glum, and Zi Wei couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt. As a result, she couldn't say anything but "Oh." At Yong Qi's worried look, Zi Wei realised how such a curt answer would seem to him. She hastened to add, "I'm sure she's not blowing you off on purpose. I mean, she's just been busy. Though... is there anything that would cause her to avoid you if she overheard...whatever it is you're afraid of that she overheard?"

He reddened and shook his head sheepishly. "No, no, it's just a silly thought."

Zi Wei didn't believe Yong Qi was being entirely truthful, but her gut feeling was whatever he apparently didn't want Xiao Yan to overhear was probably more embarrassing than alarming. Either way, it probably had nothing to do with why Xiao Yan was avoiding him, if she was.

"Does she know you're coming today?"

"Oh, yes, I saw her yesterday as she was rushing off to class, but I told her I was coming over to return a book I borrowed from her before the holidays."

That was when Zi Wei finally noticed that he was carrying a book.

"Bu Bu Jing Xin, really?"

Her incredulity was obvious, and it made Yong Qi laugh.

"Apparently, Xiao Yan thinks I need more knowledge in certain areas of popular internet phenomena. Though even after reading this, to be honest with you, as thrilling as the tale is, I'm not sure how reading an entirely fictional account of the lives and loves of my ancestors is actually supposed to be enlightening..."
"Perhaps don't tell her that," Zi Wei said, laughing as well.

She was rather amused by the fact that he had come all this way merely to return a book, but she kept that observation to herself.

Before either of them could say anything further, Zi Wei's phone rang. She grabbed it from her desk and found that it was the front desk of the dormitory management office. "Sorry, I need to take this," she said apologetically to Yong Qi, who waved his hand in indication that he didn't mind.

After a brief conversation, she looked up at Yong Qi. "Uh, I have to go sort something out at the dorm managing office, something about mixed up payments. Anyway, Xiao Yan should be back in about, fifteen, twenty minutes. I might be back before then. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks," Yong Qi said.

Zi Wei smiled at him and grabbed some of her things before leaving the room.

There were very few choices of where to sit in the room. Yong Qi really did not think he would feel comfortable sitting on either Zi Wei or Xiao Yan's bed while waiting for Xiao Yan to get back. There were only two chairs in the room, and the one on Xiao Yan's side of the room was currently piled high with books. Opting not to mess with her things, Yong Qi sat down on the chair that Zi Wei indicated for him earlier.

He could see the lights of Zi Wei's laptop which meant it was on, but the screen was turned away from him. However, as Yong Qi set the book in his hand down, his movements pushed the laptop somewhat on the table, and suddenly sounds started coming out of its speaker.

Yong Qi, at first, was only startled by the sudden sound that turned itself on, especially when he could see clearly there was a headphone plugged into the computer. That small surprise, however, was nothing next to the shock he felt next as he could not help but hear what the woman in the laptop was saying.

"...Or maybe I was just ignorant enough to not recognise him, and I'm trying to justify it now, I don't know. The point is...what I didn't realise then, the man who told me his name was Ai Bao Li, was actually the Crown Prince, son of Emperor Qingle."

Yong Qi frowned and for a moment, curiosity got the better of him, and he turned the laptop's screen around so he could see it. A woman looking eerily like an older Zi Wei stared back at him, and she was still talking...

Xiao Yan was late.

Yong Qi had texted her an hour ago to let her know that he was coming over to return her book, and she had confidently told him that she'd be home when he got there. She hadn't counted on traffic being so horrible, so she knew he probably had arrived for at least ten to fifteen minutes by the time she stepped into the lift that would take her up to her room.

At least Zi Wei was home and would be able to let him in, so he wouldn't have to wait for her outside in the hall. It would be awful if he did, especially when she had unconsciously ignored his calls and messages for the last couple of weeks. She meant to call back and reply, *she really did,* but she never could decide what she would say the moment he called or texted, so she just let his calls ring out and let his texts sit there while she tried to think of a response. The next thing she knew, enough time had passed that it was impossible to pass it off as being simply unavailable when he
made contact. She had been feeling so guilty about the whole thing, and wondered how she didn't
die of it when he didn't even mention anything when they ran into each other the day before. She
was surprised when he asked if he could come over to return her book the next day. She had almost
forgotten, amidst the drama, that she had lent him a book. The fact that he obviously wanted to see
her again – returning the book was just a pretext – made her guilt sting even more.

She nearly knocked a girl over as she dashed out of the lift and hurried along the hall, towards her
room, opening the door.

"Yong Qi, hi!" she said brightly as she poked her head in and caught a glimpse of him sitting at Zi
Wei's desk. As now that she'd seen him, she occupied herself first with setting down her bag and
kicking off her shoes. Not paying too much attention to what he was doing, she didn't even realise at
first that he hadn't turned around or answered her.

She walked into the room and said, "How are you – "

That was when she realised that the reason Yong Qi had yet to say anything to her was that he was
captivated by something on Zi Wei's computer screen. Just a small glance showed that it was a freeze
frame of Zi Wei's mother's video. Xiao Yan felt her heart dropping suddenly to the bottom of her
stomach as she considered what this picture was telling her. Yong Qi was staring right at the screen
in shock, his elbow propped up on the table, and he was leaning heavily into his hand.

"Oh god," she whispered.

Yong Qi jerked his head up, as if he had only just realised she was in the room. He stared at Xiao
Yan and she winced at the wide-eyed expression of shock on his face. She could only give him an
apologetic look while she wondered what on earth she was supposed to say to him next, trying to
keep calm herself while still trying to absorb the implication of all that apparently just happened and
figure out what would happen next.

Where the hell was Zi Wei? Zi Wei was supposed to be home. Zi Wei clearly was home, if that video
was open on her laptop. Zi Wei must have let Yong Qi in. So where was she?

Before she could provide herself with any answer to any of these questions, or even decide what to
say to Yong Qi, he spoke first. His voice was shaking through every word, as if he wasn't even sure
what he was saying, but felt compelled to speak nonetheless, "I – I was looking for you, but you
weren't home, and Zi Wei let me in. She went to deal with something to do with mixed up payment
with the office. I wasn't prying, honestly, but suddenly the sound on her laptop turned on and I heard
my father's name mentioned and I just – "

He shook his head in obvious distress, turning to stare again at the laptop in disbelief. Xiao Yan
could only imagine how much he had already seen of the video, and the turmoil he must be feeling
upon having that kind of story unceremoniously dumped on him.

Xiao Yan didn't know how she could explain to him what he just saw meant, whether she could or
even should. It was not her story, and if he had to hear about it from anyone, it really should have
been from Zi Wei.

So instead, she went into automatic defense mode and started rambling about what was probably the
last thing Yong Qi cared to hear about right then. "Er – the sound, yeah, Zi Wei's computer
sometimes does that. The audio port is bust so sometimes it doesn't receive the jack and randomly
feeds the sound through the speaker instead."

She forced herself to stop and take a deep breath. Tossing the books on her chair on the bed, she
pulled it over to sit next to him, placing a hesitant hand on his.

"How much did you hear?" she asked.

"I – uh – enough that I'm really trying hard not to freak out right now – ?"

He stood up abruptly and paced around the small room, running a hand through his hair agitatedly. Xiao Yan looked at him helplessly.

"Yong Qi," she said softly. "I – We – "

He was clenching his fist, opening it and clenching it again methodically in an attempt to calm himself. His breathing was shallow as he stared at her, bewildered. "That's Zi Wei's mother?"

"Yes."

He nodded, then immediately after shook his head. His expression showed that just this very fact was already extremely hard and painful to take in.

"How much of that is true?" he asked breathlessly.

"I think it's all true. She made this video when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, so…"

"Terminal?" he demanded, shocked. "So – ?"

Xiao Yan nodded. "Zi Wei's mother passed away in 2008."

Yong Qi closed his eyes, pressed the back of one hand to his mouth and tried to take calming breaths. Xiao Yan didn't think it worked. She stood up, approached him and took his arm gently.

"Sit down, Yong Qi. You clearly have questions, and I'll answer them as much as I can, but you should try and just remain calm, all right?"

His eyes flew open and he stared at her, indignant and shocked. "Calm? After hearing that, calm is the last thing I'm feeling right now!" he said heatedly. "I just – "

"I know it's a lot to take in – "

"As far as understatements go, that one wins a prize, I think!" he snapped.

"Yong Qi," Xiao Yan pleaded. "I know you're shocked, and angry even, but please sit down." She made sure they were both sitting before she spoke again. "The truth is…Zi Wei only just found out about this very recently herself, and she's in as much shock about it as you are. She hasn't even decided whether she should let you or your family know about this yet. Frankly, she's leaning towards never letting any of you know about this. But now that you've stumbled onto this, you need to talk to her. You two need to discuss this. Please, please can you do that?"

Yong Qi stared at Xiao Yan, his eyes hard and piercing. "She…she doesn't intend to let my family know about this?"

"She found out about this barely three weeks ago, Yong Qi. She doesn't know what she makes of it, herself, yet. She's been freaking out about it as much – if not more than – you are now."

Yong Qi didn't answer and simply continued to look at her, as if trying to judge how much of what she said was truth. She met his eyes simply. He must have been satisfied, eventually, because he exhaled sharply and leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling, dazed.
"How much did you see?" she asked again, hesitantly.

It was as if it finally occurred to Yong Qi that the video wasn't meant for his eyes. He flushed red and sounded abashed as he replied, "I – At first I was too shocked at what I was hearing to realise I was watching something very personal and private. By the time that realisation kicked in and I stopped watching, I've basically heard enough. I don't think – I don't have the presence of mind to think – " He stopped talking abruptly and gave a weary shake of his head. Pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly, he asked guardedly, "Why would this be playing on Zi Wei's computer, now, in the first place?"

"Zi Wei's still trying to make sense of it," Xiao Yan said. "Her mother died two and a half years ago, but Zi Wei only just found this video with this explanation of who her father is recently. I watched it with her the first time, but after that, sometimes she feels like she has to watch it again to…to make sure that it's real. Or maybe it comforts her to see her mother and hear her voice again."

"So…" Yong Qi said slowly, as if in a daze, "you know she's – you said three weeks, right? You and Zi Wei have known this for three weeks? Is that why you haven't been answering my calls and ignoring my texts?"

"Yes," Xiao Yan admitted. "I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't mean to, honestly. I – I just didn't know what I should say to you, whether I should say anything. I didn't want to lie by omission to your face, so I thought – I don't know."

She was rambling and not making sense at all, but Yong Qi didn't seem to notice that. He was trying to grapple with another fact. "She's – Zi Wei is – my sister?"

He looked at her, and she could only meet his gaze with a sympathetic look and a nod. He shook his head helplessly and leaned his forehead into his palms. She reached out to place a comforting hand on his arm.

"I don't know how to take this," he said to his hands, his voice slightly muffled by hands. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to be taking in right now."

Xiao Yan sighed and stayed silent for now. She didn't think he really needed her to say anything. He needed some quiet to let the information he just found out to settle and make sense, and that would not be accomplished amid her chatter.

Yong Qi looked up at her, his eyes still full of disorientation. He was still trying to put things together. "So," he said, steepling his hands under his chin, "my father went to Jinan, met this woman, didn't tell her who he was, married her, and when she found out, they got divorced? But she became pregnant with his child anyway? Zi Wei?"

"About sums it up, yes."

Yong Qi let out an audible sigh of disbelief, sprang up to his feet and faced away from her. "What the fuck was he thinking?"

Xiao Yan had never heard him swear before. Under the circumstances, she thought it was an appropriate response.

"Then what happened?" he asked, whirling around to stare at Xiao Yan again.

She shrugged. "I guess they get divorced and never see each other again. And honestly, for what it's worth, whatever happened back then, it obviously ended. After that, Zi Wei's mother never even told your father that Zi Wei existed. She never intended for him to know. When she was alive, she never
told Zi Wei either. She only left this video message for Zi Wei to find after her death, and even then it was only because Zi Wei wanted to know about her father so badly ever since she was small.

"But now that she knows, you said she doesn't want to...to make the connection?" Yong Qi asked, looking startled.

Xiao Yan sighed. "I don't think Zi Wei quite know what she wants. She wants a father, a family, certainly, but she's also afraid, Yong Qi. You do understand that, don't you?"

Yong Qi let out a shaky breath and nodded. His expression seemed to mellow a little as he thought about the situation Zi Wei must be in. Then, obviously some other thought occurred to him because he frowned. "Zi Wei was born when?"

"August 1990."

The answer clearly was painful to him. He shut his eyes and shook his head. "So whatever happened between her mother and my father happened around November, December '89?"

"Yes."

He shoved his fists into the pockets of his jacket and paced around again, clearly agitated and upset by the realisation. Xiao Yan didn't speak.

Finally, he gave a sharp turn and looked at Xiao Yan. His voice was tight as he said brusquely, "You know, I don't even miss my mother? I mean, I miss the idea of her, but not her. It's a horrible thing to say, but I don't even remember her. I was two when she died. But – " He stopped and Xiao Yan could see clearly the flashes of pain that pass over his face. "She died in March. This is the same year. It just – "

He couldn't finish his sentence, and simply stared off as if into a void, looking helpless.

Xiao Yan bit her lip, unsure of what she should say next. Before she could decide on anything, there suddenly came the sound of a key turning in the lock, signaling Zi Wei's return. Xiao Yan felt like she had missed a step walking down the stairs and turned to look at the door, her entire body filled with trepidation. Yong Qi seemed to do the same. The whole room became unnaturally still and silent as they both waited for Zi Wei to enter the room.
"Hi guys," Zi Wei said cheerfully when she opened the door and saw Yong Qi and Xiao Yan. Then she noticed that they were standing across the room from each other, looking tense and serious. There was clear concern in her voice as she added, "Are you two all right?"

Xiao Yan shot an apologetic look at Yong Qi before hurrying over and grabbed Zi Wei's arm, pulling her into the hall. Then, she pulled the door closed behind them.

"He knows," she whispered urgently.

"Know what?" Zi Wei asked, confused, looking back at the door that now hid Yong Qi.

"You didn't pause or close the video on your laptop when you left."

Blood rushed from Zi Wei's face as, in an instance, she realised what was going on.

"The vid – oh no!" she cried, her voice shaking. "When he knocked, I thought maybe it was you forgetting the key again, and then after that I rushed off – oh god."

"Yeah, and the headphone messed up while he was there, so it suddenly started playing the sound through the speaker."

Zi Wei's hand flew to her mouth in horror. "No, no, no. How much did he see?"

"I'm not sure, but clearly enough to realise that you are his half-sister."

Zi Wei buried her face in her hands. "Oh my god."

"Yeah."

She looked up at Xiao Yan, her expression pinched and worried. Xiao Yan could see she was trembling a little. "What am I going to do?"

"Be straight with him. He deserves the truth from you now."

"I suppose," Zi Wei whispered. "Is he very upset?"

"Confused, upset. I don't know. He probably hasn't managed to process everything yet."

"Right. Oh Xiao Yan, I'm sorry if you had to talk to him immediately after. I'm such an idiot for leaving it open – "

"Zi Wei, forget about me. Go in and speak to him."

Zi Wei took a deep, fortifying breath. "All right."

"Do you want me to leave?" Xiao Yan asked.

Zi Wei thought for a moment then said, "Yes, probably. It's not that I don't need you there or that
there is anything I couldn't say with you there, but for now, maybe it's best. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

They opened the door only to almost collide with Yong Qi, who was clearly on his way out.

"I should go," he said shortly, trying to walk around them. Zi Wei's expression became distressed but Xiao Yan pushed him back inside.

"No, don't leave."

"Please, don't," Zi Wei said pleadingly. "I know – I know you are upset, but we need to talk about this. Please, can we?"

Yong Qi was staring at Zi Wei with wide eyes, clearly now seeing her in an entirely new light. His expression was clouded over and Xiao Yan could see his throat constrict as he swallowed with difficulty.

"All right," he said finally, stepping back into the room.

Xiao Yan hastily grabbed her coat, phone and bag, shoved her feet into a pair of shoes, not even bothering to lace them up before making a hasty retreat, closing the door behind her.

Inside, Zi Wei was avoiding Yong Qi's eyes, despite the fact that he seemed unable to look away. The room was suddenly suffocating with tension as they sat down opposite each other and tried to decide who should speak first, and about what.

Finally, it was Yong Qi who said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have watched any of it. But the sound suddenly came up and the first thing I heard was mention of my father – "

"No, no," Zi Wei said softly, "I should have known to turn it off." She looked at him finally, her expression fretful and anxious. "I never intended for you to find out in this way. Please believe that. I'm not even sure I want you to ever find out at all."

"So Xiao Yan told me."

"How much did you see, exactly?" Zi Wei asked.

"It started as she said she didn't realise the person she just met was the Crown Prince and then I stopped it after she talked about how they got divorced."

"So you know that your father is – " Zi Wei trailed off.

"That my father is apparently your father, yes," Yong Qi said resignedly. "Did you really only know about who your father is recently?"

"Yes," Zi Wei replied. "My mother never talked about him. Then, in early 2008, she got diagnosed with cancer and passed away in the middle of the year. She left this video in a flash drive which she hid in her things. I only sorted it out after I arrived here, and as soon as I realised that the flash drive contained information about…about this, I put off looking at it for ages. I wasn't sure I could deal with knowing who my father was, after all these years. But then…during the holiday, Jin Suo, my oldest friend from Jinan was here, and I thought…I thought I could find out what my mother has to say, with both Jin Suo and Xiao Yan here for support. I didn't know…I really didn't know it would be like this. This really was the first time I ever heard her speak so much about him."
Yong Qi nodded and seemed to take her at her word. He was listening to her, but it was still clear that there were a thousand other thoughts rushing around and clamoring for his attention in his mind.

"It took a while for me to even begin to accept this as true," Zi Wei continued when he didn't speak. "And even then, I… I've been arguing with myself for the last three weeks whether I should do anything about it at all, or if I should just forget everything I know. I never wanted to burden you or your family like this…"

Yong Qi was studying her closely now, and when he finally did speak, his voice was so careful and guarded that Zi Wei had to wonder whether the question he posed was more of a test than an actual query. "Don't you want to meet him? To let him know that you exist?"

Zi Wei gave a wan smile. "My mother never thought it necessary," she said obliquely.

"What do you think? What do you want?"

"I don't know," Zi Wei said flatly. "I really don't."

Yong Qi continued to look at her as she mulled over the new realization that now that Yong Qi knew about this connection between them, the possibility that she could meet her father had increased a thousandfold.

"It's one thing to be told that this is who your father is, but it's another to really let it sink in, you know?" Zi Wei exclaimed. "It doesn't seem quite real to me, even now."

Yong Qi gave a short laugh. "I can relate to that feeling."

"I'm sorry," Zi Wei said again. "I really am."

Yong Qi shook his head. His voice sounded less harsh as he told her, "I have no idea what my feelings are right now, but I do know I shouldn't be directing it at you."

Zi Wei gave him a grateful look but didn't know how to reply to such show of good will that she certainly wasn't expecting, not when she considered how much emotional turmoil he must still be in.

"But I won't be able to keep this a secret," he added. "If you are going to ask me to never tell Ah Ma about you, I can tell you now I won't be able to do that. That's not even to mention, I'm not going to keep something like this from He Jing and Yong An."

"I know it's very unfair to ask you to keep this secret to yourself, to deal with it alone," Zi Wei said sincerely. Of course she understood what a burden it would be if he was to keep this secret to himself. But then, wasn't the fact that he knew damage enough? Wasn't the fact that he must be suffering some sort of disappointment about his father enough? It surely wasn't necessary to draw his siblings into the fold as well. What good was there in Zi Wei's existence being the source of pain for two other people as well.

She didn't say any of this to Yong Qi of course, and her silence made him raise an eyebrow. Clearly, he was expecting her to continue speaking.

"Then don't ask me to keep it a secret," he said when she did not.

Zi Wei stood up and turned away from him. What she said next came out in a rush. "This isn't about the fact that I've lived all my life without a father and had never needed him, you know, because as much as I tell myself that, it really isn't true. Growing up, all the kids around me had a father, and maybe their fathers didn't live with them, maybe their parents are divorced, or their father died, they
still at least knew he actually existed and who he is and I never had answer to any of those questions. Maybe after a while I convinced myself that since my mother refused to tell me then maybe there isn't anything good to know, but still, the question was always there. And then to be told this. That my father is the Emperor. How am I supposed to even take that? *What am I supposed to do with that?* Things like this don't happen in real life, all right? I don't know what to do with that, let alone with all the things that will come of actually meeting him and whatever else that follows."

Her voice was shaking with emotions by the end, and she wiped the tears on her cheeks away with the palms of her hands, still not facing Yong Qi.

"I know you need time – Heaven knows I need time – to digest this, still. In the end, you don't even have to ever meet him if you don't want to," Yong Qi said, more gently than either of them realised he was capable of in such an unusual and emotionally-charged situation. "It's not as if there is such thing as an imperial decree that would force you to come see him anymore. I'm just saying the fact that you're giving this rant to me now clearly shows that this secret is taking its toll on you, and it's only been a few weeks. Can you keep it for months and years? Even if you can, you have your friends to talk to about it. I need to talk to someone about this as well, Zi Wei. And no offense, that someone has to be not you. Or Xiao Yan, for that matter."

Zi Wei whirled around to look at him with teary eyes. "I guess, I've been feeling as long as he doesn't know – as long as none of you know – I could just go on knowing this information but never quite believing it. It's not that I think my mother would make this up, but I could pretend that it's some sort of mix-up or tell myself it doesn't matter. But your knowing changes everything, and I don't even know how or why."

"But I do know now," he said gently. "So what are we going to do about that?"

Zi Wei gave a shuddering breath and pressed the pads of her palms against her eyes, wanting to burst into tears to seek relief, but no tear came.

"Would you keep this a secret if I did ask you to?" she asked, looking up at him despairingly. "If I really, honestly, earnestly needed you to?"

Yong Qi sighed. "Yes. But – "

"– it's going to be uncomfortable for you, I know," she finished for him in a rush of breath. She hated herself for having allowed herself making such an unkind request in the first place. "And you are right, it's not been a month yet and I already know how much it sits on the heart. I can't ask the same of you. But I can't bear the idea of this getting and becoming, some of, I don't know, media sensation or crisis either."

He smiled wanly. "Oh, believe me, Zi Wei, if there's anything you can trust us to do is to jealously guard our privacy and secrets so that the media does not find out. Something like this, if ever comes out to public, will be on our terms or not at all. I'm just saying, now that I know, I need to be able to talk about it with Ah Ma, Jiejie and Laoda."

"How do you think they'd react?" she asked fearfully, not sure whose reaction she was dreading more.

"I – I don't know," Yong Qi said, sighing. "I don't even know how I feel. I feel like I should be angry at Ah Ma, but I can't even work out why exactly? I mean, the fact that he didn't even wait for the first anniversary of my mother's death to have a random fling – I'm sorry, I don't mean to be flippant – "
Zi Wei shook her head to show that she did not take offense.

"I mean, the timing is...unfortunate and obviously he went about it all in a very ill-advised way, but I can't imagine he was thinking straight around that time. I'm not trying to defend his actions at all – or maybe I am, trying to justify it to myself so I could stop being angry at him...I don't know."

He blew out a harsh breath and looked at Zi Wei helplessly. She gave a shaky laugh and shook her head, indicating that she hadn't more success trying to rationalise her parents' misguided relationship either. Then again, it wasn't as if either of them ever truly wanted to think overmuch on any romance any of their parents might have had.

"I think Jiejie and Laoda would be angrier at him," Yong Qi said, lost in thoughts. "They actually, you know, have some memory of E’niang."

Zi Wei couldn't help her brows creasing together. She realised that just as she had never known her father, he must have just as little knowledge of the woman who gave birth to him. "You don't remember her at all?" she asked tentatively.

"I was two, so, no."

Zi Wei nodded. Was there some point to the mirroring of their situations and if there was, what did it mean? Her mind was in too much of a muddle to lay out this loaded question into its individual components.

"It's strange," Yong Qi mused. "People hook up and break up, have messy marriages and divorces all the time. The moment it involves us, it becomes an entirely different kind of mess. Your instinct is probably right if you don't want to have anything to do with that."

Zi Wei smiled weakly. She wished she could break the situation down to such simple variables. it was never just as clear cut as that. But she was sure that wasn't something she needed to teach him.

At her dark, conflicted expression, he leaned in closer to her and spoke, completely earnest, "Zi Wei, it's one thing if you really don't want anything to do with us at all. But on the chance that you do, you need to know that I will try my best to make sure that you are welcomed. I cannot speak for anyone else right now, but I would not be the one to hold whatever happened between your mother and Ah Ma against you."

"It's one thing for you to not hold my existence against me," she said with a watery smile, "but would you truly be willing to include someone you barely know into your family? As Xiao Yan said the day we met, I could be an axe-murderer for all you know."

That made Yong Qi actually laugh. "I don't think you are. And you don't know how much the fact that you are reluctant to seek out the notoriety of this situation already says much about you. I know we haven't known each other for that long and haven't spent an awful lot of time together, but I do consider you a friend, Zi Wei."

"Why?"

Yong Qi thought and said, his tone indicating that maybe he just realised the answer as she asked the question, "Mostly because you're Xiao Yan's friend."

That could have sounded quite rude, but Zi Wei understood what he was trying to imply. "And the fact that Xiao Yan likes me is good enough for you because her opinion does actually matter a lot to you."
He wasn't blushing, exactly, but the way his eyes seemed brighter, despite everything, at the mention of Xiao Yan told Zi Wei more than she needed to know.

"Of course, she's my friend," he replied, almost convincingly casual.

"Of course," Zi Wei answered. She kept her expression neutral, and yet it still made Yong Qi look slightly more self-conscious. Before he could get defensive, she went back to their earlier subject. "To be completely honest, I think my reluctance to reach out is more because of the notoriety of this whole truth, not because I hold anything against you or your family as people. I can't, seeing as I don't know any of them except you. I guess I thought as long as I kept this truth as contained as possible, then I won't ever have to deal with any mess that comes with revealing it."

"Aside from you and Xiao Yan, and now me, who else knows about this?"

"As I said, my friend Jin Suo, and also her mother, who was my mother's close friend. They live in Jinan."

"What about the rest of your family?"

"My grandparents died a few years ago. After that, it'd been just me and my mother. My mother was an only child. There is really no family who is close enough that could bring me back to Jinan now," she admitted.

Right then, it occurred to Yong Qi that Zi Wei might actually be all alone in the world, at least in terms of family, but he could not think of a tactful way to determine the truthfulness of this guess. If that was the case, then was her reluctance to be known to this other side of family she just discovered more altruistic than he had so far given her credit for? After all, was she not putting more importance on their peace of mind than on her own need for comfort and companionship?

"You don't have any close living relatives, and yet you are reluctant to try and reach out to this other side of family that you now know you have?"

"I don't know," Zi Wei replied. "No offense, but I feel like all I have ever known of you – of the imperial family, that is – is by watching through a pane of glass. I guess I have been, quite literally, seeing you through the glass screen of a TV or computer. The whole idea that any of you are actually related to me is still quite unreal."

"I think that if met us – or when, I don't know, it's up to you – you'll find that we could be as normal as it gets. I mean, I think statistically we do have slightly higher chance of being completely messed up – substitute the word 'mess' with something more colourful if you want. When we do mess up, the consequences are more humiliating than to the average person, but other than that, we try to be normal. It doesn't always work but we do try. It's easy to look at us through a pane of glass, as you say, and perhaps you can only get over that if you break the glass, so to speak."

"Well, perhaps those other than you should be aware of my existence first before we talk about that," Zi Wei said heavily. "After all, it may be your family who won't want anything to do with me."

"I don't necessarily think so," he said. "But by that, do you mean you aren't asking me to keep this secret?"

"We've established that I can't, can I? So yes, you can tell…whoever – "

"Whoever?" Yong Qi asked, raising an eyebrow. "You should be careful with these things. I could go straight to a reporter for all you know."
"You know what I mean," she complained.

He smiled and nodded. "Don't worry. It won't go past the immediate family."

"I'm going to regret this, aren't I?" Zi Wei asked, only half-joking.

"Probably," Yong Qi said with a crooked smile. "For your sake, Zi Wei, I wish it wasn't like this, and that I could just forget that I know about this at all. But as it is…"

"I know," Zi Wei said, sighing.

"So, uhm…what was your mother's name? Just so I don't accidentally unearth some other…thing Ah Ma might have had in Shandong."

"You think there might be others?" Zi Wei asked, frowning. That idea was horrifying, as much to him as to her, if his expression was any indication.

"I don't think I want to know, is what I'm saying."

Zi Wei smiled awkwardly before realising that she hadn't answered his question. "Oh, my mother's name was Xia Yu He. Can I ask something?"

"Yes."

"Why would he be in Jinan uncover with another name? My mother left behind copies of his papers to do with their marriage and divorce and they all seem to check out. Why would he have papers necessary to get married in that name while he was in Shandong?"

"I have no idea," Yong Qi said, sighing. "May I see?"

By this point, Zi Wei saw no point of not letting him see the copies of the paperwork that her mother had kept, so she showed him.

"About why the papers exist, we do technically all have two versions of all official identification papers, one version in a civilian name," Yong Qi explained. "They are necessary in certain situations where it's not ideal to use our full names and titles, and thus the civilian name is legal in certain circumstances. The legalese explaining what those circumstances are is very dense and I'm not sure it covers – you know, marriage to an unsuspecting person. Mostly we work with precedence; when in doubt, and it's not absolutely vital to avoid full name and titles, use the full name and titles. The more pertinent issue is, my father and my brothers and sisters and I, if we marry, we have to do it with parliament's approval. I mean, nowadays it's not like they'll refuse approval because of some stupid reason like the person is a commoner; it's really more a formality than anything to ensure we're not actually marrying, I don't know, a convicted murderer. My father was a prince then, so technically he also needed approval from my grandfather. But this marriage lacked both of that so there is question of where it stands on many grounds: legally, as a marriage between two people, and legally, as a marriage of the Crown Prince, and whether those two mesh."

Zi Wei stared at him, her eyes wide. "Are you saying that…"

"Yes," he answered brusquely. "But you don't have to worry about that."

She merely closed her eyes briefly and took an uneven breath. "And honestly this is just the tip of the iceberg why this is better left buried."

"You're probably right," Yong Qi said. "But I guess we don't always get what we want." There was
a pause, then he said slowly, "Well…thank you for showing me this."

He looked at her, and for a moment, neither of them knew what to do next but just gave each other twin awkward, painful half-smiles.

"I think I should get going," Yong Qi finally murmured.

"All right."

The moment of farewell was even more difficult to figure out. After a beat, Yong Qi only nodded and approached the door, leaning down to put on his shoes.

When he straightened up, he managed to give Zi Wei another smile. "Try to not get too worked up over this, all right? We'll try to work it out, somehow."

Zi Wei wondered how much he himself believed these words of reassurance. She merely returned the smile tensely and took the few steps with him to open the door.

"Yong Qi," she called just as he walked out, making him turn at the threshold to look at her. "I – I am sorry."

"Don't apologise for your own existence, Zi Wei," Yong Qi said softly.

"Yes, well, that's not all that I meant. I am sorry if this gets in the way of you and Xiao Yan down the road."

"Why should it? We're friends, this shouldn't affect that."

"Friends, of course. You keep telling yourself that," Zi Wei said quietly, but loud enough that he would not be able to help hearing.

For a moment, she felt bad for bringing up the subject. For Yong Qi, there certainly was much to think about on that front, but he couldn't want to turn his mind to it now. It was hardly the appropriate time for her to talk of it, let alone add it to his growing list of confusing problems.

Before she could apologise, he said, "No, it's not like that, you know."

He must know she would be unconvinced by such lacklustre denial.

"Really?" Zi Wei asked, raising an eyebrow. "The fact that you said that just proves what a walking pile of romantic clichés the two of you are."

Yong Qi spluttered. "That's – Well, I don't think she's interested," he finally managed to say.

Zi Wei actually wanted to laugh. She wondered if he truly believed that. In the end, she only smiled, deciding to let him have that assertion for now, no matter how untrue it rang to her, and surely must ring for him too.

"Goodbye, Yong Qi," she said with a slight smile, and watched as he finally turned and walked away, his mind undoubtedly now doubly preoccupied.

Xiao Yan had been wandering the streets aimlessly when the phone in her jean pocket buzzed. Pulling it out, she found a message from Zi Wei: You can come back now.

She was slightly surprised, since it had barely been an hour, which had been the minimum amount of
time Xiao Yan originally planned to give Zi Wei and Yong Qi, but she wasn't unhappy to turn back. It was too cold for her walk to have been pleasant, and all her trains of thoughts were jumbled up; she wouldn't be able to say what exactly she had been thinking about all this time.

She kept telling herself that the fact both Zi Wei and Yong Qi agreed to stay in that room to talk about the issue at hand at least meant they were willing to face this situation sensibly, as sensible as one could be when met with such shocking revelation. But really, they didn't have an abundance of choice. The only other option would have been for Yong Qi to storm out and never see either Zi Wei or Xiao Yan again, but then he'd still have to live with the disjointed information he had seen on Zi Wei's computer.

What did they talk about in the last hour? How did one have a conversation such as this? Xiao Yan hoped, agitated as he was, Yong Qi would be kind, because she had a feeling that one hint of the possibility of rejection from her paternal side of the family may confirm all of Zi Wei's hypothetical fears, and she would wish to retreat from them forever. However their talk turned out, Xiao Yan hoped that, as upset as Yong Qi was and certainly had right to be, he at least understood that Zi Wei was blameless in causing it.

Xiao Yan absent-mindedly turned her phone over and over in her palm, wondering if she should call or text him. It wasn't that she wanted to know how the talk went; she was sure Zi Wei would be more forthcoming about it than he. She simply remembered the distraught expression earlier, and she was he suffered disappointment where his father was concerned. She couldn't help feeling a burgeoning need to hear his voice, to make sure he was all right, whatever that meant in this situation, and to be able to comfort him if he were not. She did not know how she would go about accomplishing that but still, the phone seemed to hum in her hand, urging her to dial.

Another part of her mind reminded her that surely, Yong Qi would not wish to speak to her right now. Not when he must have just gone through an undoubtedly emotional conversation with Zi Wei, and speaking to her would only serve to remind him of that. Not when it was Xiao Yan who had been so silent these few weeks, refusing to take his calls and texts. She had done so because she could not bear to lie to him, but wasn't keeping something this huge a secret from him equally the horrid thing to do? Now that he had as many of the facts as Zi Wei and Xiao Yan knew, perhaps he would prefer to be left to review them in peace.

Clenching her free hand and shoving the phone in her other hand back into her pocket, Xiao Yan quickened her steps, telling herself that she would text Yong Qi later, after she had spoken to Zi Wei.

"So how did it go?" Xiao Yan asked as she returned to their room.

"How do you judge something like this?" Zi Wei asked. She was sitting on her bed with her back against the wall, her knees pulled up against her chest.

"What did you say to each other then?"

Zi Wei shrugged. "I had questions, he had questions, we clarified some things. We talked about what to do now that he knows this. He – he wants to tell his father, brother and sister."

"Oh." Xiao Yan sat down on Zi Wei's bed next to her. "And you're okay with that?"

Zi Wei shrugged. "And it hardly matters if I'm okay with it or not, really. It's unfair to expect Yong Qi to just forget about this. He can't, and to keep it to himself, not having anyone else who could look at things from his point of view to talk about it, is impossible. I guess now that Yong Qi knows, there's really not much choice anymore about the rest of his family."
"And then after he tells them, then what?"

"Then…I guess depending on how they react, we try to decide what to do next? Honestly, I don't know. We didn't discuss that far. Now that I think about it, most of our conversation was just both of us trying to reconcile ourselves; him with this news, me with the fact that he knows. He's being a lot nicer to me about this than I expected, honestly."

"Zi Wei, reasonably he shouldn't have any reason to be upset at you," Xiao Yan said.

"Well, he's just got the shock of his life, I'm sure reason doesn't play a part. Are you going to talk to him?"

"Maybe later. I thought about calling him just now but maybe I should just give him some time to deal with it first."

"Yeah, that's probably for the best. But Xiao Yan, he asked me earlier whether you've been avoiding him, which I guess considering everything, you have been."

"I haven't been consciously doing it," Xiao Yan protested defensively. "I just didn't think I could act like nothing's wrong around him when I knew this huge shocking secret about his father. It was just easier…"

Zi Wei smiled slightly. "Yes, well, I dare say he'll forgive you for it. Anyway, my point was, in the future, you shouldn't give up your friendships just for me, especially when the other person isn't even at fault."

"Well, I doubt something this shocking would ever get in the way of any of my relationships again, so we won't have to worry about that," Xiao Yan said. "Speaking of other friends, have you told Jin Suo?"

"About what?"

"About the fact that now Yong Qi knows."

"Not yet. But I guess I'll tell her when she calls, even if really there's not really much to tell."

"Not much to tell?" Xiao Yan said. "This is a huge change, Zi Wei."

"Yeah, but it's nothing Jin Suo can do about it, and I don't know how it's going to affect things yet. She'll worry, of course, but I suppose you'll tell her if I don't."

"You sound like you don't want to tell her?"

"Only because she'll worry," Zi Wei said.

"Of course, she cares about you. And she doesn't want you to tell her because she can do something about it. She wants to share this burden with you, as do I. Don't push us away."

"I'm not!" Zi Wei protested. "I'm talking to you now, aren't I?"

Xiao Yan smiled and reached over to squeeze Zi Wei's hand. "Just…remember it."
Moments like this, Yong Qi longed for the simpler days when concubines and polygamy were still legal.

How did you even begin to confront your father about a secret marriage he had barely half a year after your mother died, your mother whom you were too young to even remember?

When he left Zi Wei and Xiao Yan's room, he had been so lost in thought that he couldn't remember taking the lift down to ground floor at all. He must have done though, since the next thing he knew, Er Kang was next to him. Yong Qi remembered handing his car key to Er Kang. He wasn't in any shape to drive even the familiar route back to the palace.

At first, Er Kang had simply stayed quiet and complied with his silent request, but when Yong Qi spent the first fifteen minutes of the drive in the back seat, staring, dazed, out of the window, Er Kang became concerned.

"Are you all right, Wang Ye?"

Yong Qi didn't hear him.

"Wang Ye?"

No answer.

"Yong Qi!"

"What?"

"Are you all right?"

Er Kang must have really been concerned, because his tone changed completely this time. Gone was the professional distance. Stopping momentarily under a traffic light, he looked at Yong Qi through the rearview mirror. The look in his eyes showed clearly that he was looking at his friend – almost a little brother – not at his prince.

"Yes, I'm fine, Er Kang," Yong Qi said.

"Are you sure? Because Xiao Yan sort of rushed out of the building a while ago. She was so distracted; I don't think she even noticed me."

"It's...fine. I just...It's fine."

Er Kang clearly did not believe him, but also recognising that this was all Yong Qi would reveal, he let the subject drop.

Now, all the information Yong Qi had learnt from the video on Zi Wei's computer and the ensuing conversations all seemed to replay in his head. Away from the room, away from Zi Wei's anxious eyes, he found it impossible to believe all over again.
Later, Xiao Yan had texted him to ask if he were all right and to apologise for keeping this information from him. He called her back to reassure her that he understood why she couldn't have said anything to him before. As for the question of whether he was all right with the whole thing, well, that was a little more complicated.

He wondered if it would have been easier if he had disliked Zi Wei, or else never met her before. Then at least perhaps he would have a little less emotional investment in her happiness and it would have been easier to agree with her that they should just stuff the entire secret under the rug and never mention it again.

However, the truth was, he liked Zi Wei immensely, and despite her assumptions, it wasn't merely just because she was Xiao Yan's friend (though, admittedly, that helped). Despite her protestations that she didn't want to create trouble for his family – and really, for herself – by revealing this secret to them, it was clear that a part of her was longing to be known, perhaps to know that she mattered to the father she had never known. He could hear the wistfulness in her voice and in the way she stared at the twenty-years-younger ID photographs of their father on the papers her mother kept all these years. Xiao Yan seemed to agree with his observation in their phone conversation, during which apparently Xiao Yan was hiding in their bathroom so that Zi Wei couldn't hear her side of the conversation.

If Zi Wei was his sister, Yong Qi knew the right thing would have to be for his family to be informed of her existence. For all their faults, their family was tight-knit; unconditional support was a necessity in a family whose every action and decision were judged by the entire country.

Besides, whatever happened all those years ago, surely his father had his own version of the story, and Yong Qi had to find out what it was. The alternative would be to keep this secret to himself and speculate just exactly what insane thought process went through his father's mind that resulted in the current situation. It would be torture, and Yong Qi was not willing to bear it alone for any length of time at all.

He wondered whether his either of his grandparents, when they were still alive, knew about what happened in Shandong at all. It was doubtful that his grandfather had any idea, as surely Ah Ma would not have told him when his health had failed so rapidly in the last couple of years? His grandmother might have known, and she would have kept it a secret, Yong Qi was sure, out of the fierce need to protect Ah Ma's position and reputation, especially considering how soon after Shandong he inherited the throne. But if Zi Wei's mother was to be believed, none of them would ever have known about Zi Wei. Yong Qi didn't think any of them could be so uncaring as to have never asked after Zi Wei for so many years if they did know. On that note, he supposed he couldn't quite blame Zi Wei's mother for attempting to keep Zi Wei a secret, because any attention at all would have been too conspicuous, considering after Ah Ma became emperor, in with the increased spread of media and technology, it was only too easy to recognise the faces of members of the imperial family, if only one paid attention. The age when the emperor was veiled in mystery was long over.

There was probably no good way of going about this situation at all, no good timing that could be waited for. So, in the end, he simply asked his father, He Jing and Yong An to come to come over to Xian Fu Gong to talk.

"Does this sudden need to talk to us have anything to do with how strange you've been acting in the last couple of days?" his father asked as he sat down into an armchair in the sitting room while He Jing and Yong An shared the sofa. Yong Qi could not sit, he was too agitated, so he ended up standing and looking at them with what he knew was a very grim expression.
"For Heaven's sake, Yong Qi, do sit down," He Jing said, nodding at the other armchair opposite their father.

"No," he said curtly. "Just – I need a moment to figure out how to say this – "

"You know, you're making us – or me, at least – coming up with all sorts of horrible guesses on what this is all about," Yong An said. "Who did you knock up?"

"Yong An!" He Jing cried, horrified.

Yong Qi was not in the mood to appreciate the joke, nor the irony of it when put next to the real reason for his agitation. So his reply was probably more aggressive than his brother expected. "Oh, screw you!"

He Jing startled at his harshness, and looked torn at who she was supposed to be more offended by. In the end, she glared at Yong Qi, too, for good measure.

Even as Yong Qi pretended to not see his father's frown at displeasure, he was still surprised that his father did not verbally reprimand him for his disrespectful tone. Instead, the emperor merely looked wearily inquisitive, as if wondering what he had done to land himself in this situation.

Yong An, on the other hand, was not offended. He merely scoffed at He Jing. "Don't look at me like that! I mean, the way he's been going on, that's a very logical conclusion to draw!"

"Yong An," their father said in a warning tone that implied he should stop talking and let Yong Qi get to the point. Yong An fell silent, and resumed staring at Yong Qi expectantly.

"This isn't about me!" Yong Qi said sharply, waving his hand while pacing around, not really looking at them. Then more quietly, he muttered to himself, "To be honest, right now I wish it were that – "

He could practically feel the disbelief radiating out of his family, because surely they heard this, watching him as closely as they were.

Finally, he came to an abrupt stop and wheeled around to face them all. "I didn't want to have this conversation at Yong Shou Gong, because I didn't want to risk He Ke or Yong Yan, or worse, Mama overhearing this before we figure this out."

His statement was met with raised eyebrows and befuddled looks, but before anyone could question what he meant, he took a deep breath.

"Ah Ma, do you remember the name Xia Yu He?"

The effect of his words was immediate. His father's expression turned immediately from bafflement to shock. He sprung out of his seat and took an almost threatening step towards Yong Qi.

"How do you know that name?" he demanded.

"Do you remember that name, Ah Ma?" Yong Qi asked again, taking care to keep his voice as calm as possible, though his father's reaction was all the answer he needed.

"I – " his father started, then stopped abruptly. He stood, still staring Yong Qi, who thought that if someone told them now that the sky was collapsing down on them, his father probably would not look more shocked or alarmed. The emperor's voice was gruff as he finally said, "I remember."
Yong Qi blew out a harsh breath while his brother and sister exchanged confused looks. His father was still looking at him as if he wanted to shake the answers out of Yong Qi, but at the same time the possible answers to his questions terrified him.

"Tell us about her," Yong Qi said quietly.

His father's answer was sharp. "Not until you tell me why you are asking me this now, how you even know that name - "

Yong Qi interrupted roughly, so overcome by the emotions he had until then managed to keep down that now he was almost shouting, "Tell Jiejie and Laoda about Xia Yu He, Ah Ma!"

His brother and sister stared at him in consternation. It was obvious that He Jing disapproved of his tone, and was ready to say something, but surprisingly, their father waved her down. Even Yong Qi felt shocked as he realised that his father apparently cared so much about getting answers to his own insistent questions that he would not even appear angry that Yong Qi was suddenly throwing what could be called a tantrum. If they had been speaking about any other subject and Yong Qi dared to speak to his father with such attitude, he was sure he would have been sharply reprimanded at the very least.

Yong Qi opened his mouth to start an apology, but his father interrupted.

"How do you know that name?" It was obvious that his father was forcing himself to keep his voice even.

Yong Qi took a deep breath and took care to restrain his voice to be meeker this time. "Please just tell them who she is, and then I'll tell you how I know."

The emperor stared at him, and this time, Yong Qi simply turned to meet his gaze. He could see the mixture of bewilderment, anxiety and something like dread in his father's eyes, but only for a moment, until his expression turned guarded, as if he suddenly was aware how much he was showing. Yong Qi, too, for an instance, felt like he was intruding. If he didn't already know at least some of the reasons for such expression in his father's eyes, perhaps he would have let the subject go. There were, after all, things that a child did not need to know about their parent's past.

He Jing and Yong An, still completely in the dark on the subject being spoken of, looked from one to the other, puzzled.

Finally, the emperor pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. "Sit down, Yong Qi," he said. It was more of an order than a suggestion. And yet Yong Qi didn't comply immediately; he remained standing for a couple more seconds, torn between the shame of knowing he was pushing his father to reveal things that perhaps he had no right to demand to know, and the impossible need to have the remaining parts that would allow the story of Xia Yu He to become more complete. He could hardly rest until it was. Finally, when his father simply sat back in his chair, indicating that he would not talk until Yong Qi sat too, the prince finally threw himself down onto the remaining armchair and waited.

The emperor took a deep breath then shifted the chair he had been sitting in so that he could face all three of his children. He looked hesitant for another moment, but upon catching Yong Qi's eyes, which, Regardless of what else he was feeling, still appeared stubborn, the emperor shook his head and began to speak.

"I have never thought I would need to tell you about any of this, as it happened years ago. I can't imagine how it is a good idea or even necessary for you to know the story I am about to tell." He paused and looked at Yong Qi again. "You really are not going to tell me first how much you
Yong Qi sighed, all of the sudden feeling weary. "Perhaps I know who, what happened, when. But I really would like to hear you tell your story, Ah Ma, and I think my brother and sister deserve to hear the details from you first."

"Why?" his father asked. He had clearly realised now it was useless to ask how Yong Qi knew.

"I will explain, after you tell us about Xia Yu He," Yong Qi repeated simply.

The emperor shook his head again, finally backing down. He deliberated for a moment over how he should begin, before finally saying, "After your mother died, I took a trip down to Shandong for about four months. There, I met a woman named Xia Yu He. She is a very talented guqin artist, and I met her after one of her orchestra's performances."

Yong Qi glanced over at He Jing and Yong An and saw that they were exchanging wary looks, probably guessing the direction this was heading already. He gripped the cushion wedged between him and the arm of the chair he was sitting on, but merely shrugged sharply when their querying eyes turned to him, looking for silent denial of their equally silent theories.

"It is…it is hard to explain now, what I was exactly feeling and thinking at the time," their father said. His voice sounded as if he was trying to pull the memories back from some far corner of his mind. He stopped again and gave Yong Qi another searching look.

"Please go on," Yong Qi said edgily.

The emperor sighed, but had no choice but to continue. "Yu He and I began a relationship. I didn't tell her who I was. Back then, we weren't on TV so often as we are now, access to our images were a lot more restricted, so I can't blame her for not recognising me. After about a month, we got married."

"What?" came the twin, dead cries from He Jing and Yong An while their younger brother simply sat back in his chair and blew out a slow breath. He never doubted the story he heard on Zi Wei's laptop, precisely, but even Yong Qi had not expected that their father would say it so plainly, so matter-of-factly, in a voice that was clearly implying he did not welcome judgement or disapproval from his children on this matter.

It was, of course, hard for his children to avoid these reactions, no matter what his tone demanded of them.

"What do you mean you got married?" He Jing exclaimed, incredulity ringing in every syllable. "How could you have? You couldn't have!"

"What were you even doing in Jinan then anyway?" Yong An added. "Besides, how could you have gotten married without her knowing who you were?"

His father was looking at Yong Qi again. He couldn't tell if it was a request that he jump in with what he might know, or his father was simply trying to gauge his reaction. Yong Qi just stared back, carefully expressionless. "I want to know all that too."

The emperor closed his eyes briefly and reached up to massage them with his fingers. "I was in Jinan to sell some of your mother's properties there," he said. "She wanted them liquidated and turned into a charity fund."

"We are all patrons of that fund," He Jing said. From the crease in her brow and the darkening of her
eyes, it wasn't hard to see that He Jing felt insulted that somehow during the process of setting up a charity fund in their mother's name, their father had also managed to utterly betray her by marrying another woman not even a year after her death.

"You married Xia Yu He under the name Ai Bao Li, right? Why did you even have all the necessary paperwork to do that with you in Jinan?" Yong Qi asked, hoping to distract his father from the frostiness in his sister's words. He could not blame her for feeling it; if anything he wished to join her in it. But it was unhelpful for their father to catch onto it, which would only cause them to divert on a tangent that achieved nothing. Just because their father often did not like criticism from his children didn't mean that they – being grown adults – could escape from seeing his shortcomings.

"Well, the properties were registered under civilian names," the emperor said, "left to her by her grandparents before she married me. So they had to be dealt with her civilian name, which meant when I was acting on her behalf, I needed civilian paperwork with me, including the proof that I was her spouse and her death certificate under her maiden name, and my identifications and household registration under my civilian name. When I left Beijing, I didn't think I would use them in any other way."

"No kidding," Yong Qi couldn't help muttering.

"But you did use them," Yong An pointed out, his voice strained.

"As I said, it's hard now to explain my exact frame of mind in that moment. I was grieving and – "

Yong An was unable to suppress his emotions any longer. "You were grieving for E'niang, and you went and married the first woman you saw?" he cried, clearly just catching the swearing in time.

Yong Qi winced at the angry outburst and exchanged an uneasy look with his sister, while their father looked displeased, but seemed to recognise that it was beside the point for him to criticise his eldest son for his tone.

"I never said I was in my right mind," the emperor said wearily. "She was captivating and charming, and easy to talk to at a time when I desperately needed someone to listen. I will admit that I fell in love. That was why I asked her to marry me. It was, perhaps, ill-judged; a madness that caught us in its flurry that neither of us realised how mad it was until it was all over."

"Is it over?" He Jing asked, aghast. "When did it end?"

Their father hesitated. Then, slowly, he said, "After we registered for marriage, and Yu He found out who I was, she…"

"Freaked out?" Yong Qi asked dryly.

"For lack of better word," his father admitted. He sighed. "It was, I see now, unfair of me to put her into such a situation. I suppose only then, amid her own panic, did I realise what a position I'd put her in. I'd forced her into the duties and responsibilities of being married to me. Much more significant than that, I'd unknowingly lead her into responsibilities for the three of you…"

"When did you finally remember that, Ah Ma?" Yong An asked coolly. "When did your children finally occur to you?"

The sharp look the emperor gave Yong An was almost perfunctory, and Yong An met it perfectly evenly. Finally, the emperor shook his head again.

"I cannot deny that you all have a right to be angry, now that you know about this," he said, his
voice suddenly less firm than had been before. "The truth is, Yu He was quite angry, as well, when she realised my true identity. In any case, it became clear then that I couldn't ask her to give up everything she had for a life she didn't even know existed when she agreed to marry me. So we got divorced."

Whatever He Jing and Yong An expected to hear next, it was clearly not this, since they both stared in muted shock for a long moment. Yong Qi simply buried his face in his hands.

"All this happened during the four months you were in Jinan?" He Jing asked.

"Yes," the emperor said shortly.

But Yong Qi's calculations, it was probably a shorter time than four months, but he didn't see a reason to point that out. His brother and sister stared for a moment more, before He Jing pressed her fingers against her closed eyelids and Yong An shook his head helplessly.

"Why did you even go to Jinan?" Yong An asked. "We've always had proxies, or proxies of proxies to take care of these kinds of things for us. Surely you didn't need to personally go, even if it was to settle E'niang's affairs."

"I went because I thought that was the last thing I could do for your mother," the emperor said with a voice heavy with emotions, "to complete this last thing she wanted done, by myself, for her."

All three of his children stared at him, none of them missing the great, painful irony of such a purpose and what it resulted in.

Their father looked at them for a long moment, taking in the mixtures of emotions they were directing at him – still the shock, but also the unmistakable anger, disappointment and pain. More candidly and emotionally than any of them expected, he finally said, "Now that I have told you all of this, I will also admit that I did your mother great wrongs. It has rightly distressed all of you; I cannot blame any of your for what you are feeling. I can only say that I am sorry."

The apology, sincere though it obviously was, somehow made the situation even more unbearable, Yong Qi thought. This was hardly the first time their father had admitted wrongdoing or apologised to his children, but it had never been for something as enormous as this. The fact that he said it meant that they were now expected to somehow try and move past it, towards forgiveness. Considering the suddenness with which the information had come, and the emotions with it, forgiveness was an enormous request. It would come, of course, with time, and at different speeds for each of them, but not right at that moment.

Yong An cleared his throat and spoke first, probably in an attempt to move past all that were unspoken, "Who knew about this marriage of yours? It could be disastrous if the wrong people knew!"

"I married her using the name Ai Bao Li," the emperor explained, "and divorced under that name. I don't think any of the administration officials in Jinan who dealt with the case ever caught on about who I was. It had certainly never gotten out and this is the first time I realise anyone but Yu He and myself are even aware of this."

His father, brother and sister now turned to look at Yong Qi. He chose not to answer their unvoiced question right away. "Only you and she knew about this?" he asked, wishing for his father to confirm this once again. "You never told Yeye or Nainai while they were alive? Or Mama?"

"Your grandparents never knew. I did not see a reason to tell them since by the time I returned to
Beijing, there was nothing to be said on it anymore. As for your Mama, of course not."

Yong Qi let out a slow breath, unsure if he should be relieved just yet.

"Yong Qi, how did you learn about this?" his father asked.

He stubbornly ignored the question again. "If you married her as Ai Bao Li, what is the legal implication of that marriage?"

The emperor hesitated. "I – I can't say. Why do you ask? Yu He made it very clear when she asked for the divorce that she had no demand on me, indeed that she couldn't take what I was offering."

"Well, she didn't know then probably…" Yong Qi muttered to himself. "Then again, even if she did…"

"Yong Qi," his father pressed, more insistently now. "Tell me how you know. She can't have somehow contacted you. There is no reason for her to do that!"

He looked up at his father, and for the first time since the conversation began, felt more sorrow than anger. He didn't want to be the one to break this news to his father.

"I have never met her. She can't contact me in any way, mainly because…" At this point, he reached out to touch his father's arm. "Ah Ma, Xia Yu He died, over two years ago."

The onslaught of feelings seemed to have taken even his father by surprise, because he stood up again and turned away from them, shaking.

"No!"

The pain in his father's voice was one Yong Qi had never heard before. For an immediate instance, he wondered if his father ever felt his much pain about losing his mother, and if he did, how things could ever have played out with Xia Yu He as it did. He shot his brother and sister a worried look as he half rose from his chair. "Ah Ma – "

His father turned back to look at him. "How?" he asked, voice breaking a little.

"Cancer, I believe." Then, unwilling to make his father ask yet again, Yong Qi finally said softly, "Ah Ma, when you left Jinan, did you ever think that Xia Yu He might have been pregnant?"

"What?" his father, brother and sister all exclaimed but each with vastly different emotions.

"She wasn't…she couldn't be…" his father muttered, still washed over with pain and shock at the news of her death. Yong Qi merely raised an eyebrow at the seeming conviction. "Well, I suppose technically she could but…Are you saying that she was?"

"Yes," Yong Qi said.

"And how do you know this?" He Jing asked.

"Because I've met her. Xia Yu He's daughter. Her name is Zi Wei. She goes to Yong Le."

"And I suppose she poured this sob-story on you the moment you met and you believed it?" Yong An demanded roughly.

"No!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "Give me some credit! It was a complete accident I found out. She hadn't intended to reveal herself to me or to any of us at all."
"Explain," his father said curtly.

Yong Qi gestured and everyone sat down again.

"A couple of months ago, I met this other girl, Xiao Yan, and we've become friends. Zi Wei is her roommate so I've met her a few times as well…"

He went on to explain what happened the few days before when he was waiting for Xiao Yan in their room.

"Are you sure that was an accident?" Yong An asked sceptically. "She could have set that video up for you to find…"

"She didn't even know I was coming, and left as soon as I got there, she didn't have time to set it up. Besides, you haven't met her. Xia Zi Wei is possibly the person least capable of that kind of trickery I've ever met."

"Xia?" their father asked.

"You didn't really expect her to have your name, did you?" Yong Qi asked delicately.

"I suppose not…" his father murmured.

"Surely that is not the most important issue right now," He Jing said. Turning to Yong Qi, she asked, "How do you know she hadn't intended to make herself known to us?"

"She told me," Yong Qi said. "Her mother died in 2008, but Zi Wei didn't stumble across this video her mother left for her until a few months ago. She only watched the video herself and found out who her father is barely a month ago. She is still struggling to deal with this information. She is in no state to approach us with this story yet. The whole idea still terrifies her as it is. I can tell."

"Maybe that's what she wants you to think – " Yong An started.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake!" Yong Qi exclaimed, turning away.

"I'm just saying."

"I know you're grasping for any reason to…to dislike her and not give any credit to her, all right? You don't have to prove it!" Yong Qi said.

"And you are not?" his brother demanded, unabashed.

"Well, I would be inclined to, if I hadn't met her before knowing this! But I have, and Zi Wei is not the type to do something like that. You don't have to believe me, but can you please just…I don't know, reserve your judgement for a moment?"

"Is she – she is all right, isn't she? She's well and – I must meet her!" his father said, all in a rush of emotions, spring up to his feet again, as if he was ready to rush out of the room to order a car. It didn't seem like he heard a word of the discussion that had been going on between his two sons at all. Yong Qi found this uncharacteristic, flustered mess of unrestrained feelings downright alarming.

"Ah Ma – "

"Do you have her phone number – " the emperor began, but then shook his head. He continued muttering, more to himself, "No, this must a face to face meeting – "
"Ah Ma –"

He looked at Yong Qi, clearly not really seeing his son's earnest, anxious expression. His thoughts were miles away. "You must tell her –"

"Ah Ma!"

Finally, the emperor stopped short. "What?"

"What must happen is that Zi Wei has to decide that she wants to meet you, and that it is in her best interest to meet you, before you start imagining how the meeting will go," Yong Qi said, as calmly as possible.

His father stared at him, not really comprehending. "What are you saying? Are you saying that she doesn't want to even see me?"

"That's what I've been trying to say!" Yong Qi explained. "Her mother never told Zi Wei about you, clearly she intended to keep Zi Wei's existence a secret from you all these years. Now that Zi Wei's found out, she could have approached me with the story right away, especially when it was obvious that she had many questions. But she didn't. Instead, the whole idea of making any of us become aware of this fact seems terrifying to her."

Of course, much of this, Zi Wei hadn't said in so many words to him, and Yong Qi had simply inferred from the video and their conversation. Some of it was, however, also confirmed by Xiao Yan, and he trusted Xiao Yan had been privy to much of Zi Wei's raw emotions ever since she found out her father's identity. In any case, any kind of meeting would be extremely taxing emotionally for her. It didn't take a genius to recognise that.

Yong Qi continued, "She has to convince herself that she wants to have this meeting, knowing it would mean opening the possibility of a relationship with us, which even we can't deny would bring many, many things she hasn't bargained for into her life. She has to decide that the relationship would be worth that toll, because let's face it, she's lived without us all these years, she doesn't need us."

"Have you talked to her about it? About…meeting?" his father asked.

"Not in any specific way. I mean, we've talked of the vague idea, which apparently fills her with dread," Yong Qi said frankly, though he knew it would perturb his father to hear it. It wasn't something he could sugarcoat; that would only lead to more pain down the road.

"Can you really blame her though?" Yong Qi asked. "Her mother never spoke of you to her and she only found out who you are after her mother had died and left behind a video of message. Considering that, on top of who you are, reluctance to meet you is entirely understandable."

"I – " His father sighed. "I suppose that makes some sense."

"For what it's worth, I think part of the reluctance is because she can't be sure whether you'd want anything to do with her, either. I think Zi Wei does long for a…a family, it's just that the idea of this family is very overwhelming. She practically told me herself that she doesn't have any living relative left on her maternal side that she is close to."

For a moment, as that truth sank in, no one in the room spoke. The emperor seemed lost in thoughts again, but Yong Qi could see that he was finally beginning to understand Zi Wei's fears, was taking
the moment to think about her wishes, rather than rush off into expressing his own, which could have simply been born out of the shock of the moment and the accompanying sense of guilt.

"Would it be…easier if we suggest taking smaller steps first?" He Jing asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, perhaps instead of meeting Ah Ma right away, maybe Yong An and I could ask to meet her first, so that it's a little…less intimidating?"

Yong Qi laughed. "I'm not sure if the two of you count as 'less intimidating'."

"I don't even know I want to meet her," Yong An muttered.

"Brother," Yong Qi said warily.

"What? Do you expect me to rejoice in this?"

Yong Qi shook his head. Of course he did not. On the contrary, he was not surprised by his brother's ire. He simply disliked the idea that Zi Wei might have to endure it, because she had not grown up with Yong An, and had never learnt to shrug off Yong An's temper, understanding that it was swift to come but also swift to disappear. Zi Wei would be hurt by it, and Yong Qi couldn't help but loathe to see her feeling that way.

Meanwhile, the emperor said, "You can't hold my mistakes against her, Yong An. She is your sister."

"She's a perfect stranger!" Yong An exclaimed heatedly. "And how do you even know she's your daughter? You've never even met the girl, and she might very well not be!"

"How dare you!" the emperor cried, looking at his eldest son indignantly. He was about to continue, but Yong An interrupted.

"No, Ah Ma, you are not being reasonable! We currently have nothing but this woman's word, which wasn't even spoken in person, but delievered through a video! Aside from Yong Qi, none of us have even met the daughter! So excuse me if I'm not jumping at the chance to welcome her with open arms!"

"That's enough, Yong An!" their father thundered but Yong An just looked back, defiant.

"Can I – " Yong Qi started at the same time as He Jing was saying, "That's why I think we should meet her, Yong An."

"How can you take this so calmly?" Yong An demanded, staring at He Jing.

"I – " she stammered for a moment. Then, sighing, she started again, "Well, what's done is done. At the very least, Ah Ma did marry this Ms. Xia, and this Zi Wei is her daughter. Even if there is no relation, Ms. Xia did – does – mean something to Ah Ma. Should we not then give her daughter at least some courtesy of the benefits of the doubt?"

"We don't need to do anything. We don't owe her anything," Yong An said darkly.

"Actually, you are wrong," their father said warily. "I owe her a lot, regardless whether I am her father or not. My…relationship with her mother would have affected their lives in some way or another. It is useless to deny that. I know you are angry, Yong An, but you should rightly be angry at
me. Whosever daughter she is, Zi Wei has done nothing to earn your anger."

Yong An looked away, pained and resentful still, and didn't answer.

Silence descended again, and Yong Qi finally found the opening to say what he had wanted to say. "Look, can I ask this? Whether you meet her or not, or who, can you just promise that you will let me ask her, and allow her the choice of saying no?"

"I hardly think we'd just show up on her doorstep without warning, Yong Qi," He Jing said.

"Well, any of you showing up at a Yong Le dorm room might be a little problematic," Yong Qi said dryly.

"She did actually say she doesn't want to meet me?" his father asked in a gruff voice.

Yong Qi hesitated. "I don't think she knows what she wants. It is hardly surprising. This is still very new to her. She is reluctant, but I don't think it's due to any ill feeling. She is just afraid of what comes after the first meeting. Which begs the question, what does come after?"

"No, we can't start jumping ahead here," He Jing said. "Please, can we just take one step at a time? I still can't even really grasp this whole concept. I hope I will be able to if I get to meet her. But right now, I can't think of anything ahead of that."

"You are right," their father agreed. "Yong Qi, perhaps you should just contact her and let her know that your brother and sister would like to meet her if she is willing."

Yong An shot him an indignant look, which was ignored.

"And you, Ah Ma?" Yong Qi asked quietly.

"Your sister is right. We need to take steps. She needs to want this meeting."

"If the point of meeting Jiejie and Laoda first is to convince her that meeting you might not be so scary, then I recommend she just meets with Jiejie first," Yong Qi said, only half joking.

"I second that," Yong An said sourly.

Their father sighed. "As long as you keep on stubbornly keeping her as an abstract concept, you're going to direct this unfair resentment at her. So meet her, Yong An, if she agrees, and then maybe you'll just be angry at me."

Yong An didn't answer, but silence, in this case, spoke volume.

"What about Mama and Ke Ke and Yong Yan?" He Jing asked. "Will you tell them?"

"I suppose I must, regardless of whether anything comes out your possibility of meeting Zi Wei. But let me do that on my own."

"I'm pretty sure none of us want to get into that," Yong Qi said under his breath.
"So…" Yong Qi said slowly later, after their father had left the three of them. "How do we feel, exactly?"

"Still haven't managed to move past shock, to be honest," He Jing said tiredly, leaning back in her seat.

"I still can't understand what Ah Ma was thinking!" Yong An said, punching the cushion in his lap.

"Yeah, well, I think the point is that he wasn't thinking," Yong Qi said. "I mean, if we were literally anyone else, this would just be one of those stupid things people do…"

"But we are not just anyone, okay?" Yong An said heatedly. "I mean, after a lifetime of him drilling that message into our heads – into my head – and we get to deal with this?"

"It is all a bit of hypocritical mess, yeah," Yong Qi said. It went without saying that he would never have phrased things quite this way if his father was before him. "But aren't we also equally hypocritical if we held him up to some unattainable pedestal and assume he can't do anything wrong?"

"Oh, believe me, I have never thought Ah Ma to be perfect in any way," Yong An said, "but to mess up in this enormous capacity is even beyond reasonable boundaries of my willingness to be understanding, right now. If it were one of us, you know there'd be hell to contend with!"

"You mean, if you had guessed right the first time about the reason for my need to talk to you all today," Yong Qi said wryly. "Just tell me, if it were that, if I had gotten someone pregnant, what would your reaction have been?"

His brother stared him incredulously. "'You fucking idiot'?"

Yong Qi let out a short burst of laughter. "Fair enough."

Yong An waved a helpless hand about. "Except it's not you, it's Ah Ma. So…"

Their eyes met, and neither of them said out loud what both were thinking. Yong Qi glanced at He Jing, surprised that she hadn't shown disapproval thus far. Perhaps even He Jing could not help sympathising with their current frustrations regarding their father.

She noticed his look, and simply gave another sigh. "I think we can all agree – Ah Ma included – that it was badly done," she finally said. "But is dwelling on that the most productive thing to do right now?"

"I'm not trying to dwell on it. I just can't get past how idiotic it was," Yong An said.

"Your judgemental, high-and-mighty tone is beginning to wear itself out," He Jing said wearily.

"Are you saying that I'm not allowed to be bothered by this?" he demanded.

"I'm saying it's getting wearying, especially when it solves nothing."
"Jie, he got married to a woman he barely knew! Back then, he was this close – " Yong An held his index finger and his thumb just millimeters apart – "to the throne. I mean, even pushing aside the fact that he couldn't have waited until a year after our mother died, why even get married? Why couldn't he just do the normal thing and just have a fling and never see the woman again?"

"Well, whatever the reasoning, it happened, all right?" He Jing said with a huff. "Yes, we're all angry at Ah Ma, and yes, it's going to take a long time to get over something like this, but what are we going to do about the rest of it?"

"The rest of it being this girl, Zi Wei."

"Yes."

"For what it's worth," Yong Qi said, "I like her."

"Yeah, so you keep implying," Yong An said carelessly. "No offense to your judgement, but I think I need a little more than that to warm up to the idea of her."

"You do realise that is the point to my wish to meet her, right?" He Jing said.

"Well, I really don't want to," Yong An insisted.

His sister ran a wearied hand over her face. "Look, Yong An, the truth is that as much as you clearly want to pretend Xia Zi Wei doesn't exist, she does. We cannot in good conscience pretend otherwise. Or at least, I can't."

"Why can't you? Yong Qi already said, she's not willing to meet us as it is. Why should we push the issue? Why create a problem when we can avoid it?" Yong An asked.

"Would it help if I told you, from where I stand and what I know of Zi Wei, that the unwillingness is mostly born of fear of all that this life entails, and out of a desperate wish protect both us and her from the controversy that would follow?" Yong Qi said. "I have never gotten the vibe that her reluctance to seek us out was because she truly abhors us or otherwise doesn't want to have a relationship with us, especially when we practically are the only blood relatives she has left."

"Does that somehow make us responsible for her?" Yong An demanded.

"No, of course not, but I'm just saying, she's already more considerate of us than honestly Ah Ma really deserves, and we have to acknowledge that, and we can't do that by ignoring her existence altogether," Yong Qi replied with forced patience.

"Why not? What is she going to do if we do? Take it to the newspapers?"

Yong An was not merely just posing a rhetorical question, and from where he was standing, perhaps that assumption made sense. Despite realising this, Yong Qi couldn't help but feel an irrational indignation on Zi Wei's behalf and a need to defend her.

"No, of course not, you're being absurd if you truly think she would do that."

"No, I'm being very logical," Yong An said crisply, as if Yong Qi was the one being stupid. "Why would you even defend her? It's not as if you have a relationship to preserve. You're not even her friend."

Yong Qi wondered how his brother managed to come to this casual conclusion. He scowled at the dismissive attitude which was becoming increasingly grating. "You're wrong that I don't have a
relationship to preserve. Zi Wei's roommate is her best friend, and she's my friend."

"So don't be," Yong An said flippantly, which earned him a death glare.

Considering how this conversation had been going thus far, Yong Qi felt that the coming threat was more than deserved. "If you start dictating who I can or cannot be friends with, I will punch you in the face."

"All right, calm down," He Jing broke in before Yong An could retort. "Yong An, Yong Qi is right, you know running away from this is not going to solve anything. Also, Ah Ma wants at least a chance to know her, and despite what happened to get us here, we do need to respect that. She is his daughter. Might be. Probably. Well, we would have to make sure, but that's not impossible to do anymore. So assuming that she is, my point stands."

"And if she doesn't want to know him?"

"Then he will have to find a way to live with it, but that hardly means we do not at least try and reach out," He Jing said. "Whether we like it or not, this is a situation of unbalanced power, and if she is the kind of person we could embrace into our folds, she would not be the one to reach out to us, first. That initiative lies with us."

"Fine, so we reach out, then what? The good case scenario would be she doesn't want to actual have anything to do with us. But on the off chance that she does – "

"If you're going to suggest she might have unsavoury motives for that, I swear – " Yong Qi interrupted.

"I wasn't, funnily enough," Yong An answered, glaring. "I'm just saying, say she does suddenly decide that perhaps she wants to at least try to get to know our family, what happens then? We take out an announcement in all major newspapers? The Imperial Palace is pleased to announce that twenty years ago the Emperor had a secret marriage that lasted ten days and resulted in the birth of a daughter who shall now be known as Princess'?

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," He Jing snapped.

"What?" Yong An retorted. "You know that if we try to establish this relationship in any way at all, it's not going to happen in secret! Yes, we can try and probably succeed for a while, but something of this magnitude simply doesn't just keep forever. We are going to get to a point where it has to be known, and it's going to make everything worse when it is revealed that we've attempted to keep it a secret for any length of time at all!"

He Jing apparently was not paying close attention to this logic just yet and was still preoccupied with something he said earlier, because her reply was, "Is she entitled to the title Princess?"

"Beats me," Yong Qi said. "My instinct is probably not, but that was why I asked how legal that marriage was. I mean, it's not like Ah Ma had the required approval from Emperor and Parliament when he married her...but then he wasn't exactly getting married as the Crown Prince."

"If he was getting married as Crown Prince, without an Act of Consent from Parliament and expressed agreement from Yeye, he gives up his right to the throne immediately then. Like that wouldn't create a crisis or anything now, right?" Yong An said sarcastically.

"But then he got divorced. Before he became emperor. So technically, his rights could be reinstated? I think?" He Jing asked.
"Her brothers shrugged.

"Also, they were divorced _before_ Zi Wei was born. I mean, the dubious legality here concerns the Prince, so does that make Zi Wei legitimately Ai Bao Li's daughter? I mean, technically she was conceived while they were married? _That_ counts, right?"

"Was she?" Yong An asked, raising an eyebrow. "It could have happened before they were married, legally or not. I mean, this is already heading down a very uncomfortable road, but how would you go about proving either scenario? They were married for so short a time, I'd think it's kind of hard to be conclusive."

"Is it really? They were married for nearly six weeks from what I remember of the papers I saw," Yong Qi said slowly. Even as he said it, the doubts and uncertainties bloomed and seemed to mock him.

Yong An was looking at him in disbelief. "Do I have to explain to you – "

"No!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "I'm just saying, there is a plausible window there."

"A small window, small enough that it could be contested, one way or another. Considering it was the 90s, the date on a birth certificate _could_ be called into question, and I don't suppose we can count on any records still being available wherever she was born."

"This is ridiculous," He Jing said, leaning her face down onto her hand and shaking her head. "Why are these even questions we should be contemplating anyway? Legitimate or not, legitimate to whom, it's much easier to prove whether she is Ah Ma's daughter. And isn't that what we should be considering?"

"To be fair, Jiejie, her legitimacy will affect how we go about this," Yong An said. "As is the question, did Ah Ma even inherit the throne legally?"

"Oh good god," He Jing groaned. "That is a very dangerous road to go down."

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure these are questions that can occupy a team of lawyers digging into a hundred years' worth of laws and constitution and amendments, debating over definitions for weeks before coming up with an answer, which is much beyond our ken, so maybe we should just move on?" Yong Qi suggested.

"Job creation – the only thing our family's personal crises are good for," Yong An muttered, shaking his head.

Yong Qi gave a short, derisive laugh. "Well, I don't think it's Zi Wei's dream to become a notorious public figure slash fodder for tabloids."

"Yeah, well – " Yong An started, then trailed aimlessly off, yet still clearly indicating the huge paradox that now laid in their dilemma.

"To be honest, even if we try to do this with some attempt at discretion," He Jing said, "we would still end up having to involve all the palaces' secretaries, personal advisors and media team and endure at least _their_ arguing over it, so it's definitely not going to stay just within the family for very long. They might be more sympathetic than the media – I hope anyway – but even that would be a lot to bear. In the end, though, I think I can endure the media invasion if there was possibility of something good at the end of it."

"And what good would this end in, exactly? A happy family?" Yong An asked sarcastically.
He Jing sighed. "Maybe. I don't know. But the truth is simple, Yong An. We have this sister now, and we can't just ignore her, not when we are in a position to offer her support."

"Basically you're still coming back to the point that just because she might be related to us means that we owe her something. You know, even if she were, blood doesn't always equal familial obligation."


"Blood matters, for people like us, and don't pretend otherwise," He Jing said, as if she had not heard Yong Qi's words and Yong An's reaction to it."

"Then maybe it's time we moved away from that."

"Why?" He Jing asked. "To save us the trouble? Because right now, that's the only reason."

"To save both us and her the trouble. Yong Qi, you said yourself she doesn't want to be fodder for the press."

"In the long run, this is about more than just the press though, who will have to move on, eventually. We just have to bear that out, and as if we have never done that before," Yong Qi said. "Unless specifically asked to by Zi Wei, I don't think Ah Ma will be able to not have anything to do with Zi Wei merely to avoid scrutiny from the press."

Yong An blew out a breath, obviously unable to argue with this logic.

"Why must the two of you be so damn rational?" he grumbled.

Yong Qi propped his elbow on the armrest of his chair and rested his chin on it. "To be honest I've spent the last three days arguing myself with the exact same points you've been raising. I suppose it's a little harder for me to hold it all against Zi Wei because I've met her."

"Oh Yong An," He Jing said, putting her arm around him and squeezing his shoulder in comfort. "Don't think I don't understand why you're feeling this. Honestly I shudder to think how Mama would react to this, even though at the time they weren't even together yet, so it's not as if she is personally betrayed by this. But this is going to change everything, no matter what we do, and the only way we're going to manage it, is together. At the very least, we will need that to face off the media."

Yong An sighed. "Well, I still reserve judgement on Zi Wei until I met her."

"Oh, is this you reserving judgement?" Yong Qi asked sarcastically. "Could've fooled me."

"Yong Qi," He Jing said.

"Yeah, yeah, fine," he said, not at all intimidated by his sister's warning tone. "So you both agree that you need to meet her?"

He Jing looked at Yong An. It took a long deliberating pause, but finally, he answered, "Yes."

A couple of days later, He Jing approached the master bedroom at Yong Shou Gong and found it eerily quiet.

"Mama?" she called as she knocked on the bedroom door.

"Come in, Jing Jing."
She entered the room and found her stepmother sitting at the tea table in the middle of the room alone. He Jing went quietly over to sit opposite her.

"So Ah Ma told you?" she asked.

The empress nodded, sighing. "I keep telling myself, I shouldn't be angry, that I don't have a right to be upset. All this happened before my relationship with your father began, so it wasn't like he deceived me. But a secret like this...after all these years...it changes things."

"Of course," He Jing said quietly.

Her stepmother shook her head, and He Jing could well guess the kind of conflicting emotions that she must be plagued with right now. It was one thing to tell herself that logically, she should afford her husband more understanding, it was quite another to immediately be able to do that. She might have been able to graciously and lovingly accept He Jing and her brothers from the very beginning, but then that was because she had walked into this marriage knowing of their existence, knowing that of all the responsibilities and duties she would take, they would be the most important. To be told, years later, there was another child of her husband, whom none of them – including him – had known about before, was something enormous to swallow. Acceptance and understanding wasn't something that could be conjured. It would probably come, but would take more time than had been available so far.

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't know," He Jing admitted. "I keep coming back to the timing...I think I would be able to accept why Ah Ma had to keep this a secret all these years a lot more easily if the timing wasn't so bad. But then I also realise that he probably wouldn't have made such a rash decision if E'niang's loss wasn't so fresh. It's all so confusing."

"So what are you going to do? Your father said you and your brothers will try to speak to Zi Wei?"

"Yeah. I really don't know what we'll say to her though. It might just end up being Yong Qi trying to navigate the whole thing for us, since he knows Zi Wei from before all this. Yong An...well..."

She trailed off with a sigh and merely reached over to pour herself a cup of tea, hoping it would calm her heart and mind currently in turmoil.

What He Jing implied but did not say out loud, her stepmother understood anyway. "He's not taking this well, is he?"

"Not at all, but can you really blame him? Ah Ma's managed to create the exact type of crisis that Yong An had been drilled all his life to never be involved with. To Yong An, it's the worst kind of disappointment. If it were up to him, we'd probably end up paying Zi Wei a few million to persuade her never to mention us or contact us ever again. Yong An hasn't said anything like that, of course, but I know he's thinking it."

"Honestly, that is a solution," the empress said. "Cold, to be sure, but...it wouldn't be entirely unheard of."

"Ah Ma would never – well, he might I suppose, if Zi Wei asks," He Jing mused. "I would like to think that she won't, not because I covet the money, but because it would paint quite a different picture of her than I want to imagine."

"And how do you think we should deal with this?"
"I don't know. I keep thinking that I should meet her first, before I could really decide what I think of her. One part of me tells me I am being too generous; another just keeps…pulling the other way. It's all very confusing. I do envy Yong Qi's ability to…put things in perspective," He Jing said. "I mean, I think part of it is that E’niang to him is a more…an abstract concept. He's not thrilled about all this, either, but I think the fact that he doesn't actually remember E’niang allows him to be able to focus on other things, to think for Zi Wei more clearly than we can. But I suppose it helps that he's met her. Which brings me back to the point, we can't keep considering Zi Wei as this faceless person about whom all we know is this relation which may or may not actually exist. Isn't that just judging her before really know the kind of person she is? Isn't that why we need to meet her?"

"You are right, of course, and Yong An knows that, too, since he has agreed to meet her with you, has he not?"

"Yes," He Jing said.

"I suppose, we should also think that maybe we should sympathise with Zi Wei a little. It can't have been easy, if not to grow up as she did, then to find out this secret, dealing with it alone," the empress said thoughtfully.

He Jing rubbed her face tiredly. "The thing about accepting this, and realising that we can't actually blame them for this situation existing, means that what it leaves me with is being angry at Ah Ma and…" She shook her head in frustration. "It's not that I don't understand how grief can make people do certain things that they can't explain later, exactly, but again, as I said…the timing hurts."

"Oh Jing Jing," her stepmother said, taking her hand, "no one, not even your father, expects you to be all right with this and to get over your anger so easily. So don't beat yourself up over what you feel."

He Jing sighed heavily. "Have you told Ke Ke and Yong Yan?" she asked after a while.

"No, not yet. I really can't predict how they would take this, considering it all happened before they were both born. They might not have a single problem with the concept, or they might take it even worse than the three of you combined, for all I know. You haven't told Zhu Quan?"

"Are you kidding? I can't even figure out what I'm feeling yet, I'm not in any state of mind to recount this story to him," He Jing said.

"Maybe the point of sharing this with your husband is so that maybe he could help you figure out your feelings?" her stepmother said gently. "No matter how this goes, he'll be involved in some way."

"I suppose you are right." They both sat idly with their own thoughts for a while. Then, He Jing asked, "Do you want to meet Zi Wei with us?"

The empress chuckled. "That would make it a rather intimidating reception, wouldn't it?"

"I think it would be intimidating enough on the mere fact that Yong An will be there," He Jing replied.

"I think it best to keep it to what you're planning. The poor girl will probably be overwhelmed enough. When are you planning?"

"If you're not joining us, probably this weekend, when you and Ah Ma are in Shanghai."

"Not wanting to risk an accidental meeting with your father?"
He Jing gave a curt laugh. "I wouldn't put it past Ah Ma to accidentally wander in and taking all of us – but mostly Zi Wei – off guard. Zi Wei has to want that meeting."

"Of course."

"Do you think we should – "

"What?"

"Do you think we should be trying to bury this? From what Yong Qi said, Zi Wei would probably comply if we ever request such thing, even without a massive chunk of money. I mean, I get that when it comes to family, the relationship itself should be worth any amount of – of chaos that comes with it. And obviously if we don't cut this off while we still can, Yong An is right in pointing out that we won't be able to keep it a secret forever. I'm not necessarily afraid of the hounding of the press, exactly, because they will have to back off, at some point, but there are other consequences, as well. I just wonder whether we are actually strong enough to stand against the public reaction to something like this…"

"To be honest with you, honey, considering how long this country has practiced concubinage, an institution that hasn't even been outlawed for a century yet, and how few emperor of this dynasty were actually born of first wives and empresses, I don't think anyone will be particularly flabbergasted that the emperor might have a child no one knows about. It would make for juicy gossip, and I suppose it's always been our lot to deal with that, but it won't be the reason for the collapse of the monarchy. Regardless whether his marriage to this Xia Yu He could be considered legal or not, there was nothing about the circumstances of Zi Wei's birth that was actually against the law."

"Whether the marriage was legal would affect Zi Wei's rights and position if this relationship goes beyond meet and greet, though," He Jing said. "There are questions of inheritance, duties, and public allowance. It's still going to be a nightmare."

"Look on the bright side, at least the succession is not an issue," the empress said. "Next to the issue of imperial spending, a crisis in the succession would be much, much worse."

"It hurts my brain that now I'm glad for our completely medieval, sexist succession laws," He Jing said wryly. "Though, even without the succession from Ah Ma being an issue, he did marry this Xia Yu He without approval of the Emperor and Parliament. What does that say about his rights to the throne in the first place?"

The realisation dawned on the empress as well and she looked as lost as He Jing felt at that moment. "Well, there is that. " She let out a slow breath to try and calm herself, before speaking slowly, deliberating each word, "I suppose, Parliament could contest the legality of your father's place on the throne after his marriage to this woman without consent, but what would be the point? To anti-monarchists, it's not as if there is a difference one way or another who the emperor is. There is not enough power in the emperor anymore for it to honestly matter who he is, either, as far as supporters of the monarchy or ambivalent people are concerned. This isn't feudal time when the emperor held absolutely power and thus the seat is something to truly fight for. I don't think either of your uncles want to take your father's place, even if England proved that such thing could theoretically be pulled off."

"We could only hope that is the case? I don't know, maybe if Ah Ma were to be – I don't know – convinced to step off now, none of us would necessarily mind, really, but it would make the whole brouhaha even more embarrassing. I wouldn't want to be the one to come after, either. And as a family we still have to face each other, after."
"Parliament would want to avoid turning this entire situation into a constitutional crisis, as well, He Jing. It's much more trouble than the technicality is worth. If we have to deal with this at all, it will be easier if it were kept a personal crisis for the imperial family."

"I suppose we are to rejoice at that," He Jing said sarcastically.

"Oh, do be grateful for that. A personal crisis will be forgotten by the press much more easily as soon as there is some other celebrity scandal to distract them."

"I hope so. I suppose faced with this now, we do have to count even the smallest of good things that could be got out of a bad situation."

"To be honest, Jing Jing, the way your father was telling me about this, when I finally understood what he was talking about, I was rather relieved."

"Relieved?" He Jing asked incredulously. "Why?"

"He wasn't very coherent at first. I admit I assumed the worst."

"The worst being…?" Looking at the expression on her stepmother's face, He Jing blurted out, "You thought he had an affair?"

"As I said," the empress said slowly, "he wasn't being very clear at first."

He Jing smiled weakly. She never thought there would be a day when she would have reason to be explicitly grateful for the fact that her father wasn't cheating on his wife. It should be one of those things that should be a matter of course, not a source of relief.

Perspective was indeed a strange thing sometimes.

Yong Qi stared at Zi Wei's number on his phone and had to almost physically force himself to call it. As he waited for Zi Wei to pick up, the tension mounted to such that he had to get up to pace around the room, trying to clear his head.

The phone rang for a long time. Yong Qi counted the rings and wondered if she would answer at all.

"Hello?"

Despite the fact that he had called her, Yong Qi was startled at the sound of Zi Wei's answer. Perhaps he had really expected her to not take his call. Still, there had been a beat between the end of the ringing tone and her greeting. She had obviously needed a moment to gather herself before answering.

Yong Qi's own voice was suddenly gravelly, as if he hadn't used it in days and he had to clear his throat several times before speaking.

"Hi Zi Wei, this is Yong Qi."

It was a stupid thing to say. She knew, of course, but he hadn't known what else to say. He didn't want to just jump straight into the reason he was calling, unwilling to take her off guard and intimidate her even further.

"Hi," was Zi Wei's only reply, and it was given softly, almost fearfully. A pregnant pause followed.

Why had he never noticed how unbearable a silence over the phone could be? Why hadn't he
thought about making this request in person?

The silence stretched on. Zi Wei did not know how to fill it, either. Yong Qi took a deep breath and forced himself to focus.

"Listen, would you be willing to meet us some time this weekend?" he asked.

There was another long pause before she would speak. "Us, being - ?"

"He Jing, Yong An and me."

"Oh. Uhm."

She seemed unable to answer, and he could well guess all the fears that must be going through her mind right then. Surely she dreaded a potential meeting where she knew that she would be outnumbered and emotionally compromised?

He hoped he sounded sufficiently calm and not as agitated as he really was feeling when he said, "We don't have any intention of ambushing you, all right? This is hard for us, but it's not any easier for you, either. We're – we're angry at Ah Ma, yes, but that doesn't mean any of this is your fault. Jiejie just thinks that considering things have gotten to this stage, they should meet you."

"You didn't mention what your brother thinks," she said, too perceptively for Yong Qi's comfort.

He had to take a moment to decide how to phrase his answer. "He… he's angry at Ah Ma and wasn't shy about projecting some of that onto you," he admitted finally. "But Zi Wei, he might pretend to the contrary, but he does want to meet you."

Yong Qi wondered whether Zi Wei would protest against that observation or show that she was reluctant to meet precisely because of that.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she merely asked.

"I don't know," he said with a sigh. "I don't know if anything in this entire saga is a good idea. It would be fine if we went on not knowing anything. But now that we know, we do want to talk to you."

"I'm sorry," Zi Wei said, almost apropos of nothing. Her voice was suddenly full of guilt. "I never wanted to put you all in such a difficult position or cause any discord in your family."

She was apologising for negatively affecting his and his siblings' relationship with their father, even though he was her father too and he had never spent a single moment being present in her life. When you considered that, it really was Zi Wei who had more right than any of them to be angry at him. And yet, here she was, taking the guilt upon herself, just because she had wanted to find out more about her father, who had been shrouded in secret her whole life. She clearly felt she should have just accepted the secrecy and never should have poked at it in the first place, and Yong Qi felt both immense sorrow and concern at her words.

"Zi Wei, let's get something clear; none of this is your fault, no matter what anyone says," he said, hoping that his voice didn't sound too abrupt and rough over the phone.

"It's kind of you to say, but – "

"But nothing."

"But nothing," Yong Qi cut between her words. Then, more gently, he added, "I know that maybe blaming yourself give you some sense of being in control of the situation, but Zi Wei, considering
what's laying ahead of you, it's not a healthy feeling at all. Regardless of how widely this information will become known, whatever difficulty that comes to us, you will have to bear, as well. That is enough of a burden without the misplaced guilt, Zi Wei."

There was a pause, in which Yong Qi thought he heard her sniffle. "Thank you," Zi Wei finally said, obviously through a stuffed nose. She didn't continue speaking, or maybe she could not. Yong Qi thought he would give her another moment longer to gather herself, so he took the phone away from his ear and turned the speaker on.

"Zi Wei?" he asked, after another beat of silence. "About the possibility of meeting with me, He Jing and Yong An - ?"

"Can I – can I think about it? And get back to you?"

"Of course," he replied softly. "Just give me a call when you're ready."

"Okay."

He was about to say goodbye, but then Zi Wei went on.

"Yong Qi, I mean it. I appreciate how gentle you're being with me on all of this."

Her voice was shaking as she said this, and his sympathy for her increased tenfold. She should never have to deal with a problem already as complicated as this, which was only made a thousand times messier because it involved his family. This was the kind of thing you had to be trained to deal with. Being thrown into the deep end like this wasn't something he wanted to wish upon anybody, least of all someone as sweet-tempered as Zi Wei.

"We're all just trying to navigate our way around this sudden, shocking revelation as well, Zi Wei, same as you," Yong Qi said. "We might be able to help each other make sense of it, if we try to do it together. In any case, you shouldn't have to deal with this alone."

"I'm not, really," Zi Wei said. "I mean, of my friends, only Jin Suo and Xiao Yan know, of course. But I don't know what I would have done without them. Xiao Yan, especially, since she's here, and Jin Suo had to go back to Jinan."

"I'm glad for that."

"Should I tell Xiao Yan you called?"

"If you want," Yong Qi said, taking care to keep his voice even. He knew why Zi Wei was asking, and was sure Zi Wei would be a strong advocate for his case if he ever needed it, but he could not allow himself to think about that right now. Everything was in too much of a limbo, too unsure, between him and Zi Wei. Right now was the worse time to bring Xiao Yan into the middle of it all. Swiftly, he redirected the conversation. "Anyway, think about it, all right? Let me know when you can."

"Of course. I'll talk to you later, Yong Qi."
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"You sure you don't want me to come with you?" Xiao Yan asked as Zi Wei paced around the room, waiting for Yong Qi who would pick her up. He would drive her to the palace to speak to his brother and sister.

"Yes," she said shortly and immediately feeling guilty about it. "I'll be fine, Xiao Yan," she added in a voice that she hoped was calm and reassuring.

It probably wasn't.

Xiao Yan was still looking at her worriedly, but Zi Wei turned away. Her stomach was in enough of a twist without having to watch Xiao Yan freak out on her behalf as well.

"Have you talked to Jin Suo about this…development?" Xiao Yan asked.

Zi Wei shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I – I don't know if I'm up to telling Jin Suo about this right now," Zi Wei said. She sighed and turned to face Xiao Yan, who was looking at her with creased brows. It was clear that Zi Wei's answer only managed to worry her.

"Zi Wei, considering Jin Suo and I are the only people who know about this, I don't think you should be shutting her out at a time like this."

"I'm not shutting her out!" Zi Wei said. "I told her that Yong Qi now knows."

"But you haven't told her that his brother and sister also know and you're meeting with them."

"What would be the point, before the meeting actually happens? You know because it's impossible for you not to know. Jin Suo tends to worry and be very overprotective of me. I don't want her to panic before there's anything to panic about. I can't deal with her nerves as well as my own."

Xiao Yan sighed. "If you think it's best." It was clear by Xiao Yan's doubtful voice that she was unconvinced by these words. "But you will tell her, at some point?"

"Yes," Zi Wei said.

"Okay," Xiao Yan said.

Silence descended on them. Zi Wei almost wished they still were discussing Jin Suo, just so that she had something to occupy her mind. Now that the conversation was over, she was back to restless waiting.

"It's going to be all right," Xiao Yan said after a while, apparently unable to bear the quiet but also unable to think of anything actually useful to say.

Zi Wei simply gave her a tense smile and was glad when her phone buzzed, saving her the need to
answer. What it did manage was to cause her heart to beat a thousand times faster when she looked down and saw that it was a text from Yong Qi.

"He's downstairs. I should go," she said vaguely to Xiao Yan and grabbed her things. Not waiting for Xiao Yan to give out any last advice or reassurance that surely would not be particularly useful in her agitated state, Zi Wei hastily pulled the door open and left their room.

She spent the whole lift ride down to the ground floor with her heart thudding in her chest so hard that she could feel it down to the very tips of her toes. She wondered if this was what she was feeling now, what would the state of her be like when they finally reached the palace? She wasn't even sure, even now, despite having accepted his invitation, how she could even face Yong Qi again, this time for the first time since they had that conversation the day he found out…

"How are you?" he asked when she got downstairs and slid into the passenger seat next to him.

Zi Wei smiled weakly. "That's a loaded question that I'm not sure how to answer."

He gave her a comforting smile. "Try to relax."

"Has anyone ever managed to actually follow that advice, ever, in the history of mankind?"

"Probably not," Yong Qi replied, chuckling.

He drove in silence for a while, and Zi Wei's mind and heart was too full to think of what would be appropriate small talk topics. Then again, he probably would not want to make small talk at a moment like this. She could not imagine what he might be thinking when they were approaching a meeting that would surely change both their lives forever.

Zi Wei wasn't sure how much time had passed, but finally, he glanced over at her and said kindly, "We're nervous, too, you know. We have no idea how to go about this either. So let's just try and be gentle on each other, all right?"

Zi Wei nodded and hard to swallow the mounting tension in her throat before speaking. "Is it just going to be you and –"

She had no idea how to refer to anyone and so just left her question trailing. He understood, thankfully.

"Yes," Yong Qi said, "just me, Jiejie and Laoda."

"What about –"

"Ah Ma and Mama are in Shanghai, so the chances of you running into either of them is zero."

"Oh."

She leaned her head against the window of the car and let out a shaky breath. Yong Qi gave her another reassuring smile which she was surprised to find did help this time, a little.

"How did he react, exactly?" she asked, almost fearing the answer. She didn't know until she felt the pain that she was clenching her hand so hard that her nails dug into her palm.

"Ah Ma?"

"Hmmm."
"I think shock was the main order of the day. The news of your mother passing away was naturally distressing, and he really wanted to make sure that you were all right."

Zi Wei felt like she should be feeling something upon hearing this report of concern from the father she had never met. She definitely was numb upon hearing Yong Qi's words, but for the life of her, she couldn't put a name to the emotions raging war inside her either.

"But he's not going to be here today?"

"No, we weren't sure you'd be up to meeting Ah Ma right away," Yong Qi answered. Then, he gave her a curious look. "Did you want to see him today?"

"I – I don't know," she said truthfully.

"Well, he does want to meet you, if that helps."

Yong Qi's words were so matter-of-fact that Zi Wei found it hard to judge how fervent this wish might be. She didn't know whether she would have been gladdened if she knew just precisely how very anxious his father was to meet her. She had a feeling putting a quantifier to the wish might end up scaring her than comforting her. They really needed to take baby steps with this relationship.

"Maybe?" Zi Wei said in a small voice. "A little. I – I need to think about it."

"Yeah, I thought so too. That's why we thought today, it would be a little less intimidating if you just meet Jiejie and Laoda first."

"Less…emotionally draining, maybe, but I'm not sure about less intimidating," Zi Wei said. "And even then…"

"We don't bite," Yong Qi said, smiling slightly.

She could only give a weak smile in return. "But you said that the Crown Prince is upset about this."

"The reason for it is not entirely you, yourself, or even the idea of your mother. It's a combination of many things. As Crown Prince, he's been taught and groomed his whole life to avoid situations like this – please don't take offence – "

"I don't," Zi Wei said softly.

"For all of us, the issue isn't really that Ah Ma had this secret marriage, but the way it happened and the way it ended. It goes against all the ways we've been taught to do things. Anyway, I think, in many ways Yong An understands more than anyone the turmoil that Ah Ma is probably going through right now. After all, Ah Ma was the Crown Prince when he met your mother. It's not hard for my brother to project himself into that situation. I think that's what making the let-down feel even more personal to him, and that's the main reason why he's so upset."

"I think I understand," Zi Wei said. "Can you please do me a favour?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure…everything I have ever known of your family came from what I get from the news, the media, the press, and I gather all that presents a very selective view of all of you. This is a sensitive enough situation and it is bound to be highly emotional for all of us. If I overstep my bounds, if I say anything that might be distressing, can you please make sure to tell me? I don't want to inadvertently hurt any of you more than you've already experienced."
"Of course. But really, Zi Wei, as I said, I don't think any of us really know how to deal with this entire situation, so we'll have to all figure it out together."

Yong Qi turned to her for long enough to offer her a smile, before turning his attention back to the road. The rest of their drive to the palace was made in contemplative silence.

She tried, she really did, to look relaxed and nonchalant as they drove towards Xi Hua Men. It didn't work, of course, not when even the sight of the gates themselves were intimidating enough. Looking at the august vermilion structure, she suddenly understood why emperors were often associated with dragons. Even now, she would not be at all surprised to find dragons residing behind those towering, magnificent gates.

She wondered how still even more intimidating it would be if they were entering the palace through the mightiest of them all: Wu Men.

"They'll want to see your ID," Yong Qi said as the gates came into view.

There were three gates to Xi Hua Men, and they were driving towards the largest, middle one. Zi Wei couldn't help the palpable increase in her heartbeat as she thought about how, barely a hundred years ago, that middle gate would be reserved solely for the emperor's use, and even Yong Qi would not have been allowed to use it. The structure of the palace might still remain, but how things had really changed. How much history had passed through it!

The guards outside immediately recognised Yong Qi's car. One of them leaned down to peer at the windshield to ensure he was the driver. Yong Qi gave him a brief nod. A moment later, the barrier across the opened gate lifted up, granting them entry.

Yong Qi stopped the car as they were just inside the gate, and rolled down Zi Wei's side of the window. Leaning to speak to another guard who just stepped out of his station, Yong Qi said, "Hi, she's with me."

"Rong Qin Wang, good afternoon. Good afternoon, Miss. May I please see your ID?"

Zi Wei handed it over. The guard returned to his station, and through the glass window, Zi Wei could see him placing her ID on a scanner.

"During the week, Xi Hua Men and Dong Hua Men are entrances for the staff," Yong Qi said as they waited, "and our family uses Shen Wu Men at the back, which is closer to the residential palaces. But on the weekends, the Imperial Garden is opened to visitors so security-wise it's not a good idea for us to use that entrance today, even if going through here is a bit of a longer walk back to the back palace."

The security guard returned and handed Zi Wei her ID. "Thank you, Miss. Everything's in order, Wang Ye."

"Thank you," they both said. Yong Qi started the car again and continued into the palace, returning the salute of the remaining guards as they passed.

"This is like going through airport security," she observed.

"It's just standard security procedure," Yong Qi said. "I suppose it's a little like airport security."

Surely his version of airport security would be very different to hers. Zi Wei wondered if he had ever
flown economy to know what regular airport security was actually like, but was too polite to voice her thought.

"Anyway, you're on the list now, so after the first few times, they probably won't ask for an ID anymore once they've gotten used to your face, but you still need to be accompanied in," Yong Qi continued. "If you decide to visit frequently, that is."

Zi Wei turned to him. "The list?"

"We have a list of guests who are cleared to regularly visit," he answered. "Otherwise you need to be a member of staff with an ID keycard to be let in unaccompanied."

"Electronic keycards weren't part of the original security plan when the place was first built, I guess," Zi Wei said with a smile.

Yong Qi laughed. "No, not so much. The gates have mechanical hinges now, you know, which means when it's closed at night, they just press a button and it shuts by itself. There's been more upgrade in security around here in the last ten years than the century before that combined, and it's still going on. We'd never get rid of the actual human guards any time soon, of course, but the other measures help."

"For the entrance that requires a keycard, what happens if you lose your card, or someone else uses it?"

"Well, obviously you can't just put on a balaclava and drive through the palace gates just because you have a keycard. When anyone with a keycard uses it, their photo shows up on the guards' computer and they do check you're actually that person. You wouldn't be able to use another person's keycard. And obviously, this just gets you through the gates. You also need a PIN to get into any of the offices. To get to the private residences, you need a keycard, PIN and fingerprint scan."

"Are you sure you should be telling me all these details about security in the palace?" Zi Wei asked as they stepped out of the now-parked car.

"Well, it's not as if you'd be able to break in now that I've told you," Yong Qi replied with a chuckle. "And we have signals to alert the security guards if we are ever being coerced to bring someone in. Anyway, I would drive straight to Xian Fu Gong, but I thought we might walk from here in so that you could get some air before facing the inquisition."

"So it would be an inquisition?" Zi Wei tried to joke shakily as he led the way, pulling her coat closer around herself.

"I don't know. We've never done anything like this before, and sometimes it's hard to tell exactly what Yong An would do," Yong Qi said. "Cold? Should we have stayed in the car?"

"No, just…nervous."

He gave her a sympathetic smile. He said, probably in an attempt to distract her a little, "It would have been nice, actually, if we were able to come through Shen Wu Men, then we'd be able to go through the garden. It's a little late for plum blossoms now but it's getting pretty nice this time of year. But on the weekends, it's better to avoid that crowd."

"Is it strange, having people swarming around your home all the time?" she asked, curious.

"We are used to it by now," Yong said. "And it's a bit of a first world problem to complain about. In
any case, it's only the Museum on the Outer Court area that is open five days of the week, but we
don't go down there unless there are things to do. The Imperial Garden is only open to public on the
weekends on guided tours, and even then they have a cap number of people they allow in at any
point in time. Most weekends we are out at Yuan Ming Yuan anyway, so it's never been that much
of an intrusion, actually. And honestly people only come see the Imperial Garden if they were really
desperate to see it for some reason, and they usually book tickets in advance. Jing Shan and Bei Hai
Parks are a lot more accessible. So is Yi He Yuan, which is open whenever we're not in official
residence for about two months in the summer. Technically, it's three months, but the other month we
are effectively at Yuan Ming Yuan anyway."

"But you stay at Yuan Ming Yuan regularly, anyway?"

"Yeah. It belongs to the family, instead of the country, so there's more privacy there. Before, it was
only mostly used in the summer, of course, but those were the days when it took a whole cartful of
gold and days to prepare to move the whole court to a different palace. Now it's just a matter of when
we fancy that privacy and can be bothered to drive out there."

"Were these paths so wide in the old days or were they opened up for car access later?" she asked,
gesturing to the road they were walking on.

"No, the widths of these paths are original. If you imagine an emperor's sixteen-bearer sedan chair
plus the whole entourage, the paths would have to be this large. Of course, they did cut a few gates
where previously was a wall so that you can actually drive from the gates to the palaces. Nowadays,
the idea of knocking down a wall of a four-hundred-year-old ancient structure would probably give
some people a heart attack, but this was the '20s and '30s, and modernisation was the much more
prominent concern then."

"But they must have had to modernise the palace beyond those years if you still live here, right?"

"Well, yeah, obviously over the years they've added plumbing and heating and air conditioning and
electricity and internet, but there's been a lot more backing off the knocking down of things. Any
rebuilding or improvements we make now are made with care to preserve at least the appearance of
the old structure. We're here."

Xian Fu Gong lacked security guards outside its immediate gate, but the prickling feeling at the back
of her neck told Zi Wei that there was definitely more than one security camera about. She fell quiet
as Yong Qi opened the door for them and pushed it hard enough that it slammed against its
neighbouring panel with a bang. She suspected that he did it on purpose, to alert his brother and
sister, who, if they were here already, surely were talking about her.

Yong Qi turned and gave her an encouraging smile. "Ready?"

Zi Wei gave him a shaky smile and nodded.

He reached out and squeezed her shoulder, then gestured the open door.

Zi Wei took a deep breath and stepped inside.

Zi Wei was jittery. She was drumming her fingers against her jeans as Yong Qi led her inside. That
was only to be expected and he was hardly surprised. Yong Qi's own heart was drumming pretty
heavily as well.

They walked into the sitting room, where He Jing and Yong An were already present. His brother
and sister stood up when they entered.
For a moment they stared at Zi Wei, not speaking. Zi Wei, to Yong Qi's slight surprise, was looking back with a slightly uncomfortable, but unmistakable smile. Then, when no one said anything, she shot Yong Qi a slightly panicked look.

Yong Qi was thankfully he did not have to actually intervene, because the look shook He Jing into action.

She approached Zi Wei and held her hand out.

"Hello."

Zi Wei slowly took the offered hand and shook it. "Uh – " She cleared her throat. "Hello. I'm Zi Wei."

"He Jing. This, of course, is Yong An."

The Princess shot the Crown Prince a look which clearly said 'Don't be rude', which finally made him hold out his hand to Zi Wei as well.

"Hello," he said curtly, though Yong Qi thought it wasn't quite as cold as it could have been. That was probably a good sign.

He hoped.

The awkward greetings over, Yong Qi finally spoke, "Let's sit down."

He gave Zi Wei an encouraging look and gestured an armchair. Zi Wei gingerly sat down, clenching her hands together in her lap.

As He Jing poured the tea, Zi Wei said, all in a rush, "I've already said this to Yong Qi, but please know that I wasn't sure that any of you should ever know about my – about me. I know the kind of chaos this would cause for everyone involved, and I never intended or wanted to cause such thing, at all. I know none of you want something like this, someone in my position, to sudden barge her way into your family and if you don't want anything to go further than this one meeting today, I totally understand that, and will respect that."

Yong Qi wondered whether she had rehearsed this, and was grateful when He Jing looked up with something that resembled a friendly smile.

"Yong Qi has told us this was your feeling, but I appreciate hearing it from you, yourself."

She pushed a tea cup towards Zi Wei, who returned the sentiment with a nervous smile of her own.

"The thing is, Zi Wei," He Jing continued, "we don't want to make you feel like we resent you for something that was never your fault, or even your mother's, come to think of it. Ah Ma did not tell your mother who he was, so if all of us are to blame anyone, we should blame him, as uncomfortable as it is."

"Thank you?" Zi Wei said timidly.

"But if you are Ah Ma's daughter – and forgive me, for the 'if' here – "

"No, no, I understand," Zi Wei said hastily. "I – I don't even know if I really…I mean, I get it."

He Jing nodded. "It will be easy enough to find out for sure. If you want to."
"If – if I want to?" Zi Wei asked, clearly not understanding He Jing's point.

"I'm not saying that your mother would lie to you," He Jing said. "But you understand, for us to move past this point, all of us would need some sort of proof. It will help us move past this realm of surrealness we are trapped in and begin to accept it. But whether we move past this, move to what, you have to decide."

"I'm still not sure I understand – "

"What my sister wants to say is that you need to decide whether you want to be Ah Ma's daughter," Yong An cut in, speaking for the first time. Zi Wei snapped her head to him so abruptly that Yong Qi winced in sympathy pain. "You could walk away from us now, and look at us as you have always done for the first twenty years of your life, and if you want, we could compensate you for the confusion and distress you've gone through – "

Yong Qi ran his hand across his face tiredly.

"Yong An!" He Jing exclaimed, shooting him a warning look.

Zi Wei frowned, staring at Yong An, clearly trying to figure out if she was understanding him correctly. "You think I would – I am not trying to blackmail your family!" she exclaimed, sounding distressed. "I don't – I don't want your money!"

"I'm not saying that," Yong An said as calmly as before and showing no sign that he noticed either Yong Qi or He Jing's reactions. "If you wanted to blackmail us, I'm sure you'd be a lot more coy."

"Well, thank you for that understanding, at least," Zi Wei said indignantly.

"I'm not trying to insult you," Yong An said, and it took all of Yong Qi's self-control not to snort out loud. If that was what his brother was not trying to do, he was failing miserably.

Zi Wei just stared at Yong An in disbelief.

"What I'm saying is, Ah Ma believes you are his daughter. Honestly, I don't expect the DNA test to show up negative. Despite my previous protestation to Jiejie and Yong Qi, I don't believe your mother would just make up this story and then tell you to stay away from us. The fact that we all found out about this by accident actually lends credence to the fact that you are probably Ah Ma's daughter."

Yong Qi exchanged a look with He Jing; at this point, he wasn't sure where Yong An was going, either.

Zi Wei didn't speak and simply waited for Yong An to continue.

"But Jiejie was right, if there is fault in all this, it was on Ah Ma, who didn't tell your mother the truth, who allowed things to get so out of control. And yet, Ah Ma left with hardly any consequences until now, whereas your mother became a single mother, and I don't expect you to tell me that was ever easy. What I'm saying is, as angry as we are at Ah Ma, it is anger because he was inconsiderate of our mother, because he kept such a secret all these years, not because we have ever suffered. You have."

"I – I wouldn't call it suffering, exactly," Zi Wei said. "I mean, I've never known anything different."

"Your mother suffered, whether that be in small or big ways," Yong An pointed out. "And now you know the reason."
"I suppose."

"You have more right than us to be angry at Ah Ma," Yong An concluded.

"I'm not angry," Zi Wei said automatically.

"Aren't you?" he asked mildly.

Zi Wei just stared at Yong An for a moment longer, before looking abruptly away, a distinctly uncomfortable expression on her face. She chewed on her bottom lip anxiously and didn't respond.

"You are allowed to be, Zi Wei," Yong Qi said gently.

Tears apparently filled Zi Wei's eyes as she blinked rapidly and stood up, turning away from them all.

"So what? How does this tie in - ?" she asked, voice shaking and not looking at them.

"My point is Ah Ma doesn't deserve you," Yong An said. "And honestly, it would be more beneficial for you, if you choose to run as far away from us as you can. Because, believe me, Zi Wei, we are a mess, if you get involved like this. And I swear I'm not trying to use some sort of reverse psychology on you."

"Or?" Zi Wei asked, turning around, her eyes glassy but surprisingly no tear had fallen, though her voice sounded thick.

"If you really want to open some kind of relationship with Ah Ma, you have to be aware that the chances that we could keep it a secret from the newspapers and the world are next to nil. It will come out, one way or another. Something like this, it is too significant for us to keep quiet. And if it comes out at all, we would rather that we announce it on our terms and deal with it head on. It would be worse for someone to discover and print a whole exposé that we would then need to exert energy cleaning up. But either way, the kind of attention you would have to endure will be…"

"Hellish, for lack of better word," Yong Qi piped in when his brother struggled for an appropriately significant descriptor. "But you can already guess that."

Zi Wei gave a watery smile. "What do you think I should do?"

Yong Qi exchanged looks with both He Jing and Yong An.

"We don't think we can tell you that, Zi Wei," He Jing said gently.

"But surely you don't want all that trouble crashing down on you!" Zi Wei exclaimed.

"Honestly, Zi Wei, what we want never line up with what our lives dictate, most of the time," Yong An said. "And this is about more than just what is convenient to us. Given the state of things, you deserve to know your family if you choose to, and you deserve to peacefully walk if you choose to. We will have…more than just a few people telling us how to deal with it, whatever it should be."

"But perhaps, we should put aside the looming fears of how it will be deal with in the press and in Parliament, for a moment," He Jing said. "If we were a somewhat more normal family, what would you want to do? Would you want to get to know your father?"

Zi Wei simply looked bewildered. "I – What does he want?"

"I'm not sure that matters," Yong An said.
"Yes, it does. Of course it does!"

"Honestly, he's always been a good father to us," He Jing said. "He does want to know you, Zi Wei, and it's not only out of some sense of guilt for your mother."

Zi Wei pressed her lips together and looked at the three of them, a lost expression on her face.

"If – Everything will change, if I try to do this, wouldn't it? Not just for me, for you as well. For…for this entire country."

"Yes," He Jing said. "I'm not sure what we can tell you to expect, because we don't know either. I don't like to speculate, because honestly our imaginations can sometimes make it worse."

"I don't – I don't want you all to – to hate me when – " She waved her hands around feebly and stopped abruptly, staring at them all helplessly.

"Zi Wei, you have to understand that it's always been our lot to deal with the attention directed at us, no matter what we do, no matter what happens in our lives," Yong Qi said. "We have lived with it all our lives. I know it's hard for you to imagine, but we don't know what life could be like without it. That also means that we are clear-headed enough when the time comes to know that we should not resent you for it."

Zi Wei gave a shaky breath and a nod, and sat down again. Yong Qi was thankful that both He Jing and Yong An stayed quiet as well, allowing her time to her thoughts. They were all on the brink of something so enormous that would change everything anyway, regardless of what Zi Wei chose. Yong Qi could never look at his father the same way again, nor could any of his siblings. On the other hand, Yong An was still right; until now none of them had suffered the consequences of what happened in Jinan all those years ago. If there was anyone with right to dictate how things should be dealt with right now, it was none of them, but Zi Wei.

"My mother – my mother loved him," Zi Wei said finally, so slowly and tentatively that clearly showed she was trying not to hurt them with this declaration. "She never quite forgave him, I don't think. But she loved him. It sounds so illogical when I say it like that but…it's complicated."

"I don't think it's illogical as you think," He Jing remarked simply.

"When my mother would not talk about him, I would draw my own conclusion that he abandoned her. I'd sometimes think that perhaps he wasn't worth missing, but then at other times, she'd make it so clear that she was never over him and then I end up feeling guilty about those thoughts. And now – now you are telling me I could choose to – to embrace this idea of him. If I want. Like it's so easy. But it's not!"

"Of course it's not, we do understand that," He Jing said, her voice low and gentle. "But still, you understand how this decision has to be yours?"

"Yes," Zi Wei admitted. "I understand that, but I just don't know how. I just want someone to tell me what to do right now, is that so hard?"

The aching helpless look on her face was devastating enough to make even Yong An's tone turn soft.

"Is there – is there anyone that you could talk to about this, that are, well, not us?" he asked. "Maybe not so that they'd tell you what to do, but to offer you some second opinion?"

"Well, there are three other people that know about this now, that I could talk to, but beyond them, I
don't want this spread around much wider."

"Who are they?" He Jing asked.

"My roommate here in Beijing, my best friend in Jinan, and her mother."

Yong An frowned deeply. "You have not confided in anyone in your family?" he asked. "Surely you have other family members who you could tell, who would at least support you?"

"No," Zi Wei said matter-of-factly.

"No one?"

Zi Wei sighed. "My maternal grandparents have both passed away, and even then they didn't know who my father was. Only my mother ever knew that. There has never been any other family that are close enough that I would be comfortable enough discussing this with. I mean, I have a great uncle, but we were never close. I've met him maybe twice."

"To be honest," He Jing said thoughtfully, "this doesn't necessarily have to be all or nothing. Yes, the moment this news of your very existence gets out, the media will explode and it will be overwhelming. But once the first blows over, how everything continues will depend on how we wish to present this relationship. Of course they would tear you apart, if you were to, say, insist on claiming a place in the line of succession – "

"No!" Zi Wei exclaimed, horrified. "I would never – "

Yong Qi rolled his eyes. "Jie, stop trying to scare her."

He Jing shot him a superior 'I don't know what you're talking about' look, which he chose to ignore entirely.

To Zi Wei, Yong Qi continued, "First, even if you were eligible for succession, you'd be...fifth in line. That position should drop even lower with time. So it's a non-issue. There is very little chance that all three of us here, and Yong Yan, would drop dead at once, forcing the throne on you. We never travel in the same car or on the same airplane, or with Ah Ma, to prevent all of us dying in the same accident. So you wouldn't have to worry anyway. But the fact more relevant to this discussion is that you would not be in-line for succession at all, and neither is Jiejie nor He Ke. This country isn't that evolved."

"Oh, er, thank goodness?" Zi Wei said tentatively.

He Jing laughed, which Yong Qi took to mean Zi Wei had passed her not-too-subtle test. His older sister really shouldn't have bothered. Yong Qi could have told her – he had told her – that Zi Wei had no aspirations on this front whatsoever.

"I think at the moment, the important thing you do need to think about and decide, is whether you want to meet Ah Ma at all," Yong An said. "Only once that meeting takes place that there is anything for us to proceed from."

"I know that this is the only logical way to move from this," Zi Wei said fretfully, "but I must admit the whole concept is quite terrifying."

"Because he is the emperor, or because he is your father?" He Jing asked.

"Both," Zi Wei said.
"You know that he's not literally the Son of Heaven, right?" Yong An asked, smiling. "And we don't even call him that anymore."

Zi Wei gave a weak smile.

Yong Qi reached over and placed a hand on Zi Wei's in comfort. "Just like with this meeting, you don't have to decide to meet Ah Ma now. We know it's a big step, and you have to be sure you want to take it. Think about it. Talk to Xiao Yan. To your friends in Jinan. This secret isn't going anywhere. Don't feel like you need to rush into anything. All right?"

Zi Wei looked at him, her eyes filled with conflicting emotions, but she also gave him a grateful smile.

"All right. I will think about it."

Their conversation with Zi Wei had continued, but on a thankfully lighter note, for another hour or so. He Jing decided that all of them had agonised enough over the question of whether or not Zi Wei should meet the emperor. Zi Wei would think about it, and to debate it further then would be useless. So they turned to speaking of more mundane things, with Zi Wei telling them more about growing up in Jinan. In turn, they all tried to soften the prospect of life in the imperial family by sharing the more normal aspects of their childhood and their lives that usually did not interest the press enough to be told to the public.

"So what changed your mind, exactly?" Yong Qi asked his brother later, after he had returned from walking Zi Wei to the closest bus stop. He had offered to drive her home, but she had refused, telling him she needed time alone to think.

"What do you mean?" Yong An asked.

"You were surprisingly gentle with her. In the end."

Yong An sighed. He sounded deep in thoughts as he answered, "I suppose... as angry as I still am at Ah Ma, it just hit me that we have the luxury of that anger, and each other's support. Zi Wei doesn't have that, does she? She seems can't even process the idea of Ah Ma at all, let alone allow herself to feel the anger and pain of how his decisions affected her life. And without being able to feel that emotion, she's going to find it really hard to work past the overwhelming weight of this truth."

"So you are starting to sympathise with her?" Yong Qi asked.

"Yes," his brother admitted. "I guess you were right. She's nice. At least, she certainly doesn't deserve this mess."

"I like her too," He Jing said. "It would have been easier if she was just simply horrid, wouldn't it?"

Yong Qi laughed. "Yes. That thought did cross my mind."

"I think she'll decide to meet Ah Ma, in the end," He Jing added. "She has too many questions, all of them difficult to live with no answer to."

"I think so too," Yong An said with a sigh. "Should we tell Ah Ma we think so, though? You know he'll probably call each and every one of us soon to interrogate us about how the talk went."

"He will ask, I'm sure, whether we think she wants to meet him," Yong Qi said. "I don't think we should get his hopes up, though. I would rather have him be disappointed now than later."
"So you're saying we should tell Ah Ma that Zi Wei has no intention of meeting him?" He Jing asked, incredulous.

"Of course not," Yong Qi said. "That would be an outright lie. I'm saying, tell him she hasn't come to a conclusion, and we can't tell either way. It's not exactly lying."

He Jing gave him a sceptical look, but before she could say anything in reply, her phone lying on the coffee table buzzed. She picked it up and turned it over.

"Ah Ma?" Yong Qi asked.

"Ah Ma," she confirmed. "You two want to do this on speaker?"

"Might as well," Yong An said with a shrug. "Saves him the trouble of calling each of us."

He Jing smiled faintly, before answering the call and turning on the speaker phone.
Consolidation of imperial residences

As part of the Wuxu Reformation, the ancient, millennium-old imperial concubine system was abolished and gradually polygamy became banned throughout China. The Emperor Guangxu himself, by choice, only had one Empress and one consort. His son Emperor Tongxuan would become the first emperor under new monogamy laws.

Previously, the Imperial Family consisted of the emperor, empress, numerous concubines, a significant number of children born to the emperor by these concubines and also any living concubines of the previous emperor. However, since the reign of the Emperor Guangxu, the size of the Imperial Family reduced significantly due to the abolition of the imperial concubine system. Therefore, the Six Eastern Palaces and Six Western Palaces of the Inner Court in the Forbidden City which previously housed imperial concubines fell vacant.

In a change meant to devote more of the Imperial Palace to constitutional, public, ceremonial use, the Emperor Tongxuan moved his primary residence into the Palace of Eternal Longevity. It was a move that was deemed deeply controversial at the time, however over the years, came to set a new precedence for the modern Qing dynasty.

Today, the Emperor and Empress make their main residence at Palace of Eternal Longevity (永寿宫) while the Crown Prince occupies the Hall of Great Supremacy (太极殿). The palaces of the Six Western Palaces and Six Eastern Palaces are reserved as the official residences of the Emperor's adult children who undertake public duties and their families.

Other residences

State ownership

Under the Wuxu Constitution, the Imperial Family ceased to retain the right to own all land under Heaven. Thus, the Imperial Palace, the Summer Palace (颐和园) and many other existing Residences of Imperial Princes, are now owned by the Throne.

Residences of Imperial Princes

The former Residences of Prince Gong (恭王府) and Prince Rui (睿亲王府) are now used as the State Guest House of the Government of China.

Prince He and Prince Huai, brothers of the current emperor who undertake public duties, have also chosen to take up residence at the Residence of Prince Yong (雍王府) rather than the Imperial Palace.
Private imperial residences

The Imperial Family still retains private ownership of other residences such as the Residences of Prince Yi (怡亲王府), Prince Chun (醇亲王府), Prince Fu (孚王府) and the vast estate of the Old Summer Palace (圆明园).

The Old Summer Palace was raided and destroyed during the Second Opium War, and by the time of Emperor Guangxu, still laid in ruins. The Emperor chose to retain the land under the Wuxu Constitution on the understanding that, as private property, any restoration and renovation work done after the Constitution being put into effect would be carried out without public funds.

In 1930, a financial settlement was reached between the Throne and the Emperor to revert ownership of a significant portion of the ruin, namely the Eternal Spring Garden (长春园) to the Government. Since then, this garden has been retained as a historical site.

Over the years, the estate of the Old Summer Palace has been restored in increments by successive members of the Imperial Family, featuring a more modern, Western-influenced architecture style than any other imperial residences. Its proximity to the official residence Summer Palace makes it an ideal residence for the Imperial Family during summer and early autumn months when many imperial ceremonies take place at the Summer Palace.

Forbidden City

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

(Redirected from Huanggong)

"Huanggong" redirects here. For other uses, see Huanggong (disambiguation).
For other uses, see Forbidden City (disambiguation).

The Forbidden City (also known as 皇宫 huáng gōng, literally "Imperial Palace") is the official central Beijing residence of the monarchy of the China. Located in Dongcheng District, the large complex contains many buildings used as the residences of the Imperial Family, an archive, museum and administrative offices.

Name

The common English name, "the Forbidden City", is a translation of the Chinese name Zijin Cheng (Chinese: 紫禁城; pinyin: Zǐjìnchéng; literally: "Purple Forbidden City"). Another English name of similar origin is "Forbidden Palace".

The name "Zijin Cheng" is a name with significance on many levels. Zi, or "Purple", refers to the North Star, which in ancient China was called the Ziwei Star, and in traditional Chinese astrology was the heavenly abode of the Celestial Emperor. The surrounding celestial region, the Ziwei Enclosure (Chinese: 紫微垣; pinyin: Zǐwēiyuán), was the realm of the Celestial Emperor and his family. The Forbidden City, as the residence of the terrestrial emperor, was its earthly counterpart. Jin, or "Forbidden", referred to the fact that in previous times, no one could enter or leave the palace without the emperor's permission. Cheng means a city.

Description

The Forbidden City is a rectangle, with 961 metres (3,153 ft) from north to south and 753 metres (2,470 ft) from east to west. It consists of 980 buildings with 8,886 bays of rooms; however this
The figure may not include various antechambers. Another common figure points to 9,999 rooms including antechambers; although this number is frequently cited, it is likely an oral tradition, and it is not supported by survey evidence. The Forbidden City was designed to be the centre of the ancient, walled city of Beijing. It is enclosed in a larger, walled area called the Imperial City. The Imperial City is, in turn, enclosed by the Inner City; to its south lies the Outer City.

The Forbidden City remains important in the civic scheme of Beijing. The central north–south axis remains the central axis of Beijing. This axis extends to the south through Tiananmen gate to Tiananmen Square. To the north, it extends through Jingshan Hill to the Bell and Drum Towers. This axis is not exactly aligned north–south, but is tilted by slightly more than two degrees. Researchers now believe that the axis was designed in the Yuan dynasty to be aligned with Xanadu, the other capital of their empire.

**Walls and gates**

The Forbidden City is surrounded by a 7.9 metres (26 ft) high city wall and a 6 metres (20 ft) deep by 52 metres (171 ft) wide moat. The walls are 8.62 metres (28.3 ft) wide at the base, tapering to 6.66 metres (21.9 ft) at the top. These walls served as both defensive walls and retaining walls for the palace.

[...]

The wall is pierced by a gate on each side. At the southern end is the main Meridian Gate. To the north is the Gate of Divine Might, which faces Jingshan Park. The east and west gates are called the "East Glorious Gate" and "West Glorious Gate". All gates in the Forbidden City are decorated with a nine-by-nine array of golden door nails, except for the East Glorious Gate, which has only eight rows.

The Meridian Gate has two protruding wings forming three sides of a square (Wumen, or Meridian Gate, Square) before it. The gate has five gateways. The central gateway is part of the Imperial Way, a stone flagged path that forms the central axis of the Forbidden City and the ancient city of Beijing itself, and leads all the way from the Gate of China in the south to Jingshan in the north.

In ancient time, only the Emperor may walk or ride on the Imperial Way, except for the Empress on the occasion of her wedding, and successful students after the Imperial Examination. Nowadays, when used in official, imperial ceremonies, it is still reserved for the Emperor, or members of the Imperial Family representing the Emperor, and visiting Heads of State.

**Outer Court or the Southern Section**

The Forbidden City is divided into two parts. The Outer Court (外朝) or Front Court (前朝) includes the southern sections, and contains the main archives and displays of the Palace Museum and is also used for ceremonial purposes. The Inner Court (内廷) or Back Palace (后宫) includes the northern sections, and is the residence of the Emperor and his family.

Entering from the Meridian Gate, one encounters a large square, pierced by the meandering Inner Golden Water River, which is crossed by five bridges. Beyond the square stands the Gate of Supreme Harmony. Behind that is the Hall of Supreme Harmony Square. A three-tiered white marble terrace rises from this square. Three halls stand on top of this terrace, the focus of the palace complex. From the south, these are the Hall of Supreme Harmony (太和殿), the Hall of Central Harmony (中和殿), and the Hall of Preserving Harmony (保和殿).

The Hall of Supreme Harmony is the largest, and rises some 30 metres (98 ft) above the level of the surrounding square. It is the ceremonial centre of imperial power, and the largest surviving wooden
structure in China. It is nine bays wide and five bays deep, the numbers 9 and 5 being symbolically connected to the majesty of the Emperor. [...] In the Ming dynasty, the Emperor held court here to discuss affairs of state. During the feudal Qing dynasty, as Emperors held court far more frequently, a less ceremonious location was used instead, and the Hall of Supreme Harmony was only used for ceremonial purposes. Nowadays, it still serves as the site for such ceremonies as coronations, investitures, and imperial weddings.

The Hall of Central Peace is a smaller, square hall. During the Ming dynasty and feudal Qing dynasty, it was used by the Emperor to prepare and rest before and during ceremonies. Behind it, the Hall of Preserving Harmony, was used for rehearsing ceremonies, and was also the site of the final stage of the Imperial examination. All three halls feature imperial thrones, the largest and most elaborate one being that in the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Nowadays, these last two halls mainly serve to display artifacts of the Imperial Palace Museum.

[...]

In the south west and south east of the Outer Court are the halls of Military Eminence and Literary Glory. [...] To the north-east are the Southern Three Places (南三所), which was the residence of the Crown Prince. Since 1928, imperial princes, including the Crown Prince, began to occupy palaces in the Inner Court, and the Southern Three Palace, along with the Halls of Military Eminence and Literary Glory become archive libraries for the Imperial Palace Museum.

**Inner Court or the Northern Section**

The Inner Court is separated from the Outer Court by an oblong courtyard lying orthogonal to the City's main axis. It still serves today as the home of the Emperor and his family.

At the centre of the Inner Court is another set of three halls. From the south, these are the Palace of Heavenly Purity (乾清宫), Hall of Union (交泰殿), and the Palace of Earthly Tranquility (坤宁宫). Smaller than the Outer Court halls, the three halls of the Inner Court used to be the official residences of the Emperor and the Empress. The Emperor, representing Yang and the Heavens, would occupy the Palace of Heavenly Purity. The Empress, representing Yin and the Earth, would occupy the Palace of Earthly Tranquility. In between them was the Hall of Union, where the Yin and Yang mixed to produce harmony.

The Palace of Heavenly Purity is a double-eaved building, and set on a single-level white marble platform. It is connected to the Gate of Heavenly Purity to its south by a raised walkway. In the Ming and early Qing dynasty, it was the residence of the Emperor. However, beginning from the Emperor Yongzheng to the end of the reign of Emperor Guangxu of the Qing dynasty, the Emperor lived instead at the smaller Hall of Mental Cultivation (养心殿) to the west, out of respect to the memory of the Emperor Kangxi. The Palace of Heavenly Purity then became the Emperor's audience hall. Above the throne hangs a tablet reading "Justice and Honour" (Chinese: 正大光明; pinyin: zhèngdàguāngmíng).

In 1928, the Emperor Tongxuan was the first to move his residence to one of the inner, more modest palaces that once housed imperial concubines, leaving both the Palace of Heavenly Purity and the Hall of Mental Cultivation to serve purely as official imperial reception halls today. Imperial state banquets now take place mainly in the Palace of Heavenly Purity.

The Palace of Earthly Tranquility is a double-eaved building, 9 bays wide and 3 bays deep. In the Ming dynasty, it was the residence of the Empress. [...] From the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor, the Empress moved out of the Palace. However, two rooms in the Palace of Earthly Harmony are still retained for use on an emperor's wedding night to this day. The Palace is now used for less formal receptions.
Between these two palaces is the Hall of Union, which is square in shape with a pyramidal roof. It now serves as the private archive and treasury of the Imperial Family.

[...]

Behind these three halls lies the Imperial Garden. Relatively small, and compact in design, the garden nevertheless contains several elaborate landscaping features. To the north of the garden is the Gate of Divine Might.

**Surroundings**

*See also: Imperial City (Beijing)*

The Forbidden City is surrounded on three sides by imperial gardens. To the north is Jingshan Park, also known as Prospect Hill, an artificial hill created from the soil excavated to build the moat and from nearby lakes.

To the west lies Zhongnanhai, a former imperial garden centred on two connected lakes, which has undergone renovations and now serves as the site of the Grand Council of Government, or Chinese Cabinet, as well as the Residences of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Zhongnanhai is often used as a metonym for the Chinese leadership at large as the White House is to the President of the United States and his associates. The Imperial Household Department, the collective departments which support the Imperial Family in their public duties is also located here. To the north-west lies Beihai Park, also centred on a lake connected to the southern two, and a popular imperial park.

[...]

**21st century: imperial use and public access**

Over the years, subtle yet significant renovations have been made to the Imperial Palace's landscaping to increase ease of access to the residential palaces by modern transportation. This includes creating certain new gates and driveways to enable car access into residential palaces.

Carparks have been added on both the north and south end of the Palace, on either sides of the inside of the Gate of Divine Prowess and the Meridian Gate. Driveways were created connecting the various gates to the residential palaces around the perimeter of the Six Eastern and Six Western Palaces. However unlimited access of these driveways is only granted to members of the Imperial Family residing one of the Palaces, or official cars on duty. Staff who work in the Palaces are required to park their vehicles at the carparks off the Gate of Divine Prowess and walk through the Imperial Garden to their workplace.

Members of the Imperial Family and staff have found bicycles a more convenient form of transport across distances within the Palace compound. Six Palace-owned bicycle check-points are located throughout the Inner Court, three on the East side, three on the West side. Residents, staff and employees can make use of the vehicles freely at any of these check-points, unlocking them with their security access cards.

[...]

With the exception of the Inner Court compounds holding the Palace of Heavenly Purity, Hall of Union, Palace of Earthly Tranquility and the Six Eastern and Six Western Palaces, the rest of the Imperial Palace is part of the Imperial Palace Museum, and thus opened to the public all year around, unless closed for official ceremonies. The Imperial Garden is also accessible with museum ticket or with a separately-purchased ticket, but only on weekends. The money raised in entry fees is put
towards future restoration of the palace.

[...]
2011, March - April

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2011

March

The internet, Yong Qi found, was the world's weirdest combination of a blessing and a curse.

All the knowledge of humankind at one's fingertips, and yet sometimes it was still impossible to know whether to trust what one read online.

Realisation of the century, this was not.

Still, he couldn't help thinking about the abundance – *abundance* – of information on him and his family online. Many people probably thought that between Wikipedia and Baidu Baike, they had all the necessary information to know everything there is to know about who the emperor, the empress, the princes and princesses were as people. Except, on the rare, crazy occasions when Yong Qi read up on himself or the people he knew on these encyclopedias, or anywhere else for that matter, it often felt like he was reading about complete strangers, or otherwise he went cross-eyed trying to remember when he ever said something that he was quoted saying, or where a particularly piece of information he knew to be false was published that it ended up being taken for granted as the truth. Er Tai had been known to make it into a drinking game: take a shot whenever Yong Qi did a double take or act incredulous about something written about him on the internet.

So it really didn't make sense why he was sitting here now, idly typing the name "Xia Yu He" into a search engine.

He didn't even know what specific information he was trying to look for, or even if he wanted any kind of information. He was sure if there was any burning question he had about her, he would get more accurate answers from Zi Wei.

But he wasn't really looking for answers.

He just needed…a way to dispel the tension, caused by the limbo of waiting for Zi Wei to decide if she could deal with meeting their father in person.

She needed to take her time to decide. This, Yong Qi understood perfectly and supported her whole-heartedly, but it didn't make it easy to ignore his (their) father's agitated emotional state while he waited for what essentially would be Zi Wei's verdict on the possibility of a relationship between father and daughter.

Why that led to Yong Qi doing internet searches on his (ex?) (stepmother?) – *Zi Wei's mother*, he wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because the circumstances in which his father apparently married Xia Yu He was so strange, he couldn't help but want to know what it was about her that could capture his father's heart or otherwise turn his head so completely that he would do something so rash.

He was bang out of luck though. There was very little to be found on Xia Yu He online.

It wasn't surprising, he told himself, when searches drew up next to nothing but a headshot photo in an old album on the Facebook page of the orchestra where she used to work, with a very brief, very
perfunctory biography full of information he already knew. She wouldn't be working during the last years of her life. When she was in her professional prime, the internet had not been so prevalent that she would have made any mark on it.

Yong Qi closed the laptop and leaned his face into his hands.

He liked Zi Wei, he really did. In fact, throughout this entire saga so far, there was only one thing he was sure of, and that was the fact that he would very much like to know her better. They would get along very well. He would come to love her very much as a sister, as much as he loved He Jing or He Ke. And it wouldn't be just him. Yong Qi was sure, given enough time, everyone in his family would love her for her softness and her sweetness.

He just wished it didn't all have to happen in full view of a billion other people.

His phone rang, startling Yong Qi out of his thoughts. He answered it almost unthinkingly, not even bothering to look who was calling.

"You never called me back," Er Tai said on the other end without preamble.

Yong Qi, his thoughts still elsewhere, only replied, confused, "I was supposed to call you back?"

"I called you like, three times, last night."

"Oh. Sorry," he said distractedly. "I must have not been paying attention to the phone. What's the matter?"

"I just wanted to rant about the match, which from what you're saying…I'm guessing you didn't watch."

"Match?" Yong Qi repeated blankly.

The swift silence on the other end practically oozed incredulity. "Man U – Arsenal? Last night?"

Yong Qi groaned. He couldn't believe he had so completely forgotten about the FA Cup quarter-final the night before. "How did it go?" he asked, preparing to reopen his laptop to check on the post-match articles.

"You haven't even checked the score," Er Tai grumbled. "Good god, what's wrong with you?"

"Lots of things on my mind right now," he said, trying to sound vague.

"Clearly."

"Wait, did you say you wanted to 'rant'?" Yong Qi asked, finally registering Er Tai's earlier words, his mouth filled with the first bitter taste of disappointment. "MU won?"

"Yup," Er Tai replied glumly. "2-0. Offense was rubbish. Loads of possession time but never managed to take advantage of any of it to break through defense. Fat chance they had against Van der Sar. Dude is 41, but even I have to admit he deserved that Man of the Match. I swear, based on yesterday, I was ready to just jump ship right then and there."

"If you want to jump ship because of Van der Sar, you should have done it years ago. He's retiring."

"Yeah, well."

"Damn. Probably a good thing I didn't watch. Clearly sounded bad for blood pressure."
"The worst." Er Tai heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I'm not going to even bother hoping for Premier League now."

"Probably for the best, if Arsenal continues like this," Yong Qi agreed. "And I thought that loss to Birmingham was just an off day."

"Start of a slippery slope, more like. They're definitely crashing and burning and it's pitiful to watch."

There was a minutes of commiserate silence, during which Yong Qi scrolled through news articles on his computer, which only managed to make him feel even more depressed about the loss.

"Anyway," Er Tai said finally, sounding a little more upbeat, "I've slept on it and I'm over it. I'm not calling now to talk about the match. Mama just wants to know, where are you guys going to be next weekend? My parents want to drop in."

"Huh?" Yong Qi asked vaguely, his attention still on his laptop.

"Yong Qi. Your mum's anniversary. Next weekend. Where are you going to be? Dong Cheng or Yuan Ming Yuan?" There was a pause. "You didn't forget the anniversary of the day your mother died, did you?"

"What? No, no, I didn't," Yong Qi said hastily, rubbing his eyes and forcing himself to pay attention. "Er...right, next weekend. Yuan Ming Yuan, most likely, unless there are some developments about what's happening in Japan that means Ah Ma needs to be in town. Anyway, check back later, we should have a better idea then."

"I'll let my mum know. Are you all right?"

"What? Of course I am," Yong Qi said, trying to sound like he meant it.

"You just seem...distracted, lately," Er Tai said.

"I'm fine, Er Tai."

"Are you sure, 'cause my dad said that your dad seems pretty pre-occupied with something too. I'm guessing it's related."

"An earthquake and tsunami happened literally yesterday in Japan, killing god knows how many people, including Chinese citizens, Er Tai. Of course Ah Ma's pre-occupied." Yong Qi felt a little guilty for using this tactic in attempt to distract Er Tai, but it was the much easier answer to give.

Er Tai was quiet for a few seconds, before sighing. "You know that your father has been distracted from even before the tsunami. Baba said it's something more personal than matters of state. Come on, Yong Qi, I'm your best friend. The point of me is that you can tell me things."

"I know," Yong Qi said, but didn't elaborate.

"Does it have anything to do with your mum's anniversary?" his friend pressed.

"No," Yong Qi answered finally. Thinking about it for another second, he added, "Not really."

"Well...that's a very clear answer."

"There is something going on," he admitted. "But it's just very confusing right now."

"You need to talk about it?" Er Tai asked, sounding less playful and more sympathetic now.
"I wish I could."

"But…?"

"It's complicated and sensitive and there are about a million reasons why I shouldn't talk about it, one of them being I promised I wouldn't."

Over the line, he could hear Er Tai sigh again.

"Er Tai?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for the concern. I do appreciate it."

There was a short, contemplative pause. Then Er Tai said, his voice slight gruff in the beginning, "Tell you what, come to dinner at my parents' tomorrow. Mama mentioned to me off-handedly the other day that she hasn't seen you in a long time, which I'm taking as a hint to mean I should drag you over for a meal soon."

Yong Qi couldn't help smiling to himself a little. It was obvious that Er Tai was determined that if he could not help, he would at least distract Yong Qi.

Er Tai was still speaking. "Er Kang and I will probably be there for most of the day to keep her company, anyway. Baba will spend the day on the phone with the Embassy in Tokyo, I'm sure, even if it's Sunday. Come over so that Mama has someone to complain to about her sons."

"Sure," Yong Qi replied, chuckling. "Why not?"

"Great! See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, see you."

"You do realise I have days off so I don't have to see you?" Er Kang said as he opened the door to his parents' house to let Yong Qi in. In this house, to Er Kang, Yong Qi was Yong Qi and not "Wang Ye".

"Sorry," Yong Qi replied, giving Er Kang an apologetic thump on the shoulder and laughing. "I've been telling you, you should just request a change of detail. Where's Er Tai?"

"In the kitchen with Mama. You came just in time."

Yong Qi followed Er Kang in the direction of the Fu family's kitchen. He could hear the voices of Er Tai and his mother drifting out. "Just in time for what?"

"To put a stop to Mama's weekly interrogation of me and when I'm getting married," Er Kang said.

Yong Qi laughed as they entered the kitchen together.

Mrs Fu turned to give him an affection swat on the arm. "I heard that, Er Kang," she said. Her son only gave a fond smile in return and stepped aside so that she could receive Yong Qi's greeting hug. "Hello, Yong Qi, dear."

"Hello, Auntie. Will Uncle be home soon?"
"Yes, he called early to say he'll be home for dinner. You should come around more often, Yong Qi."

"Sorry, Auntie, it's been pretty hectic lately," Yong Qi said. "Though you probably already know that, considering it's made Er Kang's schedule impossible too."

Er Kang lost no time in grabbing onto the convenient excuse. "Exactly. Mama, if you are unhappy that I have no time for relationships, you should probably just blame Yong Qi."

Yong Qi gave him a side-eyed look. "I'm not the only person you're protecting, Er Kang."

"Fine, Yong Qi *and* He Jing," Er Kang deadpanned, which made Er Tai laugh. Yong Qi and Mrs Fu shook their heads in exasperation.

"As if we make you spend all your time working. You have staff, Er Kang. Learn to delegate," Yong Qi said.

"Brother, you don't have to use work as an excuse to not date. We already know you're married to your career," Er Tai added.

"You speak as if that's a bad thing," Er Kang complained.

"I'm just saying," Er Tai said, deliberately sounding casual, "maybe you should just take the leap and ask Xiao Yan for Zi Wei's phone number already."

Yong Qi smiled vaguely. In different circumstances, he would join in teasing Er Kang, too. But mention of Zi Wei now just reminded him their still unsolved situation. Dating was probably one of the last things on Zi Wei's mind right now, even if that reason would be very different from Er Kang's.

Er Tai's comments clearly intrigued his mother. "Who is this, now?"

"It's nothing," Er Kang said firmly, ignoring Er Tai's smirk.

It was clear that his mother did not believe him, but she also recognised that it would only make Er Kang uncomfortable to continue pressing the issue, so she let it drop. As Yong Qi joined the Fu brothers in helping their mother finish up preparations for dinner, the conversation between them drifted from Er Kang's love life to the more serious topic of the fallout from the earthquake in Japan, the extent of casualty, injuries and damages of which were not yet countable. Somehow, that eventually led them to discuss the upcoming wedding of William of Wales and Kate Middleton.

"I suppose the earthquake will mean Crown Prince Naruhito and the Crown Princess will be declining the invitation to the British wedding?" Mrs Fu asked.

"Probably," Yong Qi said. "I would expect so, anyway. The damages are far from tallied yet, but their economy wouldn't be in any shape to bear a trip half way across the world to attend a wedding."

"Someone from our end is still attending, though. Right?" Er Tai asked.

"Yes, though last I checked, a slight crisis about exactly who might have arisen," Yong Qi said.

"Crisis?" Er Kang asked, frowning. "I haven't been briefed on the preparations as it's not you or He Jing going, but I thought they've sorted out all the preliminary security preps for the trip already?"
"Well, yes, that was when it was expected that Ah Ma and Mama were attending," Yong Qi said. "But since the news of the earthquake, the issue that came up was that Ah Ma might want to pay Japan a visit after the dust settles a bit. It means he'll have to shuffle some of his engagements to make time for that. Imperial Household is probably trying to figure out a new schedule now. Nothing will be definite until we have more information about what's going on in Japan, of course, but it might change things up a bit, and Yong An might end up going to the wedding instead."

Yong Qi didn't know if the sudden surge in conflicting public duties in the months of March and April was a blessing where the situation with Zi Wei was concerned or not. On the one hand, it was clear even now that their entire family would be extremely busy in the next two months. And yet, with both great tragedy and great joy on the road ahead, the attention of the press would be guaranteed to be occupied until the end of April, which gave them time to figure out, if Zi Wei wanted to become a part of their family, what their strategy would be in announcing that.

"That must mean Foreign Affairs haven't RSVPed?" Er Tai asked.

"No," Yong Qi said. "Imperial Household planned to confirm with Foreign Affairs by COB Friday, but then news of the earthquake came and they held it back pretty urgently. I'm sure Foreign Affairs have to get back to Buckingham within the next fortnight though so it'll be decided soon."

"Considering Japan's earthquake is probably going to stir up debates about the economy after Sichuan again here at home, the cheaper option of Yong An attending might be preferable," Er Kang said.

"I'm sure there will be people who think none of us should be going at all, considering what's happening this close to home," Yong Qi said.

"Diplomatically speaking, that's not really an option," Mrs Fu said with a smile. "Not without a compelling reason."

"Well, it is William's wedding, so Yong An might be a more suitable attendant in any case," Er Tai said.

Fu Lun arrived home at that point, momentarily taking their attention away from talks of the wedding. Dinner ended up being very sober, but also informative, as the Deputy Prime Minister recounted to his family and Yong Qi all he had learnt that day about the situation in Japan, information which would definitely take a few more days to be released to the public.

After dinner, Er Kang and Er Tai's parents left the three of them to their own devices. In the Fu family's living room, Er Kang turned on the sports channel, which was running analysis of the FA Cup quarter-finals and the upcoming semis.

"Oh come on! Did you decide to give them that goal?" Yong Qi exclaimed as the replay of Manchester United's first goal against Arsenal was shown on the screen. Turning to Er Tai, he grumbled, "How much swearing did you do watching that live?"

"Lots," Er Tai said, glowering at the TV. Meanwhile, the only Man U supporter among them, Er Kang, clearly was trying not to gloat. Huffing, Er Tai added, "Here's hoping for a Manchester derby for the semis."

Er Kang laughed. "You say that because you're going to root for City, I suppose."

"Of course I'm going to root for City," Er Tai replied with mock, exaggerated dignity. "It's in the principles of things."
"This isn't going to be World Cup '02 all over again, is it?" Yong Qi asked, laughing. "Er Tai, you don't even care if City wins or loses, you just want to see United beaten."

"Exactly."

As Yong Qi joined the Fu brothers in the continued discussions and good-natured riling of each other about their respective teams, Yong Qi was reminded again of why he enjoyed time spent with the Fu family so much. With them, he was not put on an unattainable height, and he himself was allowed to let his guards down. With them, he was reminded what normal could look like. As much as his own family tried, it was hard to be completely normal when one lived in a palace with furniture hundreds of years old and insured for more than an average person made in a decade.

"So, Yong Qi, how's it going with Xiao Yan?" Er Tai asked at one point.

"What makes you think there's anything going on at all?" Yong Qi asked, striving for nonchalance.

"Dude," Er Tai groaned, "it's been…what, like a month? Since we had that talk?"

"It's complicated."

"How?" Er Tai asked, incredulous. "It's the simplest thing in the world."

Yong Qi only shrugged noncommittally.

"Maybe it's complicated because Yong Qi has been seeing a lot of Xiao Yan's roommate lately?" Er Kang asked slyly.

Yong Qi shot him a dirty look. "You know, I could bring you to court martial for breach of confidentiality. Or sue you."


"Really, though?" Er Tai asked, one eyebrow raised so high that it looked painful. "You've been seeing Xia Zi Wei – "

"Not like that," Yong Qi cut in, wrinkling his nose at the implications.

"Yeah, but you're meeting up with her?" Er Tai persisted. "Why?"

"Yes, Yong Qi, why?"

Yong Qi gave Er Kang a side-long glance and smirked. "Are you jealous?"

Er Kang rolled his eyes. "Both of you are should win some sort of medal with how much conclusion you're leaping to. Have neither of you noticed I haven't had one single conversation with her?"

"You also find it hard to keep your eyes off her, though," Yong Qi said, shrugging. "Which is actually really weird, for you."

"Wait, wait," Er Tai said hastily, sitting up straight and staring at his friend and brother. "What's going on? Have I…inadvertently stumbled into a love triangle? Because let me just say, none of us need that?"

"No!" both Yong Qi and Er Kang exclaimed at the same time, though Yong Qi suspected it was for rather different reasons.
"Just so you know," Yong Qi said, looking pointedly at Er Kang, "I have no romantic interest whatsoever in Xia Zi Wei."

"You're assuming I care," Er Kang said with a casual shrug, but he couldn't hide looking momentarily relieved, nonetheless. Yong Qi decided to not call attention to it.

Er Tai wasn't ready to let the subject drop, though. "So why are you seeing a lot of Xia Zi Wei?" His slow and deliberate tone made it sound like he was contemplating a far more serious issue than Yong Qi's love life.

"I really can't talk about it," Yong Qi replied evasively.

His friend shot him a dubious look. "So this has to do with that other complicated, sensitive and confidential thing you were telling me – oh, excuse me, not telling me – about last night?"

"Yes," Yong Qi admitted. "Look, if it…develops, you'll be the first to hear, I'm sure. But for now, I don't want to say anything yet."

"But it doesn't have anything to do with Xiao Yan?" Er Tai pressed.

"No."

That only made Er Tai more confused. "So why haven't you asked Xiao Yan out yet?"

"You know, you spend far too much time worrying about my love life," Yong Qi said, making a disgruntled face at his friend.

Er Tai laughed. "I just spent a day being hinted at by my mother about my love life. Do me a favour and let me take it out on you."

"By doing exactly the same thing to me?" Yong Qi said.

"It probably makes him feel better about himself that your situation is just as murky as his," Er Kang said.

"What is wrong with us?" Er Tai exclaimed with exaggerated woe, throwing up his hands. "I mean, I know Er Kang is married to his job, but us! You and me!" He waved his hand from himself to Yong Qi. "Why are we single? You could literally get any girl you want; why are you single?"

Yong Qi was too busy laughing at his friend's histrionics to immediately answer. Er Kang was chuckling and shaking his head as well.

"Yeah, if only it were that simple," Yong Qi finally said.

"Urgh," Er Tai groaned, but a second later, he was laughing too.

Er Kang took that as a cue to change the subject.

The next morning, Yong Qi woke up to a text from Zi Wei.

Zi Wei to Yong Qi
7:45 CST
Considering recent developments, I just wonder if right now is good time for me to complicate things up for your family.
Yong Qi to Zi Wei
8:20 CST
With our lives, it's hardly ever going to be a downtime long enough to be called a good time. There will always be other things intruding, Zi Wei. We all learnt to navigate our personal lives around that. Do you want me to call you and talk?

Zi Wei to Yong Qi
8:43 CST
I can't really talk right now, so maybe later?
I will consider what you said though.

Yong Qi to Zi Wei
8:46 CST
Please do.
You don't have to put yourself and your needs aside for the sake of the whole world. It's okay to take care of yourself, first, Zi Wei.

April

Even after Zi Wei managed to decide that she definitely wanted to have a face-to-face meeting with her father, the emperor, it took a while to navigate around his suddenly packed schedule. After all, this wasn't a meeting that could be squeezed in between lunch with the Japanese Ambassador and a speech opening a new hospital in the name of the late emperor.

It was a meeting that demanded time. Both before and after, to deal with the emotional impacts.

It was a breezy April day when Yong Qi picked her up again.

"I wasn't expecting you, honestly. I'm sure you must have other things to do on a Saturday than driving me around?" Zi Wei said to Yong Qi, trying to make conversation to dispel her almost overwhelming nervousness.

"I thought you could use the moral support beforehand," Yong Qi said, smiling encouragingly. She tried to smile back. "You'll be fine."

"I hope so," she said sincerely.

"I should probably mention that Ah Ma may ask you to stay for dinner, to meet Mama and Yong Yan and He Ke. We would all love to have you, but don't feel like you have to say yes, all right? Ah Ma tends to…rush into the big gestures."

"He hasn't met me yet, and it's hardly one in the afternoon. Why would he already decide…"

"That's what I meant about big gestures. Honestly, Zi Wei, if you think you can't handle a family dinner with everyone right away, tell him. He won't pressure you. I promise."

"What…would a family dinner entail, exactly?" Zi Wei couldn't help asking. It was hard to know what to expect what even the simplest of normal concepts entailed when it came to the imperial family, and she didn't want to take ideas for granted.

Yong Qi laughed. "It's just a completely normal meal. Honestly. We sit around a table and eat. That's it. Not a Man-Han Feast lasting three days."
"I had to check, you know?" she said with a small smile. The smile faded as she added, "I…I don't want to disappoint him."

"Zi Wei, you won't," Yong Qi said. "He is happy enough that you are willing to forge a relationship with him at all. I can't blame him for wanting to make up for lost time, but it can mean he gets carried away. The thing is, though, if this is going to work, it has to be on your terms, not Ah Ma's. You have to take steps you are comfortable with, because in the end, it's your life being turned most upside down."

Zi Wei nodded contemplatively.

"Put it this way," Yong Qi said, when she didn't say anything in reply, "you should maybe be comfortable enough to call him and refer to him as 'Ah Ma' first, before you put yourself into a scene with all of us together."

"About that, I – I don't want to be presumptuous," Zi Wei stammered, her cheeks pink.

"I thought as much," Yong Qi said, giving her a sympathetic smile. "But you should not think in those terms. He would be very happy, I think, if you would call him 'Ah Ma'. The question is whether you want to. I assume it's strange for you, for more than one reason."

"Yes," Zi Wei said. "The thing is…I've never said it…and I want…I want the first time I say it to be to him, so that it would mean something, you know."

Yong Qi chuckled. "You should tell him that, when the opportunity comes up. He'll be very pleased."

Chapter End Notes

This is very much an interlude to the whole Zi Wei situation, but I wanted to introduce the dynamic between Yong Qi, Er Tai and Er Kang a little more.

A little background, because there is a lot of real events scattered in this chapter: The Tohoku earthquake happened on Friday 11 March. The Manchester United vs Arsenal game Er Tai was talking about took place in the wee hours of Saturday morning Beijing time. Er Tai and Yong Qi's telephone conversation was later in the day Saturday and Yong Qi had dinner with the Fu's on the next day, Sunday.

(The wedding of William and Kate was due to take place on 29 April 2011. The Crown Prince and Princess of Japan were invited but did indeed decline to attend because of the earthquake. Yes, I looked this stuff up. This is what procrastinating is like. This is why it took me years to write this story.)

In my original plan, Zi Wei was supposed to find out about her parents in December, and then all the drama about meeting the family, announcing the relationship etc all go down before March, and the earthquake and wedding were both supposed to act as media diversion, taking the attention away from Zi Wei. But basically what I found was there was too little time, and I wanted to give Yong Qi, Xiao Yan and Zi Wei more time to get to know each other first. Also, with that timeline, basically all the new relationships would be happening around lunar new year, which just made way for a whole different set of drama.
The football (soccer) conversations are very much based on conversations within my extended family. Growing up with lots of male cousins I used to care this much about football once.
To say that Zi Wei was nervous stepping into Yong Shou Gong would be an understatement.

Even with Yong Qi's numerous encouragements and reassurances, it was still surreal, the first time she laid eyes on her father in person.

Yong Qi led her to a room he identified as the office, where they found the emperor sitting behind a desk, reading a stack of paper. At their entrance, he rose and stared at Zi Wei with an expression on his face that suggested he couldn't believe the sight in front of him. She could hardly do anything except gaze back. It seemed like several minutes passed with the two of them only looking at each like this before the emperor walked around the desk and approached her. In that moment, both were too focused on each other to notice Yong Qi's murmured, "I'll leave you to talk" and the fact that he had slipped away.

The closer her father drew to her, the more breathless Zi Wei felt. She thought she should be saying something in greeting, but it was as if her mind had been wiped blank. She couldn't think of a single thing to say. She could only stand there, watching, trembling both inside and out, as her father reached out and placed a gentle hand on her cheek. The warmth of his touch made tears spring into her eyes, and she had to grit her teeth to stop a sob breaking away from her.

"You look so much like your mother," he whispered, still looking at her as if she was the single most wonderful thing he had ever seen.

His words made the tears that she had been desperate to hold back escape, running down the corners of her eyes.

"Oh, my dear, my daughter," he said, cupping her face in both his hands now, his thumbs brushing away her tears. "Zi Wei."

She choked back a sob at the sound of her name on his lips. She didn't know why she was crying, when her entire being seemed to be aglow with the strangest happiness she had ever felt. She couldn't remember why she ever thought this meeting would go badly or be an unwise idea.

"I don't know what to say," she admitted, when it seemed like he was only waiting for her to speak.

"Will you – " the emperor started, but then emotions choked the rest of his words. He cleared his throat, before starting again. "Will you call me 'Ah Ma'? I know it's a rather archaic address, and nowadays very few people, even Manchurians, use it, but it…"

"Ah Ma!" Zi Wei exclaimed, unable to wait for him to finish his sentence.

The way the words made her father's face brighten in happiness made Zi Wei feel suddenly dizzy with all sorts of emotions she wasn't sure she could yet differentiate.

He seemed to recognise her emotional state. Taking her by the hand, he said, "Let's sit down and
talk", before leading her to an antique gilded sofa on the other side of the room. "You must have so
many questions, so many things you are unclear on. If you want to ask, feel absolutely free to ask,
and I will be as honest with you as I can. But I have to say, I'm also desperate to know about you. I
know we can't possibly say everything we want to say in one day, but I really want to start, to make
up for all the years we didn't have."

"I don't know where to start."

"Tell me about when you got to Beijing. How you've been managing things here…"

Zi Wei was glad that her father did not immediately ask about her mother, or even her childhood in
Jinan, as that would have been difficult to speak of so early in their conversation, when she had not
yet been able to gauge how he might react to things she could tell him about her mother. The more
neutral, recent topic of school, her studies and how she was faring in Beijing allowed them to ease
gently into the conversation. She had a feeling both of them needed that.

"Yong Qi said he met you through your friend?" her father asked.

"My roommate, actually. Her name is Xiao Yan. She has been wonderful to me, ever since I arrived,
not knowing anyone here."

"That could not have been easy. Scary even."

"Yes, that's why I appreciate Xiao Yan's support so much. She…she knows what it's like, to have
few people to depend on and having to take care of yourself…"

But they would have to speak of her mother, eventually.

"I don't know what drew her to me," her father confided. "It certainly couldn't because she somehow
subconsciously knew who I was. When I did finally tell her who I was, the only thing she could feel
was horrified. I couldn't blame her, of course, for those feelings, or for wanting to end it all…"

"What drew you to her?" Zi Wei asked.

"You have heard your mother play, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"It was her music, at first. Her playing seemed to bare her soul, and all I wanted was to speak to her
person – the artist – who had stirred such feelings in me with her music. The more I speak to her, the
more I know her, I came to admire her – her talent, her dedication to her arts, the way she loves it
and how it shows when she speaks of it. She was also so very kind and good-hearted…"

It was hard, speaking to her father about her mother, but somehow at the same time liberating. They
took turn in sharing memories of her. Through the filters of his memories, she realised there was once
a time when her mother was carefree and full of hopes, so different from the loving and kind but
firmly strict mother she had known all her life. There was some part of her that wondered if she
should be more grieved about that innocence leaving her mother. In the end, though, she was still
comforted to think that he had happy memories of her, that he made her that happy, for a time, no
matter how brief.

Throughout the conversation, she noticed how much sorrow he genuinely felt about the news of her
mother passing away. It forced Zi Wei to realise that as much as it still grieved her to think of her
mother, as much as the last few months had forced her to think of her mother more than ever, she still
had had time to come to terms with the loss. Her father only found out about it so recently. Many
years may have passed since they last saw each other, but his sadness now was still profound and
clear. It could not fail to endear him to her, especially when speaking of her mother to her now was
providing to be an obvious balm to him as it was to her.

For all her doubts and fears and indecisiveness before this day, it was still hard to believe that it all
was happening, even as she sat talking to her father for the first time for what must have been hours.
Sometimes she caught herself consciously trying to hold her breath or not to blink. She feared that
slightest of movements from her might make him disappear, and she would be back in primary
school when the whole class was required to write a composition to describe their fathers; she sitting
frozen in her seat again, no idea where to even begin and too scared to raise her hand and tell the
teacher her problem.

Zi Wei did not tell him any of this. This was the beginning of whatever relationship they would have,
and she did not want to weigh it down with avoidable unhappiness. They were both overwhelmed
with the conflict of happiness and sorrow of their meeting that there would be time, later, she was
sure, for less comfortable topics.

He looked at her like she was some sort of wonder. Zi Wei knew it was because she resembled her
mother so much. But she could see her features in his face too. Her mother gave her the shape of her
face, her nose and her eyes, but her dimples and her smile came from him. It was still strange, to see
the resemblances so clearly now that she knew they were related, but never noticing it before.

They talked for hours, though to Zi Wei, it all passed like no time at all, until a light knock at the
door interrupted. As the emperor called for whoever it was on the outside to come in, Zi Wei could
not see a clock anywhere, and she was reluctant to pull out her phone to check the time, but from
what she could see, the light outside the window has dimmed.

A woman dressed neatly in a plain black suit with pencil skirt and very sensible shoes stepped into
the room.

"Excuse me, Huang Shang, but Huang Hou Niang Niang would like to confirm whether you'll have
a guest staying for dinner so the staff could be informed."

"I will call Huang Hou in a moment to let her know," the emperor said. "Where is she right now?"

"Huang Hou Niang Niang is currently in the External Relations Office at Imperial Household, sir,
with the Crown Prince, discussing the preparation of the wedding present for Prince William of
Wales."

"What is the extension number for that again?"

"1175, sir."

"Thank you, La Mei. I don't know how you remember it all."

The woman, La Mei, looked mostly collected in the face of the praise, but her lips did turn upward a
tiny fraction, as if she was fighting a smile. "It is my job to remember, sir."

With that, she excused herself with barely a curious glance at Zi Wei.

The emperor turned to Zi Wei. "Would you like to stay for dinner?" he asked, a little uncertainly.
"You will meet Xiao Ling, He Ke and Yong Yan then."

It took Zi Wei a second to realise that, by Xiao Ling, her father was referring to the empress. She
knew vaguely that this was her name, but there was never any occasion to connect the personal name
to the woman whom she always thought of with a title.

She hesitated a little, unsure of how to answer. She was even more nervous now, facing the question, after Yong Qi had so accurately predicted that it would come.

Her father noted her hesitations and her lack of surprise at the invitation, and added, "I suppose Yong Qi warned you I would ask?"

"Well, 'warned' is not exactly the right word," she said tentatively.

Her father laughed. "You don't need to try and be diplomatic, Zi Wei. Throughout these few weeks, Yong Qi had consistently told me that I should be patient with you, not try to push you into things you are not ready for, and let you take things at your own pace. He is really quite protective of you."

"He is," she replied with pleasure. "He has made things less difficult than it otherwise could be, I think."

"I am sure he would have told you already that you do not need to feel you have to accept the invitation tonight, and I'm reiterating that now. If you are uncomfortable with the idea, do not push yourself. I would like to spend more time with you, but I would also like you to be comfortable, Zi Wei."

"I – um – " she started, then paused. Starting again, she said, "I would appreciate some time to...to become more accustomed to...everything before – "

"Of course," her father said, when she trailed off.

"I'm sorry," Zi Wei hastened to add.

He held up his hand. "Don't. Please, don't feel you need to apologise."

"How about tomorrow though?" she asked, without even thinking about it.

He reached out to touch her hand. "Zi Wei, don't rush yourself."

"I'm not," she said sincerely. "I would like to have dinner with you. I'm just not sure I can handle it all at once."

"Are you sure?" he asked, looking hopeful.

"Yes," she answered. "Ah Ma."

The happiness that appeared on her father's face on hearing her say this almost took Zi Wei's breath away. He looked suddenly close to tears, and she did too, when he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head.

"Bring your friend," he said when he pulled away, beaming at her.

She was too busy trying to brush away the tears that had formed in the corners of her eyes to register what he was saying at first. "My – I'm sorry?"

"Your friend, Xiao Yan," he said. "She obviously means a lot to you. I would like to meet her."

"Really?"

"Of course."
"I'm not sure she would be – " she began nervously.

"If she wants," her father cut in. "I just thought, perhaps you would like to be not so outnumbered."

She smiled. "I will ask her."

"Very well." Then, he held out a hand to her. She hesitantly took it and allowed her to pull her up from the sofa. "For now, come. I will find a car to take you home. I'm sure Yong Qi didn't hang around to wait for you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," she said hastily, following him out the door.

"Zi Wei, you are my daughter, and right now, you are also a guest of the palace. You are not taking the bus home, even if Yong Qi did very rudely let you, last time."

Before Zi Wei could tell him that last time, Yong Qi had only relented after she insisted, they had rounded a corner in the hall and came face-to-face with a man dressed in a black suit. She could see the cord of his earpiece disappearing into his collar. Zi Wei vaguely remembered that when Yong Qi led her in to see the emperor, they also passed him in the hall, but then she had been too nervous to take note of him.

"Ah, Lu Jun," the emperor said. Then, turning to Zi Wei, he said, "Zi Wei, this is Lu Jun, my head of security. Lu Jun, this is Miss Xia Zi Wei."

Zi Wei couldn't help but feel suddenly flustered as she realised that he was near enough to have possibly heard the emperor's words about her being his daughter. Currently, he showed no sign that he had heard anything shocking, and merely nodded to her.

"Good evening, Miss."

"Hello," she said timidly.

"Lu Jun, I need a car to take Miss Zi Wei home," the emperor said, as if this request was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Of course, Huang Shang," Lu Jun answered, and stepped in a room nearby. Zi Wei could hear him pick up the phone and making a call.

"Has he heard, do you think?" she whispered.

"It matters not," he said quietly. Then, at her still apprehensive look, he said more gently, "Zi Wei, the only way to keep this a secret from our most intimate staffs is if we never see you at all, and I cannot bear that. Their jobs require discretion; you must not worry about them."

She nodded. Seeing that he still looked concerned about her nervousness, she smiled and said, "I am glad, Ah Ma, that now we have the opportunity to know each other."

He gave her an affectionate smile at this. "Zi Wei, I am glad that you feel this way, but I can't help but feel I owe you. Children should not need 'opportunity' to know a parent."

But they could not speak further, as they heard soft sounds of footsteps, and a moment later, Lu Jun appeared again.

"The car is arriving outside, Huang Shang," he said.

"Thank you, Lu Jun."
With that, the emperor led the way, and Zi Wei followed, Lu Jun several paces behind her. A black car was just pulling up as they stepped outside. Before the driver even managed to get of the car or Lu Jun managed to reach the door, the emperor pulled it open for Zi Wei. She turned, unsure how this goodbye should go, but he solved the dilemma for her by embracing her.

"I will call you later about tomorrow," he said, smiling at her, before handing her in the car.

As the driver pulled away, she turned around and looked through the back window. He still stood there, watching her go. She kept looking back, too, until the car turned and he disappeared around the bend. Then, the driver's question startled her.

"To your dormitory then, Miss Xia?"

She turned around, and for the first time, realised that her driver was Fu Er Kang.

"Um – yes, please," she stammered. "Hello. I'm sorry, I didn't realise that it was you earlier."

"That's quite all right," he said. "Actually, Rong Qin Wang and I were at the car park when they got the order from Huang Shang, and he asked me to take you home."

"Yong Qi asked you?" she asked, looking closely at him, or at least, as closely as she could with him in front of her and both of them facing the same direction. He showed no sign that he was amazed at what she was sure was an unusual parting between the emperor and a guest, which he must have seen. He didn't seem curious, either. She wondered if Er Kang knew the truth about her. Would Yong Qi have told him? She didn't he would, not when he had promised her that he would only discuss her with his family. But he was close friends with Er Kang's brother. Perhaps, in his definition, family included them?

There was no way of finding out for sure, not when Er Kang was this picture of discretion. Perhaps because of it, Zi Wei felt an irrational need to explain herself. She had to clench her fist, hidden under her bag on her lap, to quench the urge.

"Yes, he thought you would be more comfortable with someone you've already met," Er Kang explained.

Zi Wei couldn't be sure that this was precisely the case. Of course, it was less intimidating than sitting in the car with someone she had never seen before and having no idea whether she was expected to talk. With Er Kang, though, it was strange in an entirely different way.

"Thank you," she said, a little breathlessly, "though surely I shouldn't be taking you away from your duties with Yong Qi."

"I've just finished a shift, actually, so I was heading off anyway. I didn't leave him alone, even if he was only heading back to Xian Fu Gong."

This answer made Zi Wei even more flustered. "Oh!" she gasped, trying not to notice that her hands were sweating. "You should not waste your free time on me, then."

"It's no trouble," Er Kang said, though she was half-sure he would have said that even if it was trouble. "You're on my way home, anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Anyway, we are half way there, already, there's no point of turning back now."
She couldn't think of anything else to say, so she decided to repeat, "Thank you very much. I really do appreciate this."

"You're welcome, Miss Xia."

"'Zi Wei', please."

"And I am Er Kang."

He was smiling at her through the rearview mirror. She was sure she was blushing, and only hoped that the darkness falling outside was hiding it.

"Thank you, Er Kang," she said again, softly.

"It's my pleasure." Pause. Their eyes met in the mirror again. "Zi Wei."

"So?" Xiao Yan demanded, as soon as Zi Wei walked through the door. "How was it? You're back earlier than I thought you'd be."

"Really? I was gone the whole afternoon."

Xiao Yan practically bounced with anticipation. "That means it went well, right?"

"I don't know," Zi Wei said, falling down on her bed. "My head is still spinning."

Xiao Yan leapt across the room from her bed and plopped down on Zi Wei's. "But it wasn't…bad?" she pressed.

"No, it wasn't," Zi Wei answered, staring up at the ceiling. Turning to face Xiao Yan, she couldn't help smiling. "In fact, I think it was the opposite." Pulling herself up to a sitting position, she clutched a pillow to her chest. "Do you ever look at images of the imperial family on TV and think they aren't quite real people?"

"Hmm. Yes."

"The thing is, for my entire life, that was my father as well. I've spent so long imagining what he might be like, and that emperor on the TV wasn't ever it. But now that I've met him…my father…the emperor, he's different from how I imagined either of them. I'm not making sense, am I?"

"No, no, you are," Xiao Yan said encouragingly.

"He is so kind, Xiao Yan. There wasn't any point when he ever was suspicious about whether I am really his daughter. He really wanted to know about me, to know me. I never thought it would affect me so much that someone is interested in knowing me, but this isn't just anybody, is it? And he…I think, from the way he spoke about her, he really did love my mother, once. I mean, I know she's dead and people usually have rose-tinted memories of the dead, but there was this look in his eyes when he spoke about her. It was soft and…moving. I don't know how to describe it. I think he believes that they could have made it work, if she hadn't broken it off."

"I hope his current wife wasn't there to hear him say that," Xiao Yan said.

"Oh, no, she wasn't. I haven't met her. And he didn't say it, not in those exact words. But…he implied."

"You spent all these hours talking to him only?"
"Yeah. It still seems so surreal. I still think maybe I imagined the whole thing."

"You like him then?"

"Yes. I do."

"I'm glad, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said with a grin, squeezing her arm. "So are you going to meet him again?"

"Yes. He's invited me to dinner tomorrow, to meet the Empress, Princess He Ke and the Third Prince," Zi Wei said. There was a pause, and she looked closely at Xiao Yan. "Do you want to come?"

"What?" Xiao Yan yelped, staring wide-eyed at her.

"He said I could invite you too," she explained. "For…moral support."

Xiao Yan was so incredulous, her eyes looked almost bulging with shock. "The Emperor said you can invite me to dinner at the palace?"

"Yes."

"That's…crazy. Are you sure he wasn't joking?"

"He was serious, Xiao Yan. Will you come? I want you to come. As he said, for moral support."

"What am I going to do at a dinner with the imperial family?" Xiao Yan almost wailed. "Zi Wei!"

"Yong Qi said, it's not like a formal event or anything. It's just dinner."

"At the palace," Xiao Yan said, punctuating each word. "I don't think that's 'just' anything."

Zi Wei sighed. "All right. If you don't want to come…"

"You really do want me there, don't you? To support you?" Xiao Yan asked, frowning.

"Yes. I mean, today was overwhelming. Happy, but overwhelming nonetheless. Tomorrow is going to be an entirely different kind of overwhelming, I think. I know Yong Qi will be there, but it would be nice to have you too. There are so few people I can confide in about this, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan's brows creased together in thought. "Would we…I…have to do anything in preparation? I mean…what do we do? Just show up at the palace gate or something…?"

"Ah – Ah Ma said he would call me later to talk about the details. I suppose he needs to tell everyone else, first."

Xiao Yan's eyes widened again. "Ah Ma?"

"Yes," Zi Wei answered, unable to keep a smile forming on her face.

Xiao Yan exhaled loudly. "This is just weird."

"I know."

"You really need me, huh?"

"I would like to have you there," Zi Wei said.
"All right. I will come."

"Thank you, Xiao Yan." She reached over to squeeze her friend's hand. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Yong Qi will be there."

"Yes… I am sure it will be fine." Xiao Yan had never felt less convinced of her own words in her life.

"Yong Qi, tell me I've lost my mind," Xiao Yan wailed the next morning into the phone.

"You've lost your mind," Yong Qi complied calmly. "Why?"

"I agreed to have dinner in the palace," she yelped, pacing around her room, waving her arms. It was probably a good thing that Zi Wei was out at the supermarket. "With your entire family. I must be mad."

"I'm trying very hard to not feel offended, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said dryly.

"I don't mean – I mean – it's just – I don't know how to do anything! What if I mess something up?"

"Xiao Yan, calm down. It's a normal meal. Dinner. Not a five-course banquet. Just relax and act like you normally would."

"In the palace? In front of your family?"

"Why are you so intimidated?" Yong Qi asked patiently. "You've had lunch and dinner with me."

"Yes, but you…" she stammered, "you're just you."

"My family are not from outer space. We're just people, too, Xiao Yan. We all have to eat."

"What am I supposed to wear?" she asked, shooting her closet a pitiful look. She already knew there was nothing that was designed for dinner in the palace.

"Anything you want. As I said, it's just family dinner. Despite whatever you may think, we don't dress in black tie for everyday dinner. There is literally no dress code."

"Jeans?"

"Jeans are fine."

"What if I say something wrong? What am I supposed to say? What if I curtsy wrong or something?"

Yong Qi laughed. "You don't have to curtsy."

"I don't?"

"Xiao Yan, this isn't any kind of ceremony. You don't even have to bow to him as a monarch, as you're not meeting him as a monarch. Ah Ma is probably going to just offer to shake your hand, and that's it. The point is, you're meeting the father of your best friend, and he's meeting the best friend of his daughter, so he's not going to be playing the part of the emperor, Xiao Yan. He'll just be a normal father. All right?"

"What do I call him?"
"Huang Shang."

"Right. So I call him Huang Shang, but I don't have to curtsy?"

"It's only because I doubt he'll realise you're speaking to him if you address him by anything else, and it's little early in his relationship with Zi Wei for anything more familiar. While on the subject, Mama is Huang Hou, and my siblings have names."

"Right. So no 'Tai Zi Ye', no 'Gong Zhu Dian Xia' – "

"No. Please, no."

"This is so weird. And confusing."

"It doesn't have to be. Just don't think of it as meeting the imperial family. Think of it as meeting Zi Wei's family."

"Yeah, I'll think that when I sit in a chauffeured car and drive through huge palace gates," Xiao Yan muttered.

"Do you want me to pick you and Zi Wei up instead of sending a car? Because I would."

"No, don't trouble yourself. I'm not sure you'll manage to make it less weird even if you were the one to drive us in."

"Xiao Yan, I understand why you're nervous. But I'm saying you shouldn't be. The point is to make things as normal as possible, for Zi Wei's sake. So don't stress about it, all right?"

"All right. I'll try."

"Good. I'll see you tonight."

"See you."

Despite Yong Qi's assurance, Xiao Yan decided against jeans and opted, in the end, for a blouse and cardigan, and white skirt, which she borrowed from Zi Wei. She realised about two hours before they were supposed to depart for the palace that she didn't actually own a skirt or a dress. It had never been a particularly practical item of clothing at any point in her life. She had jeans and slacks, but wearing slacks made her feel like she was going on a job interview.

The car actually took them to Xian Fu Gong first, where Yong Qi was already waiting for them out in the courtyard when the car pulled up. He was dressed in tailored blazer over button-up shirt and khaki trousers. Xiao Yan supposed this was what counted as casual in the palace. He was more likely to be in jeans and polo shirts at school. At this point, Xiao Yan seriously wondered if he actually owned a t-shirt.

"Ready?" he asked when they got out of the car.

"Uh, not really," Xiao Yan said, staring up at the gilded curved roofs of the building before her. There was a pause. She ducked her head. "You're not really asking me though."

"You'll be fine, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said, chuckling. "You too, Zi Wei."

"I hope," Zi Wei said.
"We're not actually having dinner here, by the way. I'll walk with you to Yong Shou Gong," Yong Qi said.

"What's the difference between – " Xiao Yan squinted at the sign – "Xian Fu Gong and Yong Shou Gong?"

"This is where I live," Yong Qi said. "Yong Shou Gong is where my parents live. He Ke and Yong Yan have quarters in the back of Yong Shou Gong. They'll have places of their own when they come of age."

As they started making their way to Yong Shou Gong, Xiao Yan said to Yong Qi, "You know, I was saying to Zi Wei that I probably should be more nervous than her. Don't you agree?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, Zi Wei has at least met your father and your elder brother and sister. She's known to half the people we're having dinner with. I've never met anyone in your family before," Xiao Yan said, shooting Zi Wei a pointed look. It was true that part of her purpose in first pointing this out was to help Zi Wei alleviate her worries, but as she said them, her own nervousness did grow.

"Yes, but you aren't ever…afraid of meeting new people, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei pointed out. "That is the difference between us."

"And you are?" Xiao Yan asked her, surprised. She knew that Zi Wei was a lot shyer than her, but she didn't realise the shyness led to actual fear of new meetings.

"Well, not afraid, exactly. I just get…nervous."

"And you're both making me nervous now with all this talk," Yong Qi said.

"Sorry," Xiao Yan said, shrugging.

"We're here, though."

Yong Qi led Zi Wei and Xiao Yan into Yong Shou Gong. Xiao Yan could not help but look around in a mixture of awe and fascination. Yong Shou Gong was an unlikely blend of the ancient and the modern. The structure of the palace – and every other palace or building in the Forbidden City – was decidedly ancient. Inside, antique wooden furniture and porcelain vases shared the same space as security cameras out front, electric lights and chandeliers, air-conditioning, HD TVs and staff dressed smartly in black suits, on mobile phones.

Yong Qi led them from the first room they came across upon entering the palace – a large, formal receiving hall with austere, traditional furniture made of carved and polished, heavy wood – to a smaller, cosier looking sitting room, decorated in a more Western style, with cornflower-coloured wallpaper and soft, gilded sofas and armchairs, adorned with plump, gold-braid-fringed cushions, all upholstered in a darker shade of blue.

As the three of them entered, Yong Qi's family stopped their individual conversations and turned to face them.

Xiao Yan could see Zi Wei visibly taking a deep breath, and she reached out briefly to give her friend a comforting pat on the back. She was grateful when Yong Qi, in turn, smiled comfortably at her.

The emperor stood up and approached them, hugging Zi Wei. Despite her own nervousness, Xiao
Yan couldn't help feeling ridiculously happy for her friend, especially when she was able to see a
glimpse of radiant pleasure in the part of Zi Wei's face which was not buried in her father's shoulder.
She wanted to gush about it to Yong Qi, but could tell that this wasn't the time or place, so she settled
with sharing a grin with him.

Zi Wei was then introduced to the empress. Xiao Yan thought she was very graceful during the
introduction, for a woman who was meeting her husband's hitherto unknown child for the first time.

Xiao Yan couldn't help feeling a surge of relief, too, when both He Jing and Yong An greeted Zi
Wei again with smiles. She had always known that whatever misgivings anyone could have about Zi
Wei before meeting her would be spelled away by the time the meeting took place, but she was glad
to see the proof, nonetheless.

Zi Wei's meeting with He Ke and Yong Yan took place with what Xiao Yan was sure was more
enthusiastic curiosity than with the elder princess and the Crown Prince. The two of them were
young enough and adventurous enough to think of the potential media storm that came with having
an unexpected secret sister an exciting endeavour, which would probably occupy the media enough
to stop asking what university Princess He Ke might consider going to two years from now or how
many centimeters the Third Prince had grown in the last month.

Watching Xiao Yan being introduced to his family made Yong Qi come to a rather important
realisation that he really would rather have on any other evening: he was in love.

It was quite useless to argue with that conclusion now. The flush of nerves pink on her cheeks and
her completely different style of dress tonight made him more aware than ever that he could not take
his eyes off her. He had grown accustomed to the sight of her in jeans, t-shirts and nondescript
sweaters and hoodies on campus, the sight of her in a skirt for the first time reduced his reactions to
ridiculous clichés that should really only be found in movies.

It didn't help that she was effortlessly charming everyone in his family. He knew she had been
nervous before – even more so than Zi Wei, whatever she tried to show otherwise – but when the
moment came, her natural openness and friendliness allowed her to greet everyone with bright smiles
that made the sparks in her eyes dance and her whole face glow. It was hard to not meet that radiance
with anything less than pleasure.

She made his father laugh when she apparently attempted to curtsy to him anyway, but then
changing her mind half way, probably remembering Yong Qi's words, and ended up nearly
stumbling into him. He reached out to steady her himself and her flustered rambling apology made
him smile in amusement as he reassured her kindly that no harm was done.

She complimented both the empress and He Jing enthusiastically about how pretty their dresses were
and how beautiful they looked. Yong Qi was sure, normally Xiao Yan was not this attuned to the
beauty of fashion, but her natural sincerity shined through. Though they were not vain, neither the
empress nor He Jing could help feeling the intended pleasure at her words.

And she flirted with Yong An. Yong Qi didn't think she realised she actually was doing it, of course.
Still, it just happened, what with those big, fluttering, dancing eyes and her big, bright smiles
working their full potential as she greeted him and told him that Yong Qi had told her much about
him. Yong Qi just managed to hold back a snort of laughter when he remembered just what he told
her about his brother. Xiao Yan shot him a mischievous look, which made him press his lips together
to keep from laughing. He returned Yong An's raised eyebrow with a shrug.

Deciding to get a little payback for the interrogation he would get later from Yong An, as Xiao Yan
turned her attention to He Ke, Yong Qi added, after the introduction, "Ke Ke, by the way, Xiao Yan really doesn't like Taylor Swift."

"Hey!" Xiao Yan exclaimed, giving Yong Qi an 'are you insane' look. "You said I shouldn't tell her that!"

"I just thought you two might want something to talk about," he replied gleefully, laughing, while she continued to give him the death glare.

"Oh, but why not?" He Ke asked, bouncing up next to Xiao Yan, sounding not at all upset, but simply burgeoning with intrigue.

"It's just a matter of taste. It's absolutely no problem if you like her, Princess."

"You don't need to call me Princess, Jiejie. Ke Ke is fine. I would love to try and convince you otherwise, though, so you must tell me why you don't like Taylor."

"Maybe not right now, Ke Ke?" her father cut in, having seen enough of Xiao Yan and knowing He Ke enough to know that a long-winded debate was in the making.

He Ke pouted at him, but then took Xiao Yan's arm. "Can I have your phone number? We can talk about it sometimes."

"Uh, sure," Xiao Yan said slowly, shooting Yong Qi a bewildered look, before typing her number in the phone He Ke just fished out of her skirt pocket. He smiled back at her, though he was quite sure she'd make him pay for this, somehow, later. Rather than dreading it, Yong Qi had to admit he rather looked forward to it.

"Just so you know," He Ke said, putting the phone away, "you are seriously missing out."

"Maybe I am," Xiao Yan agreed easily with a laugh, that even if He Ke had been annoyed at her lack of preference for Taylor Swift before, she wouldn't be now.

Yong Qi had to admit it was vastly amusing to see Yong Yan fall into a crush at first sight with Xiao Yan. If Xiao Yan was unaware she had been flirting with Yong Qi's elder brother before, she was oblivious now, too, to Yong Yan's school-boy, thus transparent, attempt at flirting with her. Yong Yan's heart seemed completely lost when she recognised the Assassin's Creed wristband peeking out from under the long sleeves of the otherwise respectable button-up shirt and sweater combo he was wearing.

After some fifteen minutes of general conversations in the sitting room, a footman appeared to tell them that dinner was ready. They all made their way into the dining room, Xiao Yan eyes were constantly drawn to the rich decorations in the room. At the door, taking in the serving staff around the room, Xiao Yan leaned close to him and whispered, "Are they going to be there for the whole meal?"

"Yes," Yong Qi said. Noticing an odd change in her expression, he asked, "Is that a problem?"

"No, it's just a little strange, to think they'll be watching the entire meal," she said.

He laughed. "Xiao Yan, you work in a restaurant."

"That's different," she said, scrunching up her nose at him. "Waiters only come to your table if you call. They're not like these..." – she lowered her voice further, even though their conversation was already quiet enough that he was sure, the rest of his family, occupied with speaking among
themselves, couldn't hear anyway – "...palace maids? Eunuchs?" Pause. Yong Qi tried to stifle a laugh. "No, not eunuchs," she corrected herself with a blush and a glance around, clearly hoping no one heard. It was hard to judge with the palace staff, as they were all trained to be and look collected under all circumstances.

He leaned to whisper in her ear, "The terms 'servant' and 'palace maid' are a bit taboo nowadays." He placed a comforting hand on her arm as she made a little squeak in distress. "They are all collectively staff. When they're waiting at meals like this, they're footmen, but they have other duties beyond too. It's complicated. I'll tell you about it later."

Just as he finished speaking, his father's voice rang out, "Will the two of you be joining us?" and that was when Yong Qi realised everyone else was already seated.

Yong Qi ignored the quite alarming look of curiosity in the eyes of some of his family and only quietly pulled Xiao Yan's chair out for her, seeing her seated before seating down himself.

It was less awkward when the eating started and the occupants of the table broke up into smaller conversational groups again. Zi Wei was seated between the emperor and empress, both of whom more or less occupied her attention, but after several glances to check throughout, Yong Qi was assured to see her look at ease. Though he was sitting next to Xiao Yan, he allowed her attention to be captured by his younger sister and brother on her other side, while he talked to He Jing. Despite her foolish dislike of Taylor Swift, it was clear that both He Ke and Yong Yan liked her immensely. She met their youthful enthusiasm with her own and was able to engage with them in talking pop culture, celebrities and melodramatic TV shows, which made her cool in their eyes. Neither of them minded if she knocked Yong Yan's chopsticks off the table at one point, caught up with gesturing with her hands, or reached her chopsticks across the table to help herself to something on the other side without turning the revolving server to move the dish towards herself first. Table manners were a trivial thing to a sixteen-year-old and a thirteen-year-old when discussing the intrigues of Yi Xiao Chuan's time-traveling adventures in the Qin dynasty.

About half way through the meal, the emperor turned his attention from Zi Wei to Xiao Yan.

"Xiao Yan, how did you meet Yong Qi?" he asked.

"He nearly killed me," she said automatically.

"He nearly killed me," she said automatically.

Yong Qi choked on a sip of soup and started coughing while his family looked from him to Xiao Yan, bewildered.

"I did not nearly kill you," he said, shooting her a mock accusatory look when he recovered from his coughing fit. "You were the one who went charging across the road in the rain without looking."

"To-ma-to, to-may-to," she answered with a grin. "It's a more exciting story if I tell it like that."

Yong Qi rolled his eyes. "I did nearly hit her with my car," he admitted, then went on to tell the story of how he and Xiao Yan met. Thankfully, Xiao Yan was also eager to make a joke of it and assure everyone that no harm was done in the entire incident.

It didn't stop his father from wondering why no one from his security detail reported the incident.

"I convinced them not to, Ah Ma," Yong Qi explained.

It took several more reassurances from Xiao Yan herself for his father to be convinced that she really wasn't seriously accusing Yong Qi of actually nearly killing her.
Even with that minor potential misunderstanding, by the time they all left the table and returned to the sitting room for tea and fresh fruit, Yong Qi judged the meal had gone really well. Zi Wei looked visibly more relaxed and happy while He Ke and Xiao Yan began engaging in their promised debate over Taylor Swift.

After the first cup of tea, the emperor drew all their attention to what they should do next to further the relationship between Zi Wei and her new-found family.

"We will need to consider what to make as an announcement soon," he pointed out. "I am sure some members of staff have already noticed something is up."

"But we shouldn't rush Zi Wei into anything, either, Ah Ma," He Jing pointed out.

"And can we at least wait until I'm back from England?" Yong An asked. "This is going to make international news when we announce it. I don't think William and Kate are going to thank us for stealing their thunder. They might appreciate the media diversion more when they're on their honeymoon, though."

"Of course we're not going to be able to announce anything before the wedding," the emperor said. "I'm mentioning it now, but it will take several weeks, at least, for the chinks to be worked out."

"Zi Wei, what do you think?" the empress asked gently.

Zi Wei cleared her throat nervously and put down her delicate porcelain cup of tea. "To be honest, I haven't allowed myself to think that far, yet. But, if I may speak freely?"

"Of course," the emperor said.

"I know this is going to draw attention no matter what, and I know none of us can help that happening. I would just rather not have to deal with that attention during exam time. So if possible, could we... contain... this until the summer vacation starts?"

"That is actually a very sensible course of action, Huang Shang," the empress said. "The courtesy of leaving the media waves free should not just be extended to the British royal wedding, but also to the victims in Japan as well. We will all be freer to help Zi Wei in tackling what comes after any announcement in the summer."

Yong Qi knew his father would rather make this announcement as soon as possible, so that he could freely bestow all the attention he could on Zi Wei, but he understood the logic in delaying until the school year was over nonetheless. Still, even if the actual announcement had to wait until the summer, it was important to prepare it even now. The emperor's Private Secretary and Prime Minister needed to be informed of the facts, and various Household and government departments prepared for what would be the country's biggest royal news of the year.

Zi Wei would have to be involved in much of the discussion and it would get stressful for her soon enough. Recognising that, the emperor didn't draw out the topic much further, and Yong Qi could see Zi Wei was relieved. The evening must have been emotional enough for her already. He wasn't surprised to find she would rather put the future implications aside for another day.

Later, his father walked ahead with Zi Wei beside him to the car park, while Yong Qi followed behind with Xiao Yan. They could have called the car taking Zi Wei and Xiao Yan home to the gate of Yong Shou Gong, of course, but the stroll in the fresh air as well as a moment of private conversation between father and daughter seemed needed.

"How do you think it went tonight?" Xiao Yan asked him.
"I think it went very well," Yong Qi answered. "I already know that Yong An and He Jing liked Zi Wei, and Ah Ma already adores her. Now, it's obvious that Mama, He Ke and Yong Yan all like her as well. And everyone loved you."

"Really?" she asked, looking and sounding actually surprised.

"Of course," he said. "You made everyone laugh. I'm sure Yong Yan wants to marry you when you started agreeing with him about the perfection of Cate Blanchett."

Xiao Yan burst out laughing. "He's too young, unfortunately."

Yong Qi thought it wasn't unfortunate at all, but he only smiled to himself and didn't say anything.

"She'll be all right, don't you think?" she asked, more seriously, nodding to Zi Wei's back ahead of them.

"Yes," he answered. "It's important that the entire family like her. Every one of us will be eager to protect her as much as possible for everything that comes with the future announcement of her status. My father was right, though, our security details, at least, have noticed the pronounced attention paid to her, and today, someone of the staff have heard things over dinner, too."

"You must all be confident about their discretion," Xiao Yan commented.

"It's not so much an issue of blind trust as they're required by non-disclosure agreements to keep what they know to themselves," Yong Qi said. "They won't say anything, even to their families, if they don't want to be sued for breach of contract. In any case, I'm sure Mama is right now making sure they are aware that whatever they heard today is very confidential."

At this point, they have reached the car. The emperor embraced Zi Wei and kissed her cheek in farewell, before shaking Xiao Yan's hand warmly. He also personally closed the door after the two girls have slid into the car. Together, he and Yong Qi watch car disappear out of Shen Wu Men, into the darkness of the spring night.

"I like her," his father said, as they started to turn back to the palace.

"Of course."

"I don't mean Zi Wei," his father said with a low laugh. "She goes without saying."

"Sir?"

"Don't 'sir' me, Yong Qi. You know I meant Xiao Yan."

Yong Qi couldn't think of an answer right away. His father did not seem in a rush to press him to say anything.

Finally, he said sheepishly, "It's that obvious?"

"What do you think?"

"I think…” Yong Qi replied hesitantly, "she deserves…more than this."

His father sighed. "Don't they all?"

Don't they all, indeed.
Chapter End Notes

The thing about this set up is that I am very much sacrificing Xiao Yan and the emperor's relationship to the modern setting. I'm not saying that they're going to be total strangers. After all, the emperor does make a point of telling/assuring Yong Qi how much he likes Xiao Yan, because seriously that boy is not subtle. But a lot of the details in canon is hard to sneak in without the whole mistaken identity thing.

On the subject of the emperor: he's a very, very different character here than HZGG's Qian Long, who honestly is already a more mellow version of the Qian Long you'd get in more historical shows. But even HZGG!Qian Long literally thought he owned everything that was worth owning in the world, so he had big ego. With this modern emperor, however, I had to balance this man who really does have a lot status and is surrounded by all this pomp and ceremony, but his power is a lot more limited in the greater world. That changes his relationship with everyone, and most obvious of all in the last few chapters, is his relationship with his children. In HZGG, his warm relationship with Xiao Yan Zi and Zi Wei is supposed to be a shocking anomaly, which here, it's not. In this modern AU, he isn't the detached father that he would be in the period setting, and this really is the reason why his children call him Ah Ma, and not Huang Ah Ma. Ah Ma is what they would have called him when they were children and their grandfather was still alive, so their father was a prince. The idea here is that their address, and therefore the way they treat him, doesn't change even after he became emperor.
2011

May

Once it has been agreed that eventually the Palace would publicly announce Zi Wei's identity as the emperor's daughter, there suddenly seemed to be a thousand different kinds of preparations and questions that had to be tackled first.

It started with simple things like where would Zi Wei live, once the news was broken?

"Why would I need to move?" Zi Wei asked hesitantly. "I mean, the dormitory caters to summer residence."

"Zi Wei, that is not an option at all," the empress said gently. "I know you have requested to not be given a title of any kind, and to keep your mother's family name, which I must say, is what Parliament prefers…"

"Though, I will be honest, it is not what I prefer. The part about not giving you a title, at least," the emperor said. Off Zi Wei's guilty look, he hastily added, "But it is not my wishes that are important in this, Zi Wei. Your comfort is the most important issue on hand."

She gave him a grateful look though it did not particularly dismiss her sense of guilt, nor her scepticism that he really was as okay with her decision as he was trying to make it seem.

"But even without a title, you will still be known as the emperor's daughter," the empress continued, as if the injection had not happened. "As such, living in the dormitory of the university is no longer a safe option."

"No longer safe?" she asked, bewildered.

"It would expose you to too many security risks, Miss," Lu Jun, head of the emperor's security team chimed in. "As the emperor's daughter, you will become an attractive target for everything from someone's overzealous curiosity to people who might want to cause actually harm. It will be for everyone's safety, including that of your roommate, for you to move from the university's dormitory."

"I'm guessing you have a solution already?" Zi Wei asked, frowning. "If it is a security issue you're concerned about, I am not sure any of my suggestions would answer that concern."

"Without a title, you will not be obligated to take part in royal duties," the emperor said. "As such, your expenses will not be covered by civil list. However, from now on, I would like to cover all your expenses, including your university fees, Zi Wei."

"I'm not sure you have to, Ah Ma," she said earnestly. It was important to her that he understood this was not her purpose in opening herself up to him, nor what she expected of him. "I am, after all, an adult. I have money that Mama left me, as well for sale of the house I can support myself. I have been."

"I know," her father said gently, "but I would like to do what I can for you, Zi Wei, as I should have
done, throughout your life. This wish is not born of guilt, but what you deserve from me. I hope you will let me do this for you."

"You should also consider, Zi Wei," the empress said, "that even without the official duties, your lifestyle, by the nature of your connection to us, will have to change. I do not think you will be able to support it on your own, nor should you."

Zi Wei sighed, but recognised this was not a battle she should wage with her father. She nodded silently.

"We can discuss the financials in more details later," her father said, patting her hand. "This isn't any of us trying to treat you like a child, Zi Wei. I hope you understand that."

"I do," she said.

"This has been long-winded, but you need to know all the factors under consideration," the empress said. "Back to the issue of where you will live. Right now, the best solution would be for you to move into the palace, at least while you are still at university. It will, of course, give all of us a chance to get to know each other better. We have discussed this with the Master of the Household, and ultimately the choice is up to you. You can live at Yong Shou Gong with us. Otherwise, you can share Xian Fu Gong with Yong Qi, which will give you more freedom and privacy while still being close to everyone. The management of Xian Fu Gong still falls within the emperor's household for now, so it is interchangeable where you make your residence between these two palaces. Yong An's Tai Ji Dian will not be able to cover your expenses."

"Is there a third option?" Zi Wei asked, not expecting a positive answer.

"No, not exactly," the empress answered.

"In that case…I think I would prefer Xian Fu Gong. I mean, I would not want to intrude on you at Yong Shou Gong."

"It would not be an intrusion," her father said. "Not at all."

"But it would be nicer for Zi Wei to have a little independence, Huang Shang," the empress said, smiling.

Her father reluctantly nodded at this logic.

"The next issue, Miss, is security," Lu Jun said. "It is Their Majesties' opinions, and my own professional judgement, that you should have a security detail. You will be assigned a bodyguard to accompany you at all times when you are not inside the palace grounds."

"Is that…necessary?" Zi Wei asked, mildly appalled at the prospect.

"Yes," the emperor said solemnly. "This is not negotiable, Zi Wei."

That described every other issue they had discussed that day, Zi Wei thought. She didn't say this out loud, as she already knew it would hardly do any good.

The empress reached out and squeezed Zi Wei's hand. "I know the idea is not attractive to you, especially after all I've just said about you deserving your independence. However, it goes off the same logic as why you can no longer live on campus. It is, I'm afraid, something that we will have to insist upon."
Zi Wei nodded reluctantly.

The empress gave her another sympathetic smile, before looking down at the agenda before her, which still looked exhaustingly long.

"In terms of the announcement itself, the Palace PR team is working on the press release and the media strategies now, and we will discuss the details at a later date," she said. "However, there is a suggestion that we should hold a press conference after the announcement goes live."

"Why?" Zi Wei asked.

"It is easier to get the immediate questions out of the way first, rather than let speculations gather and brew into a storm of hearsay," her father answered.

"Now, in this, you do have a say whether you are present," the empress added hastily, seeing Zi Wei's eyes widen in horror. "You do not have public duties to compel you to be present at this press conference. It can just be your father and myself, and possible Yong An, as well, if you would rather not expose yourself to that. If you do want to attend, however, you will not be alone. Far from it. In that case, the entire family, with the exception of He Ke and Yong Yan, will need to be there, for an appropriate show of solidarity."

"I will…need to think about this," Zi Wei said with shaky nervous laughter.

"Of course," the empress said comfortably. "On that, we are not expecting an answer now. You will have questions before you can decide, I'm sure. But just know what the options are."

Zi Wei nodded.

"Now, after the announcement is made, you should know that all your acquaintances and friends in Jinan will be approached by the press about you," the empress said. "As such, if you have friends you would prefer to not find out through the press, you should tell them before the news break."

"This is also when you will find out who your true friends are. You will find that there will be those who will not value you or your friendship enough to stop them profiting from the simple fact that they know you," the emperor added. His voice had softened, as if he knew exactly how appalling the whole idea sounded to Zi Wei's always trusting nature. "At the same time, you will also realise who are the ones who would not sell your stories to the press, no matter what they are offered. In any case, freedom of speech means that you cannot stop people from spreading gossip and their versions of the truth to the papers. Unless it is clear libel, there is little we can do about it. We will help you deal with everything when it happens, of course, but I just want to warn you now that it will happen…"

The meeting went on this in vain for several more hours, and they discussed what seemed like everything under the sun. There was a particularly nerve-wracking conversation about when and how the rest of the family, which consisted of the emperor's brothers and their families, as well as his uncle and his family, should be told. The emperor also wanted to give a cocktail party at the palace after the news had died down a little to introduce her formally to important members of government and family friends.

There were talks of at which official engagement Zi Wei would make her first appearance. Her father hastened to explain that though she was not expected to represent the emperor on any official engagement, it was important that she was present at important events which every member of the Imperial Family would attend, to confirm and cement her position within the family in the eye of the public.
By the time Zi Wei arrived back at her and Xiao Yan's dorm room – which apparently would not be hers for much longer – she was physically and emotionally exhausted from everything that she had been told that day.

"Don't ask me how it went," she said to Xiao Yan wearily. "I don't even know. I was out of it for most of the ride back here."

"Are you still being chauffeured around?" Xiao Yan asked. "You'd think having the emperor for a father means you'd have asked for a car by now."

Zi Wei giggled, only because she knew Xiao Yan expected her to.

"Can you drive?"

"Yes," Zi Wei said, rolling onto her stomach so that she could look across the room at Xiao Yan. "But honestly, it seems a little excessive to ask for a car now that my father has just insisted on paying my tuition fees for university, asked me to move into the palace and will probably give me a huge amount of spending money for the rest of my days as a student."

"Really?" Xiao Yan asked, throwing aside the book on her lap.

"There was…a lot of talk today about security," Zi Wei said, sighing. "Long story short, you're getting a new roommate next year. If not sooner."

"Where are you going to live?"

"With Yong Qi, apparently. It's hardly going to be sharing a tiny apartment where the bedrooms are the size of a matchbox, is it?" she asked rhetorically with a nervous smile.

Xiao Yan laughed. "You know, more people would be happy with the prospect of living in the palace."

"You're not surprised about this?" Zi Wei asked, frowning.

"To be honest, I don't expect your father to want you to continue living here, either," her friend answered, shrugging.

"Oh."

"Cheer up, Zi Wei. You can't be unhappy about this, can you?"

"No, not unhappy really. I'm not trying to be ungrateful, honestly. There's just been a lot to take in today."

Xiao Yan smiled sympathetically.

Zi Wei left her bed and went over to Xiao Yan's, sitting down next to her and laid her head on Xiao Yan's shoulder. "Promise me you're not going to change how you treat me after this?" She didn't realise until her voice actually shook how much the idea terrified her.

"Oh Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said, pulling Zi Wei into a hug. "Of course not. I know your whole world is changing. But I'll always be there for you, all right? Me, and Jin Suo, and Liu Qing and Liu Hong too."

"Thank you," Zi Wei murmured. Then she sighed. "I will probably have to tell Liu Qing and Liu Hong about this before they find it on the TV or something."
"Are you allowed to do that?"

"Yes," Zi Wei said. "Ah Ma even said I should, with close friends. They've both helped me so much, and they're important to you, too, so I think I should tell them first. You'll help me, right?"

"Of course. Always."

They stayed like this for a while, before Xiao Yan pushed her off and bounced up to her feet. She held out her hands to Zi Wei.

"Come on, you're not going to be anonymous for much longer. Let's make the most of the days when you can still walk around freely and go out for dinner."

She wasn't particularly hungry, but it was hard to refuse Xiao Yan when she was this upbeat and cheerful. Zi Wei smiled and took Xiao Yan's hands, allowing her friend to pull her up.

"All right," she said. "Let's go. What do you want?"

"Hot pot?"

"Sure, why not? Hot pot, it is!"

June

The last month of her first year of university seemed to fly by in the blink of an eye. Zi Wei was both glad that the stress of end-of-year exams was over, but her stress regarding the looming announcement of her relationship to the emperor was building.

About a week before the announcement was due to be made, she had signed more legal documents than she could count, and though each had been meticulously explained to her at the time of signing, they all blended together now in her head. She had also moved into Xian Fu Gong.

As major palace of the six western palaces, Xiao Fu Gong had two layers of courtyard. There was grand courtyard out front, connecting the gate, Xian Fu Men to the front building. The second, smaller courtyard was designed as a garden and led to the back hall. Coming into the front door of the outer hall was the formal receiving hall, which according Yong Qi, was rarely used for anything but receiving guests. It connected to a smaller living room and a library/study/office on either side.

The back hall, Tong Dao Tang (she still couldn't quite wrap her head around the fact that she was living in a place where individual parts of the house had separate names) was actually the main living areas, where the bedrooms located. The hall connected to side buildings where the kitchen and dining room were located.

Her bedroom was located to the east side of Tong Dao Tang, where hung a plaque with three characters, 琴德簃 or Room of Music Morality.

"Has this always been here?" she asked Yong Qi when she first moved in.

"Yes," he said with a smile. "This actually used to be a storeroom for musical instruments, back in the day. I thought you might like it."

"I do," she said, gazing up at the plaque dreamily.

Zi Wei didn't have to ask for a car. Her father offered. She had, at first, tried to tell him that it was not
necessary, but the reality was, even if she wasn't going to drive the car herself, everyone would insist she was driven everywhere anyway. So, in the end, it seemed pointless to refuse. Yong Qi also told her that being able to drive yourself would give her something that more resembled independence and control in her own life. She wasn't sure the so-called independence was quite what it seemed when it was clear that she would be followed everywhere by a security detail, anyway.

The security detail arrived her second day of living in the palace.

She arrived back in the palace and found Fu Er Kang waiting for her outside the gate of Xian Fu Gong.

"Miss Xia, good afternoon."

"I thought we agreed you'd call me Zi Wei?" she asked, smiling.

"Of course, Zi Wei."

"Are you looking for Yong Qi?" she asked, inviting him into the living room. "I'm not sure he's home yet."

"No, in fact, I was looking for you," he said. "My team and I have been assigned to your protection in addition to our duty to Princess He Jing and Prince Yong Qi. I am here to brief you on your security arrangements."

"Okay," she said. "Um, should we sit down?"

"Yes, it is best. This will not be quite so brief."

He smiled. She couldn't help noticing that he looked so much less stern when he was amused. So much warmer. She smiled back, as together they sat down next to each other on the sofa.

"So, as I am sure you have been informed, there is never less than three agents accompanying the Crown Prince at all times," Er Kang said. "With his siblings, the number of agents on duty in their details at any given time varies depending on where they will be. Usually in familiar settings, it will be limited to one, but in busier places, the number can increase. For yourself, you will be accompanied by one security officer every moment you are not on palace grounds. For the sake of convenience, someone will be at your disposal when you are in the palace as well, though they will not have to be your immediate space…"

Even though she had tried to mentally prepare herself, the immediate days after the announcement of her very existence and connection to the Imperial Family blended together in a mess of confusion, every emotion under the sun and completely new experiences that no one could have warned Zi Wei of beforehand.

The Palace issued a press release late in the morning, which outlined the situation, and scheduled the press conference immediately that following afternoon.

She spent most of that morning being briefed on how she should act, what she should say, what kinds of questions she should answer in the press conference, and then two hours being dressed and in make-up, so she didn't have time to check how the news was being received in real time online. She couldn't, anyway, since Yong Qi had stolen her phone and hid it, promising he would only give it back after she made it through the press conference without any tears. If this was his way of keeping her calm for the press conference, she wasn't sure telling her that he expected her to cry at the press conference was helpful.
Xiao Yan told her later that this was probably a good thing, because the absolute avalanche of tweets, hashtags and comments on every available social media, both Chinese and international, conveying reactions from disbelief to anger to delight, would probably have paralysed her later in the press conference.

("It would have paralysed anyone," Xiao Yan argued when she pointed out that implying she wasn't strong enough to take the reactions was a shocking lack of faith when she needed faith most.)

Apparently there was a meme about her.

Zi Wei couldn't bring herself to feel really amused, nervous as she was.

The press conference was indeed terrifying. But even Zi Wei could recognise that it was also heavily moderated, with questions being approved of beforehand, so there were no rude questions or those intended to make everyone at the table uncomfortable. Most of the questions that ended up being asked could be answered by prepared answers she was given beforehand.

"Wait, so they actually scripted your answers for you?" Xiao Yan asked later. "What's the point of giving a press conference if you can't actually answer with your own words? Why can't they just stick all of that into a press release?"

"Honestly, Xiao Yan, it was a relief to have prepared answers," she admitted. "I was really nervous. And they told me if I disagreed with any of the prepared answers, I didn't have to give it, so it wasn't like I was giving untrue answers."

Xiao Yan still looked unconvinced, but after a few false starts, decided to just drop the argument. Zi Wei felt grateful for her friend's uncharacteristic show of sensitivity and moved in to hug her. Xiao Yan squeezed back, and for a moment, Zi Wei felt truly comforted. She didn't realise she needed Xiao Yan this much to get through this entire ordeal.

Of course, the press conference was just the beginning. Arguably, it was the easiest hurdle. Zi Wei was not prone to exaggeration, but for the first time in her life, she had to describe the day after as 'hellish'.

"Are you coming for dinner?" Yong Qi asked in the evening, having knocked on her bedroom door and letting himself in when he got no answer.

She was lying on her stomach on the bed, face buried in her pillow. "You go ahead," she mumbled. "I'll eat later. If I could be bothered."

Yong Qi didn't move away. The shift of the bed told her he just sat down next to her instead. A moment later, she could feel his hand rubbing her back. "You okay?"

She rolled around to look up at him. "Yeah, just a really long day."

He sighed. "Well, it's to be expected, honestly."

"Jiejie told me I should just stay inside today," Zi Wei said. "I should have listened to her."

"Well, you would have to face the world, sooner or later. Might as well get it out of the way."

"It couldn't have been better for you?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. "But I think people would be more intimidated by the idea of approaching me than you. I did have a few people talking to me about it, but overall, many more weird looks."

"I thought I've prepared myself for this," she said, staring up at the ceiling.

"It's not something that could be prepared for, really."

"Did you tell Er Kang to be with me today?" she asked.

Yong Qi chuckled. "I don't tell Er Kang how to do his job, Zi Wei. It couldn't have been just him, right?"

"No, including him, there were three agents following me around all day. On the one hand, they did manage to keep people away and I ended up near tears fewer times than I could have otherwise. On the other hand, it gave more ammunition to people with derisive comments to make."

Yong Qi took her hand and squeezed it. "It will die down, eventually. Even this family becomes boring sometimes."

"I just – how do you deal with it?" she asked, sitting up and smoothing her hair out of her eyes.

He smiled sympathetically. "Well, there are many levels of it. You might want to be a little more specific of what you mean."

"I don't know what's worse, to be honest," Zi Wei said, hugging a pillow to herself. "The number of perfectly random people who's come up to me today and told me I was a crazy, opportunity-grabbing attention whore determined to spend the rest of my life lazing around poaching off other people's money – and believe me, that's verbatim – "

"I can well believe that."

"The agents can keep them off me physically, but it's not like they could keep people from talking or me from hearing. The thing is, I do understand the mindset behind that opinion. I know that it's unavoidable that there are people with that opinion. It's still upsetting to hear, though. I keep telling myself it's not a personal attack on me. It really isn't. I mean, they don't even know me, but…"

"It's wearying and disheartening and you'd have to be made of steel to not feel a thing when people throw cruel words so directly at you, Zi Wei," Yong Qi said comfortingly.

She buried her face in the pillow again, inhaling its scent deeply before looking up. She was relieved that the pillow had soaked most of the tears which had sprung to her eyes. "I feel like such an idiot for letting those comments bother me, especially when before the news broke, I have imagined the worse things that people might say. But it's still horrible to hear it in person and look at someone saying that to you and know that they mean every word."

"Would it help if I told you, after a while, you do grow a tiny bit desensitised to it? I mean, it won't stop stinging when people rudely push into your face – that's probably a dangerous level of cold to become – but you stop, I don't know, beating yourself up for being the reason for a person feeling this way, because then it becomes hating yourself for existing."

"I have to say, that feeling did assault me throughout the day," she said, fiddling with the pillow in her lap. "I've never felt that before, and it's just very disorienting. I mean, what do they actually expect you to say in reply?"

Yong Qi gave a small smile. "I don't think anyone expects you to say anything in reply. They just want to put you down."

"Why?" she cried. "Why do people do that?"
"To make them feel better about themselves," Yong Qi answered, shrugging.

"It's twisted. I wish – "

She didn't know what she wished.

Yong Qi answered nonetheless. "I know."

For a long moment, they were both quiet and the only thing Zi Wei could hear was the ticking of the antique clock on her bedside table.

"The thing is, republicans think the whole system of monarchy is outdated," Yong Qi said after a while. "They think we're over-privileged and rarely have to work for anything we have. Honestly, some of it is true. But they rarely think about how we can't exactly just choose to call it quit, stand up and walk off, leaving the government to pick up the pieces either. We're as trapped in the system as everyone else in this country is, even more so. Though, honestly, the most memorable way I've read or heard someone describe the concept of constitutional monarchy was actually from a republican, and it's something along the line of, 'it's a theatre act that demands a regular human sacrifice whereby unexceptional people are condemned to lead wholly artificial and strained existences, and then punished or humiliated when they crack up'. And it's accurate; this existence is really just a long, humbling lesson in taking humiliation."

"Is any of that supposed to make me feel better?" Zi Wei asked with a shaky laugh, rubbing her eyes wearily.

Yong Qi smiled wryly. "No. I'm just giving you the facts. Though I suppose the trick is recognising just how artificial all this is, and not fall into the trap of thinking that is all you're worth."

"And how do you do that?"

"I'll let you know when I figure that part out."

Zi Wei laughed again, sounding even less calm than before. This was followed by another sigh. "I guess in some way, the hostility is less bizarre and mind-boggling than the opposite reaction."

"Let me guess, random people came over to say hi to you and then walked off?" Yong Qi asked with a smirk. "Or Heaven forbid, clutch at their chest like they're about to faint?"

Zi Wei managed to giggle. "I think the fainting department is more a reaction to you. But yeah, the staring, the gushing, the random guys I've never seen before in my life asking me out."

Zi Wei shook her head while Yong Qi looked like he was trying to not burst out laughing. "The barista at Starbucks this morning didn't even bother asking my name, wrote *Princess Zi Wei* on the cup and then two minutes later shouted it out to the entire room – "

"That must have been fun."

"*You have no idea*. I'm not a princess. And he wasn't even the only person to call me that, despite the fact that every single press release or news article on me has mentioned that I *wasn't* being given a title, in an attempt to appease the public in light of this earth-shattering news."

"Zi Wei, a word of advice. Official announcements and paper evidence to the contrary, don't expect the public and tabloids to refrain from referring to you as princess. Republicans aside, it's much more glamourous and fairy-tale-like for everyone else to refer to you as princess. They choose something that catches and just stick with it. For the tabloids, buzz words sell papers."
"It's so unfair," Zi Wei said. She gave him an uncharacteristic glare. "People don't jump out at you from behind bushes on campus."

Yong Qi burst out laughing. "*Are you kidding?* I avoid campus if I can every year during enrollment week, and then spend the first month walking around in hats or hoodies. *I have a hide-out place in the library."

"All right," she agreed, "but people are used to you."

"And they will get used to you. You just have to give it all time."

"Well, it's not like there's much else to do, in any case. I hope it will happen soon, if only to stop Xiao Yan committing murder. She actually punched someone today before Er Kang could pull her off the guy. Actually, I don't think he even wanted to pull her off, but the guy was swearing bloody murder."

Yong Qi laughed. "I have a feeling Xiao Yan has a mean right hook."

"She does." Zi Wei sighed. "But I don't know what I would have done without her today."

"I'm glad you have Xiao Yan to protect you, too," Yong Qi held out his hand to her. "Come on, everyone's waiting at Yong Shou Gong for dinner."

"Oh, you didn't say we were having dinner at Yong Shou Gong!" she exclaimed, clambering off the bed.

"You didn't think Ah Ma and Mama wouldn't ask after you today, did you?" he asked, smiling. "It's all right, I'm pretty sure they'll expect us to be late anyway."

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**July**

"I am going to request a transfer of duty," Er Kang said to Yong Qi as they drove back from university one day.

"Oh, to where?"

"Anywhere that is not this detail."

Yong Qi laughed. "Jiejie and I are that annoying then?"

"This isn't about you or He Jing," Er Kang said, apparently unaware of Yong Qi's joking tone that was also meant to be fishing for information. He merely seemed lost in thoughts. It was probably a good thing that Yong Qi was driving.

Yong Qi also couldn't help noticing there was no 'sir' or any other honourific attached, and his sister was 'He Jing' and not 'Princess', which meant that this was not Agent Fu speaking to his prince, but Er Kang speaking to Yong Qi.

"Yeah, I know," Yong Qi said, smiling. "It's probably for the best."

Er Kang startled and turned to look at him. "You know?"

"You shouldn't be on Zi Wei's detail," Yong Qi said simply.

"It's that obvious?" Er Kang asked weakly, leaning back in his seat.
Yong Qi only laughed. "Have you told her?" he asked instead of answering.

"No, not yet. I thought I'd just wait until the paperwork is all sorted out."

"If you're taking yourself away from Zi Wei's detail, I hope that means you'd actually do something about the reason that's taking you away."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "Why would I?"

"I just keep wondering if that's even a good idea. I can't protect her, that's true, but that doesn't mean that it would be a good idea for me to try and start anything."

"What makes you say that?"

"If we start something right now," Er Kang answered, "the press will dig up the information that I used to be on her security detail. Insinuations would be made. It would still be another chapter in the on-going media saga."

"Isn't the point of being a secret agent so that the press doesn't know who you are and who you protect?" Yong Qi asked.

"Well, yeah, but when it comes to relationship gossips, the tabloids seem able to dig up anything and everything."

"The tabloids will talk regardless, Er Kang," Yong Qi said. "They're not going to back off of Zi Wei just because you're not dating her. Don't think about them. Think about what would make you happy. About what would make her happy."

"And do you think – "

"No."

"No?"

"I mean, 'no' as in I'm not having this conversation with you. If you want to know what Zi Wei's thinking, what she wants, you ask her."

"Right."

"And I suppose, as her brother, I should be telling you that if you hurt her, I'll hurt you," Yong Qi said with mock-seriousness, "but I have a feeling I'd have to get in line after Xiao Yan for that."

Er Kang laughed. Then, he paused slightly, as if giving Yong Qi time to prepare for the question that they both knew was coming.

"What about that?"

"What about what?"

Er Kang laughed again and shook his head. "Come on, Yong Qi, if my feelings for Zi Wei are that transparent, do you imagine I haven't noticed yours for Xiao Yan?"

"That's different," Yong Qi said, sighing.
"You just say that because you're procrastinating."

Yong Qi had nothing to say in answer to that.

"Look, Yong Qi, you said yourself, it's going to take a while for the media furor to die down. Maybe you shouldn't wait for it, either."

"It's not that, precisely," he said slowly.

"You don't want to ruin it. I know."

"Have you and Er Tai been gossiping about me and Xiao Yan?" Yong Qi asked, somewhat annoyed.

"Not gossiping," Er Kang said, unperturbed. "The subject just pops up, occasionally."

"As if that's any difference," he grumbled.

"Yong Qi."

"I know, I know. Er Tai has been on my case about this already. I should just get on it."

"So why haven't you?" Er Kang asked.

"Waiting for the right moment?" he asked.

At this point, he wasn't even sure what the right moment was supposed to consist of.

"Zi Wei, I've come to tell you that starting next week, I will no longer be in charge of your security detail, or Yong Qi and He Jing's."

"Oh." Zi Wei couldn't help feeling disappointed and tried not to show it. Er Kang had been invaluable to her through this last month. Even if he couldn't physically protect her from people's snide words, his intimate knowledge of Yong Le campus meant he always knew the fast extraction route which got them out of potential hurtful situations quickly. She didn't want to get used to someone else protecting her, and she was bothered by the question of why he was leaving. "What's happened?"

"Nothing. I am being transferred to the Crown Prince's detail."

"Oh." She supposed she could hardly blame him for putting his career path before her. "Congratulations on the promotion, then."

"It's not exactly a promotion," he said. "It is a slightly more prestigious position, yes, but in terms of actual duty, it is the same."

Zi Wei couldn't help feeling a little bit hurt. If it wasn't a promotion, then why was he leaving her? Then again, maybe that was it. Perhaps protecting even Yong An would be a more relaxing job than what he had to deal with lately. She couldn't help an enormous sadness filling her with the realisation, even though she forced herself to smile. "Well, good luck," she said.

Er Kang caught the disappointment in her voice. Instead of leaving as she expected, he hesitated for a moment. Then, "The truth is, I requested the transfer. I didn't think it was a good idea for me to remain on your detail."
"I'm sorry!" Zi Wei exclaimed, mortification filling her as he confirmed her guesses about his reason for leaving. "I know protecting me hasn't been the easiest job lately! I really am sorry!"

"It's not that," Er Kang countered quietly. "It's nothing about you or what you did. I just – I feel my ability to do my job is compromised if the only times I am around you is when I am on duty."

She frowned, her feelings of hurt slowly being replaced by confusion. "I don't understand."

He gave her a piercing stare, his eyes blazing with such emotions that it took her breath away. "Don't you, Zi Wei?" There was a softness in it that she had never heard from him before.

"I –"

Her voice seemed to suddenly die in her throat as she wondered if that tone, that look in his eyes could possibly mean what she thought it meant.

"I can't do my job if my protectee is the one making me flustered, nervous and...distracted," he whispered, taking a step towards her.

She clenched her hands nervously and gazed up at him, breathless. Right now, if there was anyone who was flustered and nervous, it was her, not him. She could hardly believe he was saying these words to her, with such clear implications.

"Zi Wei?"

"I don't know what to say," she confessed, but she couldn't help a smile forming on her lips.

He smiled back. He so rarely smiled, and she realised now that when he did, it was often at her. Her heart wanted to skip a beat at the realisation.

He placed a tentative, tender hand against her cheek. His eyes bore into hers, as if judging her reaction. She didn't pull away. She didn't want to.

"I know your life has just been put in a blender," Er Kang said softly, his thumb caressing her cheek, "and I understand if you cannot think of me in this way now. But when you are ready, will you consider going out with me sometimes?"

"Yes," she gasped, before her insecurities could take over to second guess herself, to second guess him and ask 'why me?'. "Yes, yes, of course. I don't need to consider or for time to be ready, I will go out with you."

Happiness filled his face at her answer. He cupped her face in both his hands, and impulsively, for Er Kang, he leaned down and brushed his lips against Zi Wei's. She allowed his happiness to engulf her and melted into his arms.

It could have been years later when they parted, but even then, all she could see, all she wanted to see, was Er Kang. He smiled radiantly at her, and whispered, "Shall we go now?"

Zi Wei couldn't help laughing. "Yes! Now, if you want." There was a pause, in which she remembered her still-present problems with very public places. She tried not to allow it to ruin her current happiness. "But maybe somewhere not very crowded?"

"Don't worry," Er Kang said, wrapping his hand warmly around hers and raising it to his lips to kiss it. "I know just the place where no one will bother us."
To be clear to US readers, when republicans are mentioned here, I do not in any way mean the American kind, and more like anti-monarchists.

The thing about taking this story to modern time is that while it resolves some of the conflict. For example, the mistaken identity is almost impossible because there is no way a discovery like Zi Wei wouldn't be confirmed through DNA test. Also, the modern setting makes the relationship between Zi Wei's parents slightly less unsavoury. In the period setting, I find the relationship between Qian Long and Xia Yu He very disturbing, because it really boils down to the emperor taking advantage of a young girl who had no power of saying no to him. At least in modern time, there is less of a power imbalance and at one point it would have been consensual (if you overlook the bit where he didn't actually tell her he was the emperor). And obviously, in modern time, she was in (slightly) less of a vulnerable place after he left.

But the modern time introduces new issues, in that you can't just wave your hands and say "I'm the emperor, I can do whatever I want". You can hold royalty accountable for things now, which means some of the shenanigans and drama in the original story gets lost along the way. (You know, breaking people out of jail by fraud is a very serious crime that you wouldn't be able to get away with nowadays no matter who you are, especially if you don't even try to pretend it wasn't you who did it.)
Xia Ziwei

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This is a Chinese name; the family name is Xia

Xia Ziwei (夏紫薇; born 2 August 1990) is the daughter of Emperor Xiangyuan and Xia Yuhe, and a member of the Imperial Family of China.

Early life

Ziwei's mother, Yuhe was a guqin artist for the Daming Traditional Orchestra. Yuhe met the then-Prince Bao, Crown Prince of China, while he was visiting Jinan, Shandong province, soon after the death of his first wife. They had a brief relationship and Yuhe was not aware of the Prince's real identity. The couple married with the Prince using the name Ai Baoli, the style used during his training with the Imperial Army and Air-force. Eventually, Prince Bao's identity was revealed to Yuhe, and the couple reached the mutual decision to file for a quiet divorce, also under the name Ai Baoli. Prince Bao left Jinan unaware that Yuhe was pregnant with Ziwei at the time.

Ziwei was born on 2 August 1990 and lived most of her life in Jinan with Yuhe raising her daughter as a single mother. Ziwei was unaware of the identity of her father until after her mother's death.

Move to Beijing

In 2010, Ziwei moved to Beijing to begin her Bachelor degree at Yongle University. It was here that she met Yongqi, Pring Rong. They became friends, though neither was aware of their relation to the other.

Ziwei's mother, Yuhe, died in 2008. In 2011, Ziwei discovered who her father was through a video letter her mother left behind.

Later, it was Yongqi who introduced Ziwei to the rest of his family, including her father, now Emperor Xiangyuan.

[...]

Titles, styles and honours

When the news of Ziwei's relationship to the Emperor was first revealed, many speculated she would be granted the title gégé (格格) as the title gōngzhǔ (公主) was deemed too controversial considering the ambiguous legality surrounding her parents' swift marriage. However, Ziwei herself has requested that she not be given an imperial title. While she is publically acknowledged and recognised as the legitimate daughter of the Emperor, she continues to be known by her birth name, using her mother's surname.

Despite this, she is still most popularly referred to by the public and sometimes by the media, incorrectly, as Princess Ziwei (紫薇格格).

Court communications refer to her as Miss Xia Ziwei.

Role within the Imperial Family
She resides in the Imperial Palace, but she does not undertake any official imperial duty and is not expected to do so in a solo capacity. As such, she does not receive payment from the civil list, and any inheritance she might receive in the future or dowry upon her marriage is to be agreed upon and arranged within the Imperial Family privately. She still participates and is included in ceremonies and events that involve the entire Imperial Family.

[…]


It was decided that the first official royal engagement Zi Wei would attend would be the Banners Inspection which took place every summer at Yi He Yuan.

"What exactly is Banners Inspection?" Xiao Yan asked. "I mean, I know it's on the news and TV every year, but I never could understand what it's for, a bunch of soldiers marching around. What's the whole point?"

She and Yong Qi were having lunch at the dumpling place again, which was much quieter now in the summer. Yong Qi had just extended an invitation to Xiao Yan attend the Banners Inspection as a guest of the family. ("Ah Ma thought it would be nice for Zi Wei to have you there, for support," he explained.)

"It's basically an annual military parade, for the emperor to inspect the troops of the infantry and cavalry divisions."

"There's still a cavalry?" Xiao Yan interrupted, incredulous. "You do realise armies have drones and nuclear bombs now, right?"

Yong Qi laughed. "Yes, of course. This country was formed on horseback, you know, so obviously here's still a cavalry. They wouldn't actual go out and fight drones on horseback, but for ceremonial purposes, they've still got horses and they're still called the cavalry."

"You mean this country was conquered on horseback," Xiao Yan said.

"Anyway," he said, deciding not to address her jab. "Banners Inspection is an old tradition, originally to rally troops and allow Manchu Banner leaders to meet. In later reigns, it's used to reconfirm allegiance of Banner leaders to the Emperor. Man-Han segregation of the armies is over now, of course, and the concept of the army is now more tied to that of a nation than clans, so nowadays, the whole thing is entirely ceremonial. Basically, the point is that it's a parade to showcase military music and patriotism."

"So what would 'attending' require me to do?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Nothing," Yong Qi replied. He laughed at her disbelieving look. "I'm serious. You would just sit in the royal stand with me, Yong Yan, Mama and my sisters and watch. My father is supreme commander of all the armed forces, so he does the actual 'inspecting', and Yong An, as commander of the Bordered White Banner, will actually ride in the parade, though."

"Yong An, really?"

"Yeah, of course."

"But not you?"

"I'm not involved in the actual parade yet," Yong Qi explained. "After I finish my degree, I will have to train at the Imperial Military Academy, and eventually I will be given command of a banner and so take part in the inspection parade."
"What does being 'commander' of a banner involve?" Xiao Yan asked, intrigued.

Yong Qi laughed. "The title is a lot more exciting than the actual duties. It's an entirely ceremonial title, to be honest. Nowadays, we don't actually do any practical commanding. It's actually more like being a patron of that banner. In practice, no one would actually ever let Yong An fight on the front line even if there was an actual war happening. I doubt they would let me, either. I wouldn't have Harry Wales' panache to threaten to cause a national scandal just to make sure they send me to the front lines."

Xiao Yan frowned in confusion. "That doesn't make any sense. If you wouldn't be allowed to fight, why would you be in the army?"

"For Yong An, because he will, one day, be its supreme commander. There's a reason it's a royal tradition the world over that princes – and I'm sure, soon enough, at least princesses who are heirs apparent – spend time in the armed forces. Immediate heirs to the throne need to know how the armed forces work because they will one day command them. Their younger brothers have to be trained in the armed forces because our duties as princes and the armed forces' duties align, in that we both are sworn to protect the country. We are theoretically more likely to be sent to fight, but in reality, it wouldn't actually happen unless something extreme like a world war broke out on our front door. Or, in Harry's case, threaten to throw a hissy fit over it. In any case, I will end up spending at least four years rotating through the army, the air force and the navy."

Xiao Yan raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying your degree is just to delay national service?"

"No," Yong Qi answered, laughing. "I mean, I'm not actively trying to avoid it. It's just easier to do things in sequence and get the degrees out of the way first so that after I finish military duties, I have choices about what I want to do. I will have to spend time with the forces, but after the required training, I don't have to stay and make a career out of it. I could choose to, of course. Harry is doing that now. That's why he was so insistent on going to Afghanistan because it's a waste of his time, otherwise, if all they're going to do is just trap him at home."

Xiao Yan considered this for a few moments, in which they both silently returned to eating their food.

"So…you want me to help Zi Wei sit and watch a military parade?" Xiao Yan eventually asked.

"Well, as I said, it's a very ceremonial event, and so now it's also turned into a social scene. Aside from members of the imperial family, invited guests, dignitaries and government leaders, people can apply for tickets to watch. This year, I think everyone will be watching Zi Wei more than the actual parades. Media will definitely draw attention to her presence. That's why we wanted her to attend. The patriotic mood the entire thing can be infectious, and overall, it's considered to be good press for Zi Wei to be seen at something like this. It's a major event in the royal calendar but where there are few things that any of us actually have to do. I know you wouldn't be able to do anything to protect Zi Wei from the attention, but I think she'd appreciate having you there to share this with her, so she doesn't feel alone."

"I want to support Zi Wei, I do," Xiao Yan said sincerely, with a playful smile, "but can I just point out one tiny problem?"

"What?"

"I can already assure you, I have nothing to wear that would be appropriate for an event like this."

Yong Qi shrugged. "Borrow something from Zi Wei. In case you haven't noticed, between my
stepmother and my sister, she's been given a wardrobe make over."

"I've noticed. Whose idea was it to invite me anyway? I'm sure Zi Wei wouldn't take the initiative to suggest it herself."

"She would be too reserved to do that, true, which was why my father suggested it," Yong Qi answered. There was a strange look on his face as he said this that Xiao Yan couldn't quite understand, but didn't seem to invite question from her either.

"Your father?" she asked, astonished. "Why would he want me there?"

"As I said, to support Zi Wei. Besides, he likes you."

"He does?" Xiao Yan was now even more surprised. She had not thought the emperor would have an opinion one way or another when it came to her.

"Yes." Yong Qi suddenly smiled widely, and added, "One thing, though, if you attend this event, you will have to curtsy to him when you see him."

"You're funny," she said dryly.

"I'm serious."

"I know. And am I supposed to just figure out what to do that on my own then?"

"Of course." Off her horrified look, he laughed and hastened to correct himself. "I'm teasing, Xiao Yan. If you want to attend with Zi Wei, my sister will personally give you both a rundown of the program and a tutorial about how to dress, what to do, when, where and how. We're not going to just drop you in the middle of a highly televised event, tell you to tread water and hope you don't drown."

Xiao Yan thought for a few moments. "Zi Wei's going to really want me there, right?"

"Yes. I'm surprised she hasn't spoken to you about it."

"We haven't spoken much lately. We keep missing each other when we call. It's weird, we actually have never had a habit of calling each other, considering we shared a room before, so if we needed to tell each other something, we just wait until we got home. Anyway, she's busy with princess lessons. And Er Kang."

Yong Qi laughed.

"Why does she need princess lessons, anyway, if she's not an actual princess?" Xiao Yan asked.

"She might not have the title, but she does need to be familiar with how things work in our family and in our way of life," Yong Qi said. "She's been a saint about it, really. For us, we learn everything since we were very small, and it's reinforced over a lifetime. She's expected to just pick things up in a few short months. It was a good idea that we left all this until the summer vacation."

"She is a saint. From what she has told me about it, I'd have gone beserk a long time ago," Xiao Yan said, laughing. "On the other hand, I think Er Kang is good for her."

"I think so too. How are you, anyway, now that you don't have a roommate anymore?"

Xiao Yan groaned. "Bored. I've been really bored. I've just resorted to working more just to ward off the boredom of summer and an empty room. I probably won't get a new roommate until August, if
"Has Zi Wei told you we've moved out to Yuan Ming Yuan for the summer?" he asked.

"Yes, she has."

"In that case, if you want a diversion from the boredom, the invitation to the Inspection extends to staying Yuan Ming Yuan for the rest of the summer as well. Usually we remove to Yi He Yuan for the months of June and July, then to Yuan Ming Yuan after the Inspection. We stayed in town this year because of everything going on with Zi Wei, but now that we're at Yuan Ming Yuan until the end of August, you're welcome to stay with us. Take a vacation from your dorm room."

Xiao Yan shook her head. "I have work."

"I thought you said you've been working double time lately? Surely you've earned yourself a vacation from work as well."

She scoffed. "Unlike some people, I really can't just take a month off, doing nothing."

"Oh come on," Yong Qi persisted, "your dorm room is paid for July but you haven't paid for August, right? Don't pay for August, come out and stay with us. You'll get free place to live and free food, so I think you can afford to take a vacation. Really, Xiao Yan, you need it. Otherwise, take less hours at work, and we'll drive to you and from work if you want."

"So you want to use my tax money to drive me to and from work?" she asked, laughing.

"Well, by 'we', I kind of mean 'me', so we wouldn't have to pay anyone to drive you," he explained sheepishly. "Otherwise, you can just take one of our cars to drive yourself to work."

"In case you haven't noticed, Yuan Ming Yuan doubles my commute to work."

Yong Qi sighed, the most long-suffering sigh to have ever been exhaled. "Xiao Yan, I'm trying to convince you to take a holiday. You don't have to make it so bloody difficult."

"Some of us have to work to eat," she said nonchalantly, unbothered by his exasperation. Seeing his disappointment, however, she patted his shoulder. "I do appreciate the thought, Yong Qi. If you want, I can just come spend a weekend with you guys or something."

"That works, too," Yong Qi said, brightening visibly.

"Speaking of work though," Xiao Yan said, pulling out her phone to check the time, "I have to go."

"Want a lift?"

"I'm fine, thanks," she said, flashing him a smile. Gathering up her things, she stood up. "I'll see you later, yeah?"

"See you."

Xiao Yan arrived at work to find the usual bustling restaurant with a "Closed" sign out front. Inside, all the lights refused to work. She didn't know where Liu Qing was, but the sounds of Liu Hong's voice led her to the kitchen. She had to use her phone as a flashlight to avoid bumping against chairs and tables. The kitchen, too, was only lit by a few candles.

"Liu Hong? What's going on?" she asked as a way of announcing herself, even though she could
hear that Liu Hong was on the phone with someone.

She hung up quickly, though, and turned around to greet Xiao Yan.

"What's happened?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Apparently, the water pipe burst, and it doused all the electrical wiring. Or some of the wiring. I'm not sure. Sorry, I should have phoned to tell you that you didn't have to come in, but between trying to figure out what's going on and figuring out how much insurance is going to pay to fix this, it totally slipped my mind."

"'S okay," Xiao Yan said. "So how bad are the damages?"

"Well, according to the guy who came to look at things earlier, it will take about three weeks to fix."

"Three weeks?" Xiao Yan yelped.

"Yeah and if anything, that's quick."

"What are we supposed to do in that time?"

"Well, the restaurant is closing. Thankfully, insurance should cover the cost of repairs and keep Liu Qing and I from starving. Unfortunately, it would also mean everyone is out of a job for three weeks. Sorry, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan was in disbelief, not exactly because this has happened, but that it happened probably at the same time as she had that conversation about taking time off with Yong Qi. "It's like a conspiracy," she muttered to herself.

"What's that?" Liu Hong asked from the refrigerator across the room.

"Nothing," Xiao Yan said. "So we're closing for three weeks?"

"Yes, basically that's the gist of it. Look, I've been dividing the food in the fridge among everyone before sending them home. Take whatever you want."

"Sure," Xiao Yan muttered distractedly, still shaking her head over the weird coincidence.

"You can go home, Xiao Yan," Liu Hong said, when she didn't move and just stood there.

"Do you want me to do anything?" she asked. "Where's Liu Qing?"

"Liu Qing's gone to speak to the repair contractor. I don't think there is anything to do right now, honestly."

"Where are you and Liu Qing going to live though, while the repairs are done?"

"We're crashing at our aunt's place," Liu Hong said. "We'll be fine, Xiao Yan. It'll take time to get back up after the repairs, but for now, there's just waiting. Are you going to be okay?"

"What?" Xiao Yan asked. "Yeah, I think so."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," Xiao Yan. "I'll be all right, really. Actually...Zi Wei invited me to take a vacation and come stay with her and her family at Yuan Ming Yuan. I was hesitant, because it was too far from
"You were about to turn down taking a vacation at a palace with the imperial family?" Liu Hong asked, laughing. "Are you insane?"

"No," she said defensively, feeling quite glad that she fibbed and told Liu Hong that Zi Wei made the invitation rather than admitting the invitation came from Yong Qi. "It's just weird to go sit around someone's house for a month doing nothing though. Especially when they're...well, them."

"You might not realise it, Xiao Yan, but people do take off work and go on vacation. Maybe this is the universe's way of telling you should take that vacation."

Xiao Yan laughed. "The universe doesn't want anything, Liu Hong."

"Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't," Liu Hong said, smiling. "But for now, there's nothing for you to do here. So shoo! I'll call you when there's anything to update."

Xiao Yan took the bag of food Liu Hong held out before bidding her goodbye and leaving.

On the bus on the way home, she called Yong Qi.

"You didn't bribe someone to sabotage Hui Bin Lou, did you?" she asked when he picked up.

"What? No!" he exclaimed, clearly confused.

She began to explain what happened at her work.

"I'm sorry for your friends," Yong Qi said sincerely when he understood what was going on. "There's nothing to do except to close for three weeks?"

"Apparently not."

"So...you're free?" he asked hopefully.

Xiao Yan laughed. "Yes. Yes, I am. For three weeks, at least. That's why I asked you if you had a hand in this."

"No," he said, chuckling. "Honestly, I have nothing to do with this. If I did, honestly I would ensure you'd be free for the whole summer."

"Please don't jinx it," she groaned.

Yong Qi laughed. "Sorry. I have to say, though, there is a silver lining. Say you'll come and spend some time with us. I think Zi Wei would like it."

"I hate how you use Zi Wei as a way to convince me to do everything," she grumbled though not entirely seriously. "I suppose Yuan Ming Yuan is going to be a better option than staying by myself in my room, slowing going mad."

"Great!" Yong Qi said enthusiastically. "I'll pick you up?"

"Yeah," she said. "Just give me a couple of hours."

Nestled in the idyllic nest of Chinese-style gardens of Yuan Ming Yuan was Yuan Ming Gong. Unlike the scattered, curved roofs palaces of the Imperial Palace in the city, Yuan Ming Gong was a
single sandstone mansion built in the Palladian style, complete with Grecian columns. The three-storey building boasted a total of 108 rooms, not including the cellar and attic levels. It stood strong and white against the backdrop of the lush, green gardens, a symbol of resurrection after the destructions of the Second Opium War. To the Imperial Family, it was a closed haven from the scrutiny of the world, with no part of it open to public tours at any point in the year.

Of course, to Xiao Yan, the idea of a "small, private summer home" with 108 rooms was ludicrous, but it was hard to laugh when she was being invited to stay at this admittedly gorgeous house complete free of charge for a few weeks. It wasn't until she had come out here and bathed in the cool balm of the gardens and ponds that she realised how hot, dusty and uncomfortable central Beijing was in the height of summer.

She was given her own room next to Zi Wei's. It was far more spacious a space than she had ever occupied by herself in her entire life. The wallpaper was patterned with red flowers on delicate cream, while the upholstery of the gilded chair at the large, oak writing table, the window-seat overlooking a bed of hydrangeas and azaleas, and the cushy arm chair in the corner of the room, twined with an ottoman, were patterned cream flowers on red. A king-size four-poster bed stood in the middle of the room, tempting Xiao Yan to just give into her childish urge to jump up and down on it.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," she called.

Yong Qi poked his head in. "Everything all right?"

"Yeah," she answered, turning to grin at him. "Well, honestly, I feel a little bit like I'm a wedding chamber with all this red, but everything's awesome."

"Well, dinner's going to be in a bit," Yong Qi said. "I was about to head down. You coming?"

"Sure," she said. "I probably should go down with you. I'd have no idea how to get to wherever it is we're having dinner, otherwise."

Yong Qi led her down the stairs to a thoroughly modern kitchen, where Zi Wei was ladling soup out onto a large serving bowl, and He Jing's head was hidden by the opened door of the refrigerator.

"Set the table, Yong Qi," He Jing called as they entered.

Yong Qi opened a cupboard and began pulling out bowls, setting them on the kitchen island in the middle of the room, while pointing Xiao Yan to where she could get the chopsticks.

"You're having dinner with us, Jie?" he asked.

"Yes, Zhu Quan is dining with people at work. He asked me to go with him and on any other day, I would. But right now, spending an entire evening being fussed over by corporate accountants and their spouses doesn't sound fun, especially when I know exactly what they will be grilling me on," He Jing said.

Xiao Yan left Yong Qi to set the table as his sister asked, and went over to Zi Wei to help her bring the dishes of food to the table.

He Ke chose that moment to skip into the room. "Hey, Xiao Yan Jiejie," she said, and Xiao Yan grinned at her in greeting. "Where's everyone?" she asked her brother and sisters.
"Ah Ma and Mama are having dinner with the Prime Minister," Yong Qi told her. "Yong Yan's at a friend's birthday party. Laoda said to go ahead and eat first."

Food on the table, they took their seats around the island.

"I'm surprised you guys actually eat in the kitchen," Xiao Yan said with a smile. "Isn't there a dining room in this huge house?"

"Of course there is," Yong Qi said, "but we didn't get out of the city to sit primly in a dining room."

"Why isn't Yong An coming down?" He Jing asked as they started eating.

"He said he'll come down later," Yong Qi said with an exasperated roll of his eyes. "Said he had to finish a phone call. Probably still trying to finish whatever argument he had last night with Meng Yue."

A brief expression of annoyance passed over He Jing's face. "Is that still a thing?"

"What, the argument?"

"No, them."

Yong Qi sighed, and said with exaggerated patience, "Jie, he's not going to break up with her because you don't like her."

"I never said I don't like her – "

Both Yong Qi and He Ke snorted in disbelief.

"What?" He Jing demanded, looking affronted.

"Jiejie, you have hated all of their girlfriends," He Ke said, laughing.

"I do not!" He Jing exclaimed indignantly. "Yong Qi, tell He Ke I do not hate all of your and Yong An's girlfriends."

"No, you just disliked all of them," Yong Qi said sarcastically. At his sister's glare, he amended his statement to, "Well, maybe most of them."

"All right, so I didn't always love all of them, but you have to admit, the ones I did like lasted a lot longer, didn't they?" He Jing challenged.

Yong Qi rolled his eyes. "I'm sure that says more about your ability to sabotage my relationships than my ability to stay in them."

"I have never sabotaged your relationships," He Jing argued.

"But you are capable of giving people the cold shoulder so that they cannot help but realise you do not like them," He Ke said gleefully.

"Well..." He Jing started, then trailed off, clearly not disagreeing with He Ke's assessment even if she would not verbally confirm it.

Xiao Yan caught Zi Wei's eyes and stifled a laugh.

He Jing pretended that she did not hear this, and just said, more primly than ever, "My feelings about
any of your past girlfriends are irrelevant, anyway. Meng Yue is completely questionable." She stared at Yong Qi, and added, "You see that, don't you?" with the implication of 'you've better'.

"I – " Yong Qi started, then seemed suddenly very interested in the rice in his bowl. When he did finally look up, he said very carefully, "I officially do not have an opinion on Meng Yue."

"That's a line you give to the press, Yong Qi, not your sister," He Jing said.

Yong Qi smiled diplomatically.

Then, more seriously, he said, "Look, I'm just saying, whatever problem you – or anyone – may have with Meng Yue, that's who he's with right now, so maybe you shouldn't try to make it difficult for him?"

"Okay, you think I'm making this difficult for him? When have I Made it difficult?"

Yong Qi just sighed.

"I just think that if they're not going to work out, then maybe it's just better that they end it now to just spare everyone more drama for later," He Jing said.

"That's assuming that it's not going to work out, which I honestly don't think is necessarily going to be the case," Yong Qi pointed out.

"What?" He Jing asked, somehow managing to make the one word sound like one long threatening sentence.

Yong Qi shrugged noncommittally, unwilling to answer his sister's unvoiced, but otherwise very loud, question.

"What has he said to you?" He Jing asked.

"Nothing," Yong Qi said deliberately. "I'm just reading signs here."

"What signs?"

"Jie, when has any of his relationships ever lasted this long? They been together for two years and yeah, it hasn't always been sunshine and daisies, but he's invested a significant amount of time on her at a time when everyone and their mother know there's pressure on him to marry, don't you think he's thinking about it, at least?"

"So you think – "

"I don't. I'm just saying."

"I worry for the future of this family in the public eye if that is the case," He Jing said.

"Jiejie!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "How is that helping?"

"Look, Yong Qi, doesn't the fact that you even – " she made air quotes with her fingers – "don't have an opinion' about her already say volume?"

"I – " Yong Qi started defensively, then obviously blanked out on what he was about to say.

"Why is she objectionable, exactly?" Zi Wei asked hesitantly.
"Does it matter?" Yong Qi asked.

"Of course it matters, right?" Xiao Yan chimed in. "If she's dating Yong An, she could be the next empress of the country. You guys have standards for everything, don't you?"

"And sometimes I think by Jiejie's standards, the only choices of potential wife my brothers and I would have would be Zhen Zi, Jia Zi or Ai Zi," Yong Qi said, which made even He Jing laugh.

"Who?" Xiao Yan asked, confused.

"I believe in Japan they're called Mako, Kako and Aiko," Yong Qi said.

Xiao Yan still looked blank.

"The Japanese princesses."

"Oh."

"Aiko is much too young for both you and Yong An; even if she were not, she is much too close to the Japanese succession and all that brouhaha for Yong An," He Jing said, as if Yong Qi had mentioned the princesses as actual, serious choices. "She may be suitable for Yong Yan, eventually, but even then, imagine the nightmare of changes to relationships and structures of things if they ever really decide to change the succession so that she can succeed."

"Like that's ever going to happen," He Ke muttered darkly. "Sometimes I think we're the two monarchies that still live in the Dark Ages."

"I'm sure, for us, absolute primogeniture will be up for serious discussion once Yong An has a child, and people starts speculating what if that child is a girl," Yong Qi said.

"What on earth is 'absolute primogeniture'?" Xiao Yan asked.

"It's what we should have adopted years ago!" He Ke said feelingly. "It's gender-blind inheritance, determined by order of birth only with no male-preference. Practically the whole world's adopted it now. If only you'd fight for your rights, Jiejie."

He Ke shot her older sister a disgruntled look, but she seemed impervious to it.

"I might fight it for Yong An's daughter's sake, but not my own, Ke Ke," she replied. "I have no wish to."

"Of course, if Laoda is to have a daughter for you to fight for, we'd have to get him married first," Yong Qi pointed out.

"Which brings us back to Meng Yue," He Jing said.

"And the fact that you haven't said why you don't...seem to approve of her?" Xiao Yan asked as delicately as she could.

"Have you met her?" He Jing asked.

It must be a rhetorical question but Xiao Yan answered nevertheless. "No."

"Before you say anything, Jiejie," Yong Qi said with a smile, "I would advise you to not say that you hold Meng Yue's past against her. I'm sure Xiao Yan will have something very strong to say about that."
"Her past is the least of her problems," He Jing said shortly. ("What about it?" Xiao Yan whispered to Yong Qi, who hushed her.) "She's proven to be a security risk and has been rapped on the knuckle more times than I can count about it but shows no indication that she takes that seriously at all."

"How is she a security risk?" Zi Wei asked.

"You know who the top three accounts with most followers on Weibo are right now? Two actresses and the girlfriend of the Crown Prince."

"So she does social media," Xiao Yan said, shrugging. "It's 2011. You have Weibo and Twitter and Facebook."

"No. Our palaces have official social media accounts that none of us run or are ever told the password to – and I've never had any interest in asking what it is. It's used for public relations purposes. We don't tweet and declare to the world where the entire family is staying at the moment, or show off the private rooms of the palaces on social media."

"That seems…dangerous," Xiao Yan said.

"It's suicidal," He Jing corrected. "Sometimes I'm not sure how this family is still alive."

"I think you should tone the dramatics down a notch, Jiejie," Yong Qi said dryly.

"Yong Qi, there are about five people who have, as one of their jobs, tracking her social media activities and get rid of anything indiscreet," He Jing pointed out. "I am not being dramatic."

"You know, on that point, I've always wondered. About the fact that you have people to remove what other people post on social media," Xiao Yan said. "Doesn't that violate some kind of, I don't know, free speech law?"

"Your right to free speech ends the moment your exercising of the rights could endanger national security," He Jing said. "We have a National Secrets Law that supersedes free speech laws."

"So your problem with Yong An's girlfriend basically comes down to the fact that she's indiscreet?" Zi Wei asked.

"I think indiscreet is probably an understatement," He Jing said. "The Great Wall has more discretion than her."

Zi Wei's lips twitched, but she continued, "But can't she be taught not to be?"

"After about the tenth time she posted something any normal person should have known not to post, I lost hope on that front," He Jing said exasperatedly. "So that's my problem, among other things."

"But it's not as if you – or any of us, really – have to like her for it to matter anymore," Yong Qi pointed out, shrugging. "The only person who has to like her is Yong An."

"Parliament has to like her. I doubt they will, though, and this will be because of her, considering they gave up a decade ago on caring too much about who we marry, so long as it's not a psychopath. Honestly sometimes I think Yong An is still dating her just to spite everyone."

Yong Qi chuckled. "In that case, you know, he might just marry her without parliament approval just to prove a point."
"I doubt he'd do that to you. But if he does, you know then what that means for you. Are you prepared for that?" He Jing asked.

Yong Qi grimaced, which was answer enough.

"But it's not just her social media, right? What about this Meng Yue's past that is apparently so objectionable?" Xiao Yan asked.

He Jing sighed. "She got married at twenty, divorced a year later, couple of years after that had a child out of wedlock and gave it up for adoption. You'd think it would be something that would never get out to the press, but she has some loud-mouthed former friends. However, it's a closed adoption so whoever adopted the child doesn't know she's the mother and vice-versa; she also told us she used a fake name at the time, so thank god for small favours. Her father was also in jail for some very shady business dealing, but apparently they don't speak anymore."

"So she has a history of unfortunate choices, which probably would explain the tendency to be indiscreet," Xiao Yan said.

"And those are problems, if Yong An is serious about her," He Jing said.

Yong Qi sighed but didn't protest against that logic.

"In any case, it's not the past unfortunate choices that I take exception to, it's the current ones," He Jing said. "The press does go on a rampage against her past sometimes, and I don't enjoy it either."

"You just think too much bad press about Da Ge's girlfriend is bad press for him," He Ke said.

"I'm not totally heartless, Ke Ke. I don't disapprove of her because she's not a lily-white virgin. I know the tabloid and media criticism upsets her, and I sympathise with that. It just makes it even more baffling that then she would choose to expose herself even more."

"There are many ways of dealing with everything, I suppose some are less wise than others," Xiao Yan said. "But can you blame her?"

"What on earth do you mean by that?"

"I'm just saying, there must be a lot of pressure, dating the Crown Prince," Xiao Yan pointed out. "Maybe she finds the…support from random strangers on the internet necessary for what she's dealing with."

"Of all the coping mechanisms in the world…" He Jing muttered.

But at that exact moment, before any of them could say anything else, sounds of footsteps of the stairs indicated Yong An's approach, which effectively put an end to the conversation of the mysterious and apparently indiscreet Meng Yue.

On the morning of the day when the Banners Inspection was to take place, Xiao Yan woke early and was in the kitchen with a cup of coffee when sounds of boots on the stairs made her look up from the newspaper.

A moment later, Yong An strode into the kitchen, an impressing sight in full dress uniform, consisting of black tunic over black trousers. The collar of the tunic was embroidered with the images of a golden dragon and a red sun. His shoulders were adorned with gold-fringed epaulettes and from the right shoulder hung gold ceremonial braided cords called aiguillettes, which looped
over his arm to be fastened at one of the shining brass buttons which ran in a column down his front.

He also wore an ivory sash with red border tucked into his tightly fastened belt, the colour indicating the Bordered White Banner he was in command of. On his left breast, hung medals. The whole outfit was finished off with white gloves which currently he held in his hands, a plumed ceremonial helmet, at first tucked under his arm by his side, and highly-polished black boots. He quickly put the helmet and gloves down on the kitchen island and bid Xiao Yan good morning, before pouring himself coffee.

"Are you leaving this early?" she asked.

"Yeah," Yong An said through a yawn. "Have to check on my horse and there's also about a million other things to do that it's too early for me to even remember right now."

"When's your father leaving?"

"Not for another hour, I'm sure," Yong An said, helping himself to breakfast. (Apparently, even here in Yuan Ming Yuan, breakfast was not a meal the Imperial Family cooked for themselves. Someone came in at some ungodly hour to cook it for them.) "God, Yong Qi should count his blessing he doesn't have to do this yet. Why are you already up?"

"Habit," she said, shrugging. "Also, I forgot to close the curtain last night and my window faced east, so the sun woke me up."

Yong An quickly finished his breakfast and with a brief wave of farewell to Xiao Yan, exited through the back kitchen door.

Two hours later, Xiao Yan found herself sitting with Yong Qi on one side of her and Zi Wei on the other behind the empress, He Jing and her husband in a marquee right outside the Eastern Palace Gate of Yi He Yan, overlooking the parade ground which was now thrumming with sounds of drums and soldiers' march. Some distance across from them, at the Han Xu and Yan Xiu Decorated Archways, the Emperor sat on his horse and inspected his troops.

"Why is the ceremony held out here in Yi He Yuan if it's supposed to be a resort? Wouldn't outside Tai He Dian be more appropriate?" Xiao Yan asked Yong Qi as they watched a company march past.

"Back in the days, military occasions happened all the time so they happened in both places. Now that we've condensed it into one big thing, it has to be a time when the weather would be tolerable, so summer. It takes place here to mark the fact that the court used to move to the summer palaces around this time," Yong Qi explained.

"Was security ever an issue? I mean, Bei Da is right there. I know it's summer vacation, and everything, but you've also got people coming in to watch."

Yong Qi laughed. "Xiao Yan, we're holding one of the biggest military parades in the world, with real weapons. The guns on parade aren't loaded, but there are soldiers on guard everywhere with loaded guns, and there are a fair few real swords around as well. I don't think even of the whole of Bei Da's student population could be a problem. There are only a certain number of tickets given out per year precisely so that it doesn't become unmanageable."

Xiao Yan had to admit that Yong Qi had been right, there was something quite infectious about watching such perfectly executed displays happening live in front of you to lively, heart-throbbing music. It was enough to make one feel the spirit of the occasion, even if she was sure the subtle
nuances of the spectacle probably flew right over her head. Even with the different regiments/battalions/whatever-they-were-called colour-coded for her convenience, it was still hard to distinguish the difference between them without knowing why they were different and what it was that they did. And yet the sight and sound of it all made her feel strangely giddy. She held her breath with everyone else, waiting for the Archers' Salute.

"Has…anyone been accidentally shot by those arrows?" she asked tentatively, when it was over, as they stood up to return to the carriage which would take them back to Yi He Yuan. "Has anyone ever missed the target?"

"Not that anyone can remember," Yong Qi said. "Actually, as far as shooting arrow goes, shooting at an unmoving target directly in front of you is really not that hard."

"Right," Xiao Yan said sceptically.

"It's not! Not when we've been practicing for years."

"We? So you're saying you can do that?"

"Yeah, of course," Yong Qi said. "I'll be doing that in a few years."

"But why?" Xiao Yan asked. "What is the point of you and your brothers and apparently people in the army learning to shoot arrows when literally no one fight with them anymore?"


"Basically what you're saying is that there is no point?" she asked, giggling. Seeing his side glance, she added with a teasing smile as if appeasing a childish whim, "No real, actual practical, useful point."

She was glad that Yong Qi had a sense of humour enough to laugh. "You may have just put a description to many of the ceremonial things we do. Though, I should point out that not everyone in the army has to know how to shoot a bow and arrow. Just those in the Arrow Guards regiment. But even they learn only because it's in their name and it's more like a side hobby. We wouldn't actually send them out to face machine guns with bows and arrows."

"I hope not."

"But," Yong Qi added, as he opened for her the door of the car that would take her back to Yuan Ming Yuan, "its use in ceremonies aside, archery can be quite therapeutic under normal circumstances."

"I'll take your word for it," she chuckled, before sliding in. "I'll see you back at Yuan Ming Gong."
Broadcast excerpts from CCTV

Chapter Notes

This is adapted from the commentary provided by the BBC to the Queen's Birthday Parade June 2015 in London. See Youtube for the video (Trooping the Colour 2015) for the original parade and commentary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Transcription excerpts from CCTV's commentary, Banners Inspection Parade broadcast, 2011

One Lunar New Year's Day, 1911, a group of young soldiers of the Emperor's Guards under the Plain Blue Banner stood on this very spot after successfully defeating movement that would have changed the course of China's history forever.

A hundred years later, the Emperor's Guards of the Plain Blue Banner are marking a century of distinguished service and tradition.

The Emperor's Guards of the Plain Blue Banner will be taking centre stage today as the Troops of Honour at the annual Banners Inspection Parade.

[...]

Today's Emperor's Escort is provided by the Crown Prince's Company within the Bordered White Banner. Their Commander, HIH the Crown Prince, will of course be riding on parade later.

This year's Parade is particularly special, in that it will mark the twentieth year on the throne of the Emperor. Expectations are undoubtedly high for everything to go seamlessly in this year's Parade more than any other.

[...]

The Banners Inspection Parade begins and ends here, at the Northern Palace Gate of the Summer Palace. His Imperial Majesty the Emperor will be accompanied by the Emperor's Escort. We expect them to depart in around fifteen minutes' time. After the magnificent display of the Parade in front of the Eastern Palace Gate, including Archers' Salute performed by the Commanders of the Eight Banners, the Emperor will return again to the Summer Palace via the Northern Palace Gate.

Everything is ready on Yi He Yuan Road for the imperial procession. An impressive display of the Yellow Dragon Flag, leading all the way from the Northern to the Eastern Palace Gate.

And the street liners of the First Battalion Arrow Guards of the Plain White Banner are smartly in place.

Here in front of the Han Xu and Yan Xiu Decorated Archways, over seven thousand spectators are gathered in the stands. They are the lucky ones. There were over twenty thousand applications for tickets this year, and we have been told applications continued to come in particularly enthusiastically with the Palace's introduction of Miss Xia Zi Wei, the Emperor's daughter, just last month.
She is present here, today, in her first attendance at an official imperial event. You can see her now, in blue, already in the Imperial Marquee. To her right is the Prince Consort Ming Xian, the Princess He Jing's husband. To her left, we are told, is Miss Zi Wei's good friend, a Miss Xia Xiao Yan. The three of them will be joined later by immediate members of the Imperial Family not on parade. HIM the Empress, HIH Princess Kang Ding, HIH Prince Rong, HIH Princess Kang An and HIH the Third Prince will be arriving at the Eastern Palace Gate shortly by carriage.

[...]

We go back now to the Northern Palace Gate, where the first carriage is about to leave to the music of the National Anthem. In the first carriage, we have the Empress, of course, and with her are Princess Kang Ding and Prince Rong.

Unlike his brother the Crown Prince who will be on parade in ceremonial dress uniform of the Bordered White Banner today, Prince Rong is, as you can see, in morning dress. He has one year left of his Masters degree, after which he will join the footsteps of his brother at the Imperial Military Academy, starting in cadet training before it is expected that he will join the Plain White Banner. He is also expected to spend time with the Imperial Air Force and the Imperial Navy. We can expect him to ride alongside his brother in the Banners Inspection Parade in just a few short years.

The second carriage approaches, carrying the young Princess Kang An and the Third Prince.

[...]

Plenty of smiles, as the imperial party greets the crown gathered along their route on Yi He Yuan Road.

[...]

All eyes are now at the Northern Palace Gate again for the Emperor's ride out on horseback.

[...]

And here's the Imperial Salute sounded by the Trumpeter of the Emperor's Guards of the Plain Yellow Banner. You can see now, His Majesty riding out of the Northern Palace Gate; his mount is called Black Wind, and this is Black Wind's fifth time out on Parade at Banners Inspection.

Also in the procession, riding behind the Emperor, are the three Princely Commanders of the Banners. The Crown Prince, Commander of the Bordered White Banner and his uncles, Prince Huai, Commander of the Bordered Yellow Banner and Prince He, Commander of the Plain Red Banner.

[...]

We are back to the Empress's carriage with Princess Kang Ding and Prince Rong. They have made their way swiftly to the Parade ground and are just turning in now.

It's been undoubtedly a busy summer for the Imperial Family. The Emperor and the Empress have recently returned from Japan, a visit to not only show their support for the Emperor of Japan in the face of the devastating earthquake and tsunami Japan suffered on March 11, but also to provide reassurance to Chinese citizens currently living in Japan.

[...]

And the carriage has just moved past the Han Xu and Yan Xiu Decorated Archways and
approaching the Imperial Marquee, where the imperial guests will disembark from the carriage and take their seats to wait for the arrival of the Emperor.

[...]

This is an impressive sight. The Emperor's Escort, consisting of the men of the Crown Prince's Company, is one of the great display of the day. [...] Another highlight of the Parade is the Mounted Band. The musicians of the Mounted Band are known for their high standard of musical proficiency as well as proficiency on horseback. Many of them require the use of both hands to play their instruments, and operate the horses' reins with their feet. It must be said that the horses on parade are very well trained, as they have to march at the directed pace, and stay calm under the sounds and rhythm of the bands and drums. The average time it takes to train a horse to participate in the Parade is about three to four years.

[...]

The Emperor, with the Princely Commanders, rides into the parade ground. The Emperor acknowledges the flag. The three Princely Commanders behind him salute the flag as they ride into the parade ground, followed by the other non-royal Commanders of the remaining four Banners. The direct Commander of the Plain Yellow Banner is, of course, the Emperor himself.

[...]

The Emperor's first task is to inspect the troops of the Parade Ground Guards, consisting, this year, of the Arrow Guards from the Emperor's own Plain Yellow Banner.

The inspection of the Parade Ground Guards ends when the Emperor stops his horse in front of the Decorated Archways, and the Princely Commanders likewise stop behind him. The remaining troops will now march in front of the Emperor at the Decorated Archways to be inspected. The rest of the Imperial Family watch from across the square from the Archways at the Eastern Palace Gate.

[...]

Each year, each Banner chooses a company to display their Colour to the Emperor for inspection at the Parade. Each year, a particular company is chosen as the Troops of Honour, who lead the inspection. The great responsibility falls on Emperor's Guards of the Plain Blue Banner this year.

[...]

As each Banner's Colour passes the Emperor, he acknowledges it, while the Princely Commanders and Commanders salute.

[...]

The Mounted Band prepares to march past the Inspecting Archways.

[...]

As the Parade draws to a close, the inspected troops withdraw to clear the grounds for the Archers' Salute. The seven Princely Commanders and Commanders of the Banners dismount to prepare their Salute. Targets are being set up and the Commanders take position, with the Crown Prince at the head, three Commanders on each side.

The Archers' Salute involves the seven Commanders to simultaneously shoot an arrow each in a curving formation to a target in front of them, as a tribute to the Emperor. The move requires
particular skill and finesse with a bow and arrow, as well as coordination, as the arrows have to fly and make their marks at the same time. It is one of the shortest but also most tense displays of the Parade. It must be said that in living memory, there has not been any year where a Commander has missed the mark.

[...]

The Archers' Salute is successfully completed, to the cheers and relief of all involved. All troops make way and line a path for the Emperor to ride back to the Norther Palace Gate, followed by his Commanders, and the carriages carrying members of the Imperial Family. The Banner Inspection Parade is once again carried out successfully...

Chapter End Notes

There was a lot of staring at maps and Google Earth of Yi He Yuan involved in the writing of this snippet. If you've been to Yi He Yuan, you'll see that in modern day, the areas outside Yi He Yuan, including the east gate, is really urbanised and I don't think there would be space to hold the world's biggest military parade. The headcanon here is that constitution monarchy China had different urban planning so it would look quite different there than it does now in real life.

This snippet exists because I got sucked into a horrible cycle of unproductive misery and procrastination at one point, during which time I spent too much time being distracted by the internet in the name of research. Basically I had all this information that I already spent all this time reading for no reason whatsoever, so in the end I thought I might as well put it into use.
Chapter Notes

I'm willing to be
that angel you love inside the fairytale
Spread up my hands
become the wings to protect you
You must believe
believe that we can be like in the fairytale
prosperity and happiness is the ending

— Fairy Tale, Guang Liang

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2011

July

Xiao Yan was sure that Yong Qi dragged her out for archery lessons the next morning in an attempt to prove a point.

And even if by the end of the day, she was no more convinced that archery was actually a useful skill for anyone in the 21st century, she did have to admit she had fun, especially when Yong Qi convinced her to get on a horse for the first time. It was thrilling and terrifying at the same time and she found she couldn't wait to be proficient enough to do more than just walk her horse around an enclosure. She wanted to race it over a flat meadow and feel the wind at her back, like they did on TV.

"I thought you might like horse-back riding," Yong Qi said as they walked back to the house. Palace. Whatever.

"I did. But I still can't get over the fact that you actually unironically learnt to shoot a bow and arrow," she told him, giggling.

"Would you be more impressed if I told you I can shoot a bow and arrow on horseback?"

"Probably," she said, shrugging, "but I still wouldn't see the point."

"Fair enough," he said, laughing, opening the door for her.

They wandered through the kitchen, the library, the indoor pool, several sitting rooms (because why have one when you could have…a dozen) without finding anyone else.

"I think we might be the only ones home," Yong Qi finally drew the conclusion. It was amazing how such a statement could technically be true in a home of a hundred rooms and dozen staffs.

"I know Zi Wei has a date, but where is everyone else?"

"Yong An is probably out, too. I think my parents might have engagements. Can't imagine where He
Ke and Yong Yan are."

"Well, I need to shower and change into something less…horsey. See you for dinner?"

"Sure," he replied, distracted, as he was now pulling out his phone, probably to call and see where He Ke and Yong Yan were.

Having located the whereabouts of Yong Yan (he was spending the night at He Jing's), Yong Qi next went in search of He Ke and found her in her room, marathoning Next Top Model on her TV (with He Ke, it was always marathoning).

"Hello, Brother, you look disheveled. Did something happen with Xiao Yan that I should know about – or maybe I don't want to know about – or did you just fancy a roll down Longevity Hill?"

Yong Qi ignored his sister's nosiness and just said, "I took Xiao Yan riding. Off to clean up now. You coming down for dinner?"

"Nope," He Ke answered. "I'm set."

"Ke Ke, popcorn is not dinner."

He Ke rolled her eyes. "Thank you for your concern, big brother, but I thought you guys were out so I had dinner already. There's food which I so nicely left for you in the fridge, but it's just going to be you and Xiao Yan though."

"Right. Thanks."

He Ke gave him an obnoxious teasing smirk. "You wouldn't mind that at all, would you?"

"Never you mind," he answered, before closing the door of her room on her widening smile and heading for his own room.

Yong Qi heard the sound of Xiao Yan singing from the opened kitchen door before he even saw her. As he stood at the door, he found Xiao Yan with her back to him, singing along to what looked like He Ke's iPod on the kitchen counter.

"I'm willing to be that angel you love inside the fairytale," she sang, her hips swaying to the music. "Spread up my hands, become the wings to protect you."

Yong Qi found himself momentarily mesmerised. She was dressed simply in a t-shirt and jean shorts, and her hair was still slightly damp and loose around her shoulders and she took his breath away. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. He had to tell himself that it really wasn't a wise idea to overthink how her shorts were showing off her legs and how the t-shirt hugged her figure.

Just when he finally realised that perhaps he should make his presence known, there came a loud "Ding!" from the microwave. The words to Tong Hua on her lips trailed off as she turned towards it, but then yelped loudly when she caught sight of him standing there.

"You scared me!" she cried.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I just got down."

Either his face wasn't as red as it felt, or she had chosen to ignore it, because she simply walked
towards the microwave and said, "He Ke is up in her room."

"I know," he said. "She said she's already eaten, though."

"Yeah, she came down a couple of minutes ago to get a drink," Xiao Yan said, pulling from the microwave a serving dish of noodles. "Anyway, apparently she was eager to get back to some TV show. She left her iPod and I asked her whether I could borrow it. She sort of waved her hand which I guessed meant yes. Dinner?"

As they started eating, he asked her what she wanted to do after dinner.

"I was thinking of seeing what it's like to watch a movie on one of your disgustingly HD TVs," she said cheerfully. "Wanna join me?"

"Aren't you sick of me already?" he half-joked.

"You're all right," she said, grinning.

"What do you want to watch?"

That simple question led to a debate that lasted through the remaining of their short dinner and while Yong Qi washed up.

(They paused their argument of movies when he took her bowl from her when they finished eating.

"Are you actually going to wash the bowls?" she asked playfully.

"I'm a little insulted that you think I don't know how."

"Not necessarily…I just figured you probably have a machine washer."

"We do, but there's no point when there's literally two bowls and two pairs of chopsticks to wash.")

"If you want to watch a movie, let's go into the Blue Room, that's where most of the DVDs are," he said, drying his hands on a towel.

"The Blue Room," she repeated with faint incredulity. "In the city, you name every single building some fancy shmancy poetic name, and out here, it's the Blue Room? Let me guess, it's the one with the blue wallpaper."

"Yes," Yong Qi said, laughing. "Don't ask me how the naming of the palaces work. I didn't name them."

They arrived at the room and he settled down on the enormous sofa while Xiao Yan went through what she called "their ridiculously sinful" collection of DVDs. He figured it would just be easier to let her pick the movies. She danced around the room, putting the DVD into the machine before bouncing over to join him on the couch.

14 Blades began playing.

"Full disclosure, I have very little actual interest in this as a movie," she said.

"Then why are we watching it?"

"Zhao Wei," she answered, as if that was a perfectly good reason to watch a movie you were otherwise not remotely interested in.
Chuckling softly, he realised that, to Xiao Yan, it was.

They fell asleep about midway through the second movie (keeping with the period fighting theme, it was *Di Ren Jie*).

A cramped arm woke Yong Qi up, and he found he couldn't have slept for very long, because the movie was still playing. He also found that as much as he wanted to raise his arms to stretch, it was currently impossible to do so because his arm was draped over the back of the sofa, and Xiao Yan, in her sleep, somehow had managed to shift and lean her head on his shoulder, which meant that his arm was now firmly wedged between her neck and the sofa.

If it didn't feel so painful, he would probably enjoy this more.

Even then, he didn't give in to the need to move his arm immediately. He froze, studying her from this angle. In the dim light of the movie being played, he felt his heart skip a beat as he took in the way her eyelashes rested so peacefully on her cheeks, which was itself so unfairly pretty and soft-looking. Only the wish to not wake her prevented him from leaning down to kiss her. Even then, he could see the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest as she slept, and he wondered if he should read something into the fact that she was comfortable and relaxed enough around him to fall asleep like this.

Before he could decide either way, his arm was begging to be relieved. There was probably little chance he could pull it out from under her neck without waking her, but he had to try. As gently as possible with an arm that more or less had lost all feeling, he eased away from her.

The movement did wake her. She startled awake, blinking and pushing stray hair out of her eyes.

Yong Qi massaged his shoulder and stretched.

"Did I – I fell asleep on you?" she asked. "I'm sorry!"

"It's fine," he said, smiling. He reached for his phone to check the time. Then, he looked up at her, grinning. "Happy birthday!"

"What?"

"It's your birthday," he said, turning the phone for her to see the time. It was just five minutes past midnight.

"Oh," she said, squinting against the light, which was even brighter in the darkness of the room. "How did you even know?"

"Zi Wei told me."

"Oh," she said again. There was a pause. "I never wished you happy birthday."

"Xiao Yan, my birthday was months ago."

"I know, but we knew each other. I didn't wish you happy birthday. I didn't know then, sorry."

"Well, I never told you when it was, so you couldn't have known."

"As if it was hard to look it up," she said with a smile. "Happy belated birthday?"

He laughed.
"Anyway," she added, "today's not really my birthday. You know that, right?"

"On paper, it is," he said, shrugging. "And in lieu of knowing your actual birthday, it'll do."

She smiled. "Well, thanks."

"Your present is upstairs, by the way."

"You didn't have to get me a present," she protested.

"I wanted to," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "You know we're having that big family gathering for Zi Wei's birthday day after tomorrow right? I'm pretty sure everyone will know it was your birthday too. So be prepared."

"If your family knows, it's because you told them," she pointed out.

"Yeah, but Zi Wei would, even if I did not," he said. "But it's pretty late and it's been a pretty action-packed day. We should both get some sleep if you want to be awake to enjoy your actually birthday."

He held out his hand to her and she took it. But in the dark and their current states of half-asleep, his hand did little of its job as a steadying factor. In the end, they both wobbled on their feet and ended up knocking foreheads.

"Ouch," she said, laughing, "sorry."

"No, my fault..." he said. And then his voice died in his throat as she lifted her head and he realised her face was mere inches from his.

They were close enough that he could feel her faint breath fanning his face.

Why didn't she pull away?

Why did she just stand there, effectively gazing up at him, her eyes impossibly wide in the glowing light of the TV? How he wished to know what was in her head at this very moment.

He could see and feel her breath quicken. Surely his breathing was just as erratic.

It really didn't help that her mouth had slightly parted, perhaps in her attempt to say something but could not decide what.

He wanted to close the gap between them, to learn what those lips tasted like, to lose himself in her.

Before he could, however, Xiao Yan gave a breathless gasp, as if finally realising the tension between. She pulled abruptly away and turned her head, so that now her face was in the shadows.

"Xiao Yan – " he started, but she barreled over him.

"I – You're right. Sleep. We should get some sleep. Good night!"

And with that hasty farewell, she turned and practically ran out of the room without even looking at him.

Yong Qi stood, frozen, for what seemed like an eternity before realising there was little he could do but reach for the remote to turn off the DVD player and the TV, before heading off to his room himself.
For Zi Wei’s birthday, a picnic was held in the gardens, and everyone spread out with food and drink to mingle and chat in the soft late summer sun.

Yong Qi was perched on a boulder watching Xiao Yan, standing a little way away, talking animatedly to his father, when Zi Wei arrived and sat down next to him.

"Are you all right?"

"What?" he asked, startled, turning to her. Then, he smiled. "Yeah, sure, I'm fine."

"You just seem... a little quiet," she said thoughtfully.

Yong Qi shrugged. Zi Wei followed his gaze.

"Ah." There was a beat, when Zi Wei obviously waited for him to say something. When he didn't, she added, "Ke Ke told me that you two spent the day together the other day."

"We did."

"And? What did you do?"

Yong Qi shrugged. "I tried to teach her archery. And then we went horse-back riding. By the time we got back, it was dinner time and then we watched movies."

Zi Wei laughed. "You know, that sounds a lot like a date."

With anyone else, Yong Qi would probably have pointedly ignored this. But it was Zi Wei, and if he couldn't talk to Zi Wei about this, who could he really talk to?

"It occurred to me too, a lot later, that it was practically a date," he said. "But I don't think Xiao Yan necessarily sees it that way."

"Oh, no, I don't think she would," Zi Wei said. "But she can be extraordinarily oblivious sometimes... she sees what she wants to see until you spell it out to her."

"And... do you think I should?" he asked. "I mean, I don't want to make it weird between her and me, between us, between the two of you..."

Zi Wei smiled at his hinting hesitation. "Do you want me to tell you that she won't reject you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Just tell me something."

"I can't tell you she would never reject you, Yong Qi," Zi Wei said gently.

"Oh."

"But that doesn't mean you shouldn't ask her out," she added.

"Zi Wei! I don't think I want to pressure her -- "

"Yong Qi," Zi Wei cut in, "I never said she doesn't like you, or that there was no chance of her liking you enough to want to enter a relationship with you. I'm just saying, Xiao Yan... she might be afraid of beginning a romantic relationship with anyone, so you need to be patient with her."
"And the reason for that?"

"Prior bad experience. Any details beyond that, I can't tell you. But Yong Qi, I do know that she does like you, a lot. You just have to try and persuade her that you're worth taking the leap."

"How?" he asked, disheartened. "Contrary to popular belief, there are more disadvantages to dating me than advantages. I am not unaware of that."

"Maybe you shouldn't start out thinking of it in those terms? You both like each other. It's obvious to anyone who looks in. That should be your starting point."

Yong Qi could only wish it were really just that simple.

"What are you going out here alone?" Yong Qi asked a couple of days later when he found her leaning against a bridge over a large lotus pond.

Xiao Yan turned to him. "Oh I'm not alone," she said. "Zi Wei wanted to take photos with the flowers. She's gone back into the house for the camera. She'll be out in a moment, I think."

Yong Qi nodded and came to stand next to her. "So, did you like your present?"

Xiao Yan smiled involuntarily and touched the base of her neck through her shirt, where a silver pendant in the shape of a bird rested, hanging from a simple silver chain. "Yes, I do. Thank you. It makes me feel kind of bad that my present for you isn't nearly as nice though," she added sheepishly.

"You shouldn't feel bad at all. I'm very touched that you thought to get me a present when my birthday was ages ago."

"You mean, I shouldn't feel bad that I gave you your present ridiculously late?" she asked, smiling archly.

"Well, you didn't know," he said. Then, with a laugh, he added, "I think it's amusing that in your card you said you didn't think I owned a t-shirt."

"Well, I didn't."

There were several beats of silence when both of them looked at the fragrant pink and white blooms with their fanning green leaves rising out of the muddy pond.

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi began hesitantly, "about what happened the other day – "


Yong Qi turned to look at her, but she was staring determinedly out in front of her, clearly unwilling to turn and look at him.

"Xiao Yan – "

This time, she did turn and gave him a most reluctant smile. "Really, Yong Qi, it's fine. We don't have to talk about it."

"What if I want to?" he asked.

"Well, I don't," she said shortly, turning away again, leaving him staring hopelessly at her.
Before Yong Qi could say anything else, sounds of footsteps approached, and Zi Wei appeared, camera in hand. Xiao Yan skipped immediately to her friend and grabbed her arm. "Come on, there's a really good angle over there…"

Zi Wei let herself be pulled away, but even as she followed Xiao Yan, she turned back and gave Yong Qi sympathetic questioning look. She clearly believed she had interrupted something. Yong Qi just forced back a sigh and gave her a vague wave that indicated she shouldn't worry about it. He stood there only for a moment longer, watching Xiao Yan and Zi Wei on the other side of the pond; Xiao Yan was determined to act like nothing awkward had happened at all. When it was clear that he had little chance to tell Xiao Yan exactly how he felt, he turned and returned to Yuan Ming Gong, his heart heavier than ever.

Perhaps Xiao Yan was right. There was nothing of note did happen, after all.

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Xiao Yan's three weeks at Yuan Ming Yuan ended and she caught a ride back to university with Zi Wei, who dropped her off at the gate.

"It's not going to take that long to take you to the building, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said as she slid out of the car.

"No, don't worry," Xiao Yan said, waving her hand. "You're late for…whatever it is you're late for. I can walk back to the dorm fine."

Zi Wei still looked apologetic, despite Xiao Yan's grin. "If you are sure," Zi Wei said. "I'll see you later."

Xiao Yan watched Zi Wei pull away before shouldering her holdall and heading towards her building. It was late summer, so there were not yet many people on campus, except the few who still lived on campus over the summer or chose to come back early. Xiao Yan nodded and smiled to the few people she knew as they passed.

Then, suddenly, someone bumped into her bag and spilled coffee all over it.

Xiao Yan jumped to the side to avoid it, but it was too late. The only good thing was that the hot coffee avoided spilling on her, so she was not burnt.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" the person who bumped into her cried.

To say that Xiao Yan did not appreciate this tone was an understatement. If the girl had been nicer, Xiao Yan would have simply smiled and apologised. As it was, she only said sullenly and accusingly, "You bumped into me."

"I did not!" the girl cried, her eyes flashing indignantly. She was slightly taller than Xiao Yan, but she acted as if she was looking down at Xiao Yan from a foot up.

Xiao Yan sniffed. "Whatever," she muttered, then added sarcastically, "Sorry you spilled your coffee."

Then, she walked away, leaving the girl to stare sourly after her.

When Xiao Yan arrived in her room, she found that what had been formerly Zi Wei's side of the room was now filled with some other girl's things. Obviously her roommate had moved in, and hadn't bothered to properly put her things away yet. If it were Zi Wei in Xiao Yan's place, the mess would probably have driven her insane. Xiao Yan, however, did not particularly mind it, as long as
the mess didn't spill over to their shared spaces or into her side of the room.

It took Xiao Yan a very short time to unpack. She was only gone for three weeks, after all, and there was no laundry to do. Though she didn't ask, the staff at Yuan Ming Gong had ensured that all her clothes were washed and ironed to perfection before she packed to leave the palace. Now, the only cleaning Xiao Yan had to do was to take a small wash cloth to rub the coffee from her bag.

Several hours later, she was checking her school email when her door banged open.

Xiao Yan put the laptop aside and stood up, ready to meet her roommate.

That was when the girl walked into the room.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, staring at Xiao Yan accusingly. "How did you get in here?"

"What are you doing here?" Xiao Yan asked of the girl who had spilled coffee on her bag earlier.

"I live here!"

Xiao Yan narrowed her eyes. Of all the luck in the world! "Since when?" she asked.

"Since yesterday."

"Oh."

For a moment, the two of them stood at an impasse, staring at each other, both feeling beyond annoyed.

"You haven't answered my question. Who are you?" the girl asked.

Xiao Yan heaved an enormous sigh and shrugged. "I'm your roommate. Apparently."

"You're the roommate?" the girl asked, looking like she just heard someone had died. "What rotten luck."

"Thanks," Xiao Yan said sarcastically before throwing herself back on her bed again.

The girl just stared at her for a moment longer, before walking to her side of the room and fiddled with her possessions.

It was as if they were both daring each other to speak first.

Finally, Xiao Yan got sick of the stretched silence and asked, "So do you have a name?"

"Sai Ya," she said grudgingly. "You?"

"Xiao Yan."

Everything was quiet between the two of them again, but now, the girl – Sai Ya – no longer looked annoyed. If anything, she was staring at Xiao Yan with something like intrigue.

"What?" Xiao Yan demanded after a while.

"So what's up with you?" Sai Ya asked with genuine curiosity.

"What do you mean?"
"Well, I spoke to some of our neighbours last night. When I told them I was staying in this room, they all went mysterious or giggly. Apparently the girl who lived in this room is famous or something? Is that you?"

"No," Xiao Yan replied shortly. She would have been reluctant to gossip about Zi Wei even if her roommate had been pleasant, let alone this.

"Oh, so it was the girl who lived with you before me?" Sai Ya persisted.

Xiao Yan shrugged noncommittally. Sai Ya apparently recognised that she was being blown off, because she let out a huff breath.

"Fine," she muttered, "suit yourself."

She went back to rummaging through her things, while Xiao Yan turned back to her laptop.

It was apparently going to be a long semester.

Xiao Yan had originally been worried that it would be living hell to be shut up in a tiny room with Sai Ya for a roommate for a whole semester, but it turned out that they saw each other but rarely. Sai Ya seemed to treat the room more like a pit stop, coming in only to change clothes and pick things up. Five out of seven nights of the week, she didn't come home, or if she did, she came home after Xiao Yan had gone to sleep and left before she woke.

Xiao Yan wondered whether Sai Ya was avoiding their room and face to face meetings because she truly didn't want to spend time with Xiao Yan, or that really was just her life style. Either way, it almost felt like Xiao Yan was back to no roommate at all, which under the circumstances, served her just fine. It was clear that Zi Wei being the world's best roommate had been a stroke of luck; that luck had ran out and she got stuck with Sai Ya instead.

**September**

One day, Xiao Yan was walking to the bus stop from work when she spied a girl her age, or a couple of years older, walking towards her. Her head was bowed and she was walking rapidly, obviously trying to shake off the guy who was trailing behind her. The guy was speaking and though Xiao Yan was still too far away to hear what he was saying, she could tell by the girl's stiff, defensive posture that the attention was entirely unwelcome.

Xiao Yan's own defenses came up and told her that they did not know each other, and the guy was following the girl despite her wishes. She obviously desperately wanted to get rid of him, but didn't feel safe enough to confront him as she was alone. It was not very late, but the street they were in was not very crowded. The few people who were milling around didn't seem to see anything wrong or otherwise were unwilling to interfere.

Making up her mind in a split second, Xiao Yan plastered a wide smile on her face and approached the girl deliberately.

"Oh my gosh, is that you, Mei Qiao Lian?" Xiao Yan asked brightly, making up a name on the spot and taking the girl by both her hands. "I haven't seen you in ages! How are you?"

Both the girl and her stalker stopped walking. Facing the guy, Xiao Yan could see him looking, shocked and a little angry, between Xiao Yan and "Qiao Lian". "Qiao Lian" only looked surprised for a tiny second, before engulfing Xiao Yan in an enthusiastic hug that she was sure wasn't only to
act the part of greeting a long-absent friend.

"It's so good to see you as well!" "Qiao Lian" gushed.

For a few minutes, the two of them focused totally on each other, putting up an act of being old friends meeting again after a long time apart, improvising conversations off the top of their heads.

The stalker lingered around them for a few moments, before realising that Xiao Yan wasn't about to walk off any time soon. He scowled and stormed off, crossing the street and disappearing into a dark alley.

They waited few moments longer before dropping the act.

"Thank you," the girl said with a rushing breath of relief. "I wasn't sure what I would have done if he had followed me much longer."

"It's no problem," Xiao Yan said. "You looked like you needed the help."

"I did. I was having dinner with a friend and we had to go separate ways. I was just walking when he just turned up out of nowhere. I'm Cai Lian, by the way, so your 'nickname' wasn't far off. Thank you again for your help."

"Don't mention it," Xiao Yan said. "I'm Xiao Yan. Are you walking for much longer?"

"Well, I was actually supposed to get on a bus a few minutes down, but I didn't dare stop and wait for the bus. I was afraid he'd get on the bus with me, so I just kept walking."

"Oh, I'm going to that stop, too," Xiao Yan said. "Come on, let's go together."

"Would you mind? Thank you so much."

"No, not at all."

"Honestly, I haven't been living in Beijing for a while. I didn't realise something like this could happen," Cai Lian said as they made their way to the bus stop.

"It can happen anywhere there are jerks like him, I think," Xiao Yan said.

"Yes, well, after nearly seven years overseas, this wasn't exactly what I imagined what would happen on the second I am back in the home country," Cai Lian said with a shaky laugh.

"You've been living overseas?"

"Yes, America. I'm just back visiting family for few weeks."

They spoke easily about inconsequential things until Cai Lian's bus – which turned out to be a different bus to the one Xiao Yan was catching – arrived. With a few last words of reassurance, they parted company, neither expecting to ever see each other again.

Xiao Yan and Yong Qi never spoke of that night again.

After a few weeks, it was as if really nothing had happened between them.

They probably would have carried on like that for much longer, if it were not for a certain meeting, barely a week into the new school year.
They were back to sharing the same table in their old spot in the library, and were sitting opposite each other, each engrossed in their own laptops, when a surprised voice called out.

"Yong Qi?"

They both looked up at the person who had interrupted them, and recognition dawned on both their faces.

"What are you doing here?" both Xiao Yan and Yong Qi asked. Then, they turned, looking at each other, bewildered. "You know her?" they both asked each other, again together.

Cai Lian laughed, sitting down on a vacant chair. "So it would seem."

"How?" Yong Qi asked, frowning.

"Xiao Yan here got me out of quite a bit of trouble a few days ago," Cai Lian explained, smiling at Yong Qi. Then, turning to Xiao Yan, she added, "Yong Qi and I went to school together."

There was something about the brief, odd expression that passed through Yong Qi's face that told Xiao Yan their acquaintance went deeper than just being school friends, but she didn't press for details.

"What are you doing here?" Yong Qi asked.

"I'm back for a few weeks, visiting," Cai Lian said. "You know Ying Er?" She waited for Yong Qi to acknowledge that he did. When he just looked confused, she continued, "She's my cousin. Anyway, she asked me to meet her somewhere on this floor but she's not picking up her phone. I was just looking for her but haven't found her. Found you, though."

"Oh," Yong Qi said, apparently not knowing what else to say. Clearing his throat, he managed to add, "What did you mean, Xiao Yan got you out of trouble?"

Cai Lian started to tell Yong Qi about their accidental meeting, while Xiao Yan tried to tell her that it wasn't anything remarkable. She didn't know what made her feel more flustered, the fact that Cai Lian was telling this as some grand act of heroic, or the strange smile Yong Qi was directing at her.

Thankfully, before Cai Lian could really get into gushing mode, her phone rang. She pulled it out from the pocket of her fancy-looking blazer and said apologetically, "Sorry, I have to go. It's Ying Er." She stood up and smiled at Yong Qi. "Maybe I'll see you around?"

He smiled back. "Yes."

With a wave at Xiao Yan, Cai Lian fairly danced away, leaving Yong Qi to stare after her.

Something like annoyance rose in Xiao Yan at the sight of Yong Qi unable to look away from her retreating form like that, even if the expression on his face was simply one of confusion.

When Cai Lian was gone, Yong Qi shook himself out of his stupor and gave Xiao Yan a smile that she found she couldn't sincerely return. He didn't seem to notice, however, as he only asked, "Want to get lunch?"

"Uh – no, I can't," she lied. "I told my roommate I would have lunch with her."

Nothing could be further from the truth. So far, Sai Ya had yet to indicate that she wanted anything more than the glance-nod-'bye' dynamic they currently had between them, let alone do something as
conductive to friendship as having lunch together.

"Oh." He looked disappointed. Xiao Yan tried not to notice this. "Maybe some other time."

"Yeah," she said faintly, giving him a tight smile. Then, hastily gathering up her things, she had never left their spot in the library in more of a hurry.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly did not mean to fake-name Cai Lian after Melinda May, but uh, it happened? I seriously just picked a name out of thin air, didn't really realise why it sounds so familiar until about a month later…at that point it was basically, "why not?".

As for Meng Yue, she's not very interesting in the sense that she was only mentioned in the last chapter because that was One Big Chapter of Foreshadowing. Beyond that, I don't have the time or space to really dwell on Yong An and his girlfriend, because they're a whole other story, and Xiao Yan and Yong Qi are dumb enough already :D
Chapter Notes

You come around and the armor falls  
Pierce the room like a cannonball  
Now all we know is don't let go  
We are alone, just you and me  
Up in your room and our slates are clean  
Just twin fire signs

— State of Grace, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2011

September

Xiao Yan would not have been pushed to avoiding their place in the library if it wasn't for the next day. She was approaching their usual table again when, through the gaps in the stacks of books, she could see Yong Qi already sitting there, and he wasn't alone.

Next to him, talking animatedly, was Cai Lian.

Their backs were to Xiao Yan so she couldn't tell how Yong Qi was reacting, but they were sitting very close together, and he didn't seem to be paying attention to the books in front of him.

Xiao Yan wasn't sure why she turned and left. She only knew, the sight seemed to burn into her mind, making her want to cry, and she wasn't even sure why.

_I missed you in the library today_, Yong Qi texted her later, after she had deliberately ignored two of his calls.

She stared at the text for a long while, unsure whether she should reply.

"Xiao Yan!" Liu Hong called, snapping her out of her thoughts. She startled, looking up and shoveing her phone into her pocket. "Table five."

"Oh, right, coming," Xiao Yan said, hurrying off.

Yong Qi, his text and her confusing feelings could wait.

Several days later, back in her dormitory, Xiao Yan was staring at an empty document on her computer. She needed to start an essay but her mind was completely blank.

Her phone rang. She picked it up unthinkingly, and realised, too late, that it was Yong Qi.

"Hi," she said faintly when she heard his voice.
"Are you all right?" he asked, obviously concerned by her deflated tone.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, trying to sound casual.

"Are you sure? I just haven't seen you around lately."

"Oh, I'm just busy. Roommate wants to spend time together."

For the first time, Xiao Yan felt grateful for Sai Ya's existence, conveniently allowing Xiao Yan to use her in the lie, even if she did feel a twinge of guilt for actually lying to Yong Qi.

"Zi Wei…Zi Wei noticed you've been acting a little off, though," Yong Qi said.

"No, I'm not," she insisted.

"Are you sure? It's not…you're not bothered by Cai Lian being around, are you?" he asked hesitantly. "Because she's not – "

"No," she answered quickly, not really wanting to know what Cai Lian was not. "Why should I?"

He was clearly not convinced. "Xiao Yan – "

"I've just been really busy, Yong Qi. It's fine. I'm fine. Really. Honestly."

Yong Qi sighed audibly on the other end of the line. "You know, there is such thing as protesting too much."

Xiao Yan was silent.

"Are you coming to the library tomorrow?" he asked. When she didn't immediately answer, he added, "I really missed you."

There was something about his voice that shook Xiao Yan to the core. It made her want to cry, but also to feel comforted at the same time. It made her say, her voice unsteady, "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" and then hanging up before he could say much more.

Yong Qi kept trying to tell himself that Xiao Yan couldn't be jealous of Cai Lian.

After all, she didn't even know anything about what went on between him and Cai Lian.

Even if she did know, there was nothing between them now that should bother Xiao Yan. He had been over his first girlfriend a long time ago.

Besides, to be jealous would suggest that Xiao Yan actually had feelings for him. And she had more or less told him the opposite.

So why was she avoiding him?

(No matter how much she denied it, she was avoiding him.)

He stared at the linear regression graphs on his laptop while his mind was focused on an entirely different muddle of dots that refused to connect. In the end, he gave up the graphs as a bad job for the day. It was clear that he had chosen a phenomenally bad day to try and start the writing on his thesis. There was no way he could concentrate on the statistical significance of the last ten years' GDP growth in association with unemployment rate as applied to policy making on a day like this.
As he prepared to go on the internet, looking for something – anything – to distract him, someone slid into the seat beside him.

He turned, and his stomach dropped in disappointment when he found that it was Cai Lian.

She didn't seem to notice his unenthusiastic reaction to her presence, and just said, brightly, "Hi!"

"Hi."

"What are you doing?"

"Working."

"Right," she laughed. She nodded towards his laptop screen, which was opened to Youtube. "That does not look like work."

He shrugged. "Just taking a break."

She smiled even wider, and slipped her arm around his. "Maybe we could take a break together."

He started to pull away. "Cai Lian, I don't think – "

"You used to call me Lian Er," she said, pouting.

"Seven years ago," he muttered. More loudly, he added, "Things have changed, Cai Lian."

"Yes, so I see," she said sadly. She gave him a forlorn smile, which he knew too well was on the beginning of her attempt to wheedle something from him. Nothing good could come from this. "I was kind of hoping we could get back together."

Yong Qi stared at her, bewildered. He couldn't see why she thought that was a good idea at all. With a short laugh, he said, "Why would you want to do that? You're leaving for American in couple of weeks, Cai Lian. What is the point of getting back together?"

She sighed. "I missed you."

He couldn't honestly say he missed her. If anything, he hadn't actually thought about her in over a year.

"Clearly you didn't miss me," she said when he remained silent.

"I did," he admitted quietly. "Once."

"Not anymore."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

"Is it because I left?" she asked. "Because – "

"No!" he said firmly. "It wasn't because you left. You were right to leave. Your entire future was at stake and I couldn't go with you. We were too young for that kind of commitment anyway."

"But we were good together then, Yong Qi." He didn't deny this, but she also was speaking of seven years ago. It was like speaking of a lifetime ago. So he couldn't agree at all when she added, "We could be that again, now."
"No, we can't. I'm sorry, Cai Lian, but we can't. Not anymore."

She stared at him, looking thoroughly heartbroken for a long moment. He found that he couldn't look away, but neither did his resolve weaken.

"It's Xiao Yan, isn't it?" she asked quietly at last.

It was his turn to stare, astonished.

She gave a soft, tearful chuckle. "You always did wear your heart on your sleeves."

"Cai Lian," he said, more softly now.

"No," she interrupted with a brave, watery smile. "Don't apologise. You are right, a lot has changed. Clearly I can't expect you to be like you were seven years ago."

"I am sorry," he said.

"I know," she said. "I suppose I knew from the first time seeing the two of you together. I just tried to deny it." She stood up, looking down at him with a sad smile. "I hope she'll make you happy, Yong Qi."

With that, she started to walk away. Only several steps away, however, she paused and leaned down, picking up something. She turned back to Yong Qi, frowning.

"This can't be your phone, can it?" she asked, holding up a Nokia phone.

Yong Qi's heart seemed to plummet to his feet. He stood up abruptly and took the phone from Cai Lian. "No, but I know whose it is," he said breathlessly, only just remembering to return to the table for his things. "I've got to go. Sorry."

With that hasty farewell, Yong Qi rushed past a bewildered Cai Lian, Xiao Yan's phone clutched in his hand.

Yong Qi nearly slammed into Er Tai on his way out of the library.

"I was just looking for you – " his friend started to say.

Yong Qi wasn't listening, however. He grabbed his friend by the lapel of his jacket and demanded, "Did you see Xiao Yan leave?"

"Yes," Er Tai said, frowning. "She looked upset. I called out to her but she didn't even hear me."

"Do you know where she went?"

"I think she might be headed off to her dorm," Er Tai said.

Yong Qi ran off, leaving his agents scrambling after him and a confused Er Tai calling indignantly, "Hey, you said you'd come meet Sai Ya with me!"

"Sorry, maybe another time!" Yong Qi called back. As much as he loved Er Tai, meeting his new girlfriend would have to wait.

Yong Qi slowed his pace enough to reassure his security detail that his haste wasn't due to being in
any kind of danger. They tended to err on the side of caution in that regard, and it could get chaotic, fast, if they thought he was under physical threat.

Outside of Xiao Yan's room, he took a deep, calming breath before knocking on the door.

It was opened a lot more quickly than he predicted, but the person who opened it was not Xiao Yan. In fact, he had never seen the girl before, but she must be Xiao Yan's new roommate. She apparently didn't recognise who he was — an unexpected blessing under the circumstances — as she didn't bat an eyelash, and just asked, "Yes?"

"Is Xiao Yan in?" he asked calmly.

She nodded, and called inside, "There's someone for you."

It was completely unnecessary, of course, considering Xiao Yan could already hear his voice.

Despite the situation, Yong Qi nearly laughed. He couldn't remember being simply just 'someone' when showing up at a stranger's door.

Xiao Yan slowly appeared behind her roommate, a closed-off, carefully blank look on her face. To her roommate, she said, "I've got it, thanks."

"Okay," her roommate said. "I'm leaving anyway."

With that and not another glance at Yong Qi, she brushed past him and rushed towards the elevator.

Xiao Yan stood there, gripping the edge of the door. For a moment, Yong Qi wondered if she would slam it in his face.

He took a deep breath. "You dropped your phone," he said quietly, holding it out.

She stared at the phone in his hand for a long time, blinking, clearly holding back tears. He wanted to reach out and pull her into his arms, to tell her that whatever she thought was happening between Cai Lian and him, it was all untrue.

She took the phone from him and said grudgingly, "Thanks."

She was expecting him to leave. But how could he, when she still looked so miserable?

"Xiao Yan," he started, unsure what he would say next, but feeling a desperate need to say something.

"Why are you here?" she asked bluntly.

"I wanted to see you," he said truthfully.

She laughed bitterly. "Really? You should be with your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," he said gently.

"Don't lie. I heard you two talking."

"What exactly did you hear?"

"She's your ex," Xiao Yan said, sounding like her throat was constricted. "She wants to get back together."
"Did you hear the part where I turned her down?"

Apparently not, because Xiao Yan looked up, staring at him, tears shining in her eyes. "You…turned her down? Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm not in love with her," he said. "Not anymore. I don't think I ever was in love with her to begin with. We were seventeen when we dated, Xiao Yan. There were girls after her. I've forgotten what it's like to be with her."

She didn't speak, and just continued to look blankly at him, unable to comprehend his words.

He reached out and took her hand. She looked down, but didn't pull away. He hoped that was a good sign. "She's not who I want to be with right now, Xiao Yan," he said softly. "You know that."

"Do I?"

Yong Qi sighed. "I know you don't want to talk about what happened the night before your birthday, but Xiao Yan, if you had let me, I'd have told you how much I want to be with you."

"You can't mean that," she whispered, shaking her head.

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because," he said, taking a step closer to her, "I really, really, really like you."

She shook her head miserably and pulled her hand away. "I can't – you can't – it would never work, Yong Qi, and it will ruin absolutely everything!" she wailed so loudly that he shot a look over his shoulder, hoping that no one was in the corridor.

"Can we – uh – talk about this inside, please?" he asked, reminding her that they were still standing on her doorstep.

She looked reluctant, but then she gave a sigh and took a step back, allowing him into the room. He closed the door behind him and leaned momentarily against it.

"Why don't you think it would ever work?" he asked, looking at her solemnly.

"What can become of us? You're – you're you! You can't be with someone like me!"

It was incredible, how such simple words can make it feel like the world was darkening around him.

"So now, all of the sudden, I am a prince to you," he said, feeling like the lump in throat was choking him.

"What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"It means, Xiaoy Yan, for all of the time we've known each other, you've never cared that I am the prince," he said.

He didn't even bother to hide the bitter tone. She obviously noticed, as her brows furrowed and her lips were pressed tightly together in an attempt to control her emotions.

"When we first met," he continued, "you knew who I was but you waited for me to introduce myself. Every day after that, you've never assumed that you knew me because you've read things..."
about me. You wanted to get to know me. Do you know how few people actually do that? Around you, for the first time, I feel like I could be a normal person. I didn't have to strive to be this impossible expectation of a perfect prince. And now...now when I need you to see me for me the most, suddenly you can't see anything but the prince anymore, can you?"

"Of course I can't!" she cried, voice trembling and looking on the verge of fresh tears. "And it's your fault! You brought up this – this complication! It's not supposed to be like this! We – why can't we just be friends?"

He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily; he could feel his heart slowly splinter and break. And yet, he somehow managed to say, "All right. Okay. If that's what you want." He opened his eyes and looked at her, forcing himself to smile. "It's fine, Xiao Yan."

She was staring at him, looking as heart-broken as he felt. "Yong Qi, I – "

"It's fine," he repeated, more firmly this time, but believing it even less than the first time he uttered the words. It didn't matter what he believed, anyway. "Really, Xiao Yan. I'm not going to force you into anything you don't want. It's probably better to know now. Just...I'm sure we'll get back to normal again, after a while."

It had now become almost impossible to keep standing there and look at her, knowing it would be a long time before he could look at her without hurting again. He swallowed heavily and straightened.

"I should go," he said, turning and opening the door. Before leaving, he turned around, a desperate part of him still hoping that she would hold him back, and tell him that perhaps, perhaps she could feel as much for him as he felt for her. She didn't. She watched him with enormous, sorrowful eyes, but was silent.

He nodded, let himself out, and closed the door with a resounding thud behind him.

"Why? Why would he want to date me?" Xiao Yan wailed, an hour later, to Zi Wei. After Yong Qi left, she had seen no alternative but to seek her best friend's comfort, even if said best friend was also sister of the person she just rejected so thoroughly.

(When did her life get so complicated?)

Zi Wei sat down on the edge of Xiao Yan's bed, where she was still lying on her stomach, face formerly planted into her pillow. She turned her head so that she could look at Zi Wei while they conversed.

"He likes you, Xiao Yan. That much is obvious. Did you honestly not realise?"

"No!" she cried, staring up at Zi Wei, incredulous. "Not...not like that! Should I have?"

"Yes!" Zi Wei said. "Oh Xiao Yan, how could you not have seen it?"

"I thought he was just...being nice. Because he and I are friends. Because we're friends."

"Yes, of course," Zi Wei said patiently, "you are his friend. But that doesn't mean he just wants to be friends with you."

"But he – he could have any girl he wants, why does he – why me? I just don't get it. It doesn't make sense."
"I don't think feelings are supposed to make sense, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said gently. "Maybe you should forget whether his feelings make sense. What do you feel? Really?"

"I don't know!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "I thought I knew. I thought I was sure he is just a friend. But now, everything's confusing!"

Zi Wei was quiet for a long moment. Then, she asked, "So, are you saying that there is a possibility that you might feel more than just friendship for Yong Qi?"

Xiao Yan didn't answer, and just stared into the distance.

"Xiao Yan, it's one thing if you are sure you only see him as friend," Zi Wei said. "In that case, no one, least of all Yong Qi, would ever pressure you into something you don't want. But if…if you do think there is a possibility for something more, then I think maybe you owe it to your own happiness to not deny yourself the chance to explore that possibility."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, I think we have a choice in the world about who to trust. Into whose hand can we put our heart and our happiness and trust them to keep both safe? The question you have to ask yourself, Xiao Yan, is whether you would put that trust in Yong Qi."

Zi Wei offered to stay overnight with her, but Xiao Yan refused. Zi Wei's wisdom did little for her in her current state of confusion, though she had a feeling it would come back at a later date, refusing to leave her alone, forcing her to confront everything she wasn't ready to face right now. Perhaps, that was for the best. Zi Wei's sympathy comforted enormously, but it was even less effective in driving away Xiao Yan's uncertainties. Zi Wei's continued presence would probably only serve to remind her of what a mess everything was between her and Yong Qi. Xiao Yan had a desperate longing to be alone. She was glad for the empty room and Sai Ya's erratic schedule. Even her roommate who didn't care what she did would probably pick up on her foul mood if she were here.

Near midnight, she typed out a text and blindly pressed 'Send' before she could second guess herself.  

_I didn't mean to hurt you._

A long moment passed and there was no reply. Either he was asleep or he was ignoring her.

Just when she was about to conclude on the latter, her phone chimed.

_I know._

Another text came in a few seconds later.

_I'm not angry at you._

She could almost hear the weariness in the five simple words. Guilt flooded her, and she started to type a reply when Yong Qi sent another text.  

_It's all right if you don't feel the same. I just need time to reconcile myself to it._

_I'm sorry_, she typed. She meant to tell him that his conjecture that she didn't feel the same – that she couldn't ever feel the same – was probably wrong, but her fingers didn't obey her. Perhaps, it was for the best that she did not raise his hopes only to cruelly dash it later. After all, she didn't even know herself whether the tugging in her heart right now was simply due to the guilt she felt for making him
so unhappy, or that she really was beginning to see him in a different light.

*You shouldn't apologise*, he replied. *Really, Xiao Yan. You don't owe me anything.*

Xiao Yan didn't know what possessed her to send the next message – *I'm just afraid. I'm afraid it will end and I'll lose you for good and I'm not sure I could ever bear that.* – but when she stared at it, sent, she realised that she meant every word.

Yong Qi didn't reply for a long time.

She got impatient, waiting for him, so she sent another message: *Can we talk, please? More calmly, I mean. Maybe in a few days, when we've both had some time?*

It was several more minutes before his reply arrived. *Would it change anything?*

*I don't know.*

And she was honest. It was so hard to differentiate between the numerous emotions she was feeling right now, that she couldn't imagine how they could even begin to speak of this again, let alone what the outcome might be. And yet, she didn't want to leave everything like they did today, either. There was something about the way he left that was seemed so final...like he didn't intend to ever seek her out again. She didn't know what she wanted in terms of the two of them but she knew it wasn't this.

*Okay,* he texted a few minutes later. She stared at the word, so simple, and found herself wondering what might be going on in his head right now. She wished he was here before her, so that she could at least gauge his expression to guess what he might be thinking. This simple, not cold, but lonely word seemed to make her feel even more lost than ever. Did he even want to see her again? Did he agree only because she made the request, when reality it was the last thing he wanted to do? She wanted to ask him these questions, but didn't think she could bear the possible replies.

As she tried to decide what to say in reply, because she knew she could not leave their conversation hanging like this, another text came in: *I won't expect anything, Xiao Yan. Please know that. I don't want to lose your friendship, either.*

Her heart clenched painfully as, this time, she could hear the tone of the text, devoid of any hope and resolved, only too well.

She could only send back: *I know. You haven't. You won't.*

"I've been thinking a lot about...everything," Xiao Yan said when they met up a few days later in her room. It had become, strangely, the most private place they could talk.

It was also strange how much difference a few days made. She was no longer trapped in a constant stream of panicked thoughts, thinking everything might as well be over and ruined. She wasn't confident enough to put words to any of her feelings just yet, but she also felt somehow more hopeful, that something good might come at the end of all of this. What that good might be, and good for her or for him, or for both of them, she couldn't say.

"Xiao Yan, I meant what I said," Yong Qi said, "I would never dream of pressuring you into something you didn't want yourself."

"I know," she said, sighing. "But the thing is...you took me by surprise. I know, Zi Wei said it was obvious but I never dared – I never thought – Anyway, I was surprised."
He smiled, but it was so weighed down by sadness that Xiao Yan only felt sorrow in return.

"I suppose," he said, "there were better ways to tell you…"

She fiddled with the peeling paint at the edge of her desk for a long moment, unable to put her thoughts into words. He didn't press her to speak.

"I haven't allowed myself to think about something like this for a long time," she confessed after much deliberation. "A…a relationship. Falling in love. Everything that comes with it."

When silence stretched on and she did not elaborate, he asked softly, "Why not?" She didn't answer right away, which led him to add, "You are usually far too optimistic to be so cynical as to think love and happiness do not exist."

She laughed, but there was a self-deprecating tone to it. "It's funny that you don't think I'm cynical."

"You are, mostly about people," he allowed. "But most other times, you want to see the best in life. I know you. You believe there is always a reason to be happy in life, as long as you allow yourself to recognise it. So why do you deny it of yourself now?"

"It's not…not relevant, right now, the why," she answered, sniffing. Her heartache was enough, thinking of Yong Qi. Nothing else deserved to intrude in this conversation. "The thing is," she continued, "I've already told you I'm afraid of losing you. As I sent that text, I realised that maybe I meant a lot more than just losing your friendship."

She had not dared to look at his face as she said this, so she only saw how his hands clenched, and his back seemed to stiffen, frozen over the implications of her words.

"What are you saying?" he asked after several beats of silence. There was a breathless quality to his voice, as if he was bursting to be hopeful, but at the same barely allowing it to show.

"I don't know," she said. "I wanted things to stay the same, because it was safe. And then you introduced this…this wildcard, and I didn't know what to do with it. I realise now that I wasn't so much afraid of not feeling the same as you do as I was afraid of feeling just as much as you do."

"Xiao Yan," he breathed, impulsively taking her hand. Then, as if realising he might be letting his own eagerness take over, he took a calming breath. Her hand was still in his, though, and she found that she did not mind. "I know it's complicated," he said. "And to be honest, for a long time, I was afraid of losing what we already have, too. I'm still afraid. But Xiao Yan, after the night before your birthday, I couldn't ignore it any longer. I needed to say something to you. And I have. It's all right, if knowing this, you still want everything to remain the same as before. I'll still be glad for that."

"What if…what if things didn't remain the same?" she asked haltingly. "What if I agree to give it a try? What would you have in mind for our first…date?"

"Xiao Yan, don't feel like you need to pressure yourself — " he started.

"I'm not," she said, cutting him off. "And I'm not deliberately, cruelly trying to get your hopes up, either, Yong Qi. I just…want to know what you expect."

"I wouldn't expect anything," he replied, looking down thoughtfully at their still joined hand. "I probably would just want to take you out to dinner at first."

Somehow, the answer made her laugh, an actual, amused laugh. "Conventional."
"Is that bad?" he asked, looking sheepish.

"No," she said, smiling. "I think…we might need conventional. So, would we just go wherever?"

"Well, if you want to avoid the scrutiny, I would suggest somewhere with private dining rooms."

"Private…" she repeated, then one tiny little detail that she had not considered before occurred to her. "Oh my god."

"What?" he asked, slightly alarmed.

She stood up and stared down at him, still sitting. "You said once, that your security detail goes everywhere with you, right?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes," he said slowly.

"So…they're going to…they would be there?" she asked. She didn't know why she was speaking as if she had already to go out with him, but it seemed like a point they need to hammer out by speaking as if this was something that was going to happen.

"Yes. Unfortunately." He gave her an apologetic look, but did not offer to try to manage without them. It would probably be churlish of her to refuse to understand that he was hardly allowed that luxury.

Xiao Yan exhaled loudly and sat limply back down.

"It used to be worse, you know," he said.

"How could it be worse?"

"Well, it used to be that princes could only date girls of a certain…" he hesitated, then settled on, "…background."

Xiao Yan snorted. "I'm assuming I wouldn't have made the cut."

Yong Qi only smiled. "Also, all dates would have been chaperoned. And when I say 'chaperoned', I don't mean the security details who discreetly turn their backs and walk out of earshot to give you privacy. A…babysitter, if you will, is there all the time. With scripts."

She sighed again. "Do I want to know what happened to change that?"

"Masako happened. And Diana."

She frowned in confusion.

"They are both highly intelligent and independent women trapped in systems of rigid protocols – different, but both frozen in their own ways – that allow them little outlet, and…well, the consequences are quite clear," he said. "Our monarchy hasn't survived this long, in a country this huge and diverse, because we are absolutely set in our way and don't know the meaning of change and compromise. Traditions are the basis of the monarchy and we have nothing if not our history. But that doesn't mean we lock ourselves away from the progress of the rest of the world, either, and not just in the technological sense. Alongside digitalising the monarchy and using advanced technology to improve security, we do have to let the people grow with the world as well. A lot has changed in the last ten years. Protocols are a lot less strict these days in day-to-day interactions. They're only strictly enforced now in events of state, and even then, accommodations can be made
under the right circumstances. Dating for our generation is a lot less confusing and potentially-heart-breaking."

She offered him a small, watery smile. "I guess you're trying to reassure me."

"Yes, I am," he said. Taking her hand again, he continued gently, "I'm not saying it won't be difficult. It will be very different from what you can expect from anyone else."

"I know," she murmured, squeezing his hand slightly. "And despite what you've just said, there are still expectations. I mean, you said it yourself. Your sister never liked people you've dated before."

"Except that she does like you," he pointed out. "And at this point, I'm pretty sure she knows how I feel about you. If she didn't like you, she would have made her feelings known by now."

Xiao Yan squirmed with discomfort and pulled away from him as she considered this. "But it's not just your sister with expectations," she said. "If anything, your sister's expectations are the least of it."

"Yes, of course."

"I'm never going to be able to meet them, Yong Qi. You know that."

"Do you sell yourself so short?" he asked.

"I have seen, so far, some of the things that are expected of members of your family, and can't imagine myself equal to them," she said. "And you can't say that doesn't matter, because it does. Even now."

"I won't say that doesn't matter, because you are right," he said. "I know you find it all bewildering now, but it is something that you can get used to, Xiao Yan, with me – and in fact, my entire family – to support you. I think…in the long run, you might be very good for us, to say nothing of myself."

She didn't see that at all, and asked, confused, "How?"

"Already, you challenge our long-held assumptions. You see that there is more to us than just the things that glitter. We get lost in ourselves, sometimes, Xiao Yan, and we occasionally need someone to remind us that not everyone lives like us, or have what we have."

"So you want to be with me because I could be your family's moral compass?" she asked.

"I want to be with you because of you," he said, noting her glib tone but answering sincerely. "I think…I think we will be good together, Xiao Yan. I know there are many obstacles bigger than ourselves ahead, and I won't just assume that it's easier to overcome them all. But I want…I want to try. I think…no, I know you are worth the attempt." He paused and looked carefully at her. When she didn't say anything to protest against what he had said so far, he took a deep breath. "Will you give me a chance?"

Xiao Yan already knew before he said the words what she wanted to do. Looking down, she couldn't help all the butterflies fluttering in her stomach as she slipped her hand into the one he was holding out towards her.

After that, Xiao Yan tried to push aside the strange feeling that she was somehow already saying yes to a marriage proposal. Worries of that kind could wait for later, especially when Yong Qi was looking so much more cheerful.
Still, now that she had agreed, it was easier to really talk, for real, of where they might go on their first date.

(Though, during the discussion, Yong Qi pointed out that the day they spent together in Yuan Ming Yuan before her birthday was practically a date already. She did not dignify that with an answer, at all.)

He wanted to go to a fancy restaurant near the palace that she was sure would make her faint at the sight of the price of a glass of water. When she wrinkled her nose at the suggestion, he only pointed out that it would ensure them their privacy.

"There are places that offer private dining options that would not charge an arm and a leg for the world's smallest salad," she pointed out.

"All right," he said, unperturbed, "where do you want to go?"

"How do you feel about Hui Bin Lou?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You want to have our first date where all of your co-workers will be aware of it?"

She shrugged. "They'll know sooner or later. I think it will be better to get their curiosity out of the way. The more important reason is that I think I want you to meet Liu Qing and Liu Hong. They are like family to me."

"I didn't realise we were at the meeting the family stage yet," he said, teasing.

She shoved him. "I've met your family."

"As Zi Wei's family, sure," he said. Nevertheless, she knew he was pleased.

"So, what do you say to Hui Bin Lou?" she asked.

"If you want, I am all for it."

At first, Xiao Yan had tried fussing over what she should wear, but in the end, gave up. It wasn't like she had a huge wardrobe full of clothes to choose from. Only few of her clothes were nice enough for an occasion like this, and she already knew what she wanted to wear.

"We already spent three weeks in the same house together," Xiao Yan pointed out to Zi Wei, who had nominated herself the role of helping Xiao Yan get ready. "He already knows the kind of clothes I own."

"Yes, indeed," Zi Wei said, laughing. "You do look very nice, though."

Xiao Yan smiled, feeling absurdly pleased at Zi Wei's compliment, though being Zi Wei, she probably would say that even if Xiao Yan were completely dishevelled.

"How are you and Er Kang?" she asked off-handedly, so that they could dwell on something other than her vanity, which she didn't realise existed before this day.

"We're good," Zi Wei answered with a smile. "We had dinner with his parents the other day."

"Oh? It's got to that already?"
"You're taking Yong Qi to meet your family," Zi Wei pointed out.

"True."

"Anyway, his mother asked me to lunch with her tomorrow," Zi Wei continued. "I think that's a good sign?"

"Of course it is," Xiao Yan said encouragingly. Then, she sat down next to her friend on her bed and took her hand. "Are you happy, Zi Wei?"

Zi Wei smiled widely and nodded. "Yes, I think I am, now that everything's settled a bit."

Xiao Yan grinned and threw her arms around Zi Wei. "I am really glad for you, then."

"And I am glad for you," Zi Wei said. "I think you and Yong Qi will be great together."

As Xiao Yan led Yong Qi through Hui Bin Lou, he could feel the startled looks of the guests, but as usual, tried his best to ignore it. This kind of unwanted attention was hard to avoid in even the best of Michelin-starred restaurants. Still, he thought Xiao Yan must have warned everyone who worked at the restaurant whom she knew would be on shift that day to act normal. From them, he could only see some knowing looks shot their way, mainly directed at Xiao Yan, but no obvious whisperings broke out, at least while they were in earshot.

They walked down the hall that led to the private dining rooms, and there they met Liu Qing and Liu Hong.

Everything was uneventful when Xiao Yan introduced Yong Qi to Liu Hong.

Liu Qing, however, gave him a piercing look, and said, quite plainly, "If you hurt her, I promise you, I'll punch you in the face."

Before Yong Qi could make a reply, his security officer, clad in black and standing behind him, took a quick, threatening step forward, putting himself between Liu Qing and Yong Qi, pushing Liu Qing away. "Sir, you cannot make that kind of threat – "

"Sai Wei," Yong Qi said hastily, gripping him by the forearm before he could actually do anything to ruin everything. Like pull out a gun. "It's fine. Back away, please."

"But, Wang Ye – "

"I said, please back away." Yong Qi could hardly blame the man for doing his job, but anything more than a verbal reprimand was excessive. "I am sure Mr Liu does not mean to make serious threats."

A swift look passed over Liu Qing’s face that showed that his threat was very serious, but thankfully he kept quiet. Yong Qi still caught the expression though, and apparently so did his bodyguard.

"Wang Ye!" Sai Wei exclaimed, still refusing to step down. "There are protocols in the event of clear threats – "

"And there are threats, and then there are threats," Yong Qi said firmly. "I refuse to allow you to make a scene, Sai Wei. I will endeavour to ensure Mr Liu will never have reason to carry out his threats."

Sai Wei gave him an incredulous look, but the finally agreed to step back and let his arms fall to his
sides. He looked momentarily disgruntled, before assuming his impassive mask again. Yong Qi allowed himself a small sigh of relief.

"I mean it," Yong Qi turned to say to Liu Qing.

"I hope you do," Liu Qing said seriously. Then, as if the whole scene had not happened, he held out his hand. "Welcome to Hui Bin Lou. I hope you have a pleasant evening."

Yong Qi looked down at the offered hand, for a moment surprised. If truth be told, he was used to being the one initiating the handshake. In the end, he just laughed and shook it. Liu Qing actually smiled in return. It was clear, now, that the intimidation tactic was some sort of test, and Yong Qi had to commend Liu Qing for his guts.

"You two are infuriating," Xiao Yan finally said. She had been watching the whole scene with Liu Hong with expressions of disbelief and now could only shake her head exasperatedly. To Liu Qing, she said, glowering, "I am capable of taking care of myself. I don't need your protection, Liu Qing."

"Tough," Liu Qing replied, still smiling, not intimidated by her annoyance. "You're getting it, whether you like it or not."

She huffed, but then decided to not waste time arguing with her pseudo-brother any longer. She turned and slipped her arm through Yong Qi's. "Let's go."

With that, they followed Liu Hong to their private dining room.

"Okay, okay," Xiao Yan said, shaking her head and laughing, "you don't seriously prefer '06 Shen Diao to '95, do you? No one, and I mean, no one can surpass Li Ruo Tong as Xiao Long Nü. Can we get that straight, right now?"

"I'm not necessarily going to disagree with you on that, but there is a certain charm to Liu Yi Fei's Xiao Long Nü," Yong Qi replied, smiling.

She scoffed. "You mean she's hot."

"That's a bit rich coming from someone who went, 'But Su You Peeeng' as a reason for liking Yi Tian 2003."

"Su You Peng is a perfectly good reason to like anything," Xiao Yan said smugly.

"If you say so," Yong Qi replied indulgently. "But even then, come on, Xiao Yan, you know '86 Yi Tian is the adaptation, right?"

"Yes, but Su You Peng. My point is made."

Yong Qi laughed.

"No, in reality, I think I'm just partial to it because it's my first; I only watched '86 after '03. Sinful, I know, but there you are." She smiled superiorly and added, "What's your excuse for Shen Diao '06?"

"I was nineteen and it's Liu Yi Fei?"

Xiao Yan Zi burst out laughing.

"You know, I met her once," Yong Qi said, chuckling as well. "It was later though, after my..."
infatuation with her has subsided."

Xiao Yan giggled. "Really? How was that?"

"Well, people usually aren't themselves when they meet royalty so it's hard to tell if how she was meeting me is the same as how she always is. It was really brief, too. She was pleasant, though."

Xiao Yan shook her head in mock mournfulness. "I can't believe you were once so predictable. It's embarrassing."

"Hey, at least Liu Yi Fei is my age. Su You Peng is much too old for you."

"If Arsenal is doing so badly, why are you still supporting them?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Because true love transcends performance of the moment," Yong Qi replied, looking very serious. "Besides, at the risk of ironically using the words of the manager of the rivalling team, form is temporary, but class is permanent."

"I just think it's funny, that's all," she smiled, "how you and Er Tai and Er Kang get so worked up about it all. Even Er Kang! Who I thought would be too serious for this."

Yong Qi laughed. "Not at all. No one could be too serious for football. You know, Er Kang and Er Tai still can't speak to each other about the World Cup 2002 final match without fighting?"

"Why not?"

"Er Kang supported Germany, Er Tai supported Brazil. Brazil won. Er Kang is still in denial."

Xiao Yan burst out laughing. "For real?"

"Yes."

"What about you?" she asked, amused. "Who did you support?"

"Ah, that's an entirely different kettle of fish. I spent most of World Cup 2002 miserable because my team, Holland, didn't even qualify. That was a dark time. It didn't help that the previous World Cup they lost the semi in the stupidest way possible, by penalty shootout. I still can't help feeling irrationally angry at any mention of Phillip Cocu."

"Who?"

"He missed the first penalty shot. It wasn't the defining one, but it was a really clumsy miss."

Xiao Yan shook her head and laughed again.

"Hey!" Yong Qi said with mock indignation. "You have your hobbies, we have ours, okay? I don't laugh at you for liking Zhao Wei even though you claim to dislike every single one of her movies."

"I had a really good time," Xiao Yan said softly later that night, when they lingered outside the door of her room.

"Me too," Yong Qi replied, his eyes crinkling into a gentle smile.

For a long moment, they stood like that, gazing at each other. Instead of backing into her room, Xiao
Yan took a step forward, closer to Yong Qi.

"Xiao Yan," he whispered, leaning down towards her.

She smiled, and it seemed all the encouragement he needed, because he pulled her into his arms by her waist, his lips landing gently on hers.

The first kiss was brief but even when it ended, he didn't pull completely away. She opened her eyes and felt her knees weaken at the intense look in his eyes, so close to hers that she felt she could count his individual eyelashes. She gripped his shirt and leaned against him for support, which urged him to tighten his hold around her waist and pull her in again, for another, longer kiss. She melted into his arms, wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed giddily against his lips.

This time, she didn't know how much time passed before they pulled away from each other, she only knew that when they did, her head was still spinning and she felt out of breath.

"I...I should probably go," he whispered reluctantly.

She could only nod but she was still grinning up at him.

He grinned back, and leaned down to brush another soft kiss against her lips again in farewell.

"Good night," he said huskily when he pulled away.

She smiled. "You too," she mouthed. Out loud, she added, "Text me when you arrive home, all right?"

"I will."

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:39 CST:
I really enjoyed tonight. We should do it again soon.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:43 CST
We should.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:44 CST
You home yet? Or are you texting and driving?

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:44 CST
Just got home.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:45 CST
I can't stop smiling.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:46 CST
You don't know how glad I am to read that. I will try to always keep you in a state of unable to stop smiling.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:47 CST
I think I'd like that.

Same
23:48 CST
It's late. We should sleep.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:49 CST
I don't mind staying up and texting you.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:50 CST
I'm afraid you'll get bored of me if we do.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:50 CST
Fishing, Xiao Yan? You know I won't.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:51 CST
Not fishing. But nice to hear.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:52 CST
It is late though. I should let you sleep.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:52 CST
Good night, Yong Qi. Sweet dreams.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:52 CST
I'll dream of you.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
23:53 CST
I hope so :)

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
23:53 CST
Good night, Xiao Yan.

Chapter End Notes

So they're together, but there are still like loads of chapters left :) so speculate on that.

I am not fond of love triangles at all, so it's probably a good thing that all the love triangles in canon are relatively easier to solve by modern standard. That said, Yong Qi
and Xiao Yan Zi in canon era or modern time never need a third person getting between
them. They create enough conflict for themselves by just being them; even the modern
time can't take away their season 2 conflicts.
2011, September (2)

Chapter Notes

I think it's strange that you think I'm funny 'cause he never did
I've been spending the last eight months
Thinking all love ever does is break and burn and end
But on a Wednesday in a cafe I watched it begin again

— Begin Again, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2011

September

A few days later found Xiao Yan and Yong Qi stretched out on a sofa in his room at Xian Fu Gong. They had intended to go see a movie as they both didn't have class that afternoon. Matinee shows were usually easier to manage than evening ones. However, the torrential rain put a damper on things and suddenly neither of them felt like braving a drive in such horrible weather, so they decided to stay in instead, watching older movies in his room.

When they last watched movies together at Yuan Ming Gong, they had sat next to each other, but there was still a slight gap between them, and no part of them ever touched except for when they accidentally brushed against each other, reaching for their drinks.

This time, however, Xiao Yan spent the entire movie wrapped up in his arms, which undoubtedly made it hard for both of them to concentrate on what was on the screen. In the end, neither of them noticed when the credit started rolling.

"Yan Yan," Yong Qi murmured into her hair.

She involuntarily flinched.

Despite her hopes that he would miss it, he pulled away to look at her, frowning and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head, but the dark look in her eyes gave her away.

"Xiao Yan?" he prompted gently, looking at her with concern.

Xiao Yan took a deep breath. She hated that she was feeling like this right now. She shouldn't be thinking of this at all, not when Yong Qi was here, not when her mind should be totally occupied by him instead. It was simply unfair.

"It's just…" she started hesitantly before trailing off.

She had no idea how to explain her current feelings to him without going into all the details she didn't want to divulge, because she wasn't ready, but also because it would shatter the happy moment between them. Thankfully, he didn't press her and just waited for her to speak, looking at her with
brows furrowed in concern.

Finally, Xiao Yan took a deep breath and asked, "Can you not call me that?"

"Yan Yan?"

She nodded with a vague noise in her throat.

"All right," Yong Qi said slowly, "but may I ask why?"

She shrugged in a way that she hoped was nonchalant. "I just…I just don't like it."

He looked at her pensively for a moment, clearly seeing that there was more to this discomfort than she was telling him. She was relieved more than she could express to him when he merely nodded. "Okay," he said softly. There was a pause, then he added, "So what terms of endearment am I allowed with you?"

"Xiao Yan."

"Yan Er?"

"No. Xiao Yan," she repeated firmly.

"Okay. Anything else? Babe, baby?"

There was a tentatively teasing note to his words now. He was testing the water, trying to help lighten her mood. Xiao Yan was almost surprised to find that it worked, a little. It made her smile, not completely carefree, but the smile was there.

"No, definitely not," she said.

"Really?"

"Don't you think it's insanely creepy how often pet name refers to little children?" Xiao Yan asked, wrinkling her nose.

Yong Qi gave a light chuckle. "Okay, just Xiao Yan then."

"Or you could me Cordelia," Xiao Yan blurted out before she could think about it.

Yong Qi blinked. "Cordelia?"

"Or, Anne, but if you must, Anne with an 'e'," Xiao Yan added, deadpan.

She was expecting a completely blank stare at the bizarre request, but Yong Qi defied her expectations by bursting out laughing.

"I think you lack the red hair for that," he said, gently reaching up to stroke her hair.

Xiao Yan grinned. "I'm surprised you know what I'm talking about."

"The first book my older sister read on her own in English was Anne of Green Gables. She used to read it out loud for me, but when I was seven years old, I stubbornly thought the story was too girly for me, despite the fact that I actually liked Anne. There one time, when I was about thirteen, we were on this stupidly long flight somewhere, and the on-flight entertainment was broken, and that was the only book on board that, you know, wasn't about shady politics or the actual national
constitution. So to stop myself being driven mad with boredom, I ended up reading the whole book during that flight."

"…and found the rest of the series to finish when you landed?" Xiao Yan prompted.

"Maaaybe."

She laughed. "Actually I didn't read the series until last year. It deeply challenged my cynical instincts, but there was so much about Anne that I could relate to."

"I'd imagine."

"For one thing, she totally has the right of it that Cordelia is an awesome name. If I ever need an English name, I have a feeling I would choose just that," Xiao Yan said.

It made Yong Qi laugh. "Well, it does have a sort of ring to it."

"For real, though," she continued, "she just looks at the world with this unadulterated joy, and it makes me wish sometimes that I could feel as much as she feels, even if at the same time my cynicism is scoffing at it all. Anne Shirley really makes me question how apathetic about life and beauty and the world in general we can be. I guess at some point in reading the books, I had this epiphany that pessimism isn't as cool and deep as I once, as an angry teenager, thought." She thought for a moment, before adding, as a new realisation came to her, "I needed Anne and her positivity at that point in life, actually."

She broke off with a sadder sigh than she intended, and forced a smile in hope that Yong Qi would take it and not pose any of the questions that her last point might have triggered.

"Does that need for positivity have anything to do with why you don't like to be called Yan Yan or Yan Er?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she said shortly.

He looked thoughtful for a moment before giving a nod. "Okay."

"Just okay?" she asked, surprised, but grateful nonetheless.

"Yes."

She stared at him for a moment, before offering a watery smile and whispered, "Okay."

They were quiet and snuggled against each other on the sofa for a moment, before Xiao Yan spoke again.

"I've gathered over the years that I am automatically drawn to red-headed girls. When I was growing up, I wanted to be Ginny."

Yong Qi's confusion was only too evident. "Weasley?"

"Yes, Ginny Weasley." Then, she pulled sudden away from Yong Qi and looked at him seriously. "Please don't tell me you don't like Ginny Weasley, or Heaven forbid, that you hate *Harry Potter*. If that is the case, we can't ever be together."

Yong Qi laughed so hard for such a long time that she had to shove him hard so that he paid attention to her again.
"You're serious?" he asked, still chuckling.

"This is serious!"

"Xiao Yan, I like *Harry Potter* as much as the next person —"

Xiao Yan groaned. "Oh god, if by that, you are trying to tell me only ever saw the movies, then we are done."

"No. For your information, when *Deathly Hallows* came out, Yong An and I were ready to go to a bookstore to get the book the moment it was released, which was like some unearthly hour of 6:00 in the morning. But then we got a very insistent memo from Security saying that it would be difficult to arrange security, with a few very pointed suggestions that we get the books delivered to us. I mean, granted, we were planning to have He Ke and Yong Yan, who were like thirteen and ten at the time, to come along, which would have complicated security measures…anyway, long story short, we got the books delivered."

Xiao Yan laughed and nudged his shoulder. "Poor baby."

"I thought you said 'baby' was an improper term of endearment?"

"Oh, that was not a term of endearment," she said, smirking. "So, Ginny Weasley?"

"What about her?"

"How do you feel about Ginny Weasley?"

Yong Qi quirked his brow at her, smiling. "You're really hung up about this, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said seriously. "Our potential relationship hangs on this. So?"

"Potential relationship?" he asked, eyebrow shooting up. "I thought we've gone past the potential?"

"Well, I changed my mind," she replied casually. "I need to know how you feel about Ginny Weasley before I decide."

Yong Qi gave the most confused of shrugs. "My opinion is, eh?"

"What do you mean, eh?"

"I mean I don't have an opinion. I have never particularly thought about it, about *her*?" he said with an expression that was a cross between amusement and perplexity. "She's not even one of the main characters."

"Urgh," Xiao Yan said, blowing out a rush of air.

Yong Qi looked at Xiao Yan closely and something seemed to dawn on him. "This is actually really important to you, isn't it?" he asked softly.

"Yes!" she cried. "Do you have *any idea* how much *Harry Potter*, yes, but *Ginny* in particular, gave me hope and comfort when I was younger?"

"I think I can imagine, or at least I can, with regards to the book series," he said. "But Ginny?"

"Yes!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Ginny! She is the proof that you can go through the worst experience or trauma anyone could go through in life and still come out of it well-adjusted and full of life, but
that doesn’t mean that you forget that the trauma ever happened either. It stays with you but you don’t have to let it destroy you. She’s the proof that no matter how bleak things are, the future can still turn out for the better, and you aren’t defined by what happens in your past.” She paused for a long time, wondering whether she was ready to open up this much to him. Biting her bottom lip with trepidation, she added, "I don't think you'll ever truly understand how important that message, that... guarantee of light at the end of the tunnel, even, was to me."

He gave her such a soft look that it almost made her cry. "I think I can imagine," he said, "if you’d tell me about it."

Not now. Not when everything between them was so new, and the last thing she wanted was that the past should intrude. So she shrugged over his request.

"She's extremely feminine but it's not treated like some sort of crime," she said instead, "and she's allowed to be good at sports and to kick ass at the same time. She has both healthy and unhealthy female friendships-slash-relationships, doesn't get trapped in some 'you're not like other girls' trope and later has a career that would that could easily interfere with her plans for a family but it clearly doesn't and she isn't condemned for either her choice of career or having a family, and she gets to be happy without having to give up who she is or compromise herself for a man, and she gets to be with the guy she loves despite the fact that Ginny Weasley could totally be awesome even without Harry Potter who is probably just going to be her biggest fan. Do you know how rare that kind of FEMALE CHARACTER EVEN IS?"

Xiao Yan got increasingly breathless and loud towards the end, and ended up staring defiantly at Yong Qi, who, in turn, was looking at her, torn between concern, amusement and bewilderment.

"I might need to read the last few books again," Yong Qi said finally with a smile.

"Yes, do."

Yong Qi was laughing and shaking his head now at the pouted look she was wearing, and Xiao Yan glared at him.

"I'm not laughing at you, I promise," he said, holding his hands up in surrender mode.

"What then?"

He grabbed her hand and kissed it. "You're just very cute when you get all worked up like that," he said, full of feelings. "I really like this passionate side of you."

Xiao Yan heaved a sigh. "I will defend Ginny Weasley with my dying breath."

"Duly noted. Never insult Ginny Weasley in front of you."

Xiao Yan couldn't help but giggle at that reference and pushed herself up to kiss him on the cheek. Yong Qi wasn't willing to leave it just at that, however, as he put his arms around her and pulled her close to him for a real kiss, which she happily gave into.

"Honestly, I paid a lot more attention to Harry when I read the books?" he said when they parted.

"Yeah, that's because you're a boy."

Yong Qi laughed. "Or maybe just because he's the main character."

"Do you know that if you ask Harry Potter fans who their favourite character is, no one actually
ever says Harry? He's built on the chosen one, saviour hero trope. I'm not saying as a character he doesn't have merits or that he's boring, but compared to others, he has less twists and turns."

"To be honest, Harry isn't my favourite character either," Yong Qi said.

"Who then?" Xiao Yan asked, curious.

"Ron."

She was incredulous. "Really?"

"Yeah, why is that so surprising?"

"You related best to the poor, insecure guy with an inferiority complex?" Xiao Yan asked in a teasing voice.

"You forgot to add that despite of all that, or because of all that, he is still very brave and loyal," Yong Qi said seriously.

She smiled. "Not denying that, actually."

"It's not...hard, actually, to grow up with insecurity and develop a kind of inferiority complex when...Well, look at it this way. From even before I was born, Yong An is the heir, where as I am --"

"-- the spare, as the convention goes?" Xiao Yan said irreverently.

"Yes, actually. It's not as if my family would ever use such crude terms, but that doesn't mean that anyone else -- the media, especially -- ever had that level of tact. He's my brother, and I love him, but that's exactly what makes it so easy to develop weird resentments, at least at one point in our lives."

"Poor Yong Yan, imagine what he'd have to deal with."

"Oh, Yong Yan is more removed from this whole messy dynamic, or he will be in a few years when Yong An gets married and have a son. Please let that be soon," Yong Qi added, actually holding up his hand with fingers crossed.

"I guess you're looking forward to the pressure being taken more off you, then," Xiao Yan said.

"I can only hope."

"What happens if Yong An has only daughters? Or like, turns out gay? Sorry."

Yong Qi laughed. "You're not sorry."

"No, I'm not. So, what if?"

"Then - and honestly I hesitate to use the word 'unfortunately' here, since it will come off as massively homophobic, which is really not the intention, but for me and probably everyone else, it's unfortunate -- I end up as his heir."

"And what if -- and I realise this is massively unrealistic, all things considered -- both your brothers and you are?"

"All things considered. You mean considering this," he said, laughing and gesturing between them.
Xiao Yan smiled and shrugged.

He scrunched up his brow in thought for a moment, then admitted, "I don't actually know the answer to that. Then again, it's not as if we – or any other monarchy, for that matter – have ever had constitutional precedence for it. But I think, compared to certain scenarios, being gay would be the least of our problems. Being straight and for some reason unable or unwilling to have a child would be considerably worse."

"Why?"

"Either way, the pressure would be massive. At least, in a same-sex relationship, no one expects you to bear children together. And in this day and age, they can't really disparage you for it."

"So what if you can't have children?" Xiao Yan asked. "It's the twenty-first century. There are always, like, adoption or surrogacy."

"The point of a hereditary title is to pass it down to an heir of the body. As for surrogacy, regardless of how that comes about, it would not be a child born of a legitimate marriage, and therefore not in line anyway."

"So what would happen in that case?"

"Honestly? Probably a constitutional crisis. Though technically after Yong An, me and Yong Yan, it goes to my uncles and their sons, but traditionally everyone's reluctant to move off to a different branch, and I only have female cousins anyway," Yong Qi said. "The reason there was so little discussion of Zi Wei's place in the succession was not because from Yong An down to her there were enough heirs that it is massively unlikely for her to be in a position to inherit the throne, but because neither she, neither of my sisters, nor any of their children, are actually in line for the throne in the first place."

Xiao Yan stared, her face scrunched up in disbelief. "Seriously?"

"Yes." Yong Qi sighed. "We are like Japan in the fact that succession to the throne is limited to only male members of the imperial family. Unlike Japan, we have slightly more male members in the imperial family so we haven't reached the point of crisis or faced any pressure to change the succession laws to more... modern terms yet."

"It's the twenty-first century!" Xiao Yan yelled. "How is there not pressure?"

"Mostly because Jiejie really doesn't want anything to do with the throne. He Ke has a lot to say about it, but she's not the first born, so even if our succession laws were more gender-equal, it wouldn't really affect her in the practical sense. Believe it or not, if Laoda were gay or unable to have children, it would not be an issue, because hey, what am I for?" Yong Qi said dryly. "But it might be an issue if, as you say, Yong An end up having only daughters, because then, skipping them would effectively be infringing on their rights in this modern era. But until that happens, as far as this country is concerned, it's not even an issue for contention, since we aren't at a point where the only immediate choices for succession are princesses."

"That sound so incredibly sexist, it's hard to know where to begin to explain why," Xiao Yan grumbled.

"The 'official' logic is that it's not so much sexist as a philosophy of "it's not broken, let's not fix it". I mean, Japan only considered changing their succession law when their emperor had little chance of having a grandson. They literally talked about divorce and bringing back concubines as an
alternative to female succession. Proceedings on everything halted the moment there was a possibility of a grandson for the emperor, and the bill was withdrawn the moment said possibility became reality."

"And Japan is the framework to go with here?" she demanded.

"Certainly not framework, but they are a point of reference, considering we are the only two monarchies remaining with traces of the same culture."

"So basically, the idea is that, instead of saying a woman can't inherit the throne because she's a woman, you say she can't inherit because the law says she can't and the law's not hurting anyone right now so we won't change it. Which is pretty much the same thing, but don't politicians just tell themselves the latter so that they can pat themselves on the back and give each other credit for not being sexist?" Xiao Yan asked, rolling her eyes.

Yong Qi smiled slightly. "I'm not saying there isn't sexism involved, but that sexism is so ingrained that it's morphed and mutated into a dozen other issues now."

"Such as what?" Xiao Yan challenged.

"Most obviously, the preservation of a dynasty, which is passed through the patrilineal line. If, say, He Jing were to inherit the throne, and her children, who would still take their father's name, succeed her, suddenly the throne switches to a completely different family name, ergo new dynasty. European monarchies avoid that because they do away with the family names altogether, and their concept of House is tied to the monarch, not to the father. From a cultural standpoint, we are dealing with something completely different. The point of this constitutional monarchy existing till this day is to preserve the bloodline that has existed in this position for four hundred years and that bloodline is, in the end, preserved in the male line."

"Yes, because this country has never gone through a change of dynasty before," Xiao Yan said sarcastically. "Why does it even matter what family name the imperial has now, anyway? It's not like you have any real useful power to keep in the family. And another thing: trying to preserve Manchurian blood in a family ruling over a predominantly Han country doesn't make any sense! It makes even less sense when you consider that now, after three hundred years of forbidding Man-Han intermarriages, you end up encouraging it. Regardless, there have been emperors born of Han mothers even before that and the concept of Manchurian kinship was based on clans and banners more than actual blood. You can't possibly still believe the blood in your male line now is exactly the pure Manchurian blood that began this dynasty! Your mother was ethnically Han, your grandmother was ethnically Han, the current empress is ethnically Han, for Heaven's sake! I would argue you don't even have any Manchurian blood in you anymore!"

Yong Qi laughed. "I'm not saying it holds up to scientific scrutiny, all right? You underestimate the extent to which constitutional monarchies are trapped by conservative mindsets. It is, after all, the only thing that allows us to be just somewhat relevant."

"So you're actually admitting you're not relevant?"

"Actually, I never said we were."

Xiao Yan straightened, a wide smile appearing on her face. "Yong Qi, are you saying that you are in favour of abolition of the monarchy?" she asked.

"You seem all too gleeful about that idea," he pointed out.
"I agree that a constitutional monarchy is not necessarily terribly relevant in the 21st century as it once was a necessary progression at the turn of the 20th," she answered slowly. "You still haven't answered my question."

"I think…" Yong Qi said, equally cautious, "abolition of the monarchy and switching completely to be a republic would cause many social and political changes that would be impossible to predict whether they would be for the better until after all the changes have happened, or to foresee all the consequences of such a change. Having the emperor as a symbolic, non-partisan Head of State is not a bad thing. The emperor and his family are required by constitution to focus national unity and remain politically neutral, so we don't vote – "

"You're not allowed to vote?" Xiao Yan interrupted, looking appalled.
Yong Qi shook his head. "The law doesn't prohibit us from voting, so we have the right to vote. We just don't ever exercise that right because it goes against the constitution. - "

"That's the same thing."

"In legal terms, it's not. Anyway, this means that unlike an elected Head of Government, we don't owe allegiance to any political party."

She couldn't help an extremely sceptical expression appearing on her face. "Does that actually work?"

"Does what work?"

"This apparent requirement that you can't have political opinions."

He laughed. "Of course we have political opinions. We just aren't free to voice them publicly, but you should hear my brother and father argue about the new labour law, which Ah Ma hates and Laoda sees as a necessary evil. His words, not mine. Anyway, generally speaking, we are bound by the constitution to act in the benefit of the country as a whole, and that means appearing politically neutral. Being non-partisan allows us to support wide ranges of organisations, charities, arts and industries without politics being in play, whereas politicians are by their very nature divisive. Even the most popular ones will be hated by half the country, and they know it, so they will intentionally divide the country to advance their careers."

"So your argument for the monarchy is that politicians are evil?" Xiao Yan asked, giggling.

He gave her a slightly exasperated look. "No. I'm just saying that in an elective system, there is always an element of turbulence as politicians fight over voters' support. Amid that, having a symbolic Head of State as something that is constant and does not change can be beneficial, especially when there is no real power in the position, so it's not like we can actually do much harm. Ah Ma obviously can't change a law that his government's put into place because he doesn't like it, but precisely because he can't change it, he can have discussions with both sides, and his purpose in those discussions would be to ensure the happiness of his people, not the furthering of any one party's political agenda." There was a pause, before he added, "One also cannot underestimate how much a constitutional monarch brings into the national economy in terms of tourism."

"I'm pretty sure people would still come see the Forbidden City even if you guys weren't living in it. If anything, more of it can be opened up for public tourism in that case," Xiao Yan pointed out.

"Of course, but an empty, unoccupied palace is not as attractive a prospect as one that is still in use," Yong Qi countered. "You do realise this is a complex subject that can be, and has been, debated over
and over for the last century right? It's a bit hard to me to give a well-thought out, adequate argument simply off the top of my head."

"And yet you presented quite a lengthy argument when in reality you could have just said yes or no to the question," Xiao Yan teased.

"If it were simply a matter of yes or no, then no, because then I'd be out of a job," he replied.

"It must be nice when being royal is your job," she commented carelessly.

"It's not – " Yong Qi started defensively. Then he stopped, and started again. "You've been around us for a while now; you know it's not all play and no work."

"I do, I do," she conceded with a smile. "Of course, I must see that, because otherwise what does it say about me now that I'm with you?"

"I would hope, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said with a smile, "that you are with me because of me, not because of anything else."

She smiled more softly now and leaned in to kiss him lightly. "I am."

She would have pulled away, but he looped his arms around her waist and held her to him. "Good," he whispered.

"How did we get to talking about all of this?" she asked as he dusted light kiss on her neck.

"It started with Harry Potter," he said, brushing his nose against hers and smiling.

"Do you want to just stop talking and do something else?" Xiao Yan murmured.

"Like what?" Yong Qi asked.

She grinned.

"Do you want to go on a double date with Er Tai and his girlfriend sometimes?" Yong Qi asked later.

"Er Tai has a girlfriend?"

"Apparently. He's been nagging me to meet her for a while. Actually, I was supposed to go with him...well, you distracted me."

She frowned. "When?"

"Not really relevant. The point is, he wants me to meet her. I'd really rather not be a third wheel."

Xiao Yan thought about it for a second before shrugging. "All right. Sure, why not?"

They agreed to have dinner with Er Tai and his girlfriend at Er Tai's apartment.

"I thought you told me once that you had a key?" Xiao Yan asked Yong Qi as they rang the doorbell.

"I have a keycard because you need one to take the elevator. It can open the door, obviously, but it's
not exactly polite to burst in unannounced. Even if he's my best friend."

The door pulled open, and it was not Er Tai standing there.

"Hi," Yong Qi said with a friendly smile. "You must be Sai Ya."

Meanwhile, Xiao Yan felt like the universe was playing some huge, cosmic joke on her. Apparently Sai Ya felt the same. She was not looking at Yong Qi at all; it was unclear that she even heard his words, as she was staring at Xiao Yan in disbelief.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Xiao Yan muttered under her breath.

Yong Qi looked between them in confusion. "Do you two know each other already?" he asked. Then, looking at Sai Ya more closely. "Wait, have I met you somewhere already? You look familiar. I think."

"Yes, you have," Xiao Yan said. "When you came to my room. This is my roommate."

"Hello, Xiao Yan," Sai Ya said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. To Yong Qi, she was slightly more upbeat. "Hi. You're the prince."

Yong Qi laughed, and even Xiao Yan saw some amusement in the situation. She wondered now how it was possible that Sai Ya never recognised Yong Qi before. Had she been living under a rock?

"Yes, I am, as you succinctly put it, the prince," Yong Qi said. "Where's Er Tai?"

"He's on the phone," Sai Ya said. She finally realised that they were still standing at the door and took a step to the side to make room for them. "Come in."

Xiao Yan gave Yong Qi a sideways glance of both amusement and exasperation before proceeding him into Er Tai's apartment.

As she and Yong Qi were toing off their shoes, Er Tai appeared. "Hey, sorry, that was my mother. Couldn't exactly just blow her off. Come in, guys."

Xiao Yan gave Er Tai a hug in greeting as she passed him. Er Tai herded them into the living room, but Sai Ya didn't follow. She made some excuse about getting something from the kitchen before disappearing.

"Somehow I get the feeling that you and she don't like each other very much," Yong Qi commented to Xiao Yan.

"How is that possible? You just met," Er Tai said in confusion.

"Nope," Xiao Yan said. "She's actually my roommate."

"Wait, *you're* her roommate?" Er Tai asked, incredulous. Then he burst out laughing. "You're the one she's been complaining about?"

"Wait, she complains about me? We don't ever even see each other! What does she have to complain about?" Xiao Yan asked indignantly.

"Really?" Yong Qi asked. "I thought you said you've been spending time together."

"I lied," she said, shooting him an apologetic look.
"So you were avoiding me."

"Yes. I was foolish. I'm sorry," she said with a playful smile, before leaning in to kiss his cheek.

"How much of a disaster is tonight going to be?" Er Tai asked, though he still looked amused more than concerned.

Xiao Yan gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, now that I know she's your girlfriend, I'll be on my best behaviour. It's not like we hate each other, exactly. We just have a clash of personalities. It didn't help that we sort of didn't make the best impression when we first met."

"What happened?" Er Tai asked.

"Xiao Yan here bumped into me and didn't apologise," Sai Ya's voice sounded from the door. She had appeared with a tray with four glasses of red wine.

Xiao Yan scoffed, unable to help muttering, "More like you bumped into me and spilled coffee all over me."

Er Tai and Yong Qi exchanged a look.

"How about you guys start anew?" Er Tai asked, smiling. "Let me do the introductions."

Sai Ya rolled her eyes but then shot Xiao Yan an exasperated 'if we must' look. Despite the tension between them, Xiao Yan couldn't help feeling rather touched that Sai Ya, as prickly and clearly used to getting her own way as she had shown herself to be, still cared enough about Er Tai to give in and appease him in this matter.

"All right, Xiao Yan, this is my girlfriend, Sai Ya. Sai Ya, this is Xiao Yan," Er Tai said.

Xiao Yan gave an exaggeratedly polite smile and stuck her hand out. Sai Ya shook it.

Turning to an amused-looking Yong Qi, Er Tai added, "And this, Sai Ya, is my friend, Yong Qi."

"We've met," Yong Qi said, chuckling.

"Yes, we have," Sai Yan said. Then, turning to Xiao Yan with an accusing look, she said, "You never said he's a prince when he came to see you!"

Xiao Yan burst out into an incredulous laugh. "No one has ever needed to be told that!"

"Yeah, well," Sai Ya said with a shrug.

Er Tai laughed and told Yong Qi and Xiao Yan, "Sai Ya isn't from around here, so it's not surprising she didn't recognise you."

"Where are you from?" Xiao Yan asked. "Mars?"

Yong Qi gave her a half-amused, half-warning look at her still snippy tone. She shrugged.

"Just Australia," Sai Ya answered, clearly noting the tone but chose to ignore it.

For the first time, Xiao Yan was intrigued. "Really?"

"You guys are roommates and you didn't know that?" Yong Qi asked.
"Well, we weren't very motivated to speak to each other before," Sai Ya said.

"Well, it's a good thing we have tonight," Er Tai said, smiling. "Come on, we can talk more in the dining room. Let's eat."

Dinner was not the disaster Xiao Yan could have predicted.

If anything, she even had to admit, it was pleasant. It was probably down to the influence of Er Tai and Yong Qi, both of whom were determined to get Sai Ya and Xiao Yan to act civilly to each other. Even if they weren't roommates, their boyfriends were best friends, and it was clear that they would now be seeing a lot more of each other, therefore it would be good if they could actually get along.

It helped that Yong Qi spent a significant portion of the meal occasionally stroking her palm under the table. It was hard to act angry or hostile when his touch was making her so light-headed and giddy.

Unexpectedly, Xiao Yan found that under the haughty outside, Sai Ya wasn't actually that unpleasant to talk to once they got over their bad first impressions. She was even fascinated when Sai Ya told Yong Qi about how she came to Beijing to study Mandarin because her parents wanted her to be more in touch with her roots.

"If you asked me, if they wanted me not to lose touch with my roots, they shouldn't have migrated in the first place," she said. "Not that I mind coming here. If I did, I wouldn't have bothered. I guess it would be nice to have a couple of years' relaxation, studying nothing by a language I already know. Sort of. I mean, I know I'm not as fluent as my parents want me to be, but like, I can communicate fine."

"Have you ever been to China before this?" Yong Qi asked.

"No, never."

Conversation eventually drifted to how they met each other.

"We met in a Starbucks," Sai Ya said. "Which is insane, because I never thought I'd ever be caught dead in a Starbucks, never mind drink anything from one."

Xiao Yan laughed in disbelief. "You've never had Starbucks?"

"I'm from Australia. Australia hates Starbucks," Sai Ya said matter-of-factly.

"Why?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Because it comes charging in, proclaiming to teach coffee to a country that's already got its own coffee culture," Sai Ya said, scoffing. "Honestly, I think the biggest culture shock of coming here is just seeing it everywhere."

"That's your biggest culture shock of coming to China for the first time?" Xiao Yan said with comical, exaggerated expressions of disbelief. Sai Ya just shrugged.

"There's one in the Western Palaces," Er Tai pointed out gleefully.

Yong Qi grinned. "To my father's mortification and my younger siblings' delight. We're all still trying to get him to admit that the latter is why it's still allowed to exist there."
"Can he boot it out of there?" Xiao Yan asked. "Seeing how he doesn't actually literally own the palace anymore?"

"If the emperor says he doesn't want a Starbucks in his palace, even if he doesn't have the legal rights to decide, Xiao Yan, his words still carry a lot of weight," Er Tai said, laughing.

"True," she conceded.

"Starbucks is a bizarre business model, here in China at least, if you think about it," Yong Qi said, "considering how like 90% of the people in this country are lactose intolerant. It's basically just managed to get up on hype. But anyway. Sai Ya, you and Er Tai and Starbucks?"

"Anyway," Sai Ya said, "it was raining so I ducked into a Starbucks mostly for cover. Then I reckoned since I was already there, I might as well see what all the hype was about. But anyway, got a place to sit first, and before I could actually go and order anything, Er Tai put this ridiculous flirty Word doc into my AirDrop."

"It's embarrassing how cheesy you can be sometimes," Yong Qi told Er Tai, laughing.

"You're just jealous because your flirting game isn't on par with mine," Er Tai replied, smirking.

"That is so not true."

Er Tai snorted. "How long did it take for you and Xiao Yan to get together again?"

"Not that long," Xiao Yan said, protesting. "I mean, from the first time he broached the subject with me and our first date, it was less than a month."

Er Tai burst out laughing while Yong Qi attempted to glare him into keeping quiet. "Oh, you guys are so cute. Yes, Xiao Yan, perhaps from the first time he told you how he felt about you, it was a month. But you have no idea how long it's been since he first started crushing on you."

Before Xiao Yan could say anything in reply, Yong Qi asked Sai Ya hastily, "So how did you reply?"

Sai Ya shrugged. "I told him I'd go out with him if he bought me a frappe. I didn't think he'd actually do it." She added, "How did you two meet? How do you even meet a prince?"

"Easily," Xiao Yan said, "when you go to the same uni as him."

"They met in the library. It's the nerdiest story, ever," Er Tai said.

"Actually, not exactly. I mean, well, yes, he saw me the first time in the library," Xiao Yan explained, "but I actually saw you both before that."

"When?" Yong Qi asked.

"It was the first day I moved into the dormitory during orientation week. Zi Wei and I were exploring the campus when we came across the Business Faculty."

"Ah, you caught us avoiding Yong Qi's fan club?" Er Tai asked, chortling.

"Something like that," Xiao Yan said. Then shooting Yong Qi an amused look, she added, "I didn't like you then."

"Why not?" he asked indignantly.
"Well, when I chose Yong Le, I didn't take into account you'd be here. I thought it would be a huge pain to be at a school where the learning environment would be disrupted on a regular basis by a scene like that."

"It's not as if I could help it," Yong Qi grumbled.

"That's what Zi Wei said. You should be glad that even before she knew she was related to you, Zi Wei was already defending you."

"Who's Zi Wei?" Sai Ya asked.

And that started an entirely different story.

At the end of the night, Xiao Yan couldn't quite say that the evening had gone off without one stilted moment, but at least she and Sai Ya were cleared of their admittedly childish resentments for each other. She had a feeling that things in their room would be a lot less tense and uncomfortable now.

"I have to say, I feel a lot better now that I know where she spends all her time," she told Yong Qi later as he drove her home.

"What do you mean?"

"She's usually literally never home, even overnight," Xiao Yan explained. "Honestly that's why we knew nothing about each other. She's never in one place enough for us to actually talk to each other. Anyway, I know she's an adult and everything, but sometimes I wonder if I would even know if she was lying dead somewhere considering she's out of our room more often than not. I guess I'll be less worried about her now."

"You didn't like her before but you worried about her," Yong Qi said, smiling fondly. "Has anyone ever told you how amazing you are?"

She didn't say anything in answer to that, but couldn't help a small, happy smile blooming on her lips nevertheless.

Chapter End Notes

I admit this chapter is a tiny bit self-indulgent, and after writing it, I did wonder if it was slightly too nerdtastic for what Xiao Yan Zi is supposed to be. But to be honest, I might be going off the scene in the last episode where Xiao Yan Zi actually got really into Shui Hu Zhuan, which says to me that she is not necessarily opposed to the whole idea of literature, just the boring kind that talks about things she doesn't care about. If you think in that direction, then it actually lends itself pretty well to this slightly geeky Xiao Yan I've been writing from the beginning.

Other characterisation motivations for the conversations in this chapter can be explained in a lengthy essay that I won't bore you with. I'll just say that as I was writing this story, I realised that there is something common that connects all the female characters I've idolized in my life: Xiao Yan Zi, Ginny Weasley, Anne Shirley, MCU's Peggy Carter, Donna Noble. They are resilient women who go through all sorts of hardship in their lives but get through it on the strength of their own optimism and belief that there is goodness in the world; who refuse to be changed for the worse by the circumstances
and heartbreak life throws at them; who forge strong female friendships with other
women they will stick with through thick and thin and will always be there for each
other. Yeah, basically I have a type, and I honestly, seriously do think that Xiao Yan
(Zi) would really like all of these women, as characters, and as people, if they were real
and met.

Some other things: There is obviously Backstory laced in this chapter that will lead to
Things in the next few chapters. None of the politics in this story are necessarily my
politics. I actually had to go look up whether Starbucks ever had stores in Australia.
Apparently they do, but apparently the stores are also more well hidden than Diagon
Alley because as I don't recall ever seeing one. Yes that bit about Starbucks in the
palace is a probably-not-so-sly joke about the Starbucks that existed about ten years ago
in the Palace Museum before it shut down. Pay attention to the epigraphs :)
And so it goes
You two are dancing in a snow globe round and round
And he keeps the picture of you in his office downtown
And you understand now why they lost their minds and fought the wars
And why I've spent my whole life trying to put it into words

— You Are In Love, Taylor Swift

2011
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"Here, this is for you," Yong Qi said as he sat down at Xiao Yan's desk while she was sitting cross-legged on her bed. He slid a rectangular box across the desk at her.

She picked it up and stared at it. "It's a – an iPhone?"

"Yes. It's not new."

Xiao Yan looked at him sceptically. "Looks pretty new."

"The box looks new because there's nothing to do with an iPhone box except shove it into a closet somewhere."

"So it's not new?"

"No, it's my old phone."

"And you're giving it to me?" Xiao Yan frowned. "Yong Qi, I don't need a smart phone."

"I know you don't need it, but I would like you to have it."

"Why?" she asked, bewildered.

"Because calling and texting between iPhones doesn't need to cost money and it will actually save both of us in the long run," he explained. "I want to be able to text you random things without worrying I'm draining your phone credit by expecting a reply. It's a 3S so it doesn't have Facetime, which is a pity, but I can work with that."

Xiao Yan looked at him hesitantly. That was when he realised she was not looking at this as simply as he was.

"Xiao Yan, you shouldn't feel uncomfortable using this," he said gently. "It's not like this is doing anything except being buried in my closet right now."
She ignored his reassurance for now and asked, "If you want to give it to someone, why don't you give it to your younger brother or sister?"

Yong Qi laughed. "Xiao Yan, do you honestly think my very teenaged, very prone to peer-pressure younger brother and sister would willingly put up with a last generation phone? They will probably upgrade to a 4S the day it comes out and definitely before I do."

"I don't want to feel like – " she started, and then trailed off, as if she didn't know how to continue without sounding falsely modest.

"You don't have to," he replied, understanding anyway. His voice was gentle as he added, "Xiao Yan, I'm not trying to buy your affection. You know that."

"I do!" she exclaimed. "I'm not saying that. It's just this can – "

"If you end that with 'feed a third world country' or mentioning struggling earthquake victims in Sichuan, I swear…" he interrupted, his face scrunched annoyance, even if he didn't finish his thought.

Xiao Yan gave him an exasperated look.

"Well, it can," she mumbled.

Yong Qi sighed, loudly.

"Why do you hate that argument so much?"

"Because," he exclaimed, "it assumes that one can't have nice things and do good for the world. Those things aren't mutually exclusive, and thinking that is assuming that those with money are somehow automatically taking away from those who don't and that's not necessarily true, at all. That's not even how the world, or wealth, or economics work!"

"Says the very, very rich person," Xiao Yan countered, smiling defiantly at him.

He knew her well enough by now to know that she was deliberately winding him up, so he only rolled his eyes.

"Did you know that my brother and sister and I are patrons of a charity foundation formed in our mother's name?" he asked, more seriously. "After Sichuan, we were briefed every other week, for an entire year, on the foundation's disaster relief there. We are still being kept in touch, though the updates are less frequent. I am well aware of what the situation there was like, is like, even now, and honestly this phone makes very little difference to that."

Xiao Yan sighed and turned serious as well. "I'm sorry. You mean well, and I'm not deliberately being difficult."

"I know. I'm not exactly offering you a diamond ring here – "

"Don't!" she yelped. "Don't joke about that!"

He smiled slightly at her panicked look and reached over to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sorry," he said. "But in all seriousness, it's just a phone I have lying around that will make it easier for us to communicate. It used to be my phone so it's been encrypted and gone through all the extra security measure dress-up, which means it's more secure than your average phone. Your using it can only be good for our relationship. Please put it out of its misery and use it?"
Xiao Yan frowned and still looked distressed. He moved from the chair and sat down on the bed beside her.

"Xiao Yan, why does it bother you this much?" he asked, taking both her hands in his. "Is it just because you don't want me to give you something of this material value, or is it something else?"

He seemed to have inadvertently hit a nail on its head because she looked even less comfortable now. Yong Qi watched her closely, didn't press, and allowed her the time to sort out whatever thought process she was clearly trying to shift through. If she was going to confide in him, it would be of her own accord.

"It's just," she said finally, hesitantly, weighing every word, "in...prior experience, nothing comes from nothing, and for nothing. Whether it is material possession, or even intangible...attention, there had always been expectation that the person I'm receiving that from is entitled to something else, from me. And I'm not always ready for that."

It took Yong Qi a moment to work around her tone, the evasions and euphemism.

"Xiao Yan, if this is about sex -- " (Apparently, it was, because she looked away much too quickly, pulled her hands away from him and clenched them nervously on her lap.) " -- I'm not expecting you to sleep with me because I gave you a phone, or anything else, for that matter."

She looked down and fiddled with the sleeves of her cardigan. "I know. I'm not saying what I'm feeling is logical when applied to you. I just can't help feeling that and I don't know how to stop feeling that."

Some great emotion rose in Yong Qi's chest and he suddenly felt enormously protective of her. He put his arms around her and was relieved when she leaned into his hug rather than pull away.

"I'm sorry, you're trying to be thoughtful and I'm just being stupid," she said, her voice muffled against his shirt.

"No, you're not," he whispered softly, leaning his cheek against her hair. He began rubbing her back in comfort. "Xiao Yan, your feelings are never stupid. Not to me."

He could hear her breath hitch a little. It made him tighten his grip on her. He turned his head so that he could lay a kiss on her hair.

"Xiao Yan, it doesn't matter what happened before, and I'm not asking you to tell me if you don't want to," he said gently. "I l- "

The words 'love you' almost escaped him but fortunately he held them back in time. The feelings behind the words weren't new to him, but he was taken aback by the fact that he felt ready enough to say them out loud. And yet, it was far too early; he couldn't say it out loud just yet.

Even without vague hints from Zi Wei, he already knew there were things in the past that Xiao Yan was running from. Things that haunted her that she didn't feel she could confide in him yet. He had never asked, because he knew if he did, she would force herself to tell him. He didn't want that. If she wanted to tell him, she would do it on her own. He didn't need to know, otherwise. Still, all this considered, to say those three words to her now would only freak her out and add even more to her fear that there were expectations behind the words. He wanted make her feel happy when he finally said it, not distress her even more.

He forced himself to start again. "You mean a lot to me, and I'm not going to ruin that by pushing for something you're not ready for."
She seemed to bury herself even further into his arms, shaking slightly. Yong Qi was sure she was trying to hide the fact that she was crying a little. Her voice was thick as she mumbled, "I'm sorry."

He pulled away and cupped her cheeks in his hands. "Don't be," he said gently, brushing away the tears at the corner of her eyes with his thumb.

Xiao Yan reached up to wrap her arms around his neck and looked up at him through her eyelashes. "You mean a lot to me, too," she whispered. "Especially when you put up with me so."

He smiled and caressed her cheek gently. She pulled herself up to kiss him; their entire conversation around mobile phones were momentarily forgotten.

November

Xiao Yan and Sai Ya eventually managed to reach a point where they could believably call each other friends. But even then, Xiao Yan found herself effectively roommate-less as Sai Ya still showed little inclination to spend much time in the room that she was – or probably her parents were – paying for.

"Well, I'm not much for being trapped in this tiny room, you know?" Sai Ya said when Xiao Yan mentioned it to her, once. "Don't expect me to text if I don't come home. I'll probably only text if I was planning to come home unexpectedly, just to make sure I don't walk in on something. By the way, I just realised, we never got each other's numbers. What's yours?"

Xiao Yan recited her number for Sai Ya, which she dialed. A second later, Xiao Yan's phone rang; even though she already knew who was calling and wasn't going to answer the call anyway, by habit, she turned over the phone, which had been resting on her desk, to check the number.

"Your number ends in 898 right?" she asked rhetorically.

"Yes," Sai Ya said, hanging up. Then, glancing at the phone in Xiao Yan's hand, she added, "That's new."

Xiao Yan shrugged without comment. The phone was not new in any definition of the word. She had been using it for a while now. From the little smile Sai Ya was giving her, Xiao Yan had a feeling that Sai Ya knew exactly where the phone came and when it came into Xiao Yan's possession.

"Speaking of not walking in on each other," Sai Ya added. She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out something made of cardboard. It turned out to be a door-hanger, not unlike the "Do not disturb" signs found in a hotel. Unlike the hotel signs, however, this hanger said "Shhh! I'm studying."

"If you do ever come home with this hanging on the outside of the door, whatever you do, don't come in," Sai Ya said, hanging it on the inside doorknob.

Xiao Yan stifled a laugh. "I'm guessing you wouldn't be studying though."

"My old school gave out a gazillion of these things every year," Sai Yan said, shrugging. "And I suppose I would be studying something. Probably not books, though."

This time, Xiao Yan did laugh.

"I mean, I'd do the same for you, so totally feel free to use it," Sai Ya added.
Xiao Yan only nodded with a vague half-smile.

"Anyway, it's just a precaution," Sai Ya continued. "You already know how rarely I am actually home. I would never kick you out for a whole night or anything."

"Glad to know that," Xiao Yan said with a genuine smile.

"Though even I were to do that, it's not like you'd be entirely homeless, right?" Sai Ya said with a smirk.

Xiao Yan rolled her eyes. "Could say that same about you."

In the days that followed, despite their agreement on how to not disturb each other, Sai Ya's schedule still didn't change. Xiao Yan had yet to come to come home to a "Shhh! I'm studying" sign at the door, which probably meant Sai Ya was doing her 'studying' elsewhere. Considering her boyfriend didn't live with his parents, Xiao Yan was hardly surprised that this was the case.

Xiao Yan was also glad when this meant that she could reliably count on their room being left to her sole use when she needed it.

Sometimes, it was just simply more relaxing for Xiao Yan and Yong Qi to spend the evening in her room rather than brave the idea of going out and being given double takes and second looks everywhere they went. She tried to be a good sport about it, considering she knew he had as little control as she did over what other people did, but she couldn't help finding it trying most of the time.

That chilly late November Friday evening found the two of them cuddling on her bed with her computer on their laps, marathoning through the new TV version of *Three Kingdoms*.

Or at least, that was the last thing Xiao Yan remembered doing. The next thing she knew, she was stirring awake with a nasty pain in her neck, and it was morning. She turned to find Yong Qi nose to nose with her, startling her. After all, they were lying on her single bed, so it was hardly a surprise that she could feel the entire length of his body pressed against her side. She couldn't help but smile at the sight of him so close; she forced herself to sit up to resist the urge to kiss him and thus waking him up.

Her laptop must have tipped over when they fell asleep the night before and was now lying at the foot of the bed, closed, with its bottom side up. She thought it was a miracle that neither of them kicked it to the floor in their sleep.

She leaned forward to pick up the laptop, opened it and woke it up only to properly shut it down before putting it safely on the floor.

Her movements and the sunlight through the window woke Yong Qi and he struggled against the tangle of numb limbs, sheets and covers to sit up right as well.

"Did we fall asleep?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep and burying his face in the curve of her neck. She couldn't help but sigh contentedly at the touch and the little kisses he began scattering there.

"Yeah," she said, sighing softly, contentedly, as she felt one of his hands slide under her shirt and starting running his fingertips against the bare skin of her back.

The sensation was overwhelming and she turned around to face him, pushed him so that his back was pressed against the wall before leaning in and kissing him.
She lost track of time amid the luscious feelings of lips against lips, heated hands brushing against her skin and breathless gasps. The world could have stopped moving for all she knew. They were only interrupted when a loud alert sounded from Yong Qi's phone.

Yong Qi pulled away reluctantly from her, and still hazy-eyed, reached for his phone which was lying on her desk. One look at the screen made him become instantly more alert, and he untangled himself from her, saying, "Oh god, is that the time? Xiao Yan, I really have to go. I didn't realise… anyway, I have a lunch appointment – "

In his haste to scramble out of bed, Yong Qi tripped and would have fallen flat on his face onto the floor if she did not grab a handful of his shirt to stay him. "Careful," she said.

He smiled at her but continued to pull the sheets away and felt around the floor for his shoes. She was sure she looked just as rumpled as he did; it was not only due to having slept in their clothes.

"It's only nine," she said, running her hand through his hair in an attempt to comb and flatten it.

"Yeah, but there's a briefing beforehand, and I have to shower and change," he said, distractedly, pulling on his shoes. "I'm surprised no one's called…"

And it was as if that was the cue, because right at that moment, his phone rang.

"Yes, yes, I know, I'm coming," Yong Qi said impatiently to whoever it was on the other end.

His phone was clamped between his ear and his shoulder as he leaned down to tie the laces of his shoes. When he hung up, he turned around to look apologetically at Xiao Yan.

"I really have to go, I'm so sorry," he said.

She smiled, and squeezed his hand. "Of course, go, go. Don't let me make you late."

He leaned down to give her another quick kiss. "I'll try to call you later. Or at least text. And I'll see you soon, 'kay? I love you."

With that he grabbed his coat and phone, and rushed out the door.

It took several moments after the door had closed behind him for Xiao Yan, still sitting on her bed, to realise what exactly he had said.

I love you.

"Hey, so did you make it in time?" Xiao Yan asked nonchalantly when Yong Qi called her later that afternoon. She was determined to not sound like his declaration that morning had turned her into a mess of emotions and she had hardly been able to concentrate on anything since.

"Yeah, all that rushing made me early."

"You left your wallet."

"Did I?" he asked distractedly.

"Isn't that why you're calling?"

"No, not really." There was a deliberate pause. Then, she could hear him take an audible breath. "I wanted to…What I said when I left…"
"It's okay, you were rushing off," Xiao Yan cut in hastily, "you were just saying things, it's fine if you don't - "

"No!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "That's the thing. I mean it. I do, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan felt like her heart had stopped as she listened to these words. There was little she could do but grip her phone tightly and try to take deep, calming breaths. Her throat felt constricted and she was glad Yong Qi was still speaking, because she didn't think she knew what to say if he expected her to make a reply now.

"God, do I mean it with all my heart," Yong Qi said. He had never sounded more earnest. His voice trembled as he repeated the words which had undone her that morning, "I love you."

Xiao Yan let out a shaky breath, and still didn't speak. She knew that perhaps she should, that his declaration needed a better answer from her than this silence. He deserved a better answer from her than this silence. But she was still so overwhelmed with both his feelings and her own that she couldn't pry her mouth open to say anything.

Yong Qi didn't seem to expect her to say anything yet, though. After another deep breath, he continued, "But I hadn't planned to say those words to you for the first time quite in that situation. I'd thought… I'd thought it would be this special moment as…I don't know, some sort of gesture that we would always remember. I didn't intend for me to say it the first time as this kind of a sign off, as a throw away remark. But that's also the thing, though. I do want those words to become so natural that I can say it like that and know that you know I mean it. I guess I want us to eventually be comfortable enough that those words can become everything – a hello, a goodbye, a comfort, a reminder. I'm not sorry for saying it this morning. I'm just sorry if it took you by surprise and if you weren't ready for it."

He finally seemed to have finished, and yet she still couldn't speak. She could practically feel the tension he surely must be feeling when her end of the line remained silent.

"Xiao Yan?" His voice was shaking with nerves.

"You called just to make sure I was okay with you saying that?" she finally asked. She still felt rather choked up and her voice sounded gravelly.

"Yes," he said with desperate tenderness. "I wanted you to know that I meant it, that I didn't just say it because I fell asleep in your room. I didn't want you to think I said it maybe only as a way to pressure you into something more."

"I haven't turned to that conclusion, Yong Qi. To be honest, I didn't quite register exactly what you said until after you've gone," she said with a shaky laugh.

"And even then," he rushed on, "you don't have to feel obligated to say it back…"

"Yong Qi - "

"I would never expect you to say it just because I did, not before you mean it - "

"Yong Qi!"

"Yes?"

She paused, to give both of them time to prepare for her own enormous confession that she knew was coming. Then, she said, her voice this time unwavering, "I do feel the same." She could hear
him suck in a breath at her words, and she couldn't help smiling. She added gently, "Don't doubt that."

"Oh Xiao Yan," he breathed. Even just in those three words, he sounded as if she had made every single one of his precious dreams come true.

"I admit, this morning, you took me by surprise," Xiao Yan continued, "and I was overwhelmed. After you left. But it wasn't bad overwhelmed. You know what I mean?"

He made a little affirmative humming noise.

"I admit I did panic, a little, but not in the way you're afraid of. I'm just not very good at this, Yong Qi."

"At what?" he asked.

"Admitting my feelings to myself. Allowing myself to feel it and express it. When you said it...you forced me to admit that...that I love you too. And that scares me a little. Maybe a lot. I never thought I could feel like this, not with you, not with anyone." She felt choked up with emotions again, and had to laugh a little at herself to relieve the tension. "I don't know, I'm not making sense."

"No, no, you are. I understand, I do," he said. "After I realised that I just said those words I've wanted to say to you for such a long time in that way, contrary to all my plans, I was at loose ends too, Xiao Yan. I thought you felt the same, I hoped you felt the same, and I am so, so glad you feel the same."

She didn't need to see his face to see that beautiful smile that must now be on his face, filled with happiness.

"But the thing is, Xiao Yan," he continued, "even if you didn't, it wouldn't change anything. I would be scared, of course, that the words might scare you off, but I would still mean them all and I wouldn't take them back for anything."

She sniffed as unbidden tears sprung to her eyes upon realising the strength of his feelings.

His voice dropped lower, but she could still hear the truth in it. "I think, I have loved you for a long time. Maybe even since the first time we met. Or if not, if I had known then how much I would love you now, I feel I should have loved you at first sight."

As emotional as his words had steadily been making her, his last words caused Xiao Yan to give an undignified giggle. Yong Qi fell silent at the sound.

"I'm sorry," she said hastily. She could imagine the consternation on his face. "I know you're in the middle of a grand declaration of love and you're very sincere, but you know that's a quote from a novel, right?"

There was a moment of silence before Yong Qi spoke, much more hesitantly now, "Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

"What book?"

"It's called Just One Smile is Very Alluring," she said, unable to stop giggling. "It's really cheesy, about gamers falling in love."
Her explanation made him laugh ruefully. "I swear I have no idea where I picked it up," he said.

"It's all right," she said, still smiling widely. "It's cute. And I'm sure you mean it."

"I do."

After that affirmation, which made her think almost absurdly of what one said as vows to a wedding, they both fell silent. It wasn't uncomfortable. If anything, it was the kind of silence in which they both understood everything each other wanted to say.

She would be more than happy to continue the silence if they had been next to each other. On the phone though, she had to speak up after a while. "Yong Qi?"

"Yes?"

"I don't know what to say."

He chuckled. "You don't have to say anything."

"So we're just going to continue this call without saying anything?"

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No, don't go through so much trouble. Just go on Skype. I just want to see you."

She fancied she could hear the smile in his voice as he answered, "Sure. I'll see you in a minute."

"I love you," she said, smiling herself.

There was a significant pause, before Yong Qi answered, his voice low as if confiding a secret, "Love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

Just One Smile is Very Alluring is a very rough translation of the title 微微一笑很倾城 by Gu Man (顾漫). Yong Qi is not actually quoting it, consciously or unconsciously. The fact that he says something very close to the most important quote in this novel is supposed to be a coincidence. Which really is my way of saying I really want to give those words to him but I can't because they're not mine, but it would be entirely out of character for Yong Qi to actually read this novel and quote it. So coincidence. :P
Chapter Notes

It was months, and months of back and forth
You're still all over me like a wine—stained dress I can't wear anymore

Hung my head as I lost the war, and the sky turned black like a perfect storm

Rain came pouring down when I was drowning
That's when I could finally breathe
And by morning gone was any trace of you,
I think I am finally clean

— Clean, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2012

January

Yong Qi had turned off the engine and was about to get out of the car when Xiao Yan's voice called out.

"Wait!"

What startled him was not what she said, but the sharp, high-pitched tone she'd used, and the fact that she was now staring out of the window at the entrance of her building, transfixed.

He froze, slightly risen from his seat and looked at her in puzzlement. Most of her attention was still directed at whatever she was seeing, and she only reached back to grope behind her. Managing to get a fistful of his sweater, she pulled him down, hard.

"Xiao Yan?" he asked, concerned, reaching out to touch her hand. She whirled around to stare at him, wide-eyed, and jerked her hand away as if burnt. Yong Qi forced himself to not sound quite as unsettled as he really was feeling. "Hey, it's just me."

She was still staring at him with that enormous, lost look in her eyes. Then she turned abruptly away and looked down at her lap, her hands gripping the edge of the seat so hard that her knuckles were white and she seemed to be forcing herself to take deep breath.

"Xiao Yan, what – " he started, but she interrupted in that same high, breathless voice.

"Can we just go, please?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't care, just drive. Just get out – "

There was something in the way she sounded, in the look akin to terror on her face that told Yong Qi
he should comply, no questions asked. She was tilting her head back against the back of the seat now, her eyes closed, biting down on her bottom lip and still clenching the leather seat as if her life depended on it. He reached over to her side, pulled the seatbelt over and buckled it for her, before putting his own seatbelt back on and the car into gear, pulling out of the parking space.

As he drove past the entrance, he noticed first that Xiao Yan seemed to sink down into the seat in an attempt to not be seen from outside, and second, there was a man pacing around the entrance of the building, as if waiting for something.

Or someone, perhaps.

He could only glance over at Xiao Yan in burning concern, but drove silently, mostly because he was unsure how to even begin the conversation to ask her what it was about the man – if he was the problem – that made her react like she was.

After five minutes of aimless wandering, Yong Qi stopped the car on the other side of campus to her dormitory building. Xiao Yan was still sitting eerily still in her seat with her eyes closed, but she was no longer clenching her seat nor did she look so nauseated as before. Her hands were twisted in her lap and her lips were pressed together in a thin line.

"Xiao Yan?" Yong Qi tried again.

Her eyes flew open and she turned to look at him, as if she only just realised he was next to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly, and now that she was looking at him did he dare to reach out again, stroking her shoulder soothingly.

"I – " she started, then her breath hitched in her throat and for a moment, he was sure she would burst out into tears.

"Oh sweetie," he said hurriedly, touching her arm in comfort. "Won't you tell me what's wrong?"

She just shook her head and buried her face in her hands for a long moment. He waited, running his hand up and down her arm in an apparently futile attempt to calm her.

When she finally looked up, she was wiping away tears with the back of her hands. Then she said, her voice thick and hoarse, "Can we go back to yours?"

Of all the ways he'd ever hoped Xiao Yan would say these words to him, this did not resemble any of them. This was neither a casual suggestion to just spend time together, as they had done before, nor some saucy proposition, but a desperate plea for sanctuary. Yong Qi forcibly swallowed the question that was fighting to get out, and sternly reminded himself that her need for safety now was more important than any burning curiosity he could have, even if that curiosity was also laden with worry.

"Okay," he said simply, softly.

She merely gave him a look like she was drowning and he just threw her a rope. Reaching out, she squeezed his hand so hard that it hurt, but as swift as the look and the touch were, she turned back into herself equally fast. Yong Qi wanted to pull her in his arms, but there was something about the way she was holding herself that told him he would only be upsetting her rather than comforting her.

For the entire drive, Xiao Yan stared ahead stonily and did not speak. Yong Qi couldn't think of anything to say that could comfort her, considering he had no idea what was wrong, and his guesses were getting increasingly more alarming by each successive one. He could only occasionally throw
her worried looks and forced himself to give her the quiet and the space she so clearly wanted.

She didn't seem to notice when they drove into the Palace through Shen Wu Men, even though it always took a while to meander through the narrow driveways that lead from the gate to the residences. When he pulled into the courtyard of Xian Fu Gong, she startled and looked around, taking a moment to realise where she was. He walked around the other side to hold the door open for her as she exited. Zi Wei's car was in the courtyard, but Yong Qi didn't think she was home. It was her six-month anniversary with Er Kang, so they would undoubtedly be out. Yong Qi thought Xiao Yan would probably want Zi Wei's comfort, but he hoped that under the circumstances, she would accept it from him, too.

As they began walking up the steps of the dais, Xiao Yan hugged his arm to her and leaned heavily into him, resting her head on his shoulder. Her grip was tight even through their thick winter coats, and it seemed to Yong Qi too much like a cling onto an anchor.

"You all right?" he asked, turning to her slightly as he juggled his keychain in his other hand and held the keycard up to the reader.

She made a movement that, if Yong Qi was being very optimistic, he could call a shrug.

"Uhm…Xiao Yan, I need this hand," he said softly, pulling away to press his fingertips against the fingerprint reader.

"Sorry," she muttered.

"No, don't be," he said gently. He took her hand and slipped his fingers into the gaps between hers, raising her hand to his lips, kissing it softly before pushing the door open.

Leading her past the receiving hall, he took them into the smaller sitting room inside and watched as she dropped her bag unceremoniously down on the floor and threw herself down on the sofa to sit with her knees up to her chin.

"Tea?" he asked tentatively, not knowing where else to begin the conversation.

"Got something stronger?" she asked shakily.

Yong Qi raised an eyebrow. "You hardly ever drink. Xiao Yan, whatever this is about, I don't think –"

"If you want me to tell you, I need something stronger," she insisted.

He sat down beside her. "Xiao Yan, if it's going to take alcohol for you to tell me something then I'd rather you not tell me," he said gently.

"It's not like that," she said wearily. "I just – I need to tell you. You need to – to understand. But I – Please, Yong Qi, don't be difficult."

He hesitated for a long moment before letting out a sigh. Finally, he squeezed her shoulder and headed towards the back courtyard. Before heading to the kitchen, he poked his head into Zi Wei's bedroom and found that she really was out.

When he returned to Xiao Yan again, he held out to her a tumbler half filled.

She took a sip, coughed and spluttered. "What is this?"
"Rice wine, heavily watered down," he replied.

She set the glass down on the coffee table in front of her and patted the place next to her. He sat down and placed a hand on her shoulder, moving it in a slow, soothing motion down her back.

"I mean it, Xiao Yan, you don't have to tell me anything that you don't want to."

She turned to look at him seriously. "I know," she said softly. Taking his hand, she turned it over and clutched it to her. "But I also meant it when I said I need to."

"Okay," he whispered.

She took a deep breath, but it was another long moment before she would say anything.

Finally: "You noticed that guy hanging around the building when we drove past?"

"Yeah."

"He's – he's my ex."

Yong Qi stared, his brow creased over in a frown.

"What?" Xiao Yan asked defensively. "You don't think that I –"

"Xiao Yan, I know you've had relationships before me. It's just…I can't imagine – I don't want to imagine what could have happened with this guy that puts you in a semi-catatonic state just because you caught a glimpse of him."

"Relationship," Xiao Yan murmured.

"What?"

"I've had a relationship before you. Him."

"You've just managed to make it sound even worse."

"Yes," she agreed, sighing.

He waited as she obviously needed the time to gather her thoughts and fortify her emotions.

"The thing…the thing you have to understand is, the orphanage is a…an adequate place if you just want a place to live. But the kids there, by our very circumstances, are just…messed up, generally. I mean, depression, suicidal, abandonment issues, channeling that anger onto other kids by bullying, it's not hard to find all that, often in the same kid. For me, though, the most depressing thing about it was all the time I was there, I was told my life would go a certain way. I don't – I don't always know what I want, but I always know what I don't want, if that makes sense. And it wasn't what I was being told."

Yong Qi nodded and ran comforting circles with his hand on her back.

"So when I was fifteen, I tried to run away. His name is Liang Ding. He never really lives up to his family name. I met him – god, it sounds incredibly stupid now that I'm saying this – but I met him online. I mean, it wasn't like I've only ever talked to him online and then decided to run away from the orphanage with him. We've met in real life before, mostly in group offline meetings, and while there were other people around, he was genuinely nice. Well, he had never had a problem being nice when he wants to be, I guess. The thing that undid me, though, was that he was interested in me, and
no one had really been interested in me before. He listened to me and seemed genuinely to care about what I said. I think he did actually care – it doesn't excuse anything later but I'd like to think he hadn't played me that entire time...that I wasn't that stupid for so long..."

Xiao Yan threw down the rest of the drink and roughly wiped her mouth and her tears away with the back of her hand.

"He said...he said if I ever needed a place to stay – I was fifteen, I thought I was old enough, I thought the orphanage had made me beyond my years and that I knew enough of the world to take it on my own. I thought he would help me. It wasn't...I didn't run away for him, I wanted to get out even before him, but I did run to him."

She took a shuddering breath and stared determinedly in front of her, not looking at Yong Qi beside her.

"The orphanage, they found me, eventually. Apparently I wasn't good at hiding my tracks. I think at the time I didn't even think they'd bother." She laughed bitterly at the memory. "But that's not how even underpaid social workers operate, is it? They tracked me down to his apartment, where I'd been staying for two months."

"You were fifteen..." Yong Qi said slowly. Clearly he caught on the fact that a man devious enough to persuade a vulnerable young girl he met on the internet to run away to him wasn't just letting her stay in a guest room in his house out of kindness. "How old was he?"

Xiao Yan chewed on her bottom lip before saying in a shaky voice, "Older than the two years age gap that would have made it legal." She closed her eyes for a moment and took another deep breath. "I got taken back to the orphanage while he went to jail, but only for three years, and got out just as I turned eighteen."

She could feel Yong Qi shudder at the convenience of it.

"He sought me out again as I was just about to prepare to leave the orphanage, honestly having really nowhere to go. I felt..." She stopped abruptly and stood up, walking away from Yong Qi and his touch. She could not tell what happened next with him so nearby. "The thing is, to me at the time, what happened before was consensual and it was only the details of the law that put him into jail. I didn't think the actual numbers mattered and didn't care that the laws existed like it does to protect me. So I felt..."

She trailed off again, and for a long time couldn't say it. To say it out loud, to admit it to Yong Qi, and to herself now, would be admitting – almost for the first time – what a prize idiot she was, how very naïve and stupid and gullible and foolish she had been...

"You felt responsible," Yong Qi said in a voice that almost mocked Xiao Yan with its gentleness. It was that obvious, then. Why wasn't he repulsed by her stupidity?

It made Xiao Yan choke back a sob.

"I can't even remember now, why I was so sure it was my fault," she said finally through tears and hiccups.

There were sounds of Yong Qi standing up and approaching her from behind, but she couldn't bear to turn around to face him. She would not be able to say anything else if she saw whatever expression he had on his face. Both disgust and sympathy would undo her now, in different ways.

"But the more...the more he told me that it wasn't, the more convinced I was that it was my fault he..."
went to jail. Now, looking back, maybe that was the point. He was playing the part of the nice guy who didn't blame me, knowing that as he said that, his words were working all the needed reverse psychology on me so that I would blame myself more, and the more I felt like I owed him, the less reason, the less strength I had to walk away."

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi whispered, very close to her.

She whirled around but didn't look at him, and took several steps away.

"No, don't!" she begged, snuffling back tears. "Just – I can't talk with you so near…"

"You don't have to tell me anything else," he said gently. "Really, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan shook her head.

"I moved in with him again, and in the first instant, I felt so smug because this time no one could take me away anymore," she ploughed on. Having reached this far, she could not stop. She had to tell the rest of it. "What I didn't realise then, of course, that he was taking me away, away from everything and everyone that wasn't him. It happened gradually, but somehow, everyone I came in contact with were him, and his friends, and his acquaintances, and I didn't have anything or anyone to call my own. I never went anywhere without him. I guess, at first, I thought that was what it meant, to be in a committed relationship."

She stopped talking again and gulped back the breathless emotions that were threatening to make her collapse. She was thankful that Yong Qi didn't say anything either.

"I thought that was what I wanted. So I didn't understand why I was so miserable."

It was obvious, now, of course. Now, she could stand here and list all the reasons, but that would probably take all night. Or all week.

"Honestly, it was almost by accident that I met Liu Hong. She delivered food to the apartment once, and Liang Ding was out. I answered the door but it was obvious that I'd been crying. She asked me what was wrong but of course, I didn't even know what was wrong, so of course nothing I said was satisfying to her. She left when Liang Ding came back, but she must have seen enough of us to understand. A few days later, she accidentally ran into me on the street nearby. She said she was delivering something again, but it was obvious that that was a lie, since she was on foot, but I was so starved for interaction with someone new that I didn't argue when she started talking to me. Somehow, she ended up offering me a job at her restaurant."

Even now, Xiao Yan wondered with no little horror where she would be – still be – now, if it were not for Liu Hong.

"I – When I told him about the job, he was angry. He said so many things, I can't even remember – probably mostly revolving around accusing me of not trusting him to be able to provide for me. He tried to talk me out of taking the job."

"But you didn't listen to him, right?" Yong Qi asked when she just stopped again.

"I – I was going to." The admission was shameful and painful, even now. "But then, the next morning…he said he'd thought it over, and he'd let me take the job. That was his word. He'd let me."

She could hear Yong Qi let out an indignant breath somewhere behind her.

"Does it amaze you that I didn't see a problem with that phrase then?"
Yong Qi did not answer, but the silence itself was enough.

"If anything," Xiao Yan continued with a derisive snort at herself, "I felt the fact that he was letting me do this as a good thing, that he was respecting my wishes, that he was being nice. And he was. Nice. Awfully nice to me, for a long while after that."

A lump rose in her throat as she thought about how much she believed that niceness was what she wanted, that just by being nice and allowing her to do things she wanted, he managed to convince her that he cared. That only he cared.

"Liu Hong and her brother Liu Qing were the ones who eventually saved me, but it took them a long time. They first had to convince that they cared about me, that they loved me. By that time, I was so sure that no one did, that no one could, except him."

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said gruffly, as if he was choking back emotions too. "You know that's not true, right?"

"I know now," she said, and meaning it. She also knew now, that Yong Qi loved her, and it was only this that allowed her to be saying all this to him now. "But at the time, I thought…that he was all I deserved. But eventually, Liu Qing and Liu Hong convinced me that I needed to go, to rip him out of my life like a band-aid. They offered me shelter when I finally could bring myself to leave. They allowed me time to move on, but they didn't allow me to stop depending on Liang Ding only to start depending on them, either."

She finally turned around to look at Yong Qi again.

"Without them, I would never have thought I could have what I have now, and I certainly would not have thought to go to university, to be here, to have any of this – "

She trailed off and was silent for a long time. She was grateful when Yong Qi allowed her the quiet. She knew he must want to say something, to touch her, to try to comfort her, but he could not chase away the shadows she had invited in herself. Only she could do that.

"He used to call me Yan Yan and Yan Er, and it was always manipulative."

She could hear Yong Qi draw a quiet, but sharp breath.

She finally sat down on the sofa again, and looked up at Yong Qi standing before her.

"Do you despise me now?" she asked wanly; her mouth tasted full of bile.

He went to her and sank down so that he was level with her. Taking both her cheeks into his hands, he pulled her face close so that they were a mere fingers' width apart. "No, of course not."

Xiao Yan closed her eyes and wanted to ask, 'Why not?'

But Yong Qi was still speaking.

"You really want to know what I think?"

"No," she said through a tearful laugh. "Yes. Maybe."

"I think," he said gently, taking her hands that were clenched in her lap into both of his, "that all of this should have made you fearful, angry and bitter. But you, you, Xia Xiao Yan, you are the kindest, most generous, most selfless person I know, and that is a choice. You said Liu Qing and Liu
Hong saved you, but just as much, you saved yourself; you made the choice to become you now, despite what happened in the past and you must realise how much strength that takes. And I am so, so grateful to have met you."

He brought her hands to his lips and kissed them.

She opened her eyes slowly, almost afraid that she'd imagined up his words and that he wasn't really before her. But he was, and he was looking at her with eyes bright with sincerity, cradling one of her hands against his cheek. Xiao Yan blinked back tears, but one escaped before she could hold it back. Yong Qi leaned in and kissed it gently away. Somehow, the tender touch just made more wracking sobs break out from deep inside her chest, and she ended up sliding off the sofa and into his arms on the floor in a shaky mess of tears.

Yong Qi held her tightly and brushed away her hair to kiss her temple softly. "I love you," he whispered into her ears. It wasn't the first time he'd said the words, but in that moment, they seemed to transcend their normal meanings into something more enormous. She could do little but cling to him and hold on to those words even more tightly than ever.

Even after her tears ceased, they sat together on the floor in silence.

"Thank you," she whispered finally.

"For what?"

"For not asking questions earlier. I saw him in front of my building and it was like all the feelings I've managed to lay to rest, all the fears and dreads and – everything – came rushing back and I was so afraid that you'd want an explanation and I couldn't give it out there – "

"Do you know why he was there?" Yong Qi asked softly.

"No," Xiao Yan said, pulling slightly away to grab a tissue from the box on the table, though it was probably too late since the front of his shirt was damp with her tears. At least it wasn't snot. She hoped it wasn't. "I just realised though…our relationship is…not exactly a secret."

"You think that's how he found you?"

"It must be. I don't know how he could have found out exactly which building I live in, but it couldn't have taken much for him to deduce that I would be in a dormitory."

"The dormitories don't have public directories, do they?" Yong Qi asked.

"No. Thankfully."

"Do you have any idea what he wants, looking for you?"

She shook her head. "I can imagine. I don't want to imagine, though."

"Let me put a security detail on you," he said.

"No. It's not worth it, Yong Qi. He's not worth it."

"You are," Yong Qi replied. "Your safety is."

"I'll be fine," Xiao Yan insisted stubbornly. "Even if I do run into him again, I can take care of myself. Earlier…earlier I just didn't want to see him with you, before you know anything about who he is…"
She could tell from the look of disbelief Yong Qi was giving her that he was not at all convinced by her words. But she didn't know how to explain to him that it would probably just give Liang Ding twisted satisfaction to see that she felt threatened enough by him to allow herself to be chained with bodyguards. Maybe it was childish and reckless, but she didn't want to give him that satisfaction. Besides, whatever temporary protection Yong Qi could provide for her, she would still have to face her demons sooner or later.

Yong Qi considered the stubborn set on her face for a moment, before sighing, obviously deciding to give in to her for now. So instead of arguing further, he simply pulled her tightly into his arms again and kissed the crown of her head.

"Just promise me, if you need help, you'll let me know."

She nodded against his chest.

"Did he – " Yong Qi began in a hesitant voice after a few moments of silence, before trailing off.

"What is it?"

He pulled away to look at her face, frowning. "Did he ever hit you?"

Xiao Yan swallowed with difficulty, turned away and nodded. She couldn't look at Yong Qi, but could still feel his grip on her arm tighten. "Only once," she whispered, hoping that it would enough of answer that he would let the subject drop.

It wasn't.

"There is nothing only about that," he replied angrily. Involuntarily, she tensed, though she knew it was an entirely unreasonable reaction. She didn't think it was noticeable, but he pulled away slightly, guiding her face with his hands so that she finally looked at him. He spoke with a forced calmness, "Xiao Yan, I'm not angry at you."

"I know," she said softly, still not quite able to relax. She held back the irrational need to apologise.

Yong Qi exhaled wearily. "I wished – I'd hoped my assumption was wrong."

"What assumption?"

"You know that this isn't the first time your instinct had been to act defensive when you think I'm angry at you?" he asked, his voice now full of pain. "There was that one time, when we were arguing, you remember? It was intense, but I just moved my hand to make a gesture, and you flinched."

Xiao Yan nodded mutely and bit her lip nervously, twisting her hands in her lap. He reached out and took one of them in his so that she would stop the nervous habit.

"You wouldn't tell me why you reacted that way, though I – I assumed. I so wished I was wrong. I wanted to just hold you then and tell you I would never, ever hurt you, but you didn't let me speak and just ran off. And then after, you acted like it never happened and I wanted to ask you but I couldn't bear to hurt you just by bringing it up – "

Xiao Yan remembered the encounter, but hadn't realised before now how much he'd guessed, how much he'd known. Now, she could not help but feel pained that she had allowed him to live with that question for so long.
"I love you," he said, his voice shaking with emotions now. "Promise me, promise me you'll always remember that I could never bear to hurt you."

"I know you are not him, Yong Qi," she whispered, turning her head up so that she could look at him. "And I'm thankful for that."

Yong Qi nodded and leaned gently down to kiss her.

Xiao Yan gave a soft sigh when they pulled away from each other.

"I am thankful, too, you know," he said.

"For what?"

"That you chose to share this with me. I know it wasn't easy."

"I've never told anyone this, all at once, like this before," she admitted. "With Liu Qing and Liu Hong, some of it they witnessed."

"Zi Wei?"

"I – told her some of it in person, but there were a lot of things, in the end, I had to ask Liu Hong to fill in the blanks. She came back one day and just hugged me for a long time, and that's how I know Liu Hong had. Other than one time, we've never talked about it. But I – I need to tell you. I need you to know – to understand this. This is why – "

"Why what?"

She took a deep breath and looked away from him. "I know things get heated between us sometimes, and I know…I feel your disappointment when I pull away."

"Xiao Yan – " Yong Qi protested.

"I know you wouldn't push, but still. Sometimes, for a moment, I'd feel like I could…could let us take that next step. But then I – I just – I'm not there yet, you know? So if you ever wonder why I'm not ready…well, this…this is it."

He let out a sound, something like a cross between a laugh and sound of pain. His voice was desperately tender and heartfelt as he said, "Xiao Yan, you do realise you don't need to give a reason why you're not ready, right? You just have to tell me that. I don't have to know what the reason is, unless it's to do with something I've done or something I could fix. Even if you didn't tell me this, and you said you wanted to wait, you have to know I would respect that."

"I know. I do know," she said earnestly. "It's just, I also feel guilty…" Yong Qi looked about to protest but she just went on, not letting him. "I know it's stupid, because I shouldn't. And it's not even that I don't want to…with you. I just…I don't know if I can right now. But Yong Qi, I want to. I want to get to that point where I can be on that same page as you. And god, I hope…I hope we get there."

"I hope so, too," Yong Qi whispered before smiling lovingly at her and wrapping his arms completely around her, engulfing her in his embrace. She burrowed herself in his warmth and for the first time since seeing the unwelcome figure at her building, she felt safe.

There was only about a 50% chance that Zi Wei would make it back to Xian Fu Gong that night, so
in the end, Yong Qi accompanied Xiao Yan to Zi Wei's bedroom, where she would be free to poach on her friend's clothes and make herself at home.

As difficult as it was to tell Yong Qi about her past, as tearful as she had been, now that it was over and he knew everything, Xiao Yan had never felt more at ease. Clichéd as it sounded, it really was like an enormous weight was lifted off her shoulders. It wasn't that she was consciously keeping a secret from him before and felt guilty about it. It was simply something that she didn't want to burden him with without a reason.

Now that she had told him, she realised this lightness she felt was due to the fact that she was now suddenly freer to explore all the possibilities of them in a way that she couldn't allow herself to completely before.

Perhaps because she came to this conclusion, she suddenly felt restless.

Unlike Yuan Ming Gong, which was an entirely Western structure with modern furnishings, the residential palaces in the Forbidden City blended traditional interior design with touches of the modern that fit seamlessly together, so that it was impossible to feel that the soft, cushioned sofas were out of place among the lacquered, wooden bed, table and chairs.

Having helped herself to a set of Zi Wei's pajamas, and cocooned herself in the soft blankets of Zi Wei's bed, she couldn't sleep. She rolled around, alternated between counting sheep and checking her phone for what ended up to be nearly an hour before spring up to a sitting position in frustration, blowing her hair of out her eyes.

"This is stupid," she said to herself, before throwing the blanket off and slipped her feet into a pair of fluffy slippers.

Then, she left the room and padded down the corridor to Yong Qi's room. She was surprised to find his light still on. She knocked. A moment later, the door opened to reveal Yong Qi in glasses, track suit bottoms and a t-shirt.

"Can't sleep," she told him as a way of explaining her presence.

He smiled and stepped aside to make way for her.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading some reports from my mother's charity foundation," he said. "He Jing, Yong An and I do a sort of audit every year of its activities, to ensure that they stay true to her wishes and legacy."

"Would you mind some company?" she asked. "I won't bother you. I just really don't feel like being alone."

"Of course, stay," he said.

A few moments later, Yong Qi sat on his bed with his laptop across his leg while Xiao Yan rested her head on his shoulder beside him.

"I didn't know you needed reading glasses," she said.

"It's not just for reading. I wear contacts during the day. I'm blind as a bat without one or the other."

"I'd have thought you would have had surgery if that is the case."
"I can't," he said, running his hand absent-mindedly through her hair. "Not compatible."

"I'll shut up, shall I?" she asked.

He turned to smile at her and leaned down – a little wobbly with the computer on his lap – and kissed her forehead. "I don't mind."

Even then, she only smiled before snuggling contentedly against him and pulling the blanket more securely around them both.

About an hour later, Yong Qi closed the cover of his laptop and put it on his bedside table, before removing his glasses to rub his eyes. Next to him, Xiao Yan had fallen asleep and slid almost all the way down from where she was previously resting on his shoulder. He tugged the blankets and shifted, so that she finally rested fully on the bed, before adjusting the pillow underneath her.

He put his glasses back on to be able to look her better and stroked her hair gently. She was lying on her side, one arm clutching a cylindrical throw pillow under her chin. His heart felt lightened to see her so at peace, so different from how distressed she had been earlier.

The truth was, none of his previous relationships had ever felt like this. With his previous girlfriends, he had always thought, if it was meant to work out, it would work itself out. Maybe part of it was because he never really had to woo anyone so hard and with such persistence before. He had never felt the desire to be with anyone before her that warranted that kind of pursuit and for such length of time.

And he was still pursuing her, he realised. He would not stop until she had…

It took a moment for his thoughts to catch up with his heart and realised the only way that sentence could end was in marriage. Was he really already so sure, so ready? He pushed the thoughts aside, because after the evening they just had, those weren't the considerations that mattered right now.

Still, with Xiao Yan, it wasn't just the pursuit that was worth it; he also felt an enormous need to exert all his efforts, even if the reward was only to see her smile. The idea of an unhappy Xiao Yan, or of not being with her, of never having this current sight of her ever again, made his heart quench in a kind of pain he knew he had never felt before.

He used to associate love with butterflies in his stomach, with erratic heartbeats, with the room lighting up in an instance with her entrance, with the fantasy of spending every night curled up in each other, limbs so entwined and twisted together that it was hard to tell where hers ended and his began.

Xiao Yan certainly had triggered those feelings, at one time or another. But she also led to moments like this that he realised now were just as precious, if not even more so. Sometimes, now, his heart no longer sped up at the sight of her. Instead, it seemed like the entire furious world had calmed down; his world ceased to be a roller coaster and that was all right. More than all right. Her smile calmed his nerves and filled him with an inexplicable sense of security and the sound of her breathing carried him towards comfort.

She stirred a little and slid her arm across his waist, pulling him to her and hugging him to herself like a child clutching a beloved teddy bear before settling back into her sleep with a happy sigh. He slid down so that he was level with her, turning his head on his own pillow so that he could gaze at her in the yellow light of his bed-side lamp. He didn't know how many moments passed before he removed his glasses to put them away, turned off the light and closed his eyes. In the darkness, feeling the
even rhythm of her breathing, Yong Qi realised that loving Xiao Yan Zi didn't have to always mean a fiery fire in his soul, but a glowing hearth that would always keep them this warm and comfortable, drowsily drifting into sleep.

"You're home early," Yong Qi said teasingly the next morning when he came into the kitchen and found Zi Wei pouring herself a cup of freshly brewed green tea.

She blushed slightly, and only sipped her tea.

"Is Xiao Yan here?" Zi Wei asked instead of answering.

"Yeah, how did you know?" he asked distractedly while lifting the kettle to check whether there was still hot water.

"It's just boiled," Zi Wei said about the kettle, before adding, "Her clothes and her phone are in my room."

"Oh yeah, of course. I forgot," Yong Qi said. "She's still sleeping."

He was frowning at the coffee container, which was inexplicably empty. There were unground beans in the cupboard, but it was much too early for so much effort. In the end, Yong Qi rummaged through the cupboard to look for the instant stash.

"...Where?"

"My room."

Yong Qi turned to see Zi Wei raise an eyebrow. He only shook his head, pouring hot water over the coffee in his mug.

"We were pulling into her dorm when she saw Liang Ding lurking around the bottom of the building. So I took her back here instead."

"Liang Ding?" Zi Wei asked, her voice slightly higher now with worry. "Is Xiao Yan – "

"She's all right," Yong Qi assured her. "I mean, she wasn't when she spotted him. Not emotionally, at any rate. But I don't think he saw her."

"She told you about him then?"

He nodded. "It certainly explains some things," he added.

"Yes," Zi Wei said, sighing. "I don't want her to be hurt but I am glad she's told you now."

"Yeah, so am I," he said, "even if when she was telling me, all I wanted to do was to go find him and punch him in the face. Still do."

Zi Wei smiled wanly, but before either of them could say anything else, there came sounds of footsteps and a moment later, Xiao Yan appeared, wearing one of Yong Qi's university hoodies over Zi Wei's pajamas.

"Morning," she said, yawning. It didn't look like she heard any of Yong Qi and Zi Wei's conversation, or was otherwise too sleepy to care.

"Good morning, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said cheerfully, pulling her friend in for a half hug.
Xiao Yan gave her a sleepy smile but then, straight after, mumbled, "Why is it so cold…"

Yong Qi smiled and handed her his mug of coffee, which he only managed to take two sips of. Its smell alone, however, had managed to wake him up considerably. She smiled gratefully and wrapped her hands around it, sighing happily.

"Do either of you feel like cooking anything?" he asked. It was Sunday, so most of their staff, including all the ones who worked in the kitchen, had the day off. "If not, let's just go out for breakfast?"

Zi Wei glanced at her watch. "I'm pretty sure by the time we all are ready, it'll be more appropriate to call it brunch."

"I don't care what it's called, food sounds nice," Xiao Yan said, handing Yong Qi back his coffee, which was still half full, before tugging on Zi Wei's hand. "Come on, I hope you have something warm for me to wear."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah I went there a bit with Xiao Yan's back story but honestly, I've envisioned worse for canon! Qing dynasty! Xiao Yan Zi, considering the unprotected and constantly at the mercy of others way she grew up. There would be very different consequences to writing this kind of back story in the period setting though.

You may be interested: At first this guy was literally named Liang Ting Gui, after the magistrate in HZGG. But that was too on the nose so I ended up changing his name up a bit.
2012, January (2)

Chapter Notes

Warning: there is a lot of swearing in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2012

January

Of course, Xiao Yan didn't ever want to see Liang Ding again. But neither did she think it was at all possible that such a meeting could be avoided now that he had somehow found out where she lived.

So though she was taken slightly off-guard, she was far from surprised when she stepped out of the lift on her floor a few days later to find him loitering in the hall.

His lips curled into a nasty smile like malicious wolf cornering a prey when he saw her. Xiao Yan couldn't help flickering her eyes to the lift behind her, trying to figure out if it was possible for her to scramble back in and close the door before he could get to her. But no, the floor display was showing that it had already begun to descend. There was no way she could call it back up and escape alone.

"Yan Yan, it's been a long time," Liang Ding said, his smile widening, and his voice sending chills down her back.

Xiao Yan was determined to not look at him. "Fuck off," she said, trying to walk around him, though she wasn't sure herself where she would go. There was no way she was opening the door to her room and giving him the chance to barge in.

He grabbed her wrist roughly and pulled her to him. "Is that really the way to greet me after so long?"

She wrenched herself from his grasp. "What the hell do you want?" she yelled.

"I want to see you, of course. My, my, haven't you done well for yourself. But then again, finding a powerful man to hide behind? That's always your game, isn't it?"

The sound of his voice itself was making her feel nauseated, but the fact that he was attempting to liken himself to Yong Qi at all was an entirely different level of revolting.

"Leave," she said, with all the strength and venom that she could muster, though her insides seemed to be all twisted together and her heart didn't seem to be pumping nearly as much blood as she needed. She felt both sick and dizzy at the same time. "You have nothing to do here."

"No, you're wrong. I have a lot of business to settle with you."

"We have nothing to settle anymore," she said coldly.

"Oh you're wrong, I think we do," he said, stepping closer to her. She backed away, but realised
with a jolt of icy fear, too late, that there was only the wall behind her. "You know, the whole world is wondering who you are, what you were up to before you became the latest notch on your pretty boyfriend's belt. Maybe I should enlighten them."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" Xiao Yan retorted, looking up at him with disgust.

"Merely an observation…that the world probably would want all the juicy gossip about you…"

"Let me guess," she said in a bored voice, "now you want money to keep your mouth shut or whatever."

He laughed derisively. "Oh, you know me better than that, Yan Yan, I would never be so predictable."

She didn't answer, and just glared at him.

"I want you to leave and never see him again."

"You disgust me," she spat. "Why do you think I'd do anything you say?"

Something in the scathing tone of her voice seemed to have unraveled him because all of the sudden, his expression took an ugly turn and he grabbed her by the arms, slamming her roughly against the wall.

"Let go of me!" she yelled, trying to kick his leg out from under him.

"You think you can just toss me aside and replace me with some rich, over-entitled bastard like that?" he snarled, his breath rank on her face. "Did you forget what I fucking did for you? Did you forget I gave you a place to call your own when you had nowhere to go? You weren't so disgusted when I was your freedom, were you?"

Xiao Yan gritted her teeth, desperately trying to swallow the panic rising in her throat. "Let. Go."

"Where's your boyfriend now, Yan Er?" Liang Ding asked, mocking, as he grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. If there wasn't so much danger in closing her eyes, she would have done it to avoid that sickening mocking look in his eyes. The rush of adrenaline from her repulsion and the fact that he had let go of her arm to grab her chin allowed her to use all the strength she could muster to push him away from her, twisting herself out of his grasp. He lunged for her again but missed as she ducked. Her heart seemed to be somewhere in the middle of her throat, racing with fear, but before he could do anything else, someone was also roughly pulling him away from her. Liang Ding, being taken by surprise, ended up being shoved against the wall. For a moment, Xiao Yan almost expected Yong Qi, and couldn't help feeling a jolt of shock when she realised the person who had done this was Sai Ya.

"I don't care who the fuck you are, get off her," Sai Ya shouted, glaring boldly at a furious-looking Liang Ding.

Xiao Yan scrambled away from him, pulling Sai Ya with her, determined to put as much distance between him and them as possible.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at her roommate.

Sai Ya kept her eyes on Liang Ding, but answered, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world and Xiao Yan was dim to question it, "Rescuing you, of course."
"You'll stay out of this if you know what's good for you," Liang Ding said with a threatening sneer at Sai Ya.

"Like hell I will," Sai Ya retorted. "Why don't you just get lost? It's obvious you're not wanted here."

"I'll do whatever the fucking hell I want, and who are you to stop me?" Liang Ding growled.

For a split second, Xiao Yan wondered if she and Sai Ya would manage to hold him back on their own. However, before she could find out, there suddenly came the sound of the lift opening. A university security guard stepped out and walked towards them, brandishing his baton.

"Hey, you!" he shouted towards Liang Ding.

At the sound of the new voice, Liang Ding whirled around angrily but the guard did not look threatened.

"You aren't a student here, you have no right to be here," he said. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Even Liang Ding seemed to know when he was at the losing end, because his eyes swept viciously from the guard to where Xiao Yan and Sai Ya were standing together, before snarling and stalking off. The guard grabbed his arm as he passed, and forcibly escorted him into the lift. Only when its doors closed and the floor number started to descend that Xiao Yan could sag in relief.

"Are you all right?" Sai Ya asked.

The adrenaline that had kept her going seemed to have left her in a rush, leaving Xiao Yan too winded from the whole encounter to do anything but lean heavily against the wall and nodded. Sai Ya was still looking at her with concern, and tentatively reached out pat her arm comfortingly. Xiao Yan turned to give her a weak smile, before closing her eyes and trying to calm her racing heart.

There was a small clicking sound of a door being opened. Xiao Yan opened her eyes to see her next-door neighbour, a girl named Wei Na, poking her head hesitantly out of her room.

"Oh, he's gone, thank goodness," she said. Then, seeing Xiao Yan's ashen face, she stepped out into the hall. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Xiao Yan said.

"I – I heard some of that…so I called security," Wei Na said tentatively.

Xiao Yan raised her head and looked at her, surprised but also enormously grateful. "Did you? Thank you! Both of you, really."

"Who was he?" Wei Na asked.

"As it usually goes, a nasty ex."

Xiao Yan could see both Sai Ya and Wei Na exchanging concerned looks, but didn't know how she could even begin to reassure them. So she just said again, "I'll be fine, guys. Thank you for the help."

"Let's get inside," Sai Ya suggested. "You either need some very strong tea, or very strong alcohol."

Xiao Yan did not have any intention of telling Yong Qi about the encounter with Liang Ding. What would be the point? It was over, she had no wish to relive it, and he would only worry.
She forgot, of course, that Sai Ya had witnessed some of it, and Sai Ya was Er Tai's girlfriend.

The next morning, she got out of class to find five missed calls from him. Momentarily not registering what the calls might be about, she immediately called him back.

"Are you all right?" Yong Qi demanded as soon as she picked up.

"Shouldn't that be my line?" she asked.

"Xiao Yan!"

She frowned in confusion. "Yes, I'm fine. You're the one who left me five missed calls. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" he exclaimed, not sounding any less frantic. "Xiao Yan, why didn't you tell me about yesterday?"

"What? Oh – "

"Xiao Yan?"

She sighed. "How did you know?"

"Sai Ya mentioned it. Xiao Yan, she gave me a fright before I could get the explanations out of her. She thought you've already told me."

"Oh," Xiao Yan repeated weakly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

She could hear Yong Qi sigh. "You promised you'd tell me."

"I said I'd tell you if I needed help. I don't, not anymore."

"Xiao Yan, this isn't the time to be splitting hair and arguing exact words," Yong Qi said impatiently. "Besides, you had help yesterday, but what about tomorrow? Are you honestly going to say you still don't want me to ask for security for you?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "On what grounds could you possibly justify putting a security detail on me?"

"You are my girlfriend. As such, your protection is also for my protection."

"I don't want people following me around all the time, Yong Qi," she said. "Besides, that would just suggest to Liang Ding that he has an importance that isn't actually true."

"Xiao Yan – " Yong Qi began, but she already knew all the reasoning he'd attempt to use on her.

"No, please, Yong Qi, just listen to me on this. I'll be fine. I don't need a bodyguard."

He sighed again, and she knew if she could see him, he'd be shaking his head in exasperation. "Where are you?" he asked, obviously realising that it was hopeless to argue with her further.

"I just got out of class. Heading back to my room."

"Wait for me, I'll come and walk back with you."

"Yong Qi, no one's going to jump out of the bushes at me," she said with slight exasperation.

"Xiao Yan, please?"
"So what are you going to do, personally escort me everywhere?" Xiao Yan asked after Yong Qi arrived and they started walking back to her dormitory building together.

"Don't think I wouldn't," he said darkly.

"Yong Qi."

"What?" he demanded, turning to look at her. "Don't tell me I'm overreacting, Xiao Yan. And don't tell me I don't need to worry about you either."

"I'll be fine, Yong Qi," she said stubbornly, which made him heave a long sigh.

"Accepting you need help isn't weakness, Xiao Yan," he said pointedly.

She couldn't think of anything to say to that. It was easy for him to say that, of course. He didn't realise how hard it was for her to believe in something like that. It didn't help that for most of her life, she always only ever had herself to depend on.

They remained quiet for the rest of the way back to her room. When they were safely back in her room, she turned to him and said, trying to sound mollifying, "I know I'm being stubborn and frustrating."

"Yes, you are," he muttered.

"But you can't expect me to rejoice at being tailed everywhere either!"

"I know," he admitted quietly, sitting down at her desk. She sat down on her bed opposite him, looking at him apologetically but still unwilling to change her mind. "To be honest, that is something that would only help in the short run. We need a more permanent solution to deal with him."

"Don't tell me you intend to get him killed," Xiao Yan blurted out before she knew what she was even thinking.

He stared at her, not quite shocked or horrified like the normal reaction would have been, but simply…intrigued.

"Yong Qi!" she cried, her eyes widening in alarm. "I'm not serious!"

He let out a short burst of unamused laughter. "I know." There was a deliberate pause before he would add, "I wasn't considering that at all."

Xiao Yan wasn't sure whether she actually believed this but it was probably safer not to ask him to clarify his meaning. Regardless, she wasn't sure he understood how much she didn't want him to get involved in this.

"It's my problem, Yong Qi," she said simply, "let me deal with it."

She knew he meant well. He was, after all, worried about her, and she knew she really should be grateful for it. Still, the truth was that this still very new thing between her and Yong Qi was allowing Xiao Yan to feel freer and happier than she had felt in a long time. She just wanted everything to between them to remain untainted by whatever happened in the past. She didn't even know why that simple fact was so hard for her to put into words and explain to him.
Yong Qi took her hand and laced her fingers between his. "I'm not going to just let you deal with this alone," he said gently. "You shouldn't have to. Especially not when he's threatening you."

"The dormitory security office already told me that he's banned from the building."

"Yes, but there are so many other places he could find you." Yong Qi looked thoughtful for a moment, before adding, "I do wonder though. He left you alone all this time. Why show up now?"

Xiao Yan frowned. "Why do you think? Honestly, what with my face plastered everywhere lately… I'm surprised he hadn't shown up earlier."

"No, I mean, clearly his motivation isn't just revenge against you or whatever. He showed up because of us. So he must want something."

"Yeah, he wants what he doesn't have," she said disdainfully. "He showed up because I'm not pining after him anymore in a very public way. Not that I ever pined for him. Anyway, I'm sure he thinks his presence will drive a wedge between us or something. The only way to deal with him is to prove that that's not going to happen."

Xiao Yan looked to Yong Qi, expecting him to smile, at the very least, touched at her words, but he simply looked like he was miles away, lost in thoughts.

"Yong Qi!" she called, slightly peeved. "Are you listening to me?"

He startled and turned to her, smiling placatingly. "Yes, of course. I heard you. Of course we will do that," he said. "But I was just thinking, perhaps there is another way to get him out of your life for good."

"How?"

"I'll let you know if it works."

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Liu Qing was at the front desk of Hui Bin Lou, talking to the cashier about the reservations for that night when a draft blew in, signaling the opening of the front door.

"I'm sorry, we're not op – " he started to say, looking up before stopping mid-word as he realised who was standing before him. "What are you doing here?"

It was mildly infuriating that Yong Qi, Rong Qin Wang, only looked amused at his abrupt and honestly rather rude and demanding tone.

"Hi. Can I talk to you for a bit?" was the only reply.

"About what?" Liu Qing couldn't help asking warily.

In an instance, the amusement was gone, and the answer was given with something like a grim determination. "Xiao Yan."

Liu Qing raised his eyebrow, but Yong Qi apparently was not about to elaborate, here in the open. Glancing at the cashier who was watching with burning curiosity beside them, Liu Qing found it prudent to gesture to the prince to follow him inside.

Once they were sitting at a table in a quiet corner, with Yong Qi’s security officer standing a discreet
way away, Liu Qing asked, "So, to what do I owe this honour?"

Yong Qi steepled his hands on the table and looked over at Liu Qing seriously.

"Liang Ding came looking for Xiao Yan a few days ago."

It was as if someone had sent an electric jolt through him and Liu Qing straightened, staring at Yong Qi. "He did?" He paused, frowned and added, "You know who he is?"

"Obviously."

"Xiao Yan told you? Or Zi Wei?"

"Xiao Yan."

"I see," Liu Qing said slowly. While he was beginning to have more of an idea of why Yong Qi was here, he was still no clearer on the specifics. "You said he came looking for her. What does he want?"

"In short, I think to cause trouble," Yong Qi said. "To get rid of him in the short term is easy enough, but I am would rather make sure he is... motivated, so to speak, to never seek out Xiao Yan again. However, I need some information from you to carry out this plan."

Liu Qing tilted his head and looked carefully at the prince. "What information is that?"

"I assume you know where he lives," Yong Qi said mildly.

"You want to know where he lives?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"My plan involves meeting him face to face."

"And what exactly is this plan?"

"I would... rather not divulge it before I know it works," Yong Qi said slowly.

Liu Qing crossed his arms in front of him and didn't answer. A staring contest seemed to have begun between them, with neither willing to say anymore. Liu Qing wished he knew what was going on inside the head of the man in front of him. Yong Qi was no fool, Liu Qing had seen enough of him first hand to gather that much. Surely he was not the type to impetuously jump into childish, dangerous revenge schemes because his girlfriend was being threatened? And if he was not then Liu Qing couldn't help feeling even more disconcerted. It was undoubtedly dangerous, having such a man see you as his enemy. Should Liu Qing be worried instead for Liang Ding's fate?

"You know I can't really tell you anything before being assured that the information I give you won't get you killed, right?" Liu Qing finally said. "Or him, for that matter?"

Yong Qi laughed. "Why do both you and Xiao Yan assume I'm going to get him killed?"

Liu Qing shrugged, and couldn't fail to notice that Yong Qi did not touch on the possibility of danger to his life. Come to think of it, it didn't bode well that Xiao Yan apparently shared Liu Qing's fear.

"No one is going to die," Yong Qi added when Liu Qing stayed silent.
"So you say."

"Look," Yong Qi said, sighing and leaning forward, "I know you care about Xiao Yan. I know she trusts you, which is why I trust you now. Can you just give me the benefit of the doubt and believe that what I want to do will help Xiao Yan?"

"You think I hesitate to help you because I don't think whatever it is you're planning to do will help Xiao Yan?" Liu Qing asked, incredulous. "It's quite the opposite, Wang Ye – "

"Yong Qi, please."

Liu Qing shrugged. "Yong Qi, then. Though being on given name terms does not mean that I am obliged to give you what you want. You are, of course, mistaken if you think that I don't see that you care about Xiao Yan. I do see, very clearly, and I also see that she cares just as much about you. Any harm that comes to you will hurt her, and that is what I want to avoid."

"I told you, I have no intention of anyone being physically hurt," Yong Qi said.

"Did you tell me?" Liu Qing asked. "I suppose, now you have."

The space between them lapsed into silence again. It was a good minute later before Yong Qi gave in.

"All right, if you insist, I will tell you the gist of my plan. But I really would rather Xiao Yan does not know until it has succeeded."

"You are sure it will succeed, whatever it is?" Liu Qing asked doubtfully.

"I am reasonably sure," Yong Qi said.

Then he started laying out the plan. It must be said that Liu Qing did not feel anymore assured, having heard it.

"You still say you don't intend for anyone to be hurt?" Liu Qing asked incredulously. "Do you not see what risk you are putting yourself in?"

Yong Qi laughed easily. "I will not be at any kind of risk at all. In case you haven't noticed, I really can't go anywhere alone. I don't intend to go about this alone, either. I just need him to think I'm alone."

"Even then…"

"From what I can see, Liang Ding makes big threats, but is also rather capable of being scared off. Having known Xiao Yan to be under your protection, he left her quite alone. When he confronted her in her dormitory building the other day, he was persuaded to leave by the presence of the security guard. It goes to show that he is testing the water and withdrawing when someone other than Xiao Yan challenges him. It is in his nature to not think of Xiao Yan – or I suspect, any other woman – as a worthwhile threat or deterrent, but he will see it in other men."

"So you're giving him what he wants?" Liu Qing asked incredulously. "Is that not playing into his hands?"

"I want him to think it is. In any case, the only way to convince him to back away from Xiao Yan is for him to see how not unprotected she really is."
"I cannot disagree with your – " Liu Qing waved a hand randomly, looking for the right word – "little psychoanalysis of the psychopath, but you must see that this plan can easily blow up in your face?"

"As I believe I said. I am never unprotected either," Yong Qi said matter-of-factly. "Nor am I so foolhardy."

"Could have fooled me," Liu Qing muttered, but still loud enough that it was obvious his words were meant to be heard.

"Liu Qing, you want him out of her life as much as I do. You might as well help me ensure it. After that, you can pretend like this meeting never happened."

Liu Qing squinted at Yong Qi, as if trying to tease out a hidden thread of the plan that Yong Qi had yet to divulge. "Why do I have a feeling that asking me is just the least shady way you can find out this information? Surely you could find this information by other means if you wish?"

"I…could," Yong Qi admitted. "It just involves owing a lot of people favours. Honestly, at this point, I'd rather owe you than anyone else I know who could get me this information."

"And what do I get, when a prince owes me a favour?"

Yong Qi laughed. "If this is what you've been building up to all this time, I've underestimated you, Liu Qing."

"Perhaps you did," Liu Qing said, smiling back. Then, he took a paper napkin from the container on the table and a pen of his pocket. Scribbling the address down, he pushed it towards Yong Qi. "You didn't get this from me."

"Of course not," Yong Qi said. He looked down at the piece of paper and looked back up at Liu Qing, surprised. "You have his phone number as well?"

"No, that is my phone number. I really would like to know how your little adventure goes."

"Of course," Yong Qi said, chuckling, before tucking the napkin into his pocket. Then, he stood up, holding out his hand. "Thank you, Liu Qing."

Liu Qing shook it, but not without saying, "I do have a feeling I will regret this, but let's assume that I won't. Let us just never see the son of a bitch ever again."

Liu Qing was sure that when Xiao Yan found out what Yong Qi did and the fact that Liu Qing helped him (and she would find out, there was no doubt about that), she would be furious, but her anger would abate, eventually. Besides, Yong Qi had been right. Both he and Liu Qing wanted the jerk out of Xiao Yan's life, and if this plan worked, then Liu Qing would not apologise for having a part in it.

Having secured the information he needed from Liu Qing, Yong Qi sought out Er Kang.

"I need you to help me with something," he said. Before Er Kang could say anything in answer, he rushed on with his explanation, "This isn't me, the prince, asking a favour from a former member of his security team, but Yong Qi, asking a favour from the man he's always seen as a second older brother."

"Okay…" Er Kang replied slowly, giving Yong Qi an extremely wary look. "I was about to just say
yes, but then you went into that long-winded too-defensive-for-comfort explanation, now I have to ask, what is it you are asking me to help with? And please don't say it's moving a body."

"I need you take a shift with me."

"Why?" Er Kang asked, frowning. "I am no longer part of your detail. There is no reason I can give to take a shift with you."

Yong Qi shrugged. "Pull some strings. I'm sure you can manage it."

Er Kang looked at him, eyes full of suspicion. "Let me ask again, what is it that you're doing that you need me on duty for you?"

Yong Qi told him the plan. At the end of the explanation, the look Er Kang gave him was one of pure suffering.

"I am bound by the oath of my job to actively prevent you from getting yourself into these kinds of situation. What makes you think I'd help you?"

Yong Qi grinned. "Because you can only trust yourself in something like this so if you do this for me, you can keep an eye on me yourself?"

There was still an expression of "I'm so done with you" on Er Kang's face.

"I'm asking you, because you're the one I trust most," Yong Qi added, more seriously, "and I don't want the hassle of having to sneak away from my detail, which would just end in everyone in a bad mood."

"And this won't?"

"Not if no one finds out what we were up to."

Er Kang sighed exasperately. "You're going to do this regardless of whether I help you or not, aren't you?"

Yong Qi say anything in reply, which, really, was answer enough.

"I really hate you sometimes," Er Kang muttered.

"I know," Yong Qi whispered.

Yong Qi found Liang Ding's apartment easily, and quickly established that he was not at home. It was fine; he had expected to have to wait.

When the man himself came home, he found Yong Qi leaning casually against his door. His eyes widened with recognition, and he approached Yong Qi with a certain air of wariness, much to Yong Qi's satisfaction.

"What are you doing here?" Liang Ding demanded.

"It's Wang Ye to you," Yong Qi said.

Liang Ding smirked. "I'd be more deferential, if I didn't find it so hilarious that you're picking up my leftovers."
"I'm sure you mean for me to feel insulted," Yong Qi said, "and to save both of us time, let's assume your words have had the desired effect, shall we? To answer your question, I am here with a request."

"A request?" Liang Ding asked, half in disbelief, half in glee.

"Yes. Stay away from Xiao Yan."

A malicious laugh met Yong Qi's words, which was not surprising. In fact, he would have been shocked if Liang Ding had responded with anything less.

"You think you can just come here and what? Ask me with pretty words and I'd comply?"

"It is my plan, yes," Yong Qi said, unperturbed by the spite in his opposition's voice. "It would be a happy solution for all involved, especially yourself, if you were to agree to this request of your own accord."

"Happy solution, yeah?" Liang Ding sneered. "You think I care, let alone feel like I have any kind of duty, to ensure the bitch gets her happy ending, do you? When she dares to leave me without a single word of explanation, after everything I've done for her?"

"Whatever it is you think you did for her, it doesn't entitle you to anything about her now," Yong Qi said firmly.

"Like fuck it doesn't," Liang Ding spat.

Yong Qi was unmoved and continued to look at the other man calmly. "Will you agree to stay away from her?"

Liang Ding's expression twisted into an ugly sneer. "Let me answer that with what she said to me earlier: fuck off."

"Even if there is obviously little value in it, I'm not leaving until you give me your word."

"How about I give you an idea of where you can shove your pretentious manners? You want words? Here's a few words for you: get the fuck out of my face before I stab you in yours."

Yong Qi couldn't help smiling to himself. "I don't think you want to do that," he said, keeping his expression outwardly impassive.

"I ought to kill you, you know, for barging into my properties, acting all holy and righteous, daring to tell me what to do," Liang Ding said, rancor evident in every foaming word. "What do I give a shit what you say or what you want? You think I'd just take all of this because I don't fucking dare do anything to you? You're nothing without your army of cronies, and where are they now? Do you know how easy it is for me to just slam your head against the wall right now until your fucking brains fall out? You laugh; you don't think I dare?"

His last words came out as growls of fury, because Yong Qi had indeed given a sharp, amused chuckle.

"Oh no, I'm laughing because I didn't think you'd make it this easy," Yong Qi said, still smiling widely.

He really had expected to have to work harder to get his intended result. His continued amusement seemed to have infuriated Liang Ding to the point where the other man could not think of anything to
say. He simply stared at Yong Qi, seething and threatening.

"Did you know that threatening my life is considered treason?" Yong Qi said calmly. "Oh, you think it's not because free speech and all that. Unfortunately for you, you still can't threaten to kill the emperor's son. You're looking at twenty to life, by the way. And...this country still has a death penalty."

"And where's the proof?" Liang Ding snarled, though Yong Qi was pleased to see sparks of panic already forming in his eyes.

"Have you heard of a little thing called a microphone? It's used to pick up sounds to be recorded and transmit to other devices? Nowadays, it's small enough that it can be hidden?" Yong Qi's smile immediately disappeared, and his voice solidified into ice. He continued in a dangerously low voice, "So if you value your freedom, take my advice and never come near Xiao Yan again. Otherwise, you might want to find a very, very good lawyer. I should warn you, I do have the means to wrap this up rather quickly."

"Are you threatening me?" Liang Ding asked, his voice trembling with fury.

"You threatened me first," Yong Qi replied coldly. Then, with one last contemptuous look, he turned and walked away, leaving Liang Ding to stare gaping after him, trembling with rage.

As Yong Qi rounded the corner and stepped into the staircase, he removed the microphone and transmitter from inside his jacket and handed it to a waiting Er Kang.

"I'm never letting you borrow my spare comm set again," Er Kang muttered.

Yong Qi only smiled grimly as they made their way by stairs to the ground floor.

"Did it work?" Er Kang asked.

"We'll see, I guess," Yong Qi said.

Later, in the car, Er Kang pointed out, "You know the recording's not actually admissible in court, right?"

"That's debatable."

"You provoked him. The verdict is not so set in stone as you would have him think."

"I know that," Yong Qi said, "but he doesn't."

"Let's hope you are right, and it remains that way."

"Yes, as long as he thinks I have this over him, he'll stay away. So I do hope it remains that way."

In a way, Yong Qi would have preferred to not tell Xiao Yan about his encounter with Liang Ding, but that would simply lead to her continuing to be plagued by fears of him. So after a week had passed and neither of them sighted Liang Ding again, Yong Qi told her.

"I don't think you're going to have to worry about him anymore. He's not going to seek you out again."

"How do you know that? And why not? He doesn't really give up easily, you know," she said,
chewing her lip.

"I think he gives up quite easily, given the right motivation," Yong Qi countered, before telling her everything.

Xiao Yan stared at him for a full minute, with such a comical conflicted expression on her face that Yong Qi nearly laughed.

"Are you okay?" he asked when she didn't do more than open and shut her mouth silently.

"Am I – are you okay?" she cried, grabbing his face in her hands and pulling him closer to her, as him somehow putting them nose to nose meant she could figure out if he was in any way hurt or injured.

"I'm fine," Yong Qi said patiently, reaching up to his own face to take her hands in his, squeezing them warmly.

She continued to stare at him, still quite dumb struck for another moment, before saying in a shaky voice, "You shouldn't have done that."

"On the contrary, Xiao Yan," he said. "He was threatening you. I had to put a stop to it."

"By baiting him like that?" she asked breathlessly. "What if he had carried out his threats?"

"That was what Er Kang was there for. I'm not useless at defending myself, either, Xiao Yan."

"Yeah, but what if – "

Though it wasn't his intention to scare her, Yong Qi had to admit that he felt touched at the way she was looking at him, only concern for him shining in her eyes.

"Xiao Yan, it's done. It's over," he said, rubbing the back of her hand in comfort. "I'm fine. And he hasn't sought you out in the last few days. So you don't have to worry about it anymore."

She was still looking at him, wide-eyed, but the expression on her face showed that she was struggling to maintain the look of concern, considering he really wasn't hurt in any way. Suddenly, she turned irritated. Grabbing a cushion on the sofa they were sitting on, she whacked him with it.

"If you ever pull a stunt like that again, for Heaven's sake, at least take photos or something, so I'd at least get the satisfaction of seeing his stupid face!" she cried.

If Yong Qi had any prior expectation or guesses about what Xiao Yan's reaction might be at this moment, this entirely missed the mark. Suddenly, it was his turn to stare at her in surprise, while she pouted at him. Then, it was as a trigger or button was activated in both of them: they caught each other's eyes and burst out laughing, and it was a long time before either of them could stop.

Chapter End Notes

So it's not quite faking an imperial decree, but there is a very similar "slightly shady abuse of power" thing going on here? ;)
2012, March - September

Chapter Notes

I'm pretty sure we almost broke up last night.
I threw my phone across the room at you.
I was expecting some dramatic turn-away,
But you stayed.

And I said,
Stay, stay, stay.
I've been lovin' you for quite some time, time, time.
You think that it's funny when I'm mad, mad, mad.
But I think that it's best if we both stay.

— Stay Stay Stay, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2012

March

Xiao Yan's laptop died with the worst timing in the world.

It was the middle of the semester, and she had three different, big deadlines within a week of each other.

Her laptop decided on the day she was putting all the finishing touches to all her assignments to go completely black.

The panic that filled her wasn't due to the horror of having to redo all her assignments. She wasn't so careless that she didn't back up her work. Quite the opposite, her back up were very recent, so she only had to redo minor changes before she could have submission-ready essays again. The horror simply was, of course, that she had no laptop to make those changes on, and had no money to replace her computer if it truly could not be revived.

She took it to the repair shop still with a glimmer of hope, but it was quickly dashed when the guy at the counter told her that her hard disk was overheated and had fried the motherboard and it would cost more than it was worth to repair it. She might as well get a new computer.

It was easy enough for him to say, and then to proceed to make recommendations in terms of what the newest models are and which might suit her.

Xiao Yan only thanked him mid-sales-pitch and left the shop, heading to the library.

She spent fifteen minutes in the library pressing the power button on her computer, hoping that the guy at the shop was wrong, and the laptop would decide that it was done playing a massive, stupid joke on her and wake up as a sort of nasty jump-scare thing.
It didn't work. It only left her headdesking in the library instead.

This was how Yong Qi found her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, half-amused, half-concerned as he sat down opposite her.

"My computer died," she moaned. She opened her eyes and looked up at him pitifully with her head still pressed against the desktop.

Yong Qi made a sympathetic noise. "There's no way to fix it?"

Xiao Yan finally raised her head and ran her hand through her hair. "Nope. It's truly fried. Dead as Marley."

"I'm sorry," Yong Qi said. "Is there anything I can do?"

He leaned over the table to kiss her cheek, but missed when she turned her head away at the same to rummage in her bag for the back up flash drive. "You can lend me your laptop so that I can finish off these essays and send them off, before bemoaning my fate and wonder how I'm going to buy a new computer."

He smiled and pulled his Macbook out of his bag and slid it across the table towards her.

Xiao Yan managed to submit her assignments without much mishap.

However, she was also still computer-less.

It would be simple to buy something second-hand, of course, but she didn't want to have to go through this hassle of panic and stress again. If she was going to have to spend money, it might as well be on something decent and new that would last.

The issue was, she didn't have that much cash readily available.

Xiao Yan considered for a second about asking to borrow Zi Wei's money. It wouldn't be her father's money, Xiao Yan reasoned. Zi Wei had savings of her own from what her mother left her. And yet, because of that, Xiao Yan also was reluctant to ask her friend to dip into those savings.

There was a possibility of asking Liu Qing and Liu Hong for an advance on her pay. She knew they would not hesitate; she was practically their little sister by now. And yet, Xiao Yan couldn't understand why the idea seemed so uncomfortable for her. Maybe it was because she couldn't even be sure they wouldn't just give her the money and not expect anything back. That idea made her face flush with discomfort.

Still, it didn't seem like she had much choice, otherwise. If they didn't take it out of her pay, she'd just pay them back later whether they wanted or not anyway. Both Liu Qing and Liu Hong would try to protest, but eventually they would both know better than insisting.

She had made up her mind on this plan, and was about to pick up the phone to call Liu Qing when there was a knock at her door.

"Hey," she said to Yong Qi when she opened it. "Come in."

She was distracted enough that she didn't notice at first how he was grinning as he entered, as if anticipating something enormously exciting. However, it was hard to miss the secretive tone of his voice as he said, "I have something for you."
"Oh, what?" she asked, sitting down on the edge of her bed while he took her desk chair.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a large white box. At first, she didn't realise what it was. Then he placed it on her lap, and a silver bitten apple stared up at her. It was still sealed in plastic, so this decidedly was a brand new Macbook. Xiao Yan stared at it for a moment, frowning, a sinking feeling in her stomach.

No… he wouldn't...

Out loud, she asked breathlessly, "What's this?"

"A Macbook Air," he said. "I debated a bit between whether to get you the 11 inch or 13 screen but…"

Yong Qi trailed off when she finally looked up at him. He had previously looked absurdly pleased with himself, but upon meeting the horrified look on her face, the expression faltered.

"What?" she asked flatly.

"Xiao Yan, it's for you," he said. He kept his voice cheerful, but it was a lot less hesitant now, as if he was struggling to understand why she was not happy.

"What?" she asked again, incredulous.

"I got it for you," he repeated patiently.

"No," she breathed, shoving the box back at him as if it was burning coal, before clenching her hands into fists. Suddenly, she found it hard to look at anything except the wall behind him.

"What do you mean, 'no'?" he asked, frowning.

"I can't take this."

"Xiao Yan – " he started, sighing. From the look on his face, she was sure he thought she was being needlessly and senselessly stubborn and contrary, which just went to show how very much he didn't understand.

"No!" she cried loudly, interrupting him. "I'm not taking it. Why are you even giving this to me? Why? Why would you do that?"

"You need a computer!" he exclaimed, as if that was all the explanation that was needed. As if that was enough reason for him to just go out and buy a ridiculously expensive one to drop in her lap and expect her to just be okay with it.

He tried to give the box back to her, and she pushed it back. They went about this back and forth for a few more shoves before she gave a frustrated growl and just put the box on her bed instead, before spring up to her feet and start pacing around.

"Xiao Yan, I really don't understand why you are acting like this," he said, rubbing his eyes wearily.

"You don't understand?" she asked, turning around and staring at him in disbelief. "How can you not understand? Yes, I needed a computer, but not from you! I am perfectly capable of buying it myself!"

Yong Qi sighed again and tilted his head in exasperation. "Xiao Yan, you don't have to do that."

"Yes, I do! It's you who don't – " She took several steps away from him and gestured in frustration.
"Look, whatever. The point is, you really shouldn't have done this. Take it back. I'm not accepting this."

Yong Qi stood up too. He took a visible deep breath before saying with forced patience, "Xiao Yan, I know you have this..." – he struggled for words for a second – "this desperate need to prove that you don't need anyone – "

"I do not!" Xiao Yan retorted.

"Yes, you do!" he contradicted, irritated. "It's the most frustrating thing about you! You didn't want my help with Liang Ding either – "

"What?" she almost screeched. "You would bring that up now?"

"Only because it shows how stubborn you are about accepting help – "

She stared at him, cheeks flushed red with such fury that rendered her momentarily incapable of speaking. It also hurt, to think that of all the arguments he could make, he chose that to make a point. It was particularly even more grating when, after she had already told him to let her deal with that problem on her own, he went and interfered without telling her until it was over. At the time, she had simply been too relieved to be get rid of Liang Ding to overthink it. Now, it was becoming dangerously like a habit, and it wasn't one she was happy to consider, let alone accept, from him.

"Anyway, even assuming that is in the past," Yong Qi continued, still heatedly, when she was too angry to speak, "just yesterday you said you wondered how you would be able to buy a new computer. Now you don't have to. So I say again, I really don't see why you are reacting this way."

"And I don't see what gave you the right to just shove something like this at me and expect me to just merrily take it!" she shouted, finally finding her voice.

"Xiao Yan, I'm trying to help you!" he cried. "It really would be nice for you to appreciate it!"

"Appreciate it," she repeated tartly. "Of course. I should just appreciate even if I didn't need it! I would have managed myself, Yong Qi! You had no reason to interfere!"

"Interfere? How could you think it make sense to even use that word? Is that what you think of what I'm doing?"

"Yes! What else should I think?"

"Xiao Yan, when are you going to see that maybe you don't have to do everything by yourself, all the time?" Yong Qi asked in frustration. "Why is letting people help you such a horrible thing for you?"

"Because – " she cried, tears springing into her eyes, choking her. It was the worst thing that could have happened at that moment, especially when she didn't even know why she was crying.

"Because what?"

"Because I never asked you to do this!" she said angrily, roughly brushing away the tears with the back of her hand. "I never wanted you to do this! I would never ask you to buy something like this for me. I know you can, and maybe to you, that is enough reason to do it, but you have no right to just jump in and do things like this without my permission! You think just because you can throw money and position around, you can solve all my problems?"
Yong Qi stared at her, uncomprehending. "But this is a money problem!" When she didn't say anything, he sighed. "If it's the money that bothers you that much, you can pay me back. I don't care if it takes you years!"

"This isn't about the money!"

"Then what is it about?" he cried. "You have a computer to use now. Isn't that a good thing?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I would never have bought a Mac! I just wanted a normal computer. I'm not going to just take this and pay you back, because I'm not paying for something I don't want!"

"But you want a Mac!" he said.

"When did I say that?"

"You didn't have to. I saw you spend hours searching Mac specs and researching comparisons between PCs and Macs once, before you even needed or had plans to buy a new computer. You wouldn't have done that if you didn't want a Mac."

She found it incredible that just because he saw her make these searches once, it automatically became a valid point in favour of what he did. So she vaguely wondered about owning a Mac once, and even went online to explore the options extensively, but that didn't mean she would actually ever get one! After all, he only saw her do the research. How did he even know that at the end of it, she still wanted a Mac? She might have changed her mind! His assumptions were obnoxious, and they didn't even matter anyway, because that was hardly the point of this argument. She told him this, of course.

"How is it not the point?"

"You actually don't see?" she demanded. "You actually think that – Oh my god. You don't see how messed up it is that you didn't even bother asking me if I wanted you to buy a computer for me? You can't just assume you could do these kinds of things for me or that I would welcome them, Yong Qi! It doesn't work like that!"

He stared at her for a moment, before shaking his head exasperatedly. "Are we back to this again?" he asked, in a tone that clearly implied she was childish and somehow wrong to have a problem how he went about things. Needless to say, his tone and the hurt look on his face only made her temper flare even hotter.

"Yes, we are back to this again!" she snapped. "You can't just assume you can ride in on a stupid white horse and rescue me all the time! Maybe I don't need rescuing!"

"Xiao Yan," he said, with an obvious effort to be more temperate now, "I get that I should have asked you. I would have asked you, but I wanted to surprise you. I thought you would like the surprise, especially when it would take all your stress about buying a new laptop away. Clearly, I was wrong. But now that it's done, can you not just take it?"

"No!" she said bluntly.

"Why not?"
"Because it's your money, your computer."

"Don't you always say my money comes from your taxes anyway?" he asked flippantly.

She glared.

"All right, fine," he said, sighing, "it's my money. But it's a gift. I'm giving it to you. Please just take it."

"No."

He threw up his hands in frustration. "Xiao Yan. I thought we've been over this."

"Over what?"

"When I do things for you or give you things, it's because I want to and I care about you, not because I have any hidden motives or expect anything in return. I thought you understand that by now."

She knew he was speaking of the phone, and somehow, the mention of it made her even more angry. "That was something completely different!" she yelled. "That was a different context. Besides, it doesn't matter if I understand that or not. It doesn't even matter!"

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"People – people already say I'm just with you for the money, okay? You don't have to prove it for them!"

"People? What people?" he asked, bewildered.

"People! On the internet! In the newspapers! In the streets!"

Yong Qi scoffed. "Oh, really, Xiao Yan. You don't pay attention to that rubbish, do you?"

"So what if I do?" she cried. His derisiveness was making her even angrier; it just made it all the more obvious that he was not taking her concerns seriously at all. "I'm sorry if I can't just put myself in a little bubble and ignore the rest of the world like you do."

"Xiao Yan, people are going to say things, whatever you do. You know that. You can't let gossip and people you've never met before dictate your life. That's not a life!"

_Easy for you to say_, she thought. He didn't know how good he had it. People actually lowered their voices around him. They never afforded her the courtesy. There were things that she had to hear that she never told him, because she didn't want to hurt him. But now, she realised perhaps she should have, if the result of trying to spare him from hurt was that he could be so dismissive of her feelings like this.

"I don't 'let' gossip rule my life, Yong Qi, it just barges in and ruin it regardless of my wishes," she retorted.

He shook his head in frustration. "Look, we can talk about that later. Don't change the subject, Xiao Yan. I just want you to accept the computer. Can you just do that?"

"No," she said again stubbornly.

"Why not?" he cried, frustrated.
The anger and the frustration over the fact that he clearly just didn't get it filled her. Her chest felt like it was on fire and she wanted to cry. Or to scream and throw something at him. In the end, she shouted, "Because, the moment I start accepting these kinds of gift from you is when I start believing that maybe I am with you just for the money! You know I can't do anything for you that would be equal to this! I would always owe you!"

"Oh for Heaven's sake!"

He was angry, too, now. He had started pacing around agitatedly while she stood still, glaring at him. After a moment, he stopped abruptly in front of her. Along with the anger and the annoyance on his face, there was something else, too. Something that looked suspiciously like disappointment. She couldn't begin to understand why he felt like he had any right to be disappointed at her.

She didn't speak, and only met his look with a stubborn, unmoving, fiery gaze of her own.

"You know, Xiao Yan, you say you aren't in this relationship for the money, but what difference does it make if you're going to be keeping score anyway?" he asked bitterly.

She didn't know what she expected him to say, but it was not this. She didn't even understand why, all of the sudden, the anger in her seemed completely overwhelmed by pain, as if he had torn her heart to shreds. She stared at him, opened-mouthed, and tears blurring her eyes before she could even control them, spilling rapidly down her cheeks. She was so shocked at both his words and her reactions to them that she couldn't think of a single thing to say in return. It hurt even more when the tears apparently didn't even move him comfort her. Instead of offering her solace, he stepped away from her and grabbed his bag, before sweeping past her without another word. He pulled open the door and left her room, letting the door shut with a bang behind him.

He left the Macbook on her bed.

If it wasn't a stupidly expensive computer, she would have chucked it across the room in anger already. Instead, she forced herself to gently pick up the still sealed box and hide it in the deepest corner of her closet so she wouldn't have to look at it anymore.

"How can he not see how inappropriate that was?" Xiao Yan asked Zi Wei later. "I mean, it's not like I don't know how much it costs. It's totally, completely, utterly insane!"

"If he didn't buy it for you, how would you have bought a new computer?" Zi Wei asked calmly.

"I was thinking of asking Liu Qing and Liu Hong for an advance on my pay," she admitted glumly. Then she added more indignantly, "I will ask, still. I'm not taking this!"

"Xiao Yan, he was trying to help," Zi Wei said patiently. At her friend's furious look, she added, "He should have talked to you about it first before spending so much money, yes, I get that. But it is his money, Xiao Yan. He just wanted to do something nice for you."

"This – this is not nice!" she spat. "This is showing off. Or something. Anyway, I can probably buy three laptops for the price of this one stupid Macbook."

"Xiao Yan, I understand your discomfort, I really do," Zi Wei said. "But wouldn't it have been better if you explained it calmly to him instead of blowing up at him? Tell him why you're not comfortable taking a gift so expensive?"

"I did explain! Ages ago! When he gave me his phone!" Xiao Yan shot the iPhone which was sitting innocently on her desk a dirty look.
Zi Wei frowned in confusion. "But you agreed to use the phone then."

"And clearly I shouldn't have, if in the end what it's done is to act as precedence for things like this! The phone was different, anyhow."

"How was it different?"

"That was a hand-me-down. He didn't spend money on it." She had wanted to talk to Zi Wei because she thought Zi Wei would see things from her perspective. The fact that Zi Wei was so very calm, so very eager to play devil's advocate, made Xiao Yan irritated. Sometimes, Xiao Yan really, really hated how Zi Wei insisted on seeing every side to every story. Especially now, when pointing out that Xiao Yan had accepted the use of his old phone in the end was making her feel a little bit hypocritical right now. "Why are you defending him anyway?"

"I'm not saying he's not wrong," Zi Wei said. "I'm just saying, you might be overreacting."

Xiao Yan blew a derisive breath, which made Zi Wei shake her head. But when she spoke, Zi Wei sounded more patient than ever.

"It's just that the issue isn't serious for you to be fighting over it. He didn't do it to upset hurt you, Xiao Yan."

"Maybe not, but he did," Xiao Yan said, still not appeased.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Zi Wei asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," Xiao Yan confirmed, a stubborn set appearing on her face. "He did something stupid. He can bloody well come and apologise for it."

"Oh really, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said, slightly exasperated now. "You're going to just sulk now? That is just immature."

"So you want me to go to him and do what?" Xiao Yan snapped in annoyance. "Apologise? I'm sorry I didn't let you spend a crapload of money on me like a buying a wh-"

"Xiao Yan!" Zi Wei cried, stopping her mid-word, but then threw her such a sharp, disapproving look that it made Xiao Yan want to suddenly cry, despite how irritated she was still feeling with both brother and sister. Zi Wei seemed to see it, because her tone was slightly softer as she added, "You know that's not how it is."

Xiao Yan only turned away, pressing her lips together in a pinched expression. Zi Wei was expecting her to be reasonable, but she was not in any kind of mood to be reasonable. Besides, why should she, when Yong Qi was anything but?

Zi Wei sighed heavily. "Look, you have your pride. I get that. But are you really going to let it get in between the two of you like this?"

Xiao Yan was stubbornly silent. She thought, if her pride was truly capable of coming between her and Yong Qi, then why was it only up to her to prevent that? Wouldn't it make more sense for him to do something as well? Or not do something, like buying her a computer that she didn't even want.
"Xiao Yan, I'm not trying to take sides here," Zi Wei said gently when Xiao Yan continued to not speak. Xiao Yan snorted in disbelief, which made Zi Wei add, "Even if I were, I'm on your side."

"Really?" Xiao Yan retorted. "Could have fooled me."

"Yes! I know where you're coming from but I also want to help you understand where Yong Qi is coming from."

She didn't answer, which just resulted in Zi Wei making a vaguely disappointed noise at the back of her throat.

"And where is that?" Xiao Yan asked grudgingly, only because she knew Zi Wei wanted her to.

"You know, it was overwhelming for me, too, at first. I mean, I know the family is rich, but the true extent of it didn't sink until I received the first transfer of my allowance money from Ah Ma. I told him before that I didn't need his money, and after, that I didn't need that much. It wasn't that I really believed that Ah Ma was trying to buy my affection, and I don't think you believe Yong Qi is doing it either. But I do understand how uncomfortable it makes you to have that much money effectively dropped into your lap. The thing is, though, they don't look at it like that. For them, the money is not as precious as the gesture and the thoughts. So, in the end, it's the thoughts that you should appreciate."

"So now you're accusing me of putting money before sentiments -- " Xiao Yan started indignantly.

"No!" Zi Wei exclaimed. "Stop putting words into my mouth, please! I mean the opposite. I think it would also be good for you to try and understand his perspective a little."

Xiao Yan's brows creased together as she grasped around for something to say in reply. She both wanted to accept what Zi Wei was counselling, but was also too stubborn to easily allow herself to just give in.

Zi Wei sighed again, probably understanding her thought process, because she added, "Xiao Yan, you don't have to take the computer if you really don't want to. But understand why he's doing this. Take the thoughts and the feelings behind them as he's offering it and don't push him away. Yours or his, bruised pride is no reason to lose each other over."

It was two days later before she was calm enough to face Yong Qi again.

She had just put the Macbook, still sealed in its box and plastic wrapping, into her bag with the intention of heading out to look for Yong Qi. Pulling open the door, she was startled to find him already there before her.

"I was about to knock," he said, obviously taken by surprise by her sudden appearance too.

She stared for a moment, unsure of what to say. Then, finally, she stepped back to make room for him to enter the room.

They sat down on the only two chairs in the room opposite each other. Xiao Yan reached down to the backpack at her feet and pulled out the box, handing it to him.

"I still can't take this," she said, no trace of confrontation or anger in her voice.

He looked down at the box she was holding out, and for a moment, she was afraid he would start insisting she take it again, which she was sure would only end up in their continuing their fight.
Fortunately, after a few seconds, he simply nodded and took the box from her.

"I'm sorry I didn't ask you first," he said, placing it on her desk beside them without even looking at it. "I guess I oversimplified things. I didn't think you would see it as something so very serious. I didn't realise that we see monetary values differently. When you didn't accept it at first, the only thing I felt was that you were rejecting me. It hurt and I overreacted and didn't listen to anything you were saying. I'm sorrier about that."

His words were spoken in earnest and with such sincere conviction that she found it impossible to continue to be unreasonable in the face of them.

She looked down and her hands fidgeted in her lap. "I'm sorry I made you feel like I was only dismissive of what you did. I know you mean well."

"I went about it the wrong way. I guess...all my life, I've been conditioned into thinking favours and attention from me are all good things, I just didn't realise what it looks like or feels like when it might not be welcome."

She found it slight ridiculous that they were now both going out of their way to be in the wrong. "Basically, we were both idiots who couldn't communicate," she said carelessly, and this succeeded in making him laugh. More solemnly, she added, "I told you I'm not very good at this."

He didn't say anything. Instead, he took her hand and raised it to his lips, kissing it.

She gave him a watery smile. "You asked why it's so difficult for me to accept help. The truth is, I'm not used to...being thought of. For all of my life, there are really few people whom I could depend on, who I can really believe truly care about me."

"I care about you."

"I know. And sometimes, I think, too much. That scares me."

"Why?"

"I'm used to...fighting for what I want, what I need. I'm used to life being one huge struggle and everything being hard and something to solve. It's the good things that just appear...that come too easily that scare me, because I get caught up in thinking about how easily they could also be lost."

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said gently, "you're not going to lose me."

"I know," she said with a wan smile. "Sometimes I just have trouble remembering."

Yong Qi nodded and pulled her by the hand so that she ended up sitting on his lap. He placed his hands on her temples and scattered tiny kisses on her lips.

"So, are we made up yet?" he asked.

She laughed. "I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"Yes," she said, more firmly, reaching up to push his hair out of his eyes. "We are."

"Good," he said, resting his head against her shoulder.

They both turned their heads together to look at the still unopened Macbook on her desk.
"What are you going to do then?" Yong Qi asked.

"I'll be fine, Yong Qi," she said. She had already called Liu Qing that morning. "But thank you for caring."

He nodded and smiled at her.

"I hope you kept the receipt for that," she added.

"I did. But honestly…Yong Yan's birthday is next month, so…"

"He'll love you forever, won't he?" Xiao Yan asked, laughing.

"Basically, yeah."

"I won't tell. I promise," she whispered conspiratorially, before leaning in to kiss him.

It wasn't their first argument, and certainly wouldn't be their last. Just because they recognised the sources of tension between them, and knew the main reasons for most of their fights, it didn't mean it was easy to navigate their relationship to avoid fighting altogether. They were both too quick-tempered for that.

It still came down to the basic facts: She had always been too used to being by herself, fending for herself and depending totally on herself that sometimes it was hard to let him in. Sometimes the very fact that he cared so very much intimidated her and he never understood how that was even logical. Whatever disadvantage came with his position, however crowded his family could be sometimes, he still grew up in a loving environment. That meant that sometimes he just didn't understand how unused Xiao Yan was to have others investing their emotions and time on her. To ask her to get used to it was simple; the actual execution of it still required time.

Even beyond this, there was the fact that their relationship from the beginning had been the source of income for newspapers and tabloids, and the subject of casual gossip. He tried to shield her from it, but it was hard when internet made everything so much more out there and accessible and in her face. No matter how many times she pondered the question, Xiao Yan never could understand why people were so damn interested. Yong Qi took it as inevitable – which it was, after all – but it never ceased to annoy her, nor could she ever really get used to it all. She lived in fear, sometimes, of the way heads would turn her way on the streets, or even in the very elevator of her own building, and the back of her neck would burn with the knowledge that she was always observed.

It all scared her and frustrated her and more often than not, she took it out on him, because as much as she loved him, it was still his fault. He accepted it to a certain point, until she managed to say something hurtful and then everything always somehow managed to blow up in an argument with the speed of a charging bullet.

They would always get over themselves, of course. They kiss and make up and move on, even if in the duration between the fighting and the making up, they end up driving their friends crazy.

One memorable moment was when it seemed like Xiao Yan and Yong Qi had just had the most massive argument of their relationship, the kind that could end it all. The kind that a month later she wouldn't recall how it started or even what it was about. Xiao Yan spent the next several hours ranting and raving to Zi Wei about how angry she was with Yong Qi. How could he be so selfish? How could he not understand her like this? Even Zi Wei's saint-like patience had its limit, and Xiao Yan had reached it this time.
"Really, Xiao Yan, if he makes you that angry, why are you still even together?" Zi Wei had burst out in frustration, and then immediately clapped her hand over her mouth in horror. Having known both this long, Zi Wei knew the worst thing she could do in a heated moment like this would be to put these kinds of stupid ideas into Xiao Yan's head.

And yet, instead of storming off to take her implied suggestion, Xiao Yan just stared at Zi Wei in disbelief. "Don't be daft!" she said. "I'm the only person he's allowed to make this angry and he's the only person who will ever make me this angry and not get punched in the face."

They stared at each other for a long moment, until Zi Wei burst out laughing, and Xiao Yan looked away, embarrassed. Zi Wei reached out to pull Xiao Yan into a hug and said, "You should probably go tell him that."

Xiao Yan stared off into the distance, deep in thought for a long time, before pulling away. "Yes, maybe I should."

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**June**

At the end of her second year, Yong Qi asked her to move into Xian Fu Gong with him.

"No one would have to know," he told her.

Of course, by 'no one', he meant the public and the media.

His reasons were numerous.

"You'd be living with Zi Wei."

"You'd be a lot safer. Our relationship is too public now, but you won't let me put a security detail on you. I'd be more at ease if you were more protected."

"You won't have to pay rent. Or for food, either, come to think of it."

...

And then there was the one that was supposed to seal the deal.

"I love you."

It almost sounded like a proposal of marriage, even if at the time, both of them knew that it was not.

Xiao Yan understood why he thought the time had come for this move. In the last two years, they had counted on meeting each other at school, and Yong Qi still had time to hang around campus even when he wasn't in class to be with her.

But now that he had finished his degree, he would be spending the next year training at the Imperial Military Academy near Yi He Yuan, before completing active service. His time for her would have to be carved out from a packed schedule of military training and official engagements, which he was expected to take on more of now.

And yet...

"I just feel like moving in you would be a significant loss of my independence," she said frankly. "I know that it would be a lot less strain on both of us in the coming time if we could maximise the time we have together by at least living in the same place, but the whole idea unsettles me."
"You wouldn't be restricted in any way," he assured her. "You'd be free to come and go wherever you want."

"I know, I know. I don't mean loss of independence in any measurable form. I don't know how to explain it. It's just...I'm not going to be call my own the place I'm living, and that's what uncomfortable."

They were actually having this conversation in Xian Fu Gong. She came over and sat down next to him on the sofa.

"I understand why you want this," she said, taking his hand. "And maybe it's a little selfish, but I need a place of my own, too, Yong Qi. Even if it's just going to be the university dormitory."

He sighed, but his smile was genuine when he answered. "All right. If that's what you want," he said, leaning over to kiss her temple. She leaned into his arms.

"Don't be mad at me," she said, pouting a little.

He shook his head. "I'm not," he said, running his hand through her hair. "And I promise, I'll make as much time for you as I can. Nothing will change."

"I know." She slipped her arms around his middle and pulled herself onto his lap for a kiss.

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**September**

Xiao Yan might feel the need for a place of her own, but by the end of the school year, Sai Ya had given up the pretense of not living at Er Tai's place. She had moved out totally by the end of April into Er Tai's apartment. Her course was only supposed to last a year, and when it was over, instead of returning to Australia, she had made the momentous decision of staying in Beijing indefinitely and looking for a job here.

This was, of course, after she and Er Tai had spent the whole summer visiting her family in Melbourne.

When the new school year started, Xiao Yan found that she had yet another roommate, named Han Xiang, from Xinjiang.

"It's really unfair how pretty she is," Xiao Yan told Zi Wei.

"Oh Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said, laughing, "how can that be something that's unfair?"

"Because she literally has it all. Her father owns this huge corporation, so she's loaded, and I can already tell she's really smart. She's ridiculously polite and neat and she smells really nice all the time and there's nothing wrong with her."

"Why are you speaking as if that's a tragedy?" Zi Wei asked, amused. "She sounds like a dream roommate."

"I don't know. She's too perfect. It's scary living with someone that perfect."

"No one's perfect, Xiao Yan." Zi Wei patted her shoulder comfortingly. "Give it a month. I'm sure you'll find some fault soon to appease you."

Two months passed, and it turned out the only fault with Han Xiang was that she was always so sad.
After much cajoling and prodding, Xiao Yan finally got Han Xiang to confide in her.

Apparently, Han Xiang was in love with someone named Meng Dan, whom her father disapproved of.

"But why?" Xiao Yan asked, confused.

"Because she's a girl."

Xiao Yan stared at her for a moment in open-mouthed surprise, while Han Xiang stared back with rare defiance, as if both ready for any kind of reaction Xiao Yan could have and at the same time daring her to do her worst.

"Oh," was the only thing Xiao Yan could think of to say.

A silence descended between them. Xiao Yan still wasn't sure what she should say, while Han Xiang seemed to be judging how to take her silence. In the end, Han Xiang sighed and added, "He was really angry when he found out the true nature of our relationship. We were childhood friends, and my father had always thought that was all there was. He has picked out his deputy's son that he wants me to marry. The idea is that I would marry him, and he would inherit my father's position. When he told me about that plan…I didn't react very well. I should have broken the news to him a little more gently. But still, he was furious."

"I'm sorry," Xiao Yan said.

"My father's reaction is really not…unusual," Han Xiang pointed out.

"It might not be unusual, but it's still wrong! Even not counting that, the fact that he has a whole marriage planned for you is still really messed up!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. For some reason, her words made Han Xiang double take and she suddenly looked like she would cry. Xiao Yan's eyes widened, and she added hastily, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to criticise your father – "

"No, no, you didn't say anything that upset me," Han Xiang said, wiping her eyes. "I just…didn't expect this…"

"You expected me to be horrified?" Xiao Yan asked with a hint of challenge in her voice.

"Well, yes," Han Xiang admitted. "I don't even know why I told you. I am usually better at keeping it all hidden."

"You shouldn't have to," Xiao Yan said matter-of-factly.

"That's not how the world works, Xiao Yan," Han Xiang replied, so forlornly that Xiao Yan impulsively pulled her into a hug. It seemed to unravel Han Xiang further, and she needed several moments before she sufficiently recovered from the impromptu show of support.

Xiao Yan said, after Han Xiang was looking a little calmer, "Your father really has no right to force you to marry someone you don't want to, even if you were straight."

"Theoretically, no," Han Xiang said. "But in the end, he's still my father and it's very hard to convince him of my wishes when he's so convinced he knows what's best for me. I mean, family is still family, and it's hard to go against their wishes."

Xiao Yan found she couldn't think of a way to respond to that. Family was not exactly her area of expertise. "I guess," she answered with a sigh. Then, she added, "Why did you move to Beijing
then? You said you're a third year, too?"

"Yes. I completed two years at Xinjiang University already. When my father found out...he pressured me into moving here. I think he hopes that the distance would...break us up."

"How did he pressure you?" Xiao Yan asked, incredulous.

"Meng Dan's parents are his employees. They are also taking care of two of her grandparents who are really ill, and need constant treatment in the hospital. My father...well, he insinuated that if I didn't move here, he would terminate their employment."

"What?" Xiao Yan shouted. "That's despicable. He can't do that! They could sue for unfair dismissal."

"Only if they had more money and my father had less," Han Xiang pointed out in a tone that, to Xiao Yan, was frustratingly matter-of-fact.

"So what are you going to do?" Xiao Yan asked, still indignant.

"I don't know. Try to get through university first. My father thinks distance will change things between Meng Dan and me. I don't think so. I don't think I'll ever persuade my father to accept me, but for now, I'm still dependent on him, so I still have to do what he says. Afterwards, maybe, when I can fend for myself, things might change."

"What does your mother think of all of this?"

"She passed away when I was 14. That's one of the reasons why my father is so...protective of me."

Xiao Yan winced. "I'm sorry."

"No, you didn't know."

"So Meng Dan is still in Xinjiang now?"

"Yes. She talked about moving here, too, to be with me. But it's...well, she still has her family to consider."

"Well, at least there's still internet and everything, right? You can still keep in contact?" Xiao Yan asked.

Han Xiang smiled wanly. "Yes."

"Well, then there's still hope!" Xiao Yan said encouragingly. "As you said, things will have to change in a few years! You just have to hold on in the meantime."

Chapter End Notes

Let's get something straight (uh...no pun intended?). There will be no interaction whatsoever between Han Xiang and the Emperor. Also, I really didn't plan out to genderbend Meng Dan. At first, he was only supposed to be poor. But then this happened...I rather like the idea now actually. That said, the thing about Han Xiang is that once you take away the mysterious scent, the whole being the emperor's concubine
thing and put her in the modern world, her problem of actually being separated from Meng Dan become almost too easy to solve. Of course they have other struggles, but I'm hesitant about whether I could do them justice (without derailing this whole story or adding another 100k), so while Han Xiang does appear, she and Meng Dan won't have an entire subplot to themselves like they do in canon.
2013, September – October

Chapter Notes

So we went on our way
Too in love to think straight
All alone or so it seemed.

But there were strangers watching
And whispers turned to talking
And talking turned to screams.

— Wonderland, Taylor Swift

2013

September – October

For many months, things were idyllic and Xiao Yan was sure she and Yong Qi were happy.

They were, of course, until it happened.

So slowly that at first, she didn't realise it.

Looking back, perhaps she should have seen the way things started to fracture. Little things. Too insignificant to count at the time but all building up to the end.

It wasn't that she didn't understand there were only 24 hours in the day, and they both needed to eat and sleep. She told herself it was all right, that between his schedules and hers, any time they got to spend together was precious. That the long commute from Yuan Ming Yuan to the city in Beijing traffic wasn't worth it sometimes, and it was all right if Yong Qi couldn't find time to come into town to see her. They still talked. His time was infinitely rarer than hers now, and when he could find some sliver of it for her, it was just easier for her to rearrange her schedule to match his. They'd hardly ever actually see each other, otherwise.

Xiao Yan didn't think she was clingy.

It was undoubtedly hard, when both their dates and phone conversations became shorter, and when they did meet, there were fewer smiles and more apologies about not being able to catch each other. And yet, somehow, they held on. A year passed and Xiao Yan couldn't yet see the cracks, which must appear, inevitably, under all the strain.

It made itself known to Xiao Yan over a gathering of hot pot with the girls from two other rooms on the same floor of her dormitory building. Each floor of the dormitory actually had a kitchen, but as far as Xiao Yan knew, no one ever used it for cooking. Despite rules and restrictions against cooking in the dorm rooms, it was accepted widely that everyone had a rice cooker and an induction stove in the room anyway. But every once in a while, some rooms would get together for a shared meal, and the only place big enough to gather would be the kitchen.
One day, a couple of days after the new school year started, found Xiao Yan and Han Xiang gathering with four other girls from the two rooms on either side of them in the kitchen. The six of them, living next to each other, have had plenty of chances to interact over the years, and would often knock on each other's doors to borrow things. After four years, Xiao Yan had come to know Ling Xin, Xiao Yu, Ji Na and her sister, Wei Na fairly well and found they were all nice girls, even if Wei Na was prone to get very annoyed if disturbed by loud noises.

They placed a large mat on the floor to sit on, and were crowded around an induction stove, steam rising from the rapidly boiling pot warming them all.

Most of them were all fourth-years, everyone began sharing their plans of what they would do after graduation.

When it came to Xiao Yan, no one really even asked, and just gave her knowing looks.

"There's no need to ask you what you're going to do after graduation, Xiao Yan," Xiao Yu said.

"Why not?" Xiao Yan asked, bemused, but not really paying that much attention, as she was trying to fish a meatball out of the pot.

Ling Xin giggled. "Aren't you just going to marry your prince and live happily ever after?"

Xiao Yan laughed heartily, and looking up from the hot pot, she answered, ignoring what she assumed was just a teasing quip, "Actually, I've been looking at some options. I think there might actually be a job that opens up in the summer that I really want to apply for, which really would be perfect. But I need some experience or something first, to make my case more attractive for that. So I'm thinking of looking for an internship in the meantime or something."

"Wait, what?" Xiao Yu asked, looking as if Xiao Yan had announced her plans to move to Antarctica. "You're actually getting a job after graduation?"

"Of course I'm getting a job!" Xiao Yan said, laughing. "How else am I going to live?"

Confused, incredulous glances were exchanged, as if her friends were unsure whether she was actually being serious.

Xiao Yan frowned, feeling a little annoyed.

"Aren't you getting married?" Wei Na asked, looking curiously at her.

"Yeah, I thought maybe you just weren't allowed to say anything officially yet," Ji Na added.

They could all be speaking Greek for all that she understood what they were trying to get at.

"What? Guys, what are you talking about?"

"Xiao Yan, you've dated basically one of the most eligible men in this entire country of a billion people for two years," Ji Na pointed out with a tone that indicated it physically caused her pain that Xiao Yan didn't get what was going on. "What have you been doing if you can't even be sure you'd marry him?"

Xiao Yan continued to stare. The hot pot boiled, but now, none of them were paying attention. Steam rose, watering Xiao Yan's eyes a little and she turned away to cough.

"Are you saying he has never talked about marrying you?" Ling Xin asked when Xiao Yan still
refused to speak. She wasn't really fishing for gossip; Xiao Yan could see the crease between her brows which indicated she was actually concerned.

"Well…no, it's not like that. We've talked…" Xiao Yan said weakly.

It was impossible to have never discussed marriage. But there were many different ways to discuss it. There were times when she was invited as his family's guest for formal occasions, that ended up in long lessons about the particularly duties of everyone in the family. There were teasing remarks made in bed that were totally not-serious, forgotten in the heat of the moment and by the morning. There was the way it became so easy for them to speak of five years from now, ten years from now, as if it was inevitable that they would still be together that long into the future. There was the way his younger brother and sister had taken to calling her "sister-in-law" and neither Yong Qi nor she bothered to correct them. There was the casual way those closest to them referred to one of them in the other's presence as "ni jia Xiao Yan" or "ni jia Yong Qi" and it felt like the most obvious thing in the world.

They had even sat down and spoken the word, as early as a year ago. Yong Qi had told her, in quite plain terms, that that was what he wanted, and that was what he wanted them to head towards. At the time, she had blushed and spluttered, which led him to hastily assure her that it wasn't a proposal or a statement of what he was expecting from her. If anything, he hadn't expected her to be automatically or immediately on board with the idea right at that moment. He had only mentioned it as something for her to consider, to think about. Over many days, the idea had soaked into her slowly like rain. She already knew, without him having to ask, that marriage was the direction they were moving in. She just hadn't had time to allow herself to really, seriously think about what else she would be marrying, in addition to him.

So the question of marriage for her and Yong Qi was the clearest question in the world, but also the murkiest.

It was no wonder she had no idea how to answer her friends.

"Do you want to marry him?" Ji Na broke through Xiao Yan's thoughts.

Wei Na, Ling Xin and Xiao Yu turned to stare at Ji Na as if she were insane.

"What?" Ji Na asked. "It's a legit question. There's a lot of pressure marrying someone like that."

"It's complicated," Xiao Yan said weakly.

Four pairs of eyebrows raised at her in disbelief, while Han Xiang, precious thing that she was, saw clearly Xiao Yan's discomfort. She broke into the conversation finally.

"Come on, guys, let's leave Xiao Yan alone," she said, before steering the attention and the conversation to something else completely with such finesse and speed that everyone else couldn't help but follow along.

Xiao Yan was grateful for Han Xiang's diversion, but she couldn't seem to put the conversation out of her mind, even when the meal was over and they all returned to their respective rooms.

Who else held the expectation that she and Yong Qi would marry eventually? Who else saw it as such a given that she would graduate, marry Yong Qi and never do anything useful that wasn't somehow connected to his name and that of his family?

She loved him, but what was even the point of graduating with a degree if that was the case? What had she spent the last four years doing, in the eyes of the world? Waiting around for when the time
was ripe for her prince to sweep her off her feet into some fairy tale ending?

In what she later would recognise as the most unwise move she could make in that moment, she opened up her laptop and went onto the university's forums. If she ever used the forums, it had always only been to seek academic information. The gossip side of things…well, ever since she and Yong Qi became a 'thing', it was always safest to avoid those message boards.

Now, she found herself typing her name into the search bar.

The results came in the tens of thousands.

Do you think they'd be allowed to have a modern wedding, or would it be one of those really old traditional ceremonies?

I'd prefer a traditional ceremony. The spectacle would be even bigger then.

I'd rather not have to help pay for a stupidly expensive wedding of two random people I once walked in on making out in the library once.

My brother's a cadet at the Military Academy, and he says Yong Qi's even more handsome in person.

Your brother thinks Yong Qi's handsome. Are you sure the handsome bit is what you should be focusing on hahaha?

Piss off.

Is she really that great, do you think? I had class with her once. There's nothing really remarkable about her.

Love is blind, you know.

In this case, love really is blind.

Personally, of all of his girlfriends before, I thought that Cai Lian girl was the prettiest.

I'd make a better girlfriend.

Sure, dream on.

Cai Lian ran off to America though. I mean, who does that when you're dating a prince?

Maybe she knows something nobody else does.

Maybe that's why he's with Xiao Yan now? Once burn, twice shy, I guess.

I think Xiao Yan's pretty. Maybe not like pageant material, but she's not bad looking.

Well, I think they'd end, eventually. Can you imagine a prince marrying a girl like that? I mean, it makes for a good story while they're still at school and whatever, but no one knows who her family is. There's no way they'd make it to the end. She hasn't got the class.

There were polls: rank Yong Qi's past (and present) girls (Xiao Yan didn't venture into this; she didn't think she wanted to know how she fared), rank her outfits during appearances with him, nominate ten celebrities would you rather Yong Qi be with than Xia Xiao Yan (she went into this one preparing to get angry and went out laughing her head off), vote on names you think Yong Qi
and Xiao Yan would give to their children…

What even.

What caught her eyes, though, was the title of a particular thread: Confessions about Prince Yong Qi & Xia Xiao Yan. A quick glance into it told her that this was a place where people could submit long-winded 'confessions' – or more like speculations, judgement and gossip about the two of them anonymously.

Some of them were actually kind and thoughtful.

Others…well, under the cover of anonymity, it was easy to predict the kind of things people might write.

Xiao Yan saw red after reading about five posts, and had to hastily click out of the thread before she became so incensed that she threw her laptop at the wall.

If it was like this, just in the little corner of her university's forums, what must the whole of the internet be like?

Han Xiang came into the room after being out to make a phone call and saw Xiao Yan sitting there, staring at her laptop, red-faced.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"What?" Xiao Yan startled. "Yeah, fine."

Han Xiang sat down on Xiao Yan's bed. "They didn't mean to upset you, you know."

"Who? Oh, the girls? No, they didn't upset me."

"It's just that…everyone thinks it's pretty much a given."

"I've never thought about what other people think before," Xiao Yan said.

"But you have thought about him? Marrying him?"

"Well, yes..." she said slowly. "I mean, it's always been almost a cross between an assumption and a consideration. We just haven't given it, like, a deadline or anything."

"Well, you are graduating," Han Xiang pointed out. "I think it's going to be a question on everybody's mind in the coming months."

"Why?" Xiao Yan asked, wrinkling her nose. "Why does the fact that I'm graduating from university automatically mean that the next thing I do must be get married? What was the point of university then? I mean, seriously, if I was ever in a hurry to get married, university would not have been in the way at all."

"If it makes you feel any better," Han Xiang said, "it's not just you who's going to be pressured. I'm sure in a year or two, all of us will be nagged to get on with it."

The heavy sigh that followed Han Xiang's words was sufficient to pull Xiao Yan out of her self-centred angst.

"You're still going to ahead with your plans, then?" Xiao Yan asked.
"Yes."

When Xiao Yan found out that while Han Xiang's father had practically blackmailed her to move to Beijing to be away from her girlfriend, but still kept her very comfortable materially, a plan had been hatched between them. It was fortunate that Han Xiang's father apparently thought keeping her well-off in Beijing might spur her to turn her romantic interests to those he deemed more appropriate. It meant that Han Xiang had spent the last year saving all the money she could and upon graduation, she would theoretically have enough money to start a new life in Beijing to live as she wanted.

"When's Meng Dan coming here?"

"Probably not until after the new year," Han Xiang answered. "She wanted to make sure that her father is really settled in his new job, first."

"I'm looking forward to finally meeting her."

Han Xiang smiled.

"So you're really not going to go back to Xinjiang," Xiao Yan asked. "Ever?"

"If my father continues to deny the truth, then yes, I doubt I would ever go back or see him again."

"For what it's worth, I do hope he comes around eventually," Xiao Yan said, placing a hand on Han Xiang's arm in comfort. Even as resolute as Han Xiang was, it couldn't be easy to cut off ties like this. She knew that Han Xiang had second-guessed the plan more than a few times over the last year. "Maybe after a while, he would have to come to terms with the fact that you serious about this move, and he won't want to lose you over it."

"I can only hope," Han Xiang said sadly. "Even if that never happens…I have made up my mind."

"Good for you," Xiao Yan told her, but then couldn't help holding back an enormous sigh of her own. "Han Xiang, do you think maybe I am a bit of a hypocrite?"

"Why on earth do you say that?"

"It's just…I know you'd do anything to be able to marry the person you love. And you can't. And there's me…wanting to freak out because people suddenly are flaring up with expectations for me to marry someone the whole world would probably think me mad for not wanting to marry…"

"Oh Xiao Yan, it's not the same at all," Han Xiang said. "Besides, you aren't freaking out about Yong Qi, are you? It's everything else that scares you…"

Xiao Yan nodded and sighed again.

She didn't know why it only began to terrify her now. Now that it had been pointed out to her that there were certain expectations of what would happen next between her and Yong Qi, the whole concept seemed to her like something to dread. It wasn't as if she didn't know before how complicated it would be to marry him. Was it because before this year, she had always been able to hide behind the guise of a student, knowing how her next year would be occupied? Her days as a student were ending rapidly, and she was facing a whole new road, and clearly the whole world thought it was their right to draw that road out for her.

She knew she should talk about these things with Yong Qi, but it seemed more impossible than ever to find enough time to really sit down and talk. This wasn't something that they could just discuss over the phone.
It didn’t help that in the meantime, the speculations and expectations didn’t stop at just those around her. No, it was as if the media was in some sort of conspiracy. As the first few months of her fourth year passed, every week there seemed to be a comment or a headline or a question somewhere by somebody speculating on Yong Qi and Xiao Yan’s possible marriage, when and where and how it would happen.

Xiao Yan pushed the gossip out of her mind. She was sure Yong Qi was far from being unaware of it, and if he thought it wasn’t worth bringing up to talk about, why should she ruin the rare time they had together by pressing the issue? They knew where they were with each other; since when did anyone else’s speculations mattered? Considering his current on-going obligations, she knew that even if they were to discuss it, the conclusion would simply be that the time wasn’t right for either of them anyway.

She really thought it would have been possible for her to push back the undoubtedly complicated issue for another few months, if it were not for an unexpected encounter on night in October.

It was one of those rare days when Yong Qi was actually free for a whole day. The spent it together and it was the happiest Xiao Yan remembered being for a long time. Everything seemed perfect, until they finished dinner at a restaurant. They were simply lingering at the table after their meal, when a conversation between a group of men sitting at a table nearby drifted over to where they were sitting. Yong Qi and Xiao Yan were sitting in a closed off booth of the restaurant, separated from the group of men by a wall partition, so that both parties could only hear each other, and not see each other. It seemed that the men had just sat down at the table and were talking while waiting for their food to arrive. Xiao Wei would not have eavesdropped, but they were talking very loudly, and the subject made it impossible to not listen a little.

"Well, congratulate me, everyone. You are looking at the new Senior Imperial Correspondent at - Daily Newspaper!" one voice said smugly.

Xiao Yan raised an eyebrow at Yong Qi, but he just shook his head and rolled his eyes slightly over the sound of raucous celebrations at the next table. Of all the people to run into, did they have the encounter a bunch of reporters out on a social night?

The relationship between the imperial family and the reporters who specialised in their news from major newspapers and media corporations was always complicated and bordering on hostile. Undoubtedly, the imperial family needed the press in certain circumstances. They struggled to keep the press at a tight leash, only to draw them close when necessary. It went without saying that reporters did not appreciate being kept on any kind of leash. It was a fractious exchange where both sides had something the other wanted, and both struggled for dominance.

None of that would really be an issue, if the reporters behind them did not choose to continue their conversation in the same loud voices.

"If they’ve promoted you, you must have been given some pretty sweet assignment," another man was saying.

"Yes, of course," the original man replied with a crude laugh. "First order of business is of course to dig up everything that could be dug up on Xiao Yan and make a job of it."

Hearing this, Xiao Yan couldn't help but widening her eyes. She knew the world was always interested in knowing where she came from and who her parents might be. Numerous attempts had been made by many an investigative reporter over the years, but seeing as Xiao Yan herself knew very little, the results they managed to dig up was also similarly poor. She wouldn't take it seriously now, if it wasn't for the fact that there was something in the man's tone that unsettled her.
"You think after two years of no one finding anything really of interest on her, you'd find something?"

"There must be something; the bosses are sure of it and are providing me with all the resources to find it," the Senior Correspondent.

Xiao Yan looked at Yong Qi, and it was clear that the man's tone bothered him, too, because there was a deep, displeased frown on his face. She made a sign to suggest if they should just leave, and received a sharp shake of his head in return.

"Do you think they know something?"

"I think there must be something, and they are covering it up," another man said. "Cao Ge, if you manage to dig it up, it really would be the scoop of a career."

"Indeed," the man named Cao replied. "And even if there is nothing…I'm sure I can arrange for something to be found…it's not like anyone could actually contradict evidence I might find. She's been playing the innocent part for too long, she can't exactly come out and contradict things now when she's spent the last two years acting like she knows nothing about her past."

Xiao Yan couldn't help feeling a chill go down her back as she listened to this man plot…what was he plotting? If she didn't know any better, he was planning to just make up some scandalous past about her and print it as if it were the truth, gleeful in the knowledge that she would have little way of proving or disapproving whatever it was that he would write. It didn't matter if his slanders were true or not, even with proof of its untruth, once it was printed, whatever lies he felt needed to smear on her would follow her forever.

Yong Qi reached across the table and took her hands. "Don't worry, we're not going to let that happen," he whispered low enough so that he couldn't be heard by their loud neighbours, who were still busy talking among themselves.

At that moment, one of Yong Qi's security officers, who had been sitting at a table posing as another diner, had obviously heard the men's conversation too, walked over to their table. In a remarkably restrained and quiet voice, he asked, "Sir, would you like us to interfere – "

"No," Yong Qi said, equally quietly, shaking his head for emphasis.

The word just left him when the next table's conversation drifted their way again.

"In any case, I might as well get to the bottom of why Yong Qi's still with her, when clearly he's not going to marry her. I mean if it's going to happen, we would have heard something about it by now. It's only been positively silent."

Xiao Yan pressed her lips together in a tight line and squirmed in her seat, while Yong Qi shot a surveying look at her. She avoided his eyes, and wished that she could feel comforted by the way he was squeezing her hand.

"But I guess I can't fault him for keeping her around when there isn't a better option. That really is the only reason, isn't it? Gold-digging as she might be, I must say if I had as much money him I'd be willing to give away some to have a taste of her. You know if this was the old days, she'd make a pretty ravishing woman from a house of pleasure, if you get my drift...or maybe a woman any man would be willing to have as a concubine. Not as a wife, mind you, since a wife is supposed to be all prissy and proper – "

Xiao Yan felt her cheeks heat up with the indignation and humiliation of these words. She pulled her
hands abruptly from Yong Qi's and grabbed her desert fork and stabbed it on the table in a vain attempt to release some tension. The worst thing was that the agent was still standing by their table, looking distinctly uncomfortable and trying, unsuccessfully, to sink into the backdrop of their little corner. Xiao Yan couldn't look at Yong Qi, but she could hear him let out a low, angry breath.

She wished they could shut out the conversation but the crude words still drifted in.

"I'm sure as soon as she gets what she wants from him, we'll be getting plenty of dirt on her, and you know those articles would just bring readers flocking in, the more the better for my career..."

"That's it," Yong Qi exclaimed quietly, standing up, his eyes flashing angrily. To Xiao Yan, he said, in a barely controlled voice, "Come on."

Xiao Yan hardly know how else to react but to stand with him and let him take her hand. She felt like she should be saying something to stop Yong Qi making a scene, but the angry, hurt part of her didn't want to be that considerate of those awful people. So what if there was a scene? Who knew how many people had heard those coarse words? Wasn't that enough of a scene already?

Yong Qi and Xiao Yan turned the corner and saw ahead of them were five men gathered around a round table, glasses of wine in hand. Xiao Yan vaguely recognised all of them as reporters who have been at one point or another been present at some official function she had attended as a guest of the imperial family.

One of them caught sight of Yong Qi still several paces away and his less-than-pleased expression and turned absolutely white – which gave Xiao Yan a sort of vindictive pleasure. This drew the attention of his friends and they turned. There was suddenly a moment of absolute silence, followed by the scrapings of chairs on the floor as all five stood up.

"Wang Ye – " one of them started.

"Gentlemen," Yong Qi said in disgust as they reached the table.

Xiao Yan imagined that he would slam his fists down on their table in fury and threaten them all with bodily harm for daring to speak that way about her. Needless to say, she found herself absolutely surprised and more than a little bit hurt when Yong Qi didn't even stop, but continued to stride away towards the door of the restaurant. When she made to stop to confront them herself even if her boyfriend would not, he simply gripped her hand even more tightly and tugged her none too gently along. She would look even more of a joke if she were to struggle and end up floundering at their feet, so with extreme reluctance, she let Yong Qi pull her away, but glaring at the men as she passed.

She was fuming by the time they were in the car, and by now, the target of her anger was not the men with such vulgar words, but Yong Qi. Why did he not even attempt to defend her to them? Why did he stay so silent? The angry part of her wondered if he had not said anything because they had managed to get the right of it. Was it possible that he was ashamed of her to the point that he would not say anything to contradict such words being said about her?

It didn't help appease her anger or her fears when, once he had opened the door and saw her into the passenger seat and rounded to slide into the driver's seat himself, Yong Qi did not even try to look at her or say anything in comfort to her. Instead, he had pulled out his phone and was typing rapidly on it, an expression of cold determination on his face.

When he finally looked up at her, she was glaring at him from her side of the car. He didn't seem to realise straightaway that the glare was directed at him, because he reached out to take her hand, saying, "I'm sorry you had to hear that – "
Xiao Yan pulled her hand away and clenched it into a fist. "Don't touch me," she said acidly.

He stared from her hand up to her face, frowning. "You're angry at me," he said slowly.

"How good of you to have noticed," she snapped bitterly.

She was looking out the window in order to avoid facing him and for a moment, could hear nothing except the sounds of breathing.

"Why?" he asked finally.

She turned abruptly around, facing him with tears smarting her eyes. "How could you even ask that? How could you not know why I'm angry, when you didn't even bother to say anything back there? How could I not be angry at someone who is so embarrassed by gossip about me that he wouldn't even let me defend myself against it, let alone do it himself?"

Understanding finally dawned on him and he inhaled sharply. She looked away, sniffling and brushing the tears away angrily. She was debating whether it would be worth trying to get out of the car and storm off, or whether it would just be a futile attempt, as he surely would stop her.

Yong Qi's voice broke through the stifling silence. "Do you know what I was typing just now?"

"Who cares?" Xiao Yan sniffed.

"By this time tomorrow, Mr Cao will find that his mint title of Senior Imperial Correspondent will no longer be in effect," Yong Qi said calmly. "He will also find that his employers have realised that they can no longer employ him. He will no longer be welcome in any post of journalism with any major agency or network, let alone in a position to report on the imperial family. His friends will also find that if they attempt anything indiscreet, they could be facing the same."

Xiao Yan turned around to stare at Yong Qi in shock. "What did you say? How is that possible?"

"I know who all those men are and who they work for. I have requested a meeting with their employers and other relevant authorities where everyone will make sure that these actions will be carried out."

"You're going to get him fired?" Xiao Yan asked in disbelief. "Is that even legal?"

"Perfectly," he said, as if this was something that people did every day. "They aren't writers for gossip magazines, Xiao Yan. They are reporters employed by respectable newspaper agencies and networks to cover official news on the imperial family. As such they are bound by certain expectations and codes of conduct that comes with the position. They knew very well that if those expectations and codes are violated, it could lead to consequences."

Xiao Yan simply stared at him for a long time, her mind spinning. "Why would go to such lengths?" she asked. "Why couldn't you just have said something to them just now? Did you just not want to cause a scene?"

"Xiao Yan, do you think words would mean anything to men like that? They would be back to laughing at both of us the moment we are out of the door. If they are to be punished, I have to go at the things that they value, and that is ego, career and money."

"You would do all that, ruin their careers, because they were mean? Isn't that taking things too far?"

"Those weren't just mean words, Xiao Yan. Those were threats. Even if none of what they threaten
to write is true, that doesn't mean you have to suffer the potential of those things being published. We have agreements in place with those reporting on us to prevent, among other things, slander. They have to know that we will enforce our rights to protect ourselves against breaches of those agreements."

All of the sudden, Xiao Yan found herself lost for words, but she still felt stifled and uncomfortable.

Yong Qi waited for her to speak. When she didn't, but her expression relaxed a bit from its previously confrontational set, he reached over again and took her hand. She let him, but at the same time, she had to say, "You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"The whole, white horse, swooping down, saving me like a damsel in distress thing," she said. "I don't even know if I want you to do that. Ruining their careers. I just needed to know that you were on my side."

He sighed heavily. In the dim light of the car, she looked at him and saw that he was as conflicted as she.

"I'm sorry if my silence distressed you," he said. "I was angry, and I didn't trust myself to speak to you without making you feel like I was angry at you."

She could tell by the contemplatively look on his face that he wasn't finished, so she just remained silent, waiting for his next words.

"As for what I'm planning to do, the truth is, I have never claimed to be clear-headed when it involves you."

"Is that reason enough?" she asked, turning to look directly at him.

"You don't want me to do it?" he asked.

"Of course not!"

He smiled ruefully and nodded. "All right. Maybe I won't go that far. I am still having that meeting, though. You won't prevent me from delivering a few pointed threats, will you?"

There was something about the wide-eyed pleading expression he was adopting that made her laugh a little. "All right, a little bit of threatening will do. But only that."

"Only that," he agreed, "and nothing more."

"I would probably have preferred if you just punched them in the face from the beginning," she said, "but I guess this can work too."

This made him laugh. "Punching reporters is the best way to land on the front page, Xiao Yan. I would never do that."

"There was something that that reporter, Cao, said at the restaurant, though," Xiao Yan said tentatively later a couple of hours later. They were lying on his bed at Xian Fu Gong; she was perpendicular to him with her head resting on his stomach and his hand was playing with her hair. "About whether...whether you'd...about whether we'd get married."

"What about it?" he asked gently.
"He might have been crude about it, but the…question is on everyone's lips these days."

"Do you want me to propose? Right now?" he asked in a tone that if they were talking of anything else, she would have a hard time telling if he was joking or not.

"No!" she exclaimed, sitting up to look at him. "Not after tonight."

He sat up too, taking her hand to pull her into his embrace. She settled against his chest and closed her eyes. She could feel the warmth of his arms, but found that she couldn't quite relax.

"Do the speculations really bother you?" he asked softly, stroking her arm lightly with the tips of his fingers.

"Of course," she said, trying to ignore the goosebumps that were rising on her arm at his touch. She raised her head slightly to look at him, incredulous. "Don't they bother you?"

"I'm used to it."

"I wish I could be," she muttered darkly.

"Xiao Yan, you mustn't pay it any mind."

"You always say that!" she exclaimed, unable to help feeling a little annoyed now. She pulled away from him and hugged a pillow to herself. "But it's not that simple!"

"How is it not?" He was still infuriatingly matter-of-fact.

"I don't know how you do it, but I can't just shut off my eyes and ears, Yong Qi," she cried.

"You don't have to unsee anything. Just don't pay attention to it."

"Your advice is the most useless advice ever," she said with a huff.

"Xiao Yan, why does it bother you?" Yong Qi asked softly. "You know how I feel about you."

She didn't know how to answer that and just looked away.

"Xiao Yan. He sat up now to look at her seriously. "I've told you what I want. And you know now is not the right time for me. So why are you letting the rumours and speculations get under your skin? Is it – "

He trailed off and stared at her, frowning.

"Is it what?" she snapped, unable to understand herself why she suddenly felt so annoyed.

"What do you want from me, Xiao Yan?" he asked. "Forget anyone's expectation, forget even my wishes. Just considering yourself, what do you want from this? From the two of us?"

"I – "

It was as if the words were frozen in her throat. She was sure, if she were to say that she wanted him, everything would be resolved and over and they'd both be smiling again. But it wasn't that simple.

If she were to do away with everyone's expectations and wishes, including his own, and looked at the choices in front of her…
She wanted to have a life after graduation where she was free to call the shots. Some might call her crazy, but she wanted to go through the struggle that every one of her classmates would go through, what with finding jobs and establishing a career and finding a place in the world. She wanted to be able to live – even if it were only for some time – a life where the future wasn't tied up in a box for her. She wanted the mystery and spontaneity of not knowing what the future held and being able to explore all the possibility that lay in the unknown.

And she wanted him beside her during that time.

But there was the conflict.

He could offer her none of that. In some aspects, he could hardly even join her in that unknown.

The things he could offer her had been laid out from the very moment they entered this relationship. None of it contained freedom or a life that would ever really be her own.

She looked at him, and realised that he understood. When he sighed, she knew that her silence must be breaking his heart, but she couldn't even force herself to say something falsely comforting. It would be crueler to lie.

"I told my father once," he said quietly, "that you deserve more than this. I think that is more clear now than ever."

Somehow, the gentle note in his voice unsettled Xiao Yan even further. How did he think she was supposed to react to such a confession? Did he want her to agree that she wanted more for herself than his way of life could offer? She couldn't say that! How could she, when at the same time, she was also so convinced that she wanted him? And to say that out loud…what did that mean then for them?

Before she even quite knew what she was doing, Xiao Yan found herself swinging her leg off the bed and picking up her sweater from the floor and pulling it over her t-shirt.

She didn't understand why she felt so choked up. She only knew that, all of the sudden, she just needed to be away from him.

"Wait, where are you going?" he said when he realised that she was heading towards the door. "It's the middle of the night."

"To Zi Wei's room," she said shortly, before more or less fleeing the room, leaving Yong Qi to stare after her, confused and helpless, with everything unresolved.
2013

November

The deadlock between them drew on.

She wished they had actually been disagreeing on something. Then at least they could just argue it out.

Instead, Yong Qi apparently thought he could not exert more pressure on her to think about their future, not when the rest of the world was already doing more than their fair share.

She almost wished some of the pressure did come from him. It would be easier, or at least she would have more reason to confront it, than pressures from nameless, faceless people she did not know.

The tension eventually built to a point where even his family noticed.

This, of course, just made it all the more complicated.

It reached a new height of complication when, one day, Xiao Yan was just leaving Xian Fu Gong to head back to her dorm room when she ran into Yong An.

"Xiao Yan," he said, "are you just leaving?"

"Yes," she answered, sighing. "Yong Qi is heading off in a bit, so…"

Yong An seemed to see through the reason for her slightly disgruntled expression and gave her a sympathetic smile.

"If it helps, he hates it too. The fact that he has so little time right now to spend with you."

"I know," Xiao Yan said grudgingly. She didn't add that this didn't mean it was any easier for her to accept it.

Yong An glanced at his watch. "How are you getting home?"
"I'll be fine."

"I know. But it's early yet. I was wondering if maybe we could talk?"

Xiao Yan raised an eyebrow at this not shocking, but certainly unusual request.

"About what?" she asked with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

Yong An shrugged. "Things." It was obvious he didn't want to get into whatever it was he wanted to talk about here in the middle of the road. He gestured to her in the direction away from the palace gates. "Come on, let's head to Tai Ji Dian, and then we can talk."

Xiao Yan was still slightly thrown off by his request, but couldn't see a reason to back out of this. She simply fell into step beside Yong An.

"I'm not trying to be nosy," Yong An said after a few moments, "but it's hard to not notice that things have reached a certain…crossroad between you and Yong Qi. I know from experience that there comes a certain point where you have to make decisions that will change your life forever. It's even more momentous for us. I just think that perhaps…you might appreciate some…perspective."

"Strangely, I've been getting loads of perspective lately," Xiao Yan said, unable to keep the weariness out of her voice.

Yong An simply smiled sympathetically at her. "I know." He sighed. "I don't intend to be condescending. I just think, I may understand what both of you are going through, and that perhaps you would like to hear some…observations from someone who might get it, but are neither you nor Yong Qi."

Xiao Yan didn't think, having convinced her to walk with him, Yong An would give her much of a choice whether to hear him or not. She could just walk the opposite way, of course, but she knew it would just end up in her wondering what he could possibly have to say.

He sensed her conflicted feelings, and added, "I don't want you to think that I don't think you and Yong Qi can work your relationship out yourself. I just have some…"

"Thoughts?" she prompted dryly when he paused to find the right word.

"Yes. You are free to regard or disregard what I say as you wish."

By now, they were standing at the gate of Tai Ji Dian, and she turned to face him.

"All right," she said. What difference could one more opinion make, really? "I'll listen."

Yong An led her into the living room, where they bustled around to sit with tea on the table. Xiao Yan was on the sofa and Yong An took the armchair to the side of her.

When the first sips of tea were taken, Yong An finally began to speak.

"I won't beat about the bush. I know that there are a lot of speculations right now on when you and Yong Qi might be getting married. Believe me, I know what that feels like. Every time one of my relationship hits the one-year mark, that's when it starts."

"So are you saying I should be grateful they waited this long to start on me and Yong Qi?" Xiao Yan asked a little bitterly.

"No. I want you to realise that regardless of what our wishes truly are, the speculation is
"unavoidable," Yong An said.

She didn't answer; he must know she knew this. What was the point of repeating it?

"Usually the pressure is placed on me," he continued, "but I guess, lately they might have just gotten bored of waiting for me, and decided to turn to you two instead. The thing is, I think one of the reasons it's been so relentless lately is that everyone has realised he's a lot surer about you than anyone else before."

Xiao Yan scoffed. "I know that. I don't need the press telling me that."

"I know." Yong An sipped his tea and looked deep in thoughts for a long moment. When he finally placed his tea cup down, he turned to look at Xiao Yan seriously. "Something you need to understand is, short of me dying or in the future, it is absolutely impossible for my wife and I to have a child, there will be very, very little chance that Yong Qi would ever have to face the throne. I have always known I have more than myself to consider in the matter of my marriage, but I also have always known I would have to marry. If not at least for the sake of the succession, then for Yong Qi's. The fact that I would become Emperor one day has been decided four hundred years ago. Yong Qi is the one who isn't supposed to be emperor, and he doesn't want to be. He's grown up more or less knowing he won't be. You can count on this, going forward."

"Okay."

"But that doesn't mean he can take off and live a normal life with you. He will always be a prince, and I'm sure you understand the kind of responsibility and public duties that come with that. If you marry him, you will be marrying Yong Qi, plus all that. You will be required to become part of that life of events and engagements and schedules and never be able to do anything spontaneous like take off for a year to travel the world just for the heck of it."

"I know all this," Xiao Yan said needlessly. She knew Yong An didn't need her to point this out, but she felt compelled to say something, nonetheless.

"I know you do," he replied with a slight smile. "But you have ever considered that maybe the reason you feel the pressure from everyone about marriage so acute is because you've never known independent life without him?"

Xiao Yan stared at him, seeing the purpose and the point behind his words but at the same not wanting to really accept them. After a moment, when Yong An simply looked back at her with profound understanding in his eyes, she tore her gaze from him. She felt like there was an enormous weight on her chest that prevented her from drawing enough breath.

When she still said nothing, Yong An continued to speak. "You met him when you were twenty and in university. For all this time, school is what's been occupying you, and your relationship with Yong Qi is a nice aside to that. But once you graduate, things will be very different. You'll have to decide what you want to do with your life, and whether any of us should be a part of that. If you graduate now, Xiao Yan, and marry him straight after, this life will only trap you. It will be all that you know. You will always long for the experiences of actual adult life that you never really had."

"What are you saying?" she demanded.

"I'm saying – I'm saying that you need to decide whether this life is what you want. And to do that, you must think about what other things you may want out of life. Things away from Yong Qi, without him."
"Honestly I can tell you right now, this isn't what I want," she said bluntly.

"Of course," he said gently. "I don't think anyone really wants it. Yong Qi and I, we don't have a choice. You do. You have to choose whether you want to walk into this and accept it, for Yong Qi."

"I – " Xiao Yan swallowed the painful lump in her throat. "I love him."

"Oh Xiao Yan, I never doubt that," Yong An said softly. "But...honestly, love is not enough when you are us. This isn't – isn't a TV drama where if you love him enough everything will solve itself out. It won't. The pressure and the expectations will only increase, Xiao Yan, if you marry him. I would rather you are able to live the life that you want, and miss him, ten years from now, rather than marry him and then long for the freedom you should have had, despite how much you love him. You will come to resent him for it, Xiao Yan, and I don't want that for either of you."

Xiao Yan could only draw in a shaky breath at the very honest reality Yong An was laying before her. She grabbed a cushion beside her and clutched it to her chest, burying her face in it, so that he could not see the tears she couldn't hold back.

Yong An continued to speak. "My siblings and I were all too young to really understand this at the time, but the pressures, the emotional, mental and physical tolls this life puts on Masako really acted as a warning bell for us. Mama married Ah Ma at around the same time, but he already had both Yong Qi and me at the time, so the pressure on Mama was never so overwhelming. But still, it was like we were being cautioned to not walk down that same road in the future. Therefore, I would like to think, Xiao Yan, that we would know to respect you if you were to say the burden was too much. Even then, it's never going to be easy, marrying into our family. Our position and our roles will come with expectations that you will not be able to avoid."

"I don't want to hurt him," Xiao Yan said in a small voice, looking up at him with watery eyes.

"I know," he said kindly. "Neither do I. But Xiao Yan, Yong Qi loves you enough that he would let you go, if you ask."

"This is so stupid," she said, her voice cracking. "I don't want – "

Yong An reached over to place a hand on her arm. "I'm not saying, end it forever. Actually, I'm not even saying end it at all. I'm just saying, you're twenty-three years old. You are not in a position to make a decision like this, especially not for the sake of all the pressure around you, and I don't mean it as any kind of slight on your intelligence, maturity or competence. I honestly can't think of any contemporary royals who don't marry significantly after the age of 25. The only one who did was Diana, and that turned out...horribly."

Xiao Yan laughed, yet not really feeling the humour at all.

"But still, you have to understand, to everyone else, they won't see it like that. As long as you are together, the pressure will be there. You will always have to mind it, think about it, and it will affect your entire relationship. It clearly is already doing that. I'm just afraid that one day, not far from now, it will be the only thing that makes up your relationship and then it will hurt all the more."

"You are saying that we should break up," she said, looking at him accusingly.

He gave her a wan smile and said, "I'm saying you should consider taking a step back."

Part of her was angry at him for even suggesting it at all, and yet another part of her was also grateful for his candidness.
"If I do, then what?"

"I don't think you'd disappear from our lives. You still have Zi Wei. But it would give you room and air."

"And because it worked for Will and Kate..." she said, before trailing off meaningfully.

Yong An chuckled and shook his head. "Well, their situation was completely different, with different culture and expectations, so it might not apply to you and Yong Qi. But yes, you should consider that their yuanfen, if you will, didn't end just because they broke up once. Or three times. And honestly, we only know so much about them because British tabloids are ridiculously vicious. I can guarantee you all other royal couples had their problems, too. We're not fairy tales where you dance with us once and then live happily ever after. If anything, the norm now is women who turn down princes multiple times before finally saying yes."

"You'd think you guys would be able to take a hint and drop it after the first refusal," Xiao Yan muttered, though her voice was free of the sourness that statement implied.

Yong An sighed. "To be honest, for us, once we find someone who we love enough and we know loves us enough to push us to propose even once, we tend to be unable to let go, especially when we realise that the reason for refusal wasn't because of lack of love. The chances of finding someone we could envision spending our life with is so slim, you see. To be honest, given a choice, I probably wouldn't get married. Then again I'm not sure whether that mindset was born because there is so much pressure on me to marry. Perhaps, if I were someone else, and no one cared whether I marry or not, I might not think of it as such a duty. But I don't think Yong Qi necessarily thinks like that."

"That's all very well," she said, "but a bit irrelevant right now. Yong Qi hasn't proposed, or do you not realise that?"

"Of course he hasn't, not with the newspapers running headlines practically wagering among themselves the timing," Yong An said. "But that doesn't mean he doesn't want to marry you."

"Are you sure you're supposed to tell me this? Aren't those things generally supposed to be a surprise?"

Yong An laughed. "Xiao Yan, once you get involved with us, if you haven't even talked about whether one – or both – of you want to get married, then you have no business proposing to each other at all. But you and Yong Qi have talked, haven't you? You know he wants to marry you."

"And yet you're still telling me to break up with him!"

"I'm not telling you to do anything! Except, maybe to admit that you're scared."

"I'm not – "

Yong An just raised an eyebrow at her, his eyes practically radiating 'yeah, right'. The automatic protest died in her throat.

"Xiao Yan, if this life doesn't scare you, then you are a fool. But you're not. So you can admit it."

She let out a shaky breath before burying her face into the sofa cushion again.

"For what it's worth, I think...and maybe this is slightly childishly romantic...but I do believe that you and Yong Qi will still find your way back to each other in the end. But for you to be sure of that, I think you might want to put things in context. But, also as I said, you don't have to listen to me."
Xiao Yan laughed. "If you really mean that, you wouldn't have said all this to me."

He smiled gently at her. "Yong Qi is not the only one who's fond of you in this family, Xiao Yan. None of us want you hurt."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "I know that you want the best for both of us."

"Whatever you do, however permanent it might be, you have to be sure, Xiao Yan," Yong An said. "Because either way, the consequences are going to follow you for the rest of your life."

December

There were bad days.

And then there were days that were just so long and tiring that she felt like she never should have gotten out of bed in the first place.

The phone was ringing. Xiao Yan glanced at the caller ID, not really wanting to answer the call but knowing that he would let it ring until it stop and then call again if she didn't pick up. Sometimes this persistence was the most annoying thing about him.

She reluctantly reached for the phone and answered.

"Hi."

Her voice was completely cold and unenthusiastic, so it was completely natural when there was a brief pause before Yong Qi's worried voice rang out, "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, fine," she said somewhat sullenly.

"You don't sound fine."

Xiao Yan pressed her lips together and took a deep breath to stop herself from losing her temper, which was hanging on by a thread as it was. She didn't want to talk to him, she didn't want to pretend to listen to him and she certainly didn't want to explain anything at that moment, to anyone.

"I'm fine," she repeated, trying very hard not to grit her teeth. "What is it?"

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Do you want me to bring something over for you?"

How could he bear to be so inhumanly patient?

"I wouldn't think you'd have the time," she said, more sourly than she intended even in her black mood.

There was a long pause, in which she was sure he felt hurt by her tone. Even then, his voice was still calm as he asked, "Are you sure you're ok, Xiao Yan?"
She knew he was rightfully concerned about her listless tone, but her patience for the conversation was wearing out. The more she stayed on the phone with him and listened to his voice, the more she was forced to think of why she was so irritated that day. So finally, to stop herself from saying things she completely would regret, she snapped "Yes!" before hanging up abruptly. If it was ungrateful for the concern he was showing, she would have to deal with it and feel guilty later. Right now, she wished for everything to stop – the thoughts, the feelings, and the world.

She buried herself in her thick blanket, shutting out the cold, but even that couldn't make her feel better. She was half-afraid he would call back, but the phone stayed silent. Still, she could not be relieved. She knew he would come looking for her eventually.

Normally it would be so easy to avoid him – she could just go out by herself or with people he usually didn't hang out with, or hide in Hui Bin Lou with Liu Qing and Liu Hong who would probably let her blend in. However, the very idea of setting one foot out of doors again that day was terrifying and she couldn't stand it, so waiting for him to find her here was probably the lesser of the two evils, even if he would ask her what was wrong and would not stop until it probably exploded in an argument.

Then again, everything seemed likely to end in argument between them these days.

Half an hour later, he knocked on her door. She considered just not answering, but he knew she was in here. He wouldn't leave quickly even if she were to deliberately leave him out in the hall, and the only thing that would accomplish would be to cause gossip about them on the whole floor. That was the last thing she needed.

So she wearily got up to open the door to let him in, before falling faced down on her bed again and not looking at him.

She could feel him sit down beside her and kiss her hair. "Come on, tell me what's wrong."

She flipped onto her back and looked up at him with angry tears. "Why does anything have to be wrong? Maybe I just need some space, maybe I just don't want to see you for one day!"

He stared at her with eyes full of hurt, then said slowly, "I see."

Only he would say, "I see" in such a tone after that outburst and make her feel a thousand times worse. Only he could make her feel like the world's biggest jerk for having these feelings, especially when they didn't see enough of each other lately as it was.

She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. Guilt was creeping into her heart but she beat it back.

The feeling of being drowned in something enormous was taking over her, making her totally incapable of coherent thoughts. She didn't want these rational feelings like guilt to barge in while she was unable to think rationally. She wasn't even sure what she was overwhelmed with but there was something about that day that had triggered all those feelings, like there was an enormous weight on her shoulders and she could not shake them off.

She didn't want to deal with being considerate of Yong Qi right now.

When she said nothing more, he stood up and was half-way to the door before he turned back and said, "When you have enough space and feel like talking to me again, you can call me."

Well, she always knew that he was capable of matching her temper with his own. This time he could match her coldness as well.
So it wasn't an argument. It was worse.

Xiao Yan stared at the ceiling, listening to the sound of his feet on the tile floor and to the sound of the door closing with a final click. She turned over again and buried her face in a pillow, and promptly burst into tears.

Sleep didn't make things better like Xiao Yan half-hoped it would. When she woke the next day, the weariness from the previous day only seemed to have settled in even more comfortably instead of disappearing.

She opened her eyes to see Han Xiang watching her from her side of the room.

She was half afraid her roommate would ask her if she were all right. It was the one question that Xiao Yan could easily live without ever hearing again.

What Han Xiang did say instead, though, was, "Zi Wei came over last night when you were already asleep. She was worried about you. I think she texted you after."

Xiao Yan turned and buried her face in her pillow to fortify her strength. Then, she reached for her phone to find, sure enough, a text from Zi Wei.

*Come have breakfast with me at Hui Bin Lou. Text me when you start out.*

There was nothing from Yong Qi.

Xiao Yan stared at the message for a long time before she could pull herself out of bed. She might as well go meet Zi Wei. She'd probably have this conversation sooner or later. They might as well have it now.

"I'm fine," she said with a perfunctory smile at Han Xiang in response to her worried look.

Han Xiang nodded but was obviously not convinced.

Xiao Yan ignored it and began getting ready. As requested, she texted Zi Wei before heading out.

By the time she got to Hui Bin Lou, Liu Hong told her Zi Wei was already there.

They sat in a private room – it wasn't like it was being used this early in the day – and ate breakfast. For about the first half hour, Zi Wei kept up the conversation around the most random topics that managed to relax Xiao Yan without her realising until she was laughing her head off about one of the most silly jokes she had ever heard. At this point, Xiao Yan had to wonder if there was no other motive behind Zi Wei's invitation for breakfast after all. Perhaps Zi Wei really did just want to hang out, and there wasn't anything heavy to discuss.

It wasn't until they have finished their breakfast and were cupping their hands around cups of green tea that Zi Wei asked gently, "Feeling better than yesterday?"

Xiao Yan scowled. "I was, until you asked that."

Zi Wei smiled apologetically, but Xiao Yan thought she could see something like understanding in her eyes. Xiao Yan sighed heavily.

"I suppose I have been wondering when you'd start to feel it," Zi Wei said after another long silence.

"Feel what?"
"All the pressures. Of being so…connected to me, to Yong Qi, to our family."

Xiao Yan closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing. She was sure she had never had a panic attack before, but she wondered whether she was beginning to have one now, since at the word 'pressure' from Zi Wei, her throat started to constrict and she felt like could just burst into tears.

The truth was, she started feeling it all months ago. It just took till now to undo her.

"It's just…" she started, then stopped, wondering if she could even start. If she started speaking now, she was sure she could hold nothing back and somehow the idea of laying all her frustration out in the open terrified her even more than the discomfort of keeping it all back. In the end, however, she couldn't hold it all back, either.

"It's just that there are days like yesterday when I just couldn't stand the very idea of being out of doors or being seen by anyone. I don't want to know that every time I am on the streets, people are going to look twice. Some days I just want to blend in and disappear but no matter how absurdly easy that was before, now it's impossible. And I can't stand it! After pulling an all-nighter for an assignment, I don't want to have to think that, oh, I've better look decent coming into to an eight o'clock lecture because someone might just take a photo of me and sell it some paper and they'd put it on the front page for the world to see with all sorts of invasive questions, and the whole thing will haunt me for the rest of my life. I really want to think I'm not vain, Zi Wei, but somehow they always just manage to make everything worse. Even if no one says anything or look at me, even when for a small moment everything feels like it's normal again, I'd have to catch sight of myself at some newsstand and it's like an illusion just shattered."

She took a deep breath and wondered why the whole rant didn't make her feel any better. It didn't help that Zi Wei didn't say anything, but just continued to look at her as if she expected more.

"I'm just tired of everyone – but Yong Qi especially – making it seem like it's so easy to face it all, because then I feel like an incompetent fool for not being able to take it like he does," she added before finally running out of things to say.

Once again, Zi Wei let their conversation fall into silence, as if she knew Xiao Yan still wasn't finished.

Frustration flared up and Xiao Yan felt like crying.

"See! That's the problem! You look at me like that, expecting me to tell you what's bothering me, like it's natural that I should be feeling this, but how could you not feel it too? How is it that you can go through all this as well and not feel like I do? If this was all the normal things to feel, I wouldn't be the only one feeling like this!"

Zi Wei, infuriatingly, tilted her head and looked at Xiao Yan with a slight smile. "And by 'you', you mean Yong Qi, didn't you?"

Xiao Yan opened her mouth, then faltered. "No…yes…maybe…partly."

"Oh Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said with a comforting smile, reaching over to take Xiao Yan's hands. "The thing about feelings is that there's no such thing as normal. Especially in these circumstances."

"That doesn't – "

" – help, I know. But don't you think that Yong Qi can deal with it because he's had to, all his life? It's a given for him and it's not going to go away and he'd learnt to all these years. You've been thrown into this head-first and you shouldn't expect yourself to be able to take it like he does."
"How about you, then?" Xiao Yan demanded, feeling more envious than ever of Zi Wei's outer calm demeanour. "You haven't had to deal with this all your life like he does, so why doesn't it freak you out?"

"You think it doesn't freak me out?" Zi Wei asked with a wry smile. "But it won't disappear for me now as much as it won't disappear for Yong Qi. If I didn't want to deal with it, I should never have walked into this. But I did, because I needed my family, and I don't regret it. But it also means I can't let myself think too much about it. But you can walk away, you know. You don't have to be here. You have more of a choice than we do."

Xiao Yan squirmed uncomfortably in her seat as she realised that Zi Wei just repeated something Yong An already said to her during their talk. But that was part of the problem. The fact that she had a choice seemed to be the most difficult thing to admit. It meant asking herself whether it really was best for her to stay where she was. It meant wondering, as much as she loved Yong Qi and Zi Wei, whether she ever knew what she was getting into when it all began.

That was to say nothing of the future.

She didn't need Yong An's talk to know that the road in her future was so vast, but Yong Qi's was more or less drawn out for him. So it wasn't drawn in ink, but at the very least, dotted out there and he was expected to join the dots into a certain pattern. He had choices, certainly, but he also had more restrictions that she did. She knew this from the very beginning, but until recently, she never really allowed herself to think how his restrictions would affect her.

It wasn't until now that Xiao Yan realised how everything around her was moving faster than her, into something so much bigger than her. Even a normal life can move so fast that you could miss it if you don't stop and look around. But this life, his life, moved at a pace that could make her lose her footing and she would not notice until she fell and hurt herself.

Even if she didn't fall, she didn't want to be swept along with it against her will either.

It was two days later when she saw Yong Qi again.

When he picked her up for lunch, it was almost as if no tension had arisen between them the last time they met. They ate dumpling soup. He pretended to feed her a dumpling with his chopsticks, causing her to lean towards him, only to fall against his waiting lips and allowed him to land a kiss on her forehead. It made her laugh before stealing a dumpling from his bowl.

The sight of her laughing had made him smile. At the time, she had not realised how coloured by sadness that smile was.

Then they walked back to her dorm room together, hand in hand.

"Are you happy, Xiao Yan?" he asked, after they sat down together on the edge of her bed.

She looked up at him, ready to say yes, because what other answer could she give? Then she saw the earnest look in his eyes, begging for the truth, even if it would break both their hearts. Suddenly, her words suddenly seemed stuck in her throat as she faltered.

She looked down and saw that he had taken her hands in his. It was such a natural feeling that she had stopped taking note of the moment when it happened. She could only stare dumbly at their entwined hands, and didn't know why, after such a happy couple of hours together, she suddenly wanted to cry again.
Beside her, Yong Qi sighed resolutely.

"Maybe we should…take a break," he said gruffly.

His words made Xiao Yan's head jerk up and she stared at him, only able to utter a single 'Oh' before it seemed like a painful lump had settled in her throat.

He searched her face for some hidden reaction in the face of such a shocking suggestion.

And she was shocked. Shocked that he had even considered it. Shocked that he said those words. Shocked when she realised that…she had truly considered saying them herself. Perhaps not that day. Not right then. But…recently.

Yet he didn't let go of her hand.

If he wanted to break up with her, why was he still looking at her with such concern?

Faced with the contradictory nature of his words and his actions, she found herself engulfed in a cloud of confusion. She also didn't want to admit to herself how much the very idea, coming from him, hurt.

If he wasn't letting go, perhaps she should be the one to pull away. Why was it suddenly such a hard thing to do? Was it because for her to pull away now would be accepting his words, and it would then be she who put a full stop on their relationship?

She couldn't bring herself to pull away from him, and he, too, inexplicably, was content to let her hand stay where it was.

He must have understood the mixed nature of the signals he was giving, because when she didn't say anything else, he went on. "I still – " he seemed to pause deliberately to search for an appropriate word – "care about you, Xiao Yan, a lot, but that's the reason why we should probably…give each other some room."

She tried not to think about how close he came to saying the one word that could simultaneously make this scene between them both more bearable and infinitely more painful.

"Xiao Yan? Say something. Please?" Yong Qi said after a long silence, and it was only then that she realised her only verbal response had been "Oh".

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it?"

She wasn't imagining the hurt in his eyes and his voice, was she?

"I'd be lying if I didn't say that the thought had never crossed my mind lately. I guess…you just said it first."

It was his turn for a monosyllabic answer. "Oh."

Why were her hands still in his? Why hadn't he pulled away?

He seemed to be thinking this too, as he looked down at her hands wrapped still between his. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then, finally, when he looked up at her, he asked, "Why?"

She bit the inside of her lower lip, trying to phrase her answer.
Pulling her hands out of his finally, she opened her mouth to answer, but only ended up asking back, "Why did you say we need a break?"

Yong Qi sighed. "You're not happy, Xiao Yan. And I don't mean just the other day. You haven't been happy for a while, and I think...I think I've just been deceiving myself, refusing to see it for what it really was. I know you've been uncomfortable under all the speculations and expectations, but for a long time, I guess I tried to convince myself that if we...cared about each other enough then everything else would work itself out. The truth is, we have always known that it takes more than that for it to work. I guess all this time I've been so afraid of losing you that I've been in denial about that fact. I've been...I've been so selfish, I suppose, not really allowing myself to see that this was never the ideal place for you to be. Perhaps this was never what you wanted for your life, and you are only here now because of me – "

"Not just you, Zi Wei too," she protested, but feebly. The sad smile he gave told her that he saw right through it.

"The point is...we could try to force it to work, but we might just end up torturing ourselves. Or we can take a breath and see where things go. I think we could both do with some air right now."

For a long time, she didn't answer, and he didn't press her. She supposed he understood that this whole relationship only ever consisted of new things for her, mostly things she never thought could ever happen to her. She had no points of reference to guide her on how to act in moments such as this. The truth was, he wasn't the only one in denial. She had been so afraid of hurting him, too, that she hadn't been able to bring herself to truly admit how very overwhelmed she was.

"There are times when I have had to reconsider previously stated opinions, I just never thought this might be one of those times," she murmured, more to herself than to him.

Yong Qi, clearly, was confused. "What do you mean?"

She looked up and smiled thinly. "I was just thinking about how I never liked the type of stories in movies or on the TV where the couple can't decide whether they want to be together and then spend ages dancing around the whole question. But I guess when I decided that, I didn't know what that situation would really feel like."

There was another silence, in which he looked at her thoughtfully.

"Xiao Yan, I don't want to be putting words into your mouth. We don't...I mean, this is just my view of what's going on between us. But you have to tell me what you want, especially if this is not it..." He trailed off, clearly not sure what else to say.

She looked up into his eyes. "Do you want to – " deliberate pause – "break up?" There, she said it. It hurt – she would consider how much it hurt later, but she said it.

"I think – " he started, then stopped. This time, it was he who took the deliberate pause. Then, "I don't want to, but I do believe that it might be necessary. Just because I know what I want, Xiao Yan, doesn't mean I know how to get there in a way that wouldn't hurt either of us. And maybe it takes stepping away for me – for us – to figure that out."

Xiao Yan nodded, for a moment not sure how she should respond. She wondered when in the whole course of their knowing each other had their time been more punctuated by silences that she wanted to break, that she knew she needed to break, but did not know how.

Apparently Yong Qi was thinking about this too, because he said, "Please don't let me do all the
talking. You said – or at least, implied – that you were going to suggest we don't see each other anymore as well. But you haven't told me why."

"Would you believe me if I told you this isn't about you, it's about me?" she asked.

Despite the situation, the corner of Yong Qi's lips twitched and he was obviously holding back a laugh. "I would have believed it if you hadn't turned it into a 'it's not you, it's me' line."

She smiled, because she could see the humour in the situation. Then she swiftly turned serious again. "It's true though. I never truly appreciated it until now. The thing is...you come into my life at a time when I was supposed to be working out who I was and what I wanted. The first eighteen years of my life was...dull. Well, it was a lot of things, but it was also dull. The only future I envisioned then was getting out of institutionalised care and being independent and working out for myself how I want to live my life, where I want my life to go. And then I messed that up. I was lucky to be able to start again, but then so soon after that, I met Zi Wei, and you...and everything changed."

She wasn't crying but she wanted to cry, because they were breaking up, for goodness's sake, shouldn't she be crying? Yet all she could do then was flounder around, looking for a way to put everything that she was feeling into words. It didn't help that he was looking at her like that – like he understood, and was only staying silent to give her the chance to articulate it all, because she needed to say it to be able to understand it. Maybe that was the worst part: that he understood, and that was why he was suggesting they break up in the first place. She was sure, as reluctantly as they would both admit it right then, this wasn't happening because they no longer cared. It was because they cared too much.

"You came and it all changed, and you brought me into something that should never be possible in the first place. I allowed myself to get lost in you, and it was wonderful, but somewhere along the way, I got lost. I feel like all this time I've just been following you, or Zi Wei and the path I wanted to take isn't there anymore. I don't even know where I want to go anymore, because I never figured out who I was supposed to be. So I need time, to learn about myself and what I want, what is important to me in the world, to find where I'm meant to be. It might be here with you, it might not, but I need to figure that out, away from you."

She took a deep breath, and hardly dared to look at him. She wasn't sure that her resolve could be as strong as she wanted it to be if she looked at him now. Vaguely, she wondered to herself, why it took until now for them to be able to speak so candidly to each other. Where was this ability when they needed it before it came to this? Or was this the way it was meant to go all along, and all they did before was delaying the inevitable?

"All right," Yong Qi said softly, after another lengthy silence.

He stood up, and for a moment, he stood over her. She wondered if he wanted her to hold him back, to take his hand and pull him down with her again. She wondered if he would stay if she did, and whether having him stay now would hurt less than watching him walk away.

In the end, she didn't do anything but stare blankly at the wall opposite her, beyond him, willing her tears not to fall just yet.

"I'll – " he started, then waved his hands around for a second, searching for the right word...the right goodbye, but apparently not finding any. In the end, there was just another longing look at her, before he turned around and walked out of her room, closing the door behind him with a thud that pounded against her heart.

Xiao Yan closed her eyes, almost in defeat. There was no goodbye, and she couldn't decide whether
that was a promise of a return, or truly the cold end to everything that ever made up the two of them.

It was odd, how quickly it all was settled and then was done. She always thought, if things ever ended between her and Yong Qi, it would end in a flurry of tears and hurt rather than this rather smooth passing of one day to another. To say it was all painless was inaccurate, but it wasn't the type of hurt that resulted from throwing things at each other, slamming doors in each other's faces screaming "It's over" and that could only be solved by blaring Taylor Swift on repeat all through the house or marathoning through cheesy Korean dramas. It just...ended, with subtle, understated pangs of pain of what could have been.

Then again, perhaps that was the truer to life. Sometimes things in life came and went with a whisper rather than a bang.

"So that's it?" Zi Wei asked in shock later that night.

Xiao Yan nodded glumly against her ice-cream cone.

It was too cold for ice-cream, of course. But ice-cream numbed. Xiao Yan needed that, even if the whole concept was so damn clichéd.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it."

"No, I meant, I thought you had lunch together? What happened? Did you fight?"

"No," Xiao Yan said. "Actually, it was really nice. But now...I think...maybe that was his way of saying goodbye."

"What?"

"I don't know how to describe it. Now, looking back, it just feels like he wanted to make sure our last date still had some happiness, so that we at least don't end this in all the depressing notes."

"That makes no sense."

Xiao Yan sighed. "Well, I don't think it has to."

"Are you all right?"

She smiled wanly. It was, after all, half her idea; Yong Qi just beat her to bringing up the subject. She refused to cry.

She only said, "I'm fine."

And she was. Really.

Zi Wei looked on the verge of saying more, but at the last minute, she just squeezed Xiao Yan's ice-cream-free hand. "You know I'm always here, right?"

Xiao Yan leaned in and rested her head on her friend's shoulder. Zi Wei moved to wrap her arm around her.

"I know," she said softly.
Comedy? Did I say comedy? I lied.

In Xiao Yan's defense, it's a huge commitment she would be making, so it would actually be better for her to err on the side of overthinking.

I've been sitting on this chapter for literally years. I think a lot of it has to do with age and perspective. Back in The Prince and Me, when I was Xiao Yan's age, I knew the story was heading in this direction, and I stubbornly resisted it. Now that I am closer to Yong An's age here, I obviously see more of the points he's making, even if he does make them in a very officious way. And consider how they are in canon, Xiao Yan Zi and Yong Qi are one of those couples who do have to grow apart before growing back together, I think.
Chapter Notes

Remembering him comes in flashbacks and echoes
Tell myself it's time now, gotta let go
But moving on from him is impossible
When I still see it all in my head
In burning red
Burning, it was red

— Red, Taylor Swift

2014

January

In the new year, Xiao Yan applied for and was granted a part-time internship at the Beijing office of an international NGO. It was a paid position, fortunately, because she didn't have time to work at Hui Bin Lou anymore. The pay itself was dismal but Xiao Yan was used to living on a budget.

She was assigned to work in a team which focused on the promotion of women's rights to education. The field itself was interesting, even if the work assigned to a lowly intern was not. Consequently, she spent the last six months of her life as an undergraduate student translating documents and making the tedious phone calls no one else wanted to make. Xiao Yan was not complaining, though. The work her team was doing was important, and she needed the distraction.

That wasn't to say it wasn't difficult at work, what with everyone knowing who she was even before she stepped into the office. It didn't even help that she was interviewed and offered the internship before the news of her break up with Yong Qi was known publically, and started work after it had been more or less announced.

If there was anything the last few years of her life had taught her, it was how to ignore the stares and whispers and just get on with it.

"So are you going to stay with them?" Zi Wei asked when the school year began to draw to a close.

"Well, I have been offered a permanent position," Xiao Yan said, "but I haven't said yes to it yet. I actually have my sight on something else."

"Oh, what is it?"

"You know J. K. Rowling's charity Lumos? They've just opened an office in Beijing last month, and they're recruiting plenty of positions. They work with orphaned and institutionalised children, promoting and aiding policy reforms to help improve their lives. Zi Wei, I really, really want to get in there."

From her smile, Xiao Yan knew that Zi Wei understood exactly why she wanted to work for Lumos so badly, and it was far from because the organisation's president was J. K. Rowling.
"You've applied then?" Zi Wei asked.

"Yes. Hopefully, hopefully, I'll get at least an interview. I don't think I've ever wanted to do something so badly in my life, Zi Wei."

"You'll get in," Zi Wei said with more confidence than Xiao Yan dared to feel. "And you'll be great."

"How's your Masters applications going?"

"Well, I'm not going to know anything for sure until this year's exam results are released," Zi Wei answered. "But I think it will be all right."

"Of course it'll be all right," Xiao Yan said with a laugh. "I mean, not even counting the fact that you're you, you're you, they're not going to reject you."

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean."

Zi Wei's answer made Xiao Yan laugh even harder. "It means," she said, as if she really believed Zi Wei's claim that she didn't understand, "even on your own merit, I'm more than sure you'll get accepted. And failing that? There's always the fact that your father – "

"No! Don't!" Zi Wei exclaimed, shoving her, but she was also laughing. "I don't want to think that's how I'm getting in."

"I'm sure it won't be."

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**July**

In the end, Xiao Yan got her dream job and Zi Wei got into her postgraduate program.

By the middle of June, Xiao Yan had moved out of her dormitory into a rented apartment near the Lumos office.

When her graduation ceremony rolled around, Xiao Yan couldn't help but feel it was fortunate that that day would not be the first time she and Yong Qi saw each other again since their break up. *That* would have been all manners of awkward on an otherwise already emotion-filled day.

However, over the last six months, probably despite their best efforts, they had not been able to entirely avoid running into each other. Xiao Yan would like to think all the encounters were all by accident, seeing how she still saw a lot of Zi Wei, and none of it was any part of anyone's efforts to shove them together. The meetings weren't ever exactly comfortable, nor were they so awkward that one of them felt the need to come up with convoluted excuses to get out of the situation. By June, Xiao Yan almost could convince herself that they were now simply friends. Sort of. With a history. Or whatever you'd call it. Anyway, she had made her peace with how things were between the two of them.

Even if she had not, by the time she started work and July rolled around, she had more things to worry about than potential awkward encounters with Yong Qi.

Xiao Yan and Zi Wei were supposed to have dinner together at Xiao Yan's apartment that night. She had given Zi Wei a spare key to let herself in, since she wasn't sure when exactly she would be home.
By the time Xiao Yan did get home, she was slamming the door.

"Are you okay?" Zi Wei called from inside the apartment.

Xiao Yan stomped in the direction of her friend's voice. Once in the living room, she dumped her bag at the door and threw herself on the couch.

"Bad day?" Zi Wei asked sympathetically.

"I just realised why I got this job," Xiao Yan said, throwing her arm over her eyes. She hadn't realised before that day that disillusionment felt like this.

"Why?"

"I'm 'that girl who dated the prince'.'"

"Oh, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said soothingly, reaching out to pat her knee. "I'm sure it's not that."

Xiao Yan sprung up right and stared at Zi Wei stubbornly. "Yes, it is. I am not overthinking. I am not overreacting. I am not paranoid. That is totally why they hired me. Maybe they thought, I don't know, my name could boost awareness or something equally ridiculous."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I've been at work for precisely two weeks. Every time someone new is introduced to me, they literally can't go two sentences before mentioning him in the ensuing conversation. And now, all the jobs they have me do is somehow related to charities that has connections to him or your family. It's not a coincidence."

"Maybe it is," Zi Wei said, though the words rang obviously hollow.

"No, it's not," Xiao Yan snapped.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Xiao Yan scowled. "I'm not quitting. I refuse to quit."

"Of course you can't just quit," Zi Wei said in consternation. "You wanted this job so badly!"

"Yes, because I thought I would actually get the chance to do something good!" Xiao Yan cried, frustrated. "To make a difference! To give hope to kids who have never known it or kindness in their lives. Do you know how much I wanted to have someone to give me that when I was little? I want to help provide them with what I never had. Not to be paraded around as a mascot!"

"You will get the chance to make a difference, Xiao Yan. It just takes time. You've only been working for two weeks. And even if...look, even if you were hired because they think your name draws attention to the organisation, then isn't that a kind of making a difference?"

"I don't want to do it like that!" Xiao Yan yelled. "To wave the fact that I used to date Yong Qi around like a trophy? Even if it does help, it's a cheap way to do it and I refuse to take part in that!"

"But you're not going to quit. So what's the alternative?"

"I don't know." Xiao Yan sighed heavily. "I guess...I will have to just stick to it, and prove them all wrong. I'm not the girl who got the job because of my bloody ex-bloody-boyfriend. I'll prove them wrong."
"And you will." Zi Wei held out a hand to Xiao Yan. "Come on, let's eat."

"You cooked? I sort of thought we'd call take-away or something."

Zi Wei laughed. "Lucky for you I'm on vacation."

"It's not exactly that I don't like what I'm doing," Xiao Yan told Zi Wei over dinner. "I just wish… everyone would get over it, you know? The whole 'oh my god you used to date a prince' thing."

"Well, they've just met you, I'm sure it's just curiosity," Zi Wei said. "You just have to do something very well and that would give them something else better to remember you by."

"It's unlikely to happen anytime soon, with the boss I'm stuck with," she muttered darkly.

"I thought you said that at your interview, the boss seemed like a pleasant person to work with?"

"Oh, the big boss, the program director, yes," Xiao Yan said, waving her chopsticks around a little. "She's actually British. Well, she was born here but then her parents migrated so now she's changed to British citizenship. She's reasonable and fair. Admitted, she doesn't seem particularly fussed about me, which is nice. I guess it's partly because she hasn't been around to get caught up in the fuss. She's only moved back to Beijing for this job at the beginning of the year. Anyway, I don't have any problems with her. It's my line manager, he's a pain in the ass."

"How so?"

"First of all, he's totally Chinese and hasn't been overseas for a day in his life, and yet he insists on being called Daniel. Like, I couldn't care less normally, but he's just really obnoxious about it. He went into this huge speech about how since we are working for an international NGO and will be dealing with international stakeholders, we should have English names so that other people don't feel embarrassed about not being able to pronounce Chinese names blah blah blah and how in his last work place, it was compulsory for everyone to have an English name." Xiao Yan scoffed. "His last work place was a hotel. If you're in customer service, of course you have to bend over backward to accommodate your customers. But like, you're working in a poverty-reduction aid NGO. I felt like pointing out to him that if our international stakeholders were really serious about helping us advocate the rights of less fortunate children in other countries, the least they could do would be to learn to say our damn names, to say nothing of the kids' names."

"But you don't actually have to have an English name?"

"No, of course not. I mean, people could, if they want, but in reality, the only ones with foreign names in the office are stupid Daniel because he insists, and the program director, Grace Teng. She has a Chinese name, apparently. Well, she must, considering she was born here, but I don't think she'd remember to answer to it. Anyway, we call her Teng Jie."

"The name thing can't be the only thing bothering you about this Daniel person."

"He's just obnoxious, in general. Basically he's the one that got me convinced that I didn't get this job because of me. He speaks to me like I'm an idiot. He seems to think I'm incapable of even the smallest task and acts all surprised when I get it done. Do I get a word of recognition or praise for it? Of course not."

Xiao Yan stabbed the rice in her bowl aggressively with her chopsticks.

"Anyway," she said then gave a long, exasperated sigh. "I really don't need to think about him any more than I have to. Let's talk birthdays. What's the plan?"
"You know, the usual," Zi Wei said. Then, looking closely at Xiao Yan, she added hesitantly, "Will you be coming out to Yuan Ming Yuan with us for the party?"

"I dunno. Do you want me to?"

"Of course I want you to!" Zi Wei exclaimed. "I just wonder if you'd be up to it, that's all."

"Yong Qi and I are fine, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said, answering the question Zi Wei would not ask.

"If you're sure," Zi Wei said, though Xiao Yan could tell she was not very convince. Xiao Yan didn't press the issue. When she didn't say anything, Zi Wei added hesitantly, "It's your birthday too. I wouldn't want you to feel…stifled."

Xiao Yan shrugged. "You know I never cared much about my pretend birthday."

Zi Wei was still looking at her worriedly. In order to reassure her friend, Xiao Yan smiled.

"It's on Sunday, right? I'll be able to drop in."

---

**August**

Zi Wei's birthday party was not as dreaded an event as Xiao Yan half-expected, even if this was the first time she was back among Zi Wei and Yong Qi's family after her break up with him.

At least, it was a private event, and there was only one person there that she hadn't met before.

Xiao Yan had been running late, and she was crossing the garden, heading for Yuan Ming Gong, one eye on her phone, checking the time, when she crashed into somebody, who yelped out in pain.

"Oh, I am sorry," Xiao Yan said, scrambling to help the person she had bumped into to stand up from where she had fallen.

If Xiao Yan had to guess, she would peg the young woman before her to be around her age, or maybe a couple of years older. She looked vaguely familiar though Xiao Yan couldn't put her finger on where she had seen her face before. She didn't look like a member of staff.

"Are you all right?" Xiao Yan asked, leaning down to pick up her own fallen bag.

"Yes, I'm fine," the stranger replied, smiling, and brushing grass from her skirt.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you."

"It's all right. I'm Qing Er, by the way."

"Oh, you're their cousin!" Xiao Yan exclaimed in recognition. "I'm Xiao Yan, Zi Wei's – "

" – friend, I know. Everyone's expecting you."

"I'm a little late, I know, I'm sorry," Xiao Yan said.

"Well, I'm heading to the palace too, let's go together," Qing Er said.

"Sure. So, how long have you been back in the country? I was told you that you've been living in America?" Xiao Yan asked.
"Yes…"

They walked together towards Yuan Ming Gong. Over lunch, Xiao Yan sat between Qing Er and Zi Wei, and spent most of her time talking to Qing Er, since Zi Wei's attention was occupied by everyone else in the room. From their conversations, Xiao Yan learnt that Qing Er had spent the last six years studying and working as a researcher at Harvard University Centre for Environment. Qing Er was far from boastful, but Xiao Yan still ended up feeling increasingly intimidated by her accomplishments. Despite this, the rest of the day proved Qing Er to be ridiculously nice and by the end of the day, Xiao Yan couldn't help but like her.

They left the palace and spread out in the garden with tea and fruit after lunch, where Xiao Yan even managed to have a relatively normal conversation with Yong Qi. She was sitting on a stone bench, observing everyone milling around, when he sat down next to her.

"Hey," he said. "How have you been? How's work?"

She smiled. "Good. Work is…interesting on the whole, even if I want to stab my boss on a regular basis."

Yong Qi smiled back. "Well, you did say you wanted normal experiences," he said, nudging her.

"I did, didn't I?" She shook her head a little, laughing at herself.

"I have a present for you."

She turned to him, surprised. "You do?"

"It's your birthday, Xiao Yan," he said.

She laughed and didn't remind him that it wasn't really her birthday. Instead, she just said, "You didn't have to – "

Before she could finish, he interrupted – "Xiao Yan" – and gave her a look that told her he thought her protests rather silly. "Anyway, you got me a present for my birthday."

"That's because I already had it," she mumbled.

If she had looked up, she would have seen him smiling at her tacit admittance that she had thought about his birthday present months in advance so that she already had it prepared before they broke up, three months before his birthday.

"So am I supposed to go on a scavenger hunt for it, or…?" she asked after a few moments of silence.

He grinned at her. "Wait here."

Yong Qi disappeared into the house for a few minutes, before returning with a neatly wrapped present.

Xiao Yan unwrapped it to find there were actually two smaller boxes inside.

"This isn't one of those presents where I keep opening boxes and the actual present is tiny, is it?" she asked, looking up at him.

He chuckled. "No."

She opened the first box to find inside a black coffee mug with a sleepy, frowny face on it.
"Oh, is this one of those mugs that changes when you add hot water to it?" she asked, squealing. She had mentioned as a throwaway remark once, ages ago, that she wanted one. She didn't expect him to actually remember.

"Yes, it changes to a smiley face when add hot liquid to it."

In the second box was a painting of coloured sand in a glass bottle, small enough to be cupped in the palms of her hands. The painting was the image of a little black bird with her wings thrown wide, looking in the process of weaving in and out of willow branches against a gorgeous blue sky.

"I saw this and couldn't help thinking of you," he said quietly. "The bird looks really free and happy here, and I hope that's how you'll always be."

His words rendered her momentarily breathless and feeling like something was pressing against her chest. She had to force herself to take a deep breath and was glad no one was paying them any attention.

"I really like it," she said with a small, soft smile. "Thank you."

"I thought of getting you a genuine leather Prada briefcase or something for you to use for work – " he started, but the mischievous smile on his face gave away the fact that he was joking, which earned him a smack on the arm from her – "but I didn't think you'd take it."

"I wouldn't," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, I hope you use it at the office and that both of these will cheer you up when you feel like murdering the boss," he said with another smile. "I very much intend for my presents to help you on the way to becoming an awesome badass human rights activist."

She laughed, then reached over to squeeze his hand. "Really, Yong Qi, thank you."

"Of course."

As she put the presents back in their boxes, she looked away from him to the rest of the party, where everyone was off in small groups, talking. She needed something to distract them both. Despite how they managed to get through the last few minutes without much mishap, she had a feeling if they kept talking about themselves much longer, it would take an uncomfortable turn rather fast.

She nodded towards where Zi Wei, Er Kang and Qing Er were standing together by a pond.

"Is it just me, or does Er Kang look a bit…twitchy over there?"

Yong Qi followed her gaze and sighed, shaking his head. "He is really overreacting."

"Er Kang?"

"Yeah."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure if Er Kang has told Zi Wei about this, so don't bring it up with her unless she does it first, but Er Kang and Qing Er used to go out."

"And…?"

"And nothing. They broke up even before she had any firm plans for America, so the fact that she
was leaving wasn't the reason. It just ended. I think he's just nervous because he's afraid Qing Er might mention something that Zi Wei would take the wrong way, which probably suggests he hasn't told Zi Wei yet. He doesn't have to, really, it was years ago."

"But he should, though. Zi Wei would be all right if he was up front about it. She'll only be upset if she thinks he has something to hide," Xiao Yan said.

"I think Er Tai has told him that, too," Yong Qi said. "But it's up to Er Kang to decide on the timing, I guess. You won't say anything?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. "I guess, but only because I agree that it's up to Er Kang to say anything to Zi Wei."

A few minutes later, Qing Er watched as Zi Wei walked away to join Xiao Yan, before turning back to Er Kang, smiling.

"She's really nice. I'm really happy for the two of you," she said sincerely.

"Thank you," he answered, sounding far too formal for the setting. Qing Er didn't point it out. She was only too aware that Er Kang overcompensated with excessive formality whenever he was nervous.

She watched Xiao Yan and Zi Wei laughing together on the other side of the garden for another moment, trying not to show that she noticed how Er Kang was still standing here, looking like he would rather walk away if he didn't think it was rude to leave her alone mid-conversation.

"How serious are you about her?" she asked, turning back to him.

Er Kang gave her a look that was both incredulous and alarmed. "I'm sorry?" he asked, reddening.

Qing Er chuckled. "Don't look so panicked. I'm not trying to be nosy or stir something up. It's probably none of my business. I'm just curious."

There was such a prolonged pause that at one point, Qing Er thought Er Kang would not answer at all. In the end though, it was hard to miss the conviction in his voice. "I think…she is it."

Qing Er probably shouldn't be surprised, but she was. Her brows knitted as she asked, "You'd marry her?"

"Yes."

"How would that work? Would you be able to stay in Security Service?"

"Not in the field," Er Kang answered calmly, in a tone that implied he was very sure of this. That probably meant that he had looked into the options. Of course he had. Er Kang was nothing if not thorough and prepared. Even if Zi Wei did not have a title and would not be undertaking any official duties, she was still the emperor's daughter. Marrying Zi Wei would effectively mean Er Kang would not be able to stay in his current job and protect any member of the imperial family. The conflicts of interest and the potential for him to be compromised emotionally on the job were too great. Qing Er herself posed the same conflicts, once upon a time.

"You're all right with that? Leaving the field?" Qing Er asked, unable to help feeling a certain pang of…something she couldn't quite put her fingers on just yet.
"Yes, of course."

"You must love her," Qing Er murmured, almost to herself, "if you're giving up your career for her."

"I'm not giving up my career," Er Kang said. "I won't be in the field, true, but I'll be moving into training and management."

"But the field was the reason you became an agent," she said, looking up at him. "You broke up with me because you didn't want to quit training, remember? You wouldn't give it up for me. You could have taken a different career direction then."

If she was challenging him, it was more because she wanted to hear how he would answer. This was not sour grapes, she told herself. It was mostly true.

Er Kang's frowns were always so severe, Qing Er noted as he turned to her with this exact expression.

"Back then, I had to make a choice, Qing Er. You or my career, which just barely started. I didn't have the options then that I have now. Besides, you were eighteen. We both knew it wasn't going to last. Maybe I was selfish, but I couldn't trade my whole future for something that wasn't going to last."

"I know," she said, sighing, but she wasn't sad. She didn't need him to tell her the situations were different, of course; but somehow, it quenched the odd feelings she had been experiencing to hear him say all this out loud. "I suppose she doesn't know about us?"

"There is no 'us', Qing Er," he said. His voice was not harsh, simply matter-of-fact.

"There was," she pointed out. "And you haven't told her."

"I don't need to tell her about every girl I've ever gone out with."

"Maybe you should when it was me. She's my cousin," she reminded him gently. "We'd hardly be able to avoid each other in the future. You can't imagine she wouldn't find out at some point? Wouldn't it be better if it came from you?"

Er Kang didn't immediately answer.

Qing Er sighed. "I meant what I said, Er Kang. I like her and I'm happy for you both. And that is why I think you should tell her yourself. I really want to get along with Zi Wei. I don't think it's going to be hard, but I would rather not have this implied secret between us."

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**October**

Yong Qi always found it strange that he and his brothers could go out together and no one would particularly care, but the moment there was someone female involved for any of them, suddenly the whole world seemed interested. Still, if it allowed him and Yong An a night out without feeling like every pair of eyes in the whole room was watching their every move, then Yong Qi couldn't complain. They needed the reprieve every once in a while.

They had just left the restaurant and Yong Qi was about to hand his car key to the parking valet when Yong An tapped his shoulder and nodded across the street.

"Is that Xiao Yan? And what the heck is she doing with Zheng Hao Ran? In a bar?"
Yong Qi turned swiftly around and saw that it was indeed Xiao Yan across the street from them. She was walking swiftly out of the bar, and even from this distance, he could tell that she was annoyed. Close on her heels was a man that Yong Qi did not know; he grabbed her wrist none too gently and held her back as Xiao Yan struggled to cast him off.

"Do you know him?" he asked his brother.

"He was in my year at high school, and even back then he was trouble. She shouldn't be with him. Come on."

Xiao Yan managed to jerk her arm free and continued to walk rapidly away. The man – Hao Ran – quickly caught up; Yong Qi and Yong An looked at each other and were preparing to cross the streets to rescue her when Xiao Yan suddenly stopped walking and approached another man who was leaning against a car parked at the curb, engrossed in the phone in his hands. She slapped the phone out of the stranger's hands, much to his shock and obvious puzzlement of Hao Ran, making the phone fall to the ground, and stomped on it for good measure, before preparing to walk away. Yong Qi put a hand out to hold Yong An back, already beginning to guess what she was trying to do with this.

As he predicted, the second man made an angry exclamation and reached out to pull Xiao Yan back. He was shouting at her about his now-obviously broken phone; she did not seem remotely remorseful and just stared with steely eyes at him, while Zheng Hao Ran looked from one to the other, shifting his weight from foot to foot. It was too far away and too dark for Yong Qi to see expressions, but it must be difficult to tell which man was more annoyed. Yong Qi himself couldn't decide whether it was extremely resourceful or extremely foolish of Xiao Yan to play this gambit.

"You destroyed my phone! You're going to pay for that!" the second man was shouting at her.

"Sure, you can settle the payment with my boyfriend," Xiao Yan said loudly but coolly, shoving Zheng Hao Ran at the other man so hard that he stumbled before preparing to walk away.

It wasn't so easy, of course, but Yong Qi suspected that Xiao Yan knew that.

"What?" Zheng Hao Ran spluttered, indignant. "I'm not – we are not – "

He had grabbed Xiao Yan's arm and was jerking her back. She was prepared for the rough-handling, however, and simply tugged her arm determinedly out of his grip.

Beside Yong Qi, his brother laughed.

"Remind me not to get on Xiao Yan's bad side," he said.

"You're only just realising that now?" Yong Qi asked mildly, still keeping an eye on the scene across the street. Zheng Hao Ran's body language indicated he was more furious than ever; he tried to tug Xiao Yan away, but of course the man with the phone wasn't letting them get away without paying for his damaged property so easily; it was obvious he was more interested in keeping back Xiao Yan, who had actually made the damages, rather than her companion who clearly couldn't decide whether he wanted to be her boyfriend anymore.

In the end, Zheng Hao Ran, unable to get anywhere with Xiao Yan and unwilling to pay for the damaged phone, stormed off in a fit.

Xiao Yan turned to the other man and they seemed to enter into conversation. Yong Qi wasn't sure whether the man was excessively dim, or too angry to care, or otherwise pretty much so unsympathetic that he didn't seem to realise the point of the whole scene; he was still demanding
payment for his broken phone.

Yong Qi rapidly crossed the streets. Approaching them now, he could see that in her hurry to leave
the bar, Xiao Yan must have left her coat behind, because she was wrapping her arms around herself
and shivered in the cold. Yong Qi shrugged off his own coat and when he managed to catch up with
her, he called her name and draped it around her shoulder.

His movement still obviously startled her, because she cried out, "Let go of me!" and turned around
abruptly. Yong Qi swerved to the side to duck what he was sure was a punch. For that one moment
when she was reacting on pure instincts, he could see under the dim streetlight, she looked both
furious and terrified; the expression, which Yong Qi had never seen on her before, made his insides
turn in uneasiness.

"Xiao Yan! Hey, hey, it's all right, it's only me," he said soothingly, holding up his hands, palms
faced towards her.

She stared at him for a moment, as if not believing her eyes, before her whole body seemed to sag in
relief. They both momentarily ignored the man with the broken phone who had obviously recognised
Yong Qi, if not by his face, then by the entourage of security officers that had followed Yong An
across the street. He was looking from one prince to the other with a wide-eyed expression of
nervousness and amazement.

Yong Qi leaned down to pick up his coat which had fallen off when Xiao Yan struggled and put it
around her again, rubbing her shoulder gently.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She looked up at him, breathless. "I'm fine. Thanks," she said, but he could see the relief in her eyes.

In the meantime, while both of their attention were elsewhere, Yong An had pulled the man with the
phone to the side and somehow come to a price. Yong An took out his wallet and handed the man
some money.

"What are you doing?" Xiao Yan exclaimed, walking rapidly over and put a hand on Yong An's
wrist. "You don't have to do that, I've got it!"

"It's fine, Xiao Yan," Yong An said simply.

"But --"

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said, "just don't argue with him. I've never found it productive."

Xiao Yan was obviously still reluctant, but he knew she could see the merit of getting the man and
his phone out of their hair right now. So with a sigh, she pulled back and glowered while Yong An
gave the man the money. He took it, but did not seem inclined to clear the scene until one of the
agents stared pointedly at him. It took another moment before he finally got the message, he gave
them all one last bewildered look, got in his car and drove away.

Xiao Yan had absent-mindedly put on Yong Qi's coat properly instead of leaving it hanging off her
shoulders. He nearly smiled at how she did this as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You didn't have to do that," she said grumpily to his brother.

"No," Yong An said calmly, "but I did."
"How much did you give him? I'll pay you back."

"Really, Xiao Yan," Yong An said exasperatedly. "That is entirely unnecessary."

"No, it is not!"

"Xiao Yan, I know why you needed to make that scene," Yong An said patiently. "We saw most of it from across the street. But clearly the guy didn't understand or didn't care, because he still insisted you pay for the phone. If you'd been alone after Zheng Hao Ran left, he would have totally ripped you off. He didn't dare do that with me."

Xiao Yan stared at him. "How did you know Zheng Hao Ran's name?"

"I went to school with him."

She looked shocked for a moment, before shaking herself. "That's not the point! I mean, I know how much that phone cost. I wouldn't have paid for more than it was worth! I knew when I knocked his phone off that I would have to – "

"No, Xiao Yan, you would have ended up paying at least twice what it's worth. After all, you wouldn't have wanted to be rid of one Zheng Hao Ran to be stuck with a second now, did you?"

Xiao Yan glowered silently at Yong An for a long moment, but clearly silently admitting truth to his words. Still, she said stubbornly, "It didn't matter what I would have paid him. Clearly you've managed to settle with him a true price of the phone, so let me pay you back."

"Absolutely not," Yong An said smugly. "You said to him to settle the matter with your boyfriend."

"You are not my boyfriend!" Xiao Yan cried, her eyes widening in alarm. Yong Qi wondered if it was appropriate to laugh.

"Of course not," Yong An replied. "But I am your friend. So same difference, really."

Xiao Yan was rendered speechless, and just finally looked at Yong Qi helplessly. He could only give her a shrug. He knew, she would be fighting a lot harder if he had made these arguments; she would be even less willing to give the impression that she was accepting any illusion of their being involved. This was why he had stayed silent and let Yong An argue with her. As stubborn as Xiao Yan could be, she was not as stubborn as his brother.

Sensing the lull in Xiao Yan's argumentativeness, Yong Qi sought to distract her.

"Let us take you home."

"No, it's not – I'll be fine – "

"Xiao Yan," Yong An said, "it's late. Let Yong Qi take you home."

She bit her lip in hesitation, obviously noting the distinction between Yong Qi's more inclusive suggestion and Yong An's, which left him out of the fold. Still, in the end, she nodded; it was a tad reluctant, but Yong Qi was glad she agreed, because he didn't want to stand here and argue with her on this subject, but neither was he ready to let her go off by herself at this hour, no matter how awkward the car ride might be.

"Did you leave your things in the bar?" he asked. He could see she was holding a clutch in her hand and this wasn't a hint to go get her coat so that he could get his back. He didn't particularly miss it; he
only worried that she might have left other things behind.

"No, just my coat."

"Come on, I'll walk back to get it with you," he said.

She hesitated for a moment, before agreeing.

Yong Ai exchanged a look with his brother and knew that he would make his own way home. He handed his own car key to one of his agents and then followed Xiao Yan back into the bar to collect her coat. When they came outside again, the agent was stepping out of the car that he had driven up to the curb and Yong An with his half of the security had gone. Yong Qi opened the door to the passenger side for Xiao Yan and saw her settled in before rounding to the other side. The agent closed the door for him before walking over to join the second car behind them.

Neither Yong Qi nor Xiao Yan spoke until they had totally left the street.

"Where did Yong An go? If you've taken the car, how's Yong An getting home?" Xiao Yan asked.

"In his car," Yong Qi replied.

"Isn't that the one behind us?" Xiao Yan asked hesitantly.

"No. That's the security car."

She raised a confused eyebrow at him.

"You know that there are never any less than four cars out whenever my brother and I go out together, right?" Yong Qi said, chuckling. "There's always one for each of us, because we aren't ever allowed to travel in the same car. And then with both of us out together, there is always increased security which means that the two extra cars are both decoys and for the agents. That's one of the main reasons why Yong An and I rarely go out together. It always requires practically a motorcade and is too much of a logistical nightmare."

"Really?"

"Really. We don't fly together, either."

"How would that work? What if you need to both be somewhere together that can only be reached by airplane?"

Yong Qi glanced at Xiao Yan and saw that she was trying to distract herself from the early encounter with the questions, so he decided to answer to help her.

"For official duties, our engagements are simply set so that we avoid both of us having to fly somewhere together. It's purely a cost-cutting arrangement. In any event that we absolutely need to be somewhere together that can only be reached by airplane, or if we take a vacation together or something that's privately paid, then we take two different flights."

"That's...excessive," Xiao Yan said.

He couldn't help smiling slightly. "Well, it defeats the point of having an heir and a spare if we allow the said heir and spare to take the same metal tube fifty-thousand feet up into the sky together. Yong An and Ah Ma never travel together either, and neither do I with Ah Ma if we can help it."

The topic ended and silence fell between them. It was not entirely unbearable, but it wasn't the kind
of companionable silences Yong Qi remembered between the two of them either.

After a couple of minutes, Xiao Yan broke it.

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked.

He was almost embarrassed to admit that he did know the address of her new apartment, though she never told him herself.

"I'm not stalking you or anything," he said with a wry smile.

She chuckled. "No, you probably don't have to, since Zi Wei would tell you anyway."

Actually, Zi Wei told him less about Xiao Yan than one would expect. She was the best of all his siblings at grasping the concept of not-meddling and leaving-them-to-their-own-devices. Yong An, needless to say, was the worst.

He wanted to ask her what happened back at the bar, but if there was one thing weirder about witnessing with relief your ex-girlfriend successfully extracting herself from the clutches of her possibly-current boyfriend, it was asking about what was going on between said ex-girlfriend and current boyfriend that required the extraction in the first place. But Xiao Yan knew him well enough, and said, "I guess you want to know what happened tonight with Hao Ran?"

"You don't have to tell me," he said, though if truth be told, he was worried about her, if not to say morbidly curious.

"Don't worry," she said, seeing his conflicted expression. "Tonight just killed any of his chances for a second date. I didn't really want to go out with him in the first place, to be honest. I just said yes this one time to shut him up more than anything."

"Well, according to Yong An, who apparently went to school with him, he's not a great guy, let's just leave it at that."

"I think I've seen enough of that the entire evening. I met him at this event I attended for work a couple of months ago, and he's been asking me out ever since. To be honest, if tonight is any indication, he was never really interested in me and probably just wanted the…notoriety of having gone out with me. Anyway, he was being…let's just say pushy, the entire night and I couldn't take it anymore so I tried to storm out though clearly it didn't work."

"Since when do you have your first dates at a bar?" he asked.

"I don't. We had dinner and then he took me in the back door and I didn't realise it was a bar until I was inside. Yeah, I know, that just screams all sorts of wonderful thing, doesn't it? He was trying to get me drunk, but as I said, I stormed out."

"He doesn't know where you live, does he?" Yong Qi asked, only half joking. "Or will I have to worry that he'll camp outside your door one of these days?"

"I'll be fine," she tried to assure him. Then, after a pause, she chuckled lightly. "Though to be honest, now I'm starting to think there's something about me that just attracts shady characters."

"Thanks," Yong Qi said dryly.

She shot him a crooked smile. "You're the exception, I guess." There was a pause, then she added more soberly, "Thank you for coming to my help out there. I guess I did need it more than I wanted..."
"Don't thank me," he said mildly. "I didn't really do anything. My brother did most of the actual helping."

"I guess I should text him and tell him. I didn't really get a chance earlier what with trying to argue with him." She sighed. "How does he do that?"

"Do what?"

"Just...say things are going to go a certain way, and they go that way."

"He's the Crown Prince," Yong Qi said, chuckling. "I'm sure it's in the job description."

She smiled a little.

"But seriously, though," she said, "thank you both."

Yong Qi turned slightly to smile at her, nodding.

The rest of the car ride passed in silence, but a slightly less stuffy one than the one before. At one point, if Yong Qi didn't have the memories of their separation in the last months, he might have nearly been able to believe that nothing had changed between them. It was only until they arrived at her door that he couldn't decide how to say goodbye.

It was there, with one hand against her door frame, that he realised how much this scenario resembled the parting after a first date, with all the wondering of whether it was better to hug or kiss her in farewell. The fact that their actual first date wasn't even this strange made the entire situation even more awkward.

They stood there, facing each other for a long moment; it was all he could do to concentrate on not saying something stupidly obvious like "I should go" and stop himself from wondering what was going through her mind, whether she was considering inviting him in at all.

In the end, it was she who moved in for a hug, whispering a 'thank you' and squeezing his hand. As they parted, he brushed his lips against her forehead in a gesture that seemed more brotherly than anything.

"Good night, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said softly, eliciting a smile from her.

"See you," she replied. Then he pulled away to allow her to completely step into the apartment and close the door behind her.

Xiao Yan realised later that, somewhere along the way, she had almost forgotten what it was like to be able to talk to Yong Qi. After not really talking properly for so many months, she was almost afraid that it might now be impossible for them to tell each other anything anymore. She suspected that Yong Qi shared that fear as well. But the fact that they managed to be together alone for the first time in months in the car and still managed a half-decent coherent conversation seemed to have somehow changed everything. So the conversation wasn't outrageously personal or even that in-depth but somehow it had opened a door, allowing her to hesitate for a shorter period of time, if at all, when she happened to scroll by his name in her phone's contact list.

When Yong Qi texted her the next day, Xiao Yan took less time to answer him and agonised less over her wording than she might have done if the night before didn't happen. Perhaps there was a
silver lining in the whole uncomfortable evening with Zheng Hao Ran after all.

It wasn't much longer after that that they found themselves occasionally texting each other again. When this was known to their friends, it was inevitable that they faced some not-so-subtle questions of why exactly they didn't just get back together. However, it was as if both of them had come to a silent agreement that this new-found relaxed friendship (or whatever it was) between them was too precious and fragile to disturb by adding more complicated aspects to it.
Chapter Notes

Searching for a sign in the night even like a lonely string of lights
That'll burn just long enough for you to see it
The road's been long and lonely and you feel like giving up
There's more to this than just the breath you're breathing

So keep on climbing, though the ground might shake
Just keep on reaching though the limb might break
We've come this far, don't you be scared now
'Cause you can learn to fly on the way down

— Fly, Maddie & Tae

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2014 November

It was Monday morning, they were in a meeting, and Daniel was droning on and on. Xiao Yan knew she really ought to be paying attention, as after all, he was reporting on the progress for the very event she was working on. She wished he would just get to the point.

Lumos was a newly established NGO in Beijing, so much of their current work involved promotion and creating working linkages. As part of this effort, they were holding their first big event, a charity dinner gala and auction, which would serve both as a chance to raise awareness about their organisation and its mission, but also be a fundraiser. Lumos would put all the proceeds from the gala towards children-related charities and development projects around the country.

"…a substantial number of sponsors have confirmed, and the contracts should all be signed within this week…” Daniel was reporting to Grace Teng at the head of the meeting table.

At that moment, a piece of paper was shoved under Xiao Yan's nose.

He's talking like he did all the contacting and negotiating with the sponsors himself.

Xiao Yan looked at Ming Yue, the author of the note who was sitting next to her, and rolled her eyes.

Ming Yue was recruited at the same time as Xiao Yan, and was also assigned to work under Daniel. She sat back to back to Xiao Yan, and they bonded over how pompous, insufferable and generally unappreciative a boss Daniel was.

"…currently there are over a hundred lots that have been gathered for the auction…”

Xiao Yan looked up at that bit of erroneous report and made a face at Ming Yue. At the same time, she couldn't decide whether she should speak up and point out Daniel's inflated number now in front of everyone, or try to save him some face and wait to tell Grace more discreetly later that Daniel's...
number was totally out of date.

Grace seemed to notice Xiao Yan's expression, because she said, "Yes, Xiao Yan? Do you have something to add to that?"

"Er – well, that number is not quite accurate," Xiao Yan said. "Over a hundred was the number of items we were offered but not all were appropriate. In reality, we have narrowed down the total number of items to be auctioned to 50."

"I'm not sure when you narrowed this down, but I was not aware of this," Daniel said, frowning at her. Xiao Yan knew he was displeased that she contradicted him in front of everyone, but she pretended not to see it. It wasn't like it was her fault he got the numbers wrong. He was the one who was supposed to be in charge of organising the event. Sure, he was meant to delegate, but he should still ultimately be on top of everything. He should be well aware that they have neither the time nor the space to auction over a hundred items. Even if he somehow didn't see this, it wasn't like Xiao Yan had never mentioned this before to him.

"Well, seeing as the auction is just a part of the gala, we cannot auction the total of a hundred items. It would tire out everyone and likely reduce the cash donations. Only 40 items will be on silent auction as the room will only be able to accommodate that much. Since the silent auction is scheduled for the pre-dinner drinks portion of the evening, realistically the guests would only have time to look at that many, anyway. For the live auction during dinner, we cannot expect to put up more than 10 big value items. So the total is 50," Xiao Yan explained, more patiently than Daniel really deserved. Then, she added, "Daniel, I emailed you the rationalisation for these numbers two weeks ago for your written confirmation, which you gave. I could go and print it out to remind you…"

"All right, all right," Daniel cut in, his ears red. "It must have slipped my mind."

"Of course," Xiao Yan replied dryly.

Beside her, Ming Yue unsuccessfully suppressed a laugh, which Xiao Yan hoped only she could hear.

"Have the invitations been sent out?" Grace asked.

This time, Daniel didn't bother answering, but just gave a huffy look in the general direction of Xiao Yan. Really, just because Xiao Yan contradicted him on something he got wrong, he'd resort to throwing a petulant tantrum? How perfectly childish…and predictable.

"We are just going over them all again today, Teng Jie," Ming Yue said when Xiao Yan glanced at her. "We expect to send them by end of day via priority mail, so it should reach all the recipients by mid-week."

"Excellent," Grace said. "Is there any other issue to talk about regarding the gala?"

Both Xiao Yan and Ming Yue shook their heads and not receiving a different answer from Daniel, Grace moved the meeting to the next item on the agenda.

Later that day, Xiao Yan and Ming Yue were sitting side by side at Ming Yue's desk, boxes and boxes of invitations already in sealed envelopes at their feet. Xiao Yan was reading out the names and addresses for Ming Yue to do one last cross check on their spreadsheet of invitees.

Daniel walked past their desks and suddenly paused. He stood there and watched them for about half a minute, during which time Xiao Yan and Ming Yue both ignored him, focused on their task.
"Make sure you get all those out by today," he said pompously.

Xiao Yan didn't even look up from the box of invitation she was counting. "We've already asked the post office to come at three to pick them up."

Daniel approached the cubicle and after some scanning, plucked an invitation from their 'Done' pile. "Hey, you're putting them all out of order!" Ming Yue cried.

"Why do they even need to be in any kind of order?"

"Of course they do!" Ming Yue said. "We've put them in order of the spreadsheet, which we're emailing to the post office so that they can merge them into the receipt forms for us. If one envelope is out of order, the receipts will be all messed up."

Daniel dropped the envelope he just picked up carelessly back on the desk. "Maybe you should hand deliver this one, eh, Xiao Yan?"

One glance at it told Xiao Yan it was the envelope addressed to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor care of the Imperial Household Department. She forced herself to not look up at the infuriating man. There was too much danger of retorting something that she would later regret if she did, so she only satisfied herself with gritting her teeth and glaring at the envelopes in the box on her lap. Thankfully, Daniel didn't stay to provoke an actual reaction from her and just walked off.

Ming Yue picked the envelope Daniel just dropped off the desk and put it back in its right place. "If he's not going to help, you'd think he have the decency to not create more work for us," Ming Yue muttered so low that only Xiao Yan could hear.

Xiao Yan scoffed, but found it much more prudent to not say anything. Instead, she went back to counting envelopes.

Three weeks later, Xiao Yan opened the spreadsheet of the guest list again to filter for those who had RSVPed 'Yes' to attending the event.

"So how many in total?" Ming Yue asked behind her.

"376."

"What?" Ming Yue swiveled her chair around to look at Xiao Yan's computer screen. "That can't be right."

"It is," Xiao Yan insisted. She pointed to the 'Attending' column, which had been filtered to 'Yes'. "Look."

Ming Yue was frowning. "Is it just me…or does that ballroom at the Grand look too small for this many people?"

Xiao Yan thought there was suddenly a sinking feeling in her stomach as she, too, considered their venue. "It is too small…" She went to the filing cabinet nearby and began riffling through it, looking for their contract with the Grand Hotel for the event. Having found it, she flipped through the terms and stared. "This contract is only for 200 guests."

"What?" Ming Yue exclaimed. "That can't be right! Why? We sent out 250 invitations, which theoretically counting plus-ones, we'd be expecting 500 people. Why would the contract with the
"God knows," Xiao Yan said, feeling like banging her head against the filing cabinet. "This was signed before either of us started working here."

"This can't be happening," Ming Yue groaned.

Xiao Yan turned around, scanning the room. "Where is Daniel?"

"He's in with Teng Jie, I think."

"Oh, good, let's take this problem to both of them," Xiao Yan said tartly, and marched off in the direction of Grace's office. Ming Yue sighed before following her.

Xiao Yan knocked, and at Grace's 'Come in', entered the office.

"We have a problem," she announced unceremoniously.

"Yes? What's wrong?" Grace asked.

Xiao Yan put the hotel contract down on Grace's desk. She purposefully did not glance at Daniel; she had a feeling if she did right then, she would strangle him.

"This contract for the gala was signed for 200 guests. I just totaled the RSVP, we have 376 guests, not counting our entire office," Xiao Yan explained, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Grace frowned and picked up the contract to check the numbers.

"I've seen the room at the Grand," Xiao Yan added, "I'm sure 200 is their max capacity and they don't have any other rooms to extend to. We cannot possibly squeeze nearly 400 people in there."

"Why are the numbers so inflated?" Grace asked.

"They're not, actually," Ming Yue said. "We sent out 250 invitations, and for every invitation, we should be expecting two guests attending. So technically, if all invitations were accepted, we'd be looking at 500 people. 376 is a reasonable number of acceptances. What Xiao Yan and I don't understand is why the contract was signed for only 200 guests? I mean, it was negotiated and signed before either of started here…"

"Daniel?" Grace asked, turning to the man in question, who had yet to say anything.

"Well, the plan was to send out 250 invitations with the expectation of 500 guests, yes," Daniel said, sounding flustered, "but there is no way everyone accepts the invitation. So I booked the room with the expectation that we can't expect that everyone would come. I mean, even those who have RSVPed that they'd come, there's a chance that they might not show up anyway. Things can happen. People might just RSVP for the heck of it and never show up."

"But the fact of the matter is, Daniel, we cannot use a venue for 200 people when we have been informed 400 would show up!" Grace exclaimed. "I understand the need for an underestimate when booking, but this much of an underestimate? Did you forget that the 250 invitations included plus-ones as well? Did you just think we send out 250 invites and the maximum number we get back would really just be 250 people? Because that would make sense. There is no sense in knowing we have a potential of 500 guests and then booking a venue that only holds 200!"

"Well, I – " Daniel stammered, clearly not knowing what to say or how to explain the situation. "I
really didn't think that many people would accept the invitation.

Xiao Yan exchanged an incredulous look with Ming Yue. She couldn't even feel triumph at Daniel, because though this problem might have been created by him, she was sure it would fall on her and Ming Yue to clear it up. If they even could.

"You have to be kidding me, right?" Grace asked, sounding as weary as Xiao Yan felt. "Your last position was Meeting and Events at a five-star hotel, Daniel. That's why I had you take point on the whole organisation of this event! How could you so utterly fail to understand how event planning works?"

Daniel looked as red as a cooked lobster. "I – "

Grace shook her head, clearly not having time to deal with Daniel's damaged pride. "Let's deal with that later," she said brusquely. "The issue now is, what are we going to do about this? Because Xiao Yan is right, we simply cannot force 400 people in a room with 200 capacity. Even if we want to, the hotel will not be able to accommodate that."

"I think we can still assume that not the full 376 people will come, Teng Jie," Daniel said stubbornly.

"It doesn't matter if they don't actually come on the day, Daniel!" Grace cried. "They have RSVPed and we must be ready to receive that many no matter what. Even if some do pull out in the last minute, I imagine that would take us down to 320 or 330 at the very most and nowhere near this 200 mark! We can't even tell the Grand we're expecting 300 people! Look at this contract appendix, Daniel. The full capacity of the room for standing buffet style is 250! That mean they can't even fit in 250 people for a sit down banquet, let alone 300 plus."

"Could we...Is it possible for us to change the venue?" Xiao Yan asked. Even as she said it, she could already see the mountain of work that would be involved in this.

"How could we?" Ming Yue cried. "The event is in two weeks! Even if we could find somewhere big enough in time, we'd have to tell all these people!"

"I don't think we have a choice, Ming Yue," Grace said, sighing. "It's impossible to put that many people into the Grand. If it was summer and the weather was nice, I'd explore the option of having it outdoor still at the Grand. But as it is, we will have to try to find someplace else, and once we have, inform everyone."

"That would basically involve calling everyone to tell them of the change in venue," Xiao Yan pointed out. "We can't just send an email and hope people will read them."

Just the volume and sheer tedium of that task alone was making Xiao Yan want to scream.

"The good news," Grace said, "if there is such thing, is that there is only so many places in this city that could hold a dinner gala for 400 people indoors and have another big enough room for the silent auction. Try everything. Shangri-La, the Peninsula, Park Hyatt, the Hilton, InterCon. I mean, everything."

"Do you want me to check Imperial while I'm at it?" Xiao Yan muttered.

"If that is at all possible, try it," Grace answered.

Xiao Yan heaved an enormous sigh. It was probably not helpful to point out that she was more or less being sarcastic. Short of calling the emperor himself for help, it would be impossible to book a function room this large for a private, non-governmental function at the Imperial Hotel without
months of advance notice.

(Could she actually do that?)

(Probably not.)

"Right," Xiao Yan said, putting the idea of out her mind. Glancing at the clock on the wall, her face crumbled. "It's four forty-five. Hotel sales departments won't work after hours."

"Well, please go and get started. Try what you can until five," Grace said. "Before you agree on anything, try to visit the venue to make sure they're suitable."

"Of course," Xiao Yan answered.

"Daniel, please stay. I want to talk to you."

Half an hour later, Xiao Yan was headdesking. After they left Grace's office, Ming Yue and she had drawn up a list of possible hotels and divided them up. Each of them only managed to call and speak to the Sales representative of one hotel each, before their calls started to ring out in empty offices. With the two hotels they did manage to call, their event spaces were fully booked.

"Of course they're all booked," Xiao Yan grumbled, aggressively shuffling her papers and stabbing her pens into their holders. "You can't go asking after a ballroom for 400 people with only two weeks' notice."

Ming Yue was rubbing her fingers against her temple. "We'll continue calling tomorrow, then?" she asked, clearly not believing they'd have more luck in the morning.

"What if we were to just go to these places tomorrow?" Xiao Yan asked. "To see the rooms as well as negotiate the prices on site? Teng Jie is right, there aren't that many places that could hold us. We might as well just go directly there."

"Okay, if you think that would work," Ming Yue answered. "But how are we going? Neither of us have a car."

"I can borrow my friend's car," Xiao Yan said. "Let me just check. I'll call you later tonight to confirm. Is that all right?"

"Sure. Of course," Ming Yue said. "I don't suppose we could do anything else before the venue is confirmed. Let's just call it a day. I have a feeling the next two weeks will be loads of fun."

"I know, right?"

Half an hour later, when she was riding the lift down to the ground floor of her office building to go home, Xiao Yan rang Zi Wei.

"Zi Wei, can I borrow your car tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course," her friend answered. "Why though?"

"Urgh," Xiao Yan groaned, "we just got confirmation for number of guests at the gala, and it's way past the capacity of the hotel we've already booked. Obviously we can't turn any of them away, so now we have to find another hotel to hold it. The thing is in two weeks! It's going to be a nightmare finding a place big enough in such short notice, but I have to do it. I'll visit and negotiate with every
single suitable hotel in this entire city if I have to. But I need a car to do that."

"Of course, go ahead and use my car. But wouldn't it be massively expensive if you change locations this last minute?"

"Oh yes. We'll lose the deposit to the old location, and the price for the new location will be sky high. At this point, I'm just praying that the money raised in the gala will manage to cover the cost. Well, it should, but then how much that leaves over as proceeds is...debatable. But let me cross that bridge when I get to it."

She rubbed her eyes wearily as Zi Wei made a sympathetic noise over the phone.

"I don't suppose you can wrangle the ballroom at Imperial for me?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I don't have that much power and influence, Xiao Yan."

To that depressing answer, Xiao Yan sighed.

"Your father does," she said, in a half-joking, last-ditch effort.

Zi Wei laughed. "I don't think the Imperial works like that, either."

Xiao Yan sighed loudly.

"Do you want to come over and get the car now?" Zi Wei asked, obviously trying to distract her. "I imagine you'd want to start early tomorrow."

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd say that," Xiao Yan said. "See you in about forty-five minutes?"

"Sure. Stay for dinner if you want." There was a pause. "Yong Qi's not going to be in."

Xiao Yan gave a curt laugh. "Honestly, Zi Wei, tonight I really can't care less."

Apparently, miracles did exist. Two days later, Xiao Yan was presenting a contract with the InterContinental Hotel Beijing to Grace for signature. By some god's blessing, the InterCon still had both of their massive ballrooms free on the date required. The price for such late booking was extreme, of course, but considering how all the other hotels were fully booked or didn't have the capacity, even if the InterCon had demanded her weight in pure gold, Xiao Yan had a feeling they would still have gritted their teeth to bear it.

Of course, confirming the new venue was just the beginning of two of the longest weeks of Xiao Yan's working life so far. Grace had decreed that everyone in the office would basically drop everything that could be dropped and join in the massive task of telephoning every single one of their guest to inform them of the change in venue. Xiao Yan, meanwhile, had the task of cancelling their previous location (which, as she expected, led to them losing their 50% deposit) and calling all their other subcontractors for the event to work out the logistics of moving the event to another hotel. The only saving grace was that her counterpart at the InterCon was blessedly efficient and understanding of their plight and went out of her way to be accommodating.

By the time gala night drew close, Xiao Yan was sleep-deprived, jumpy and paranoid that something else would definitely go wrong at the last minute. She and Ming Yue spent the evening before the event at the hotel, checking and double checking all the arrangements. Daniel seemed to think it was obvious that they should do this, and didn't even offer to come with them. It was probably for the best, anyway, as Xiao Yan was not sure she could be counted on to not hit him over the head with
some antique vase they were auctioning the next night had he been there.

It was eleven-thirty in the evening when they stumbled out of the hotel and started to head home. After Xiao Yan righted herself after nearly crashing into the concierge desk, she and Ming Yue only had the energy to weakly wave goodbye to each other. Once she arrived home, Xiao Yan vaguely realised that she hadn't eaten anything since lunch time, but by then, her stomach was in such knots over the next day that she felt like she would throw up if she tried to eat anything now. She forced herself to swallow a glass of soy milk before falling face-first into bed and slept with her light on.

She woke the next day at her usual work hour and could not go back to sleep, even though she didn't need to go back to the hotel until the afternoon. When she finally tried to get out of bed, she was so dizzy that she rather fell out of it. It took her several moments to realise the reason she was so light-headed was because she hadn't eaten since noon the day before, and even then, it was only a bowl of noodle.

As she went in search of food, Xiao Yan told herself that once this night was over, she would sleep for a week. If Grace had any decency at all, she would bloody well approve the leave.

It was six-thirty in the evening.

Guests were arriving in steady streams. Nothing disastrous had happened, but the night was young.

Xiao Yan's feet were already killing her.

Xiao Yan, Ming Yue and Grace were making a round of the silent auction hall to check on everything, when a white-uniformed, white-gloved staff of the hotel approached them.

"Ms Teng, my manager wants me to tell you that some of the Crown Prince's security team has arrived to survey the area. They inform us that the Crown Prince himself should be arriving soon."

"The Crown Prince?" Grace exclaimed. She turned to Xiao Yan, surprised. "He's actually coming?"

"I – " Xiao Yan stammered, pulling out her phone and drawing up the confirmed guest list. There was no way Yong An confirmed his attendance she somehow missed it, was there? "I remember that Imperial Household only confirmed that a 'representative' would come along. They do send their secretaries and the like to attend these kinds of invited events in their place when their schedules are full, so I thought that was…Yeah, here, look. 'Representative', not the actual Crown Prince."

"Well, clearly the Crown Prince has decided to come," Grace said briskly, not at all thrown off by the unexpected guest, which was more than could be said for how Xiao Yan was actually feeling. "I have to go and greet him."

She had already taken several steps towards the door, before turning back to Xiao Yan.

"You should come, too," she said.

"No, no, Teng Jie, I shouldn't," Xiao Yan protested. "I still have lots to arrange here. Besides, it's got nothing to do with me. You go."

Grace narrowed her eyes at Xiao Yan, but she stood her ground. She didn't mind seeing Yong An, but she knew, if she went to greet him now, the attention would be focused on the sight of the two of them, reminding everyone of their previous associations through Yong Qi. The only thing that would accomplish would be to turn people's mind immediately to gossip, rather than the causes they were supposed to be here for. That was the last thing Xiao Yan needed that night.
"Fine," Grace said finally with a sigh. "Suit yourself. But still, know that this is a good development. You may not want the credit, but I am sure it is in no small part due to you."

"If you say so," Xiao Yan replied. "Now, please just go and greet him. He's probably nearly here."

Twenty minutes later, Xiao Yan was weaving between guests with flutes of champagne in their hands to the ballroom to do a last check on the stage from where the live auction would be held later at dinner, which was due to start in ten minutes. She was approaching the stage when someone suddenly took her by the arm.

"Xiao Yan."

She cried out in surprise and whirled around.

"Oh, it's you," she said, sighing when she saw it was Yong An. "I mean, good evening, Tai Zi Dian Xia."

Yong An laughed. "Really, Xiao Yan. We are not such strangers."

"No." She allowed herself a smile at him. "But this is a formal event that you are attending as the Crown Prince. I should extend you some courtesy."

"Well, good evening to you too, Miss Xia," he replied, grinning at her.

"I am surprised you are able to come," she said. "Though I am very grateful, of course."

Yong An hesitated for a moment, then lowered his voice. "To tell you the truth, Yong Qi wanted to come." He waved his hand reassuringly at the look of mild distress on her face. "Yes, I know, it would have been awkward, mostly for you with your colleagues and probably with your guests, too. So I said I would go for him. The truth is we want to support you and the work you're doing. We do believe it's a good cause, Xiao Yan, but we both know it can't have been easy for you to start work with…"

"My reputation?"

"Something like that."

She smiled, genuinely thankful for his words and support. "Thank you, Yong An. I do appreciate you being here. For myself, I appreciate your support, of course, but for Lumos, your being here will definitely bring attention to the organisation in ways that all our promotion work for the whole year never could."

"I am glad I can help, Xiao Yan. Speaking of which, how over budget are you?"

"What?"

"How over budget are you? Tell me so I can make the appropriate donation."

"What do you mean?" Xiao Yan asked, frowning at him in confusion. "How do you know we're over budget?"

Yong An chuckled. "Xiao Yan, you changed locations in the last minute, to this much bigger hotel and ballroom. Of course you're over budget."

"So what can you do about it? What do you mean, 'appropriate donation'?"
"I will make sure that my donation will at least help you break even. This will ensure that you have proceeds at the end to go to the charities."

"You don't have to, Yong An, honestly," Xiao Yan said earnestly. "You don't have to do this."

"I want to, Xiao Yan."

"But – "

"Xiao Yan, I'm not Yong Qi, okay? Even if this were from Yong Qi, you don't have to feel like you're doing something wrong in accepting this from us. It's a good cause, and I know how much it must mean to you. Let me help. I want you to succeed, and I want this event to be successful, for your sake and for the charities' sake."

She sighed. She knew that he would not let her win this argument, but still, she couldn't bring herself to give him the answer he wanted.

"So tell me. What's the damage?"

She hesitated for a moment longer, before reluctantly deciding to give in. She gave him the figure.

"Consider it covered," he said, winking at her.

"Yong An – " she started, feeling guilty.

"It's for charity," he said firmly. "I would have donated at least that much anyway. In any case, I will not bargain with you over it."

"Thank you," she whispered, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

"It's my pleasure, Xiao Yan."

She smiled, but then checked her watch. Five minutes till dinner would be called. "I have to go," she told Yong An.

"Of course. You're busy. Don't let me keep you."

"Thank you again, Yong An, so much. Have a good evening."

The gala ended up being successful in ways that Xiao Yan could not have imagined at the beginning of the week. All the items for auctions were sold at prices higher than Xiao Yan could have predicted. All in all, the night proceeded smoothly and there was no last minute crisis to panic over. The ballroom was beautifully set up and the food was delicious (once Xiao Yan's nerves had settled enough to allow her to taste what she was eating). She couldn't help but think that perhaps this new venue was a better choice than their old, after all. Of course, she would rather have done without the stress of the last two weeks.

Near midnight, all the guests had departed, and her colleagues going around, saying goodbye to each other too.

"Has Daniel left already?" Grace asked Xiao Yan.

"Yeah, I think he took off about five minutes ago," Xiao Yan answered through a yawn. "I'll go too, if you don't mind."
"Of course, go, go, you've done a marvelous job," Grace said, smiling. "You deserve the rest. How are you getting home?"

"Don't worry about me. Ming Yue's boyfriend is picking her up and they're giving me a lift home."

The truth was, Yong An had offered her one of his cars too, but she had declined, thinking that was certainly excessive.

"That's good then," Grace said. "Go home and sleep, Xiao Yan. And take a couple of days off, if you want."

"A week?" Xiao Yan asked hopefully.

Grace laughed. "All right. A week."

She grinned. "Thank you! Goodnight!"

Xiao Yan really didn't come back to work until a week later. She was half done with wading through the mountain of emails she accumulated during that time when Ming Yue tapped her on the shoulder.

She turned around. "Huh?"

"Teng Jie wants to see you."

"Oh, okay," she said, standing up and walked towards Grace's office. Knocking and then poking her head in, she asked, "You wanted to see me?"

Grace looked up from her computer. "Yes, Xiao Yan. Come in."

She came in and sat down in front of her boss' desk.

"Don't look so wary, you're not in trouble," Grace said, smiling.

Xiao Yan didn't think so, but neither could she imagine what Grace would want to see her personally for. She had already written both her and Ming Yue a long email praising them about the gala. Xiao Yan was secretly gleeful that Daniel was not included in the email chain.

"First things first, Daniel is resigning."

Xiao Yan looked up, surprised. This was the first she had heard of this. "He is?"

"Yes. Actually, that day when you and Ming Yue came in to tell us about the venue problem, he was informing me that he was resigning. Apparently, even then, he had already decided that this work isn't what he wants. Now, I haven't announced this yet, so I would appreciate, for the time being, that you keep this confidential."

"Of course," Xiao Yan answered, though she couldn't think why Grace would tell her this in private first. Of course, it would affect her work, but so would it affect Ming Yue's work. Why wasn't she in here?

Grace continued, "I am sure the fact that he's leaving is the reason he dumped the whole eleventh-hour crisis with the gala on your lap."

"Teng Jie, I didn't – "
"I know you didn't complain, but you are not that good at hiding your emotions, Xiao Yan. You were annoyed with him, especially when he didn't offer, and in fact did barely anything, to fix the problem that grew from his careless planning and budgeting in the first place."

Xiao Yan didn't think it was diplomatic to agree with this observation, even if the man was resigning, so she said nothing.

"Do you know why you were hired here, Xiao Yan?"

Xiao Yan frowned, confused at the change in subject. "Um…I suppose I met the requirements for the job?"

"Half the applicants met the requirements for the job. It's an entry level job," Grace said, laughing. On someone else, the laughter would have been mocking and Xiao Yan would have found it quite annoying. But there was something in her boss' tone that made her wait patiently for the next words. "The truth – and I want you to listen to all I've got to say before losing your cool – the truth is, in the end, it was down to you and a couple of other applicants. Any of you would have done the job adequately enough. The reason you were chosen is because you are Xia Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan saw where she was going with this, of course, but was determined not to say so herself. She merely raised an eyebrow, daring Grace to spell it out.

Grace nodded approvingly at her. "You're going to make me say it. You want me to offer you that basic courtesy. Good for you. You were hired, Xiao Yan, because you are Rong Qin Wang's ex-girlfriend."

Xiao Yan pursed her lips and crossed her arms.

Grace would hardly fail to understand her body language. "I see you've…noticed."

"I dare say I have," Xiao Yan muttered.

"To be honest, Xiao Yan, I was raised overseas since I was nine; I am no longer a Chinese citizen," Grace said, unfazed at the displeasure in Xiao Yan's voice. "So the finer points of your relationship with the prince are fuzzy to me. Chan Yu from HR who interviewed you with me only mentioned – more like gossiped – the details to me after your interview. I will say, I know shockingly little about the Chinese imperial family, but having grown up in England, I have something to compare to. It would have been something like interviewing Kate Middleton for a job once upon a time."

Xiao Yan's lips were pressed even more firmly together in a thin line but she stayed silent. Grace did ask her to wait until everything had been said.

"The truth is, Xiao Yan, in our line of work, where we strive to draw attention to the lives of the less fortunate, and we rely mainly on the awareness of others, dropping names is not a bad thing, it is a necessary thing. So yes, at the point of offering you the job, I did it because I realised that your name, and its connection to the imperial family, would bring recognition to Lumos, and open doors for us to co-operate with other organisations in the country. So far, I will not apologise for this tactical move, though I do apologise if it made you feel like you were not appreciated or respected for you who you are independent of the prince."

"I admit, I couldn't help feeling that sometimes."

"The truth is, Xiao Yan, you have proved yourself an invaluable part of the team. You're passionate and resourceful and hard-working, everything that is needed in this job. You might have gotten this job because of the prince, but you are definitely staying because of you. How you threw yourself
into rescuing the gala from burning to ashes proved how capable you are."

Xiao Yan had to admit she felt a lot more appeased by this praise, but also rather squirmish. However, she also managed to relax, saying sincerely, "Thank you, but I had help."

"Of course you did, but you took charge of the whole thing, even when it was really still Daniel's job to do so. There is also, of course, the matter of the Crown Prince's attendance, which I need scarcely tell you how valuable that was."

"That's not really me," Xiao Yan protested.

"Is it not? I would beg to differ. I imagine the Crown Prince probably changed his schedule to attend because of you. Also, while we haven't pounded out the specifics yet, I bet he also donated a small fortune that raised our proceeds to far beyond anything we could have expected."

Xiao Yan shifted uncomfortably in her seat, unsure how to answer that. However, Grace didn't need her to answer, because she went on. "That just proves my comment about name-dropping being necessary, Xiao Yan. Having said that, you must realise that when I praise you for your work with the gala, I am not talking about the Crown Prince's presence. That whole event could have been cancelled, or worse, it could have gone ahead in a much too small location to the ire and dissatisfaction of every guest attending. Both scenarios would have put very dark marks on our reputation, which I don't need to tell you we can't afford, being so young as we are. But you threw yourself into finding a new location and worked around the clock for two weeks to make sure that the transition is carried out smoothly. I know everyone else chipped in, and it drove practically everyone around the bend, but no one more than you. But you didn't complain."

Grace paused, and Xiao Yan knew she needed an answer now. So she said, "Thank you. But honestly, I just saw it was something that needed to be done. It wasn't like we could go with the old venue or cancel the event altogether."

"Yes, I know," Grace said. "Without your determination, I am sure many more people would have been in tears before the night was over. So, well done."

Xiao Yan smiled. "Thank you."

There was a small pause. Then, Grace added, "Also, I am offering you a promotion."

Xiao Yan's eyes widened in shock. "A…promotion?"

"Yes. Daniel's job, to be precise."

"You can't be serious!" Xiao Yan exclaimed, straightening in her seat.

"Indeed I am," Grace said. "You are young, and in many ways, you are still inexperienced. But after you handled the gala, I think with guidance and time, you will gather the needed experience for yourself. I don't see any reason you couldn't carry out the tasks Daniel has been doing."

"Oh. Wow."

For a long moment, that was all Xiao Yan could say before she found herself speechless. Grace didn't press her to speak, and just waited.

"I – I don't know what to say," Xiao Yan added, her mind still reeling with the offer. "I really didn't expect this."
"Our office here in Beijing is very new, Xiao Yan," Grace said, "and we need people with the drive and passion that you have to build it up. This whole office is also learning on the job as it is, and I think you are capable of this. So what do you think?"

What did she think? Was there any need to really think, when her boss had put things like that?

"Thank you!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Thank you very much! I would be glad to accept the job."

Grace smiled and held out her hand. "Then it's settled."

Xiao Yan grinned and shook it.

Chapter End Notes

You know how they say write what you know? This is that. 90% of the stuff I write about Xiao Yan's job comes from real life.

I could not make up that crisis even if I tried. It really happened at my work, except that we planned a 300-guests function and ended up with 600 and one week to change venues. It was not fun. If you can believe it, I actually toned down what a nightmare that was in this chapter.

Sometimes I wonder if I actually put more thoughts into Xiao Yan's career path than my own.
2014, December - 2015, February

Chapter Notes

Distance, timing, breakdown, fighting
Silence, this train runs off its tracks
Kiss me, try to fix it, could you just try to listen?
Hang up, give up, for the life of us we can't get back

A beautiful magic love there
What a sad beautiful tragic, beautiful tragic, beautiful

— Sad Beautiful Tragic, Taylor Swift

2014

December

Xiao Yan was entering her office building on a Monday morning when she heard footsteps behind her. She twisted her neck to look and saw that a man had entered the building behind her. She didn't pay him much mind, even when he stepped into the lift with her and didn't choose any other floor after she had pressed the '11' button. She just thought he might be working in one of the other offices on the same floor.

However, she couldn't help feeling the odd prickling at the back of her neck when she stepped out of the lift and headed towards her office and could still hear the man's footsteps behind her.

Xiao Yan stopped abruptly and whirled around, looking up at him suspiciously. "Can I help you?"

The man raised his eyebrows at her. It annoyed her that he looked mildly amused rather than bothered by her admittedly confrontational tone.

"You work here?" he asked, unperturbed, gesturing the office door behind her.

"Well, if you do," he said patiently, "then we will be colleagues. I am also working at Lumos, starting today. I am the short term M&E consultant."

"What M&E consultant?" she demanded. "I haven't heard of any M&E consultant starting today. Look, if you think you could just sneak in and dig up some scoop – "

The elevator made a 'ding' sound in the middle of Xiao Yan's speech, causing them both to turn to look at it. From the elevator, Grace emerged and her face brightened with recognition upon seeing the strange man.

"Ah, Fang Yan!" she said, smiling, holding out her hand. "You have arrived. Why are you standing out here? Come in, come in."

Xiao Yan looked from her boss to the stranger, her cheeks suddenly warming up as Grace's words
seemed to confirm the man's claim. How did she not know about this?

"I see you've met Xiao Yan," Grace said.

"In a manner of speaking," the man, Fang Yan, said. The smile on the corner of his lips has turned positively mischievous.

"Sorry," Xiao Yan said, embarrassed, "I didn't know. I'm Xia Xiao Yan."

"And I am Fang Yan," he said. She was thankful that he did not take offense to her earlier accusations. "As I mentioned, I am the Monitoring and Evaluation consultant."

"Nice to meet you," Xiao Yan said, before turning to Grace. "I don't think you mentioned that Mr Fang was coming in."

"I did, at the meeting…" Grace started, and then realisation seemed to dawn on her. "Of course, you were on leave."

Well, that certainly cleared up some confusion.

Then again, now that Xiao Yan thought about it, considering how different sections of their office were now in the throes of developing operational strategy and plans for the next five years, there had been mentions of having a short term M&E consultant to contribute to the more technical aspects of strategy development. She must have forgotten the plans amid all the event planning stress.

As the three of them walked into the office, Fang Yan said, "Please, none of this Mr Fang. Call me Xiao Jian. That's what everyone calls me."

"All right," Grace said, smiling. "Xiao Jian, I think the only desk free is this one." She indicated a cubical directly across the room from Xiao Yan's. "I'll leave you to get settled. Please see me in my office when you're ready and we can discuss how you could begin."

"Thank you," Xiao Jian said, setting his briefcase down on the desk indicated.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke. It was early enough in the day and as far as Xiao Yan could see, no one was in yet except the three of them and the receptionist. Xiao Yan only knew she was in because her bag was on her chair and the morning mail was already on Xiao Yan's desk, but the woman herself was nowhere in sight. Xiao Yan bustled around her desk, turning on her computer and putting the mail to one side.

"Scuse me," Xiao Jian said.

Xiao Yan looked up to see him leaning against the partition of her cubicle. "Yes?"

"I completely didn't think about the fact that power outlets are different over here, so I can't plug in my laptop yet. Does the office have international power adapters?"

"Oh yeah," Xiao Yan said, "there are some in the stationery cupboard. Top shelf, I think, over there."

He gave her a smile. "Thanks so much!"

Xiao Yan couldn't help smiling back. "After you are settled, I should probably show you to the pantry," she said. "You can get tea or coffee there."

"That would be great, thanks."
Xiao Yan waited a couple of minutes before picking up her mug and approaching Xiao Jian.

"Ready?"

"Sure."

As she led the way into the pantry, Xiao Yan said, "I'm sorry about earlier, I don't know what I was thinking."

Xiao Jian laughed. "Don't worry about it. It was funny."

Xiao Yan smiled sheepishly, before starting to point out to him the coffee and tea, before filling the electric kettle at the sink and switching it on.

"Does everyone have lunch here?" Xiao Jian asked, indicating the fridge and microwave.

"No, just some of us," Xiao Yan said. "I do, occasionally when I have left-overs or something. But yeah, there's the fridge if you want to bring lunch and heat it up later."

As they waited for the kettle to boil, people were starting to come into the office, and dropping into the pantry to eat their breakfasts or seek out tea and coffee. Xiao Jian introduced himself and immediately became the centre of attention.

Men were rare in their office; there was something about the work that attracted only women. Aside from Daniel who had resigned, there were only two other men in the office, stereotypically the IT guy and the one other man who worked in communications. Therefore, Xiao Jian's arrival could hardly fail to be a point of interest. For his part, Xiao Jian seemed unbothered by the excess of attention directed his way and seemed in his elements as he effortlessly charmed them all. Xiao Yan only chuckled to herself before pouring hot water over the chrysanthemum teabag in her mug and making her way back to her desk.

Ten minutes later, Ming Yue and Cai Xia, who had been hired to replace Xiao Yan herself when she moved to take Daniel's position, crowded around her desk.

"Have you met the new consultant?" Ming Yue asked, looking starry-eyed and pink-cheeked.

Xiao Yan laughed. "Yeah, I have."

"Isn't he good looking?"

"I guess, yeah," Xiao Yan said with a smile.

"I think he looks a bit like Huang Xiao Ming," Cai Xia said.

Xiao Yan glanced to where Xiao Jian was standing across the room, talking to Chan Yu from HR. "He does, actually. A little bit."

"I wonder if anyone has managed to ask if he's single," Ming Yue said.

"Well, he's not wearing a ring," Xiao Yan pointed out.

"That doesn't mean anything, though," Cai Xia said. To Ming Yue, she added, "And don't you have a boyfriend?"

Ming Yue shrugged. "I'm just curious. I'm not going to try anything."
Xiao Yan laughed and shooed them away from her desk. "Oh I'm sure someone will find out soon enough and you'll hear it in the rumour mill. Now can you please just go and call those schools in Inner Mongolia like I asked you to yesterday?"

Both Ming Yue and Cai Xia chuckled too and began to wander away.

"Of course, boss."

"Sure, boss."

An hour later, Grace called a meeting of all the staff involved in writing the various strategies that would make up the bulk of their annual plan for the new year, as well as their projected plan for the four years after that. Xiao Jian was introduced to the group and the scope of his work was outlined.

"I've already sent all your strategy drafts to Xiao Jian, so he is already familiar with their contents," Grace said. "Xiao Jian, I think the plan is that you will meet each person individually to discuss the M&E side of each strategy?"

"Yes," he replied. Then, addressing the rest of the room, he said, "Your strategy documents basically have two functions: lay out the strategic objective of each of your individual line of operation, and lay out your activities for the next few years. My job is to make sure that the activities you plan to do will actually serve to achieving the objectives, and ensure that we put in place ways to measure that, so that at the end of the year, or at the end of five years, when it comes to reviewing your strategies, you have actual evidence to show that you have actually done what you say you would do."

As luck would have it, Xiao Yan ended up being the first to sit down with Xiao Jian.

"Your strategy is the – ?" Xiao Jian asked from across the meeting room table from her.

"The Linkages and Partnership Engagement one," she replied.

"Right." After a few taps on his laptop, he seemed to have drawn up the half-finished draft of her strategy. "So, you're the first person I'm speaking with. I just want to make sure we both understand each other. I'm not here to judge or rate any of your strategy and plan in any way, nor will I be telling you what you should do. The point of me is to make sure you look good and get the credit for all the things you actually implement. That's all. So let's talk about what you have here. First, do you have anything you want to raise with me?"

"Yeah, it's more or less in shape," Xiao Yan said, "I'm just not sure about how to approach the last two sections on M&E and Risk Management, which I'm guessing is what you're here for."

"To be honest, as far as I'm concerned, most of the background you have here is not of much interest to me." He shot her a smile to show that there was no offence meant in that statement. "Yes, in terms of the strategy, you have to include it all. But for me, what I'm interested in is what you say you want to do, and what you actually do. The risks and how to manage them will come out of our conversations about these things. Often when you set out a strategy, there is a trap of saying the objectives are such and such, but what you actually set down as activities to be implemented don't actually deliver on those objectives, even if on the superficial level it seems like they do, or you can't prove that they do. What I will do is help you make sure that the two are aligned and identify indicators to capture the outcomes. Let's look first at your section 3, Objectives. You've set out the objectives as actions, which is fine in terms of getting your message across, but for M&E purposes, it would be more useful for you to present them as what you actually want to achieve…"

They talked for over an hour about her work, at the end of which discussion Xiao Jian assured her..."
that it was not too long a conversation at all.

"These are meant to be quite substantial meetings," Xiao Jian said, when theirs was beginning to wind down. "I'm speaking to Ming Zhu on the Promotions and Communications strategy next, and I expect that is going to take even longer to hammer out than your one."

"Thanks, Xiao Jian," she said with a smile. Then, she tilted her head curiously. "What does it mean, your name?"

"Apparently, as a child, I had this toy sword and flute that I would not part with, and that's why my adoptive parents started calling me that. I guess it just stuck," he said with a chuckle.

She was surprised. "You are adopted?"

"Yes, my parents died in a traffic accident when I was four. I was taken to an orphanage for a while, and I think the toy sword and flute were things my parents bought me, which was why I refused to let go of them. After a while, friends of my parents found me and adopted me."

"Oh." There was a pause, and she sighed. Then, with a small rueful smile, she added, "Well, you're the lucky one, really."

He looked at her questioning. "Why do I sense that there's so much meaning loaded in that sigh?"

"There is," she said. There was something about the sympathy in Xiao Jian's eyes, or maybe it was the knowledge that he might understand this more than anyone she knew, Xiao Yan began telling him a little about how she grew up in an orphanage herself.

"Which orphanage is this?" he asked, and when she gave him the name, he frowned. "They never figured out how you got there?"

"No," Xiao Yan answered, shaking her head. "After all these years, I doubt I will ever know."

Xiao Jian didn't say anything, but just looked pensive for a long while.

"To be honest, after I start working here, I realised that I was fortunate, still," she said, more to herself than to him. "I mean, my time at the orphanage was never quite happy, but I don't think I suffered any lasting damage from it."

"I don't suppose I need to ask whether that contributed to your motivations to seek out this job," Xiao Jian said.

Xiao Yan smiled wanly. "Not at all. When I first found out about Lumos and knew it was opening a branch here, I knew I had to get involved. What about you?"

"Well, as a consultant, I usually work several clients at once. Grace is the friend of a friend, who first alerted me to this job. Of course, I was drawn to the mission of Lumos, too, but I must say I also liked the fact that this job gives me a chance to come back to China."

"Come back?"

"Oh yes, my adoptive parents migrated to the US when I was six. I have rarely been back since."

"Everything must have changed since."

Xiao Jian laughed. "Oh, of course. I just arrived on Friday, so I haven't been able to get to know Beijing yet. But seeing how we're keeping both the British and Chinese holiday calendars, I'm
intending to use the couple of days we have off for Christmas to explore a bit."

Xiao Yan grinned at him. "Well, I've lived here my whole life, so if you want some pointers about how to get around or something, let me know."

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2015

January

"Okay, next, Rong Qin Wang will be visiting our office in two weeks' time."

The quietness of the meeting room was suddenly broken as many whispered conversations broke out. Xiao Yan looked up abruptly from her notes and stared at Grace, unable to believe what she was hearing. She also could not fail to notice how everyone's eyes seemed to have turned to her and could only try to ignore the stares as best as she could.

"All right, settle down," Grace said, tapping her pen on the table. "The visit is to prepare for the prince's visit to the UK in March. I've been told that his itinerary in London includes a visit to Lumos UK to meet with our president, J. K. Rowling."

"So unfair," Xiao Yan muttered under her breath to herself.

"The purpose of visiting our office before his trip is to allow the prince to learn more about the work we've been doing here for Lumos in China," Grace continued to speak as if she didn't notice any of the hushed conversations that still had yet to cease. "We will have a brief reception here for him to meet everyone and then he will attend a meeting with me and line managers. Any question so far?"

There were still whispers, but no one posed any question out loud. Meanwhile, Xiao Yan abandoned her notes and tried to sink as low as possible into her seat.

"Xiao Yan!" Grace called.

She startled and hastily sat up straight, hoping her face didn't look as red as it felt. "Yes?"

"You will need to contact the Imperial Household Department to work out the logistic arrangements of the visit, and to learn about anything we need to do to prepare, on our end. I have the contact details of the person in charge of this. I'll forward it to you. Please follow up with them."

"Okay. Sure," Xiao Yan said as nonchalantly as she could muster. Of course, she knew that the arrangements for the visit naturally fell under her job descriptions; at the same time, she couldn't help feeling a tiny bit targeted in what must be someone's idea of a gigantic joke being played on her.

"For now, that's all everyone needs to know about this visit," Grace said. "Updates will come later when we have more details. If no one else has any other business, we can end the meeting here."

As Xiao Yan made her way out of the meeting room, she wasn't quite sure whether she should be glad that everyone apparently felt too inhibited to try and talk to her about Yong Qi. On the one hand, it meant she wasn't forced into uncomfortable conversations. On the other, she knew everyone would be talking about her when she wasn't in earshot.

Evidently, only Xiao Jian had no idea about the significance of the prince's visit in relations to her, because he asked her innocently when they had lunch together later, "Why was everyone giving you weird looks earlier in the meeting room?"
Xiao Yan looked at him and found it amazing that somehow, during the six weeks he had been here, he managed to steer clear of any office gossip about her. Her past relationship with Yong Qi remained the first thing anyone knew about her upon entering the office, and as far as many of her colleagues were concerned, it was still the most interesting thing about her. Though she supposed she should be grateful that in the few times people have brought the subject up with her, they weren't being malicious, just nosy.

Perhaps no one had told Xiao Jian because they all assumed that he, like them, automatically knew. Xiao Yan was only more than happy to prolong that small blessing.

In response to his question, she only said vaguely, "Well, my best friend is his sister."

"Whose sister?" Xiao Jian asked. "The prince?"

"Hmmmm."

"So you know him?"

"You can say that," Xiao Yan said.

"What did Grace mean when she talked about preparations? How much preparing could here be for a meeting, and why do we need to do anything about it weeks in advance?"

Xiao Yan laughed. "You have no idea how complicated a visit by a member of the imperial family is, do you?"

"No," Xiao Jian answered blithely. "But then, you know, I'm American."

"Yes, exactly."

"So what would preparations consist of?"

"I'm not sure," Xiao Yan said. "I've never done this before, not from this end. But I imagine they'd want our staff list to run background checks and members of the Imperial Security Service will come and case out the whole building."

"All that for a meeting that's probably going to take at most two hours," Xiao Jian said, shaking his head.

"Oh, come on, as if the US President doesn't go around with just as much security," Xiao Yan said.

"Yeah, but he's elected," Xiao Jian pointed out. "He didn't come by it all in a random lucky draw of genetics."

Xiao Yan laughed. "Well, I guess it's as you said, you're American. You wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?"

"The concept of monarchy."

He raised a sceptical eyebrow at her. "You support it then?"

"I'm…not against it," she said slowly. It was the least complicated answer she could give under the circumstances.

Xiao Jian stared at her in disbelief. "You're not," he repeated, sounding like he didn't believe her at
"Did you think I was?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I just felt like...you seem like you would be against it. I mean, considering how you grew up. How do you come from that and support a bunch of people who would live their entire lives in luxury and never have to work for anything, ever?"

She laughed. "You forget, one of them is my best friend." She paused and added, "Though, full disclosure, when we became friends, she wasn't one of them yet."

"Oh, is she the long lost princess or whatever?" he asked.

"I'm surprised you know about that."

"I think the whole world know about that. America might have rebelled against kings and queens but paradoxically they are still obsessed with gossip about them. Usually they're obsessed about the British ones, but that was a big story."

"Of course," Xiao Yan said dryly.

"So do you just support them for the sake of your friend, or what?" Xiao Jian asked.

She shrugged, but he just continued to look at her challengingly. In the end, she sighed and gave in.

"My...stance on them is complicated," she said. "The fact is, they don't run the country in terms of policies anymore, but neither are they simply useless decorations. They have a purpose in being the unifying factor giving this country a tie to its thousands of years of history. It seems trivial but sometimes that's desperately needed. And they take that role seriously and work hard at it, though it may seem from the outside to be the opposite. Are they utterly privileged in a really unfair way because they just happen to be born royal? Yes, of course, but it's not as if any of them could help that. Privilege exists everywhere. There will always be those people who are simply just born into rich families or positions where things are handed to them on a plate and they're able to coast by on family lineage. I think it's what you do with the things on that plate that is what matters."

"Yeah, but rich people don't get paid from a country's taxes."

"They don't generate billions in tourism revenue, either," Xiao Yan said. "I'm not saying it's a perfect system. There is no perfect system. I just feel like by now, the question to ask isn't necessarily 'what's the point of the monarchy?' but more like 'is a revolution worth it?' If instead of a Prime Minister, we have a President, what exactly, fundamentally, would change about how the country is governed and run? Would it really help take away any of the problems? In the past, kings and emperors are overthrown because they lose the so-called Mandate of Heaven by being tyrants. But tyrannous emperors literally cannot exist in this day and age. A constitutional monarch simply doesn't have that kind of power. Removing them really does nothing except throw the order of things into chaos. All those arguments about how they represent lack of equality, class differences and privilege – that's still going to exist whether there's an emperor or not."

"So basically, you think because it's not broken, don't fix it?" Xiao Jian asked.

Xiao Yan shrugged. "I suppose, yes. I mean, at least the emperor cares about his people equally and to him, one person is the same as the next. There is no motivation for him to differentiate between them. Whereas with an elected person, you think because you voted for him, he's supposed to care about you, but that's not even necessarily always the case, never mind the person who didn't vote for him."
Xiao Jian looked thoughtful as he considered her arguments. Meanwhile, Xiao Yan tried to quench how her insides were squirming, alerting her to the fact that she was, basically, unironically using many of Yong Qi’s own arguments, ones which she had been thoroughly sceptical of when she first heard them.

She added, "I admit that I have been…persuaded over the years to see things more from their perspective, but to be honest, it's hard to avoid that when you stop seeing them as a concept and consider them as people."

"I'm not saying I'm sold," Xiao Jian said, "but then I suppose I have to remind myself that it doesn't even affect me anymore so it really is none of my business."

"I don't know, you were born Chinese…"

"But I'm not anymore. Not…legally, in any case. I mean, I still feel like I'm Chinese inside, but in reality I'm not. It's odd to think about sometimes."

Xiao Yan smiled. "I'm not sure that it's odd at all."

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February

The morning of the visit, everyone was flying around the office making sure every single thing was straightened within a millimetre of its life. It was enough to give Xiao Yan a headache. She had been determined to not work her nerves up about the whole thing, but it seemed like everyone else was already doing that for her. Of course, she had joined in tidying up the office and making sure there were no stray files lying around or chairs out of place, but she thought the receptionist's attempt to measure and make sure the flower vase on her desk was at perfect right angle with the telephone was a little obsessive.

Behind Xiao Yan, Ming Yue was flicking through a stack of stapled paper.

"What are you reading so frantically?" she asked.


Xiao Yan laughed. She couldn't help but feel that perhaps the ebook on protocols and etiquettes the Imperial Household Department had emailed their entire office was doing more harm than good.

"Ming Yue, relax. It's going to be fine. There's nothing to be nervous about."

"Easy for you to say," Ming Yue said, swivelling her chair around to look at Xiao Yan. "I haven't totally memorised this yet."

"Ming Yue, you don't have to memorise that whole manual."

"The email said it was recommended that we take note of it!"

"Yes, meaning read through it," Xiao Yan said patiently. "You don't have to memorise everything, especially when about eighty percent of the things on there doesn't even apply to this visit."

"But some of it applies, doesn't it? And so we do have to remember it! Why is everything so specific anyway? I mean, like, everything from how low you're supposed to curtsy and how long to hold it–"
"Ming Yue, don't worry about those kinds of details," Xiao Yan insisted. "Trust me, he's not going to care if your curtsy is two second too short or something. No one actually times it. Besides, as long as you don't intend to be rude, then normal, common politeness is more acceptable than imperfectly remembered etiquettes. Actually this is a business visit, I don't think you even have to curtsy at all. This isn't some televised state function, for Heaven's sake!"

Ming Yue looked up at her with uncertain wide eyes. "Are you sure?"

Xiao Yan scoffed. "I'm not curtsying to him."

"Xiao Yan, come downstairs with me," Grace said as she left her office.

Xiao Yan looked at her watch and knew that at this time, Grace could only be making her way down to the lobby to prepare to greet Yong Qi, so though she did follow, it was very reluctantly.

"You don't need me to greet him, do you?" she asked in the lift.

"Well, no," Grace said, "though would you rather meet him for the first time up there with the whole office looking in?"

Xiao Yan gave a curt laugh. "Probably not," she admitted. She glanced over and saw that Grace was giving her a pensive look. "Don't worry," she said soothingly. "I'll be perfectly professional. Besides, it isn't like this is the first time I've spoken to him since we broke up or anything. Even if it were, this is for work. Trust me, if there's anyone who knows how to not let personal things get in the way of that, it's their lot."

"Lack of professionalism was not what I was worried about," Grace said, "but it's reassuring to hear you say that, nonetheless."

They reached the ground floor and stepped together into the lobby. Looking at the time, Xiao Yan knew it was fifteen more minutes before Yong Qi was scheduled to arrive, but of course it was necessary for them to be waiting when he did.

Despite what she said to Grace, this was strange. Between both their schedules, she and Yong Qi had not met face to face since he rescued her from her ill-fated date, and the only interactions they had in the meantime was through the occasional texts, the subject of which was almost always Zi Wei. Even if they had seen each other recently, Xiao Yan had never dealt with Yong Qi in this official capacity. She had never been in the position where she was actually, for real, expected to treat him as a prince and offer all the due obeisance.

Before any sign of Yong Qi showed up, Grace and Xiao Yan caught sight of someone else coming into the building from outside through the revolving door. Xiao Jian approached them and spoke as soon as they were near enough to be heard, "What are the two of you doing down here?"

Amid all the excitement in the office, Xiao Yan had almost forgotten that Xiao Jian was returning from a business trip to Inner Mongolia that day.

"We are waiting for Rong Qin Wang, of course," Grace said. "Did you forget his visit was today?"

"No, I didn't," Xiao Jian said, "I just didn't realise you needed to be waiting to greet him like this. Where's the red carpet then?"

Xiao Yan laughed as she imagined what Yong Qi's reaction might be if they rolled out the red carpet for something as simple as this visit.
Grace ignored both Xiao Jian's attempt at a joke and Xiao Yan laughing at it. "It is only proper that we wait for him here and then see him up to the office, Xiao Jian. Maybe you should wait with us as well."

"Do you need me?" Xiao Jian asked. "I mean, I just got off a plane. I'm not sure I'm presentable."

"You look fine," Grace reassured him. "Stay. He should be arriving any minute."

"Part of his security team is already here," Xiao Yan said.

"How do you know that?" Xiao Jian asked, looking around for signs that could have alerted her to this.

She nodded at the glass door. "The black car across the street. It just pulled up. That's the security car. It means he'll follow along soon."

Xiao Jian asked, intrigued, "How do you know that?"

Xiao Yan could feel Grace's eyes on her, but she avoided her boss's gaze. To Xiao Jian, she answered carefully, "I told you, his sister is my best friend."

If there was still one person in the office who managed to remain blissfully unaware of her past with Yong Qi, she would rather keep it that way. It had been liberating to be around Xiao Jian, especially when in the last fortnight, many people in the office seemed to have forgotten that they have come to know her as Xiao Yan, and reverted back to seeing her as 'that girl who dated the prince' again. It wasn't that they said anything to the effect. She could just tell in the subtle changes in the way they looked at her and spoke to her.

Some five minutes later, another black car pulled up to the curb of their building. From the front passenger's seat, an agent in black got out of the car and opened the door of the back seat.

Yong Qi stepped out of the car and buttoned his suit jacket as he made his way through the revolving door and into the lobby.

Damn, she'd forgotten how good he looked in a suit.

As he approached, her nervousness couldn't help but mount. Her mouth felt dry and she clenched her hands together to calm herself.

Even then, her heart pounded in her chest as he reached Grace and they shook hands before exchanging words. Xiao Yan had told Ming Yue that she was not curtsying to him, and she didn't intend to, especially when Grace did not either, but she also hadn't really considered how she would greet him. A handshake seemed obvious under the circumstances but strangely out of place for the two of them. They could not just pretend they didn't know each other.

Perhaps she should not have worried so much. When he turned to her, Yong Qi smiled and did hold his hand out, but not for a handshake. Instead, he took both her of hands and gave them a friendly squeeze.

"Hi," she said with an overly sweet smile, which made him smile back with genuine amusement.

"Xiao Yan. How are you?"

"Furious that you get to meet J. K. Rowling," she replied without really thinking about it. On either sides of her, she could practically feel her colleagues' raised eyebrows though she thought the
reasons behind each were quite different.

Still, Yong Qi laughed. "I'll get you an autograph," he said, patting her hand.

She grinned. "I'll hold you to that."

"Of course," he said, smiling, before turning to Xiao Jian. Xiao Yan was too happy to step back to let Grace do the introductions.

After a few brief words, they made their way to the lift to go up to the Lumos office.

Xiao Yan felt, the initial meeting over, the rest of the visit probably would pass without anything of note. After all, now she was free to let Grace steer the progress of the visit and make all the other introductions with everyone in their office. Xiao Yan, meanwhile, tried to sink into the backdrop, or at least not draw attention to herself.

There were certainly a lot of smiles and occasional giggles as Yong Qi was introduced to her (mainly female) colleagues, which Xiao Yan watched with an odd mixture of amusement and prickling annoyance.

Once the introductions and reception was over, and they adjourned to the meeting room, the territory became easier to navigate. At least here, there was an agenda of things to talk about. It wasn't that she felt uncomfortable with his presence before. No, if anything, it was the knowledge that everyone around her expected her to feel uncomfortable made it uncomfortable. Xiao Yan only began to feel less on edge when they started talking business.

"We have implemented so far a special transport system for children, especially children with disability, in the Great Plains to be able to attend school in town but also are cared for by their families," Grace told Yong Qi about Lumos' efforts in Inner Mongolia. "In the long term, we have plans to build a special school that will allow children from these remote regions to access education more easily."

"What are your strategies towards keeping such endeavour sustainable?" Yong Qi asked. "I imagine it would take more than just efforts from Lumos to keep such a school in the long term."

"Yes, of course," Grace answered. "The idea is that we have to get the officials of the autonomous region involved from the beginning, and what Lumos would do is to give the project a kick start. We would of course ensure that they are given the resources and expertise to keep going, but in the long term, the goal is that the region is able to sustain the school on its own."

"What are some of the ways you are planning to ensure that the regions have what they need? Of course I understand that there are many ways to ensure continued resource, but I find your point about expertise interesting. It would be beneficial, I am sure, if certain human resource development plans were put in place in the regions?"

"On the expertise side, we are currently working with certain organisations to provide scholarships to those currently working in child education in the area. The scholarship will, as you recognise, contribute to HRD and the goal is that the recipients would come back and contribute what they've learnt to the area…"

The meeting continued and eventually, Xiao Yan found herself completely relaxed as everyone focused on the discussion on the table. Yong Qi listened, and was alert and attentive. He was good at listening because it was what his position demanded, but Xiao Yan knew it was also because he had just as much reason as she did to care about the subject at hand. After all, as fortunate as he was to
have been born into his position, he had also suffered loss. Xiao Yan knew that he saw clearly the contrast between everything he had always had, and what children who suffered similar losses in circumstances so vastly different from his never had. His empathy shined throughout the meeting; Xiao Yan thought even Xiao Jian’s initial obvious hesitations and wariness upon meeting Yong Qi was mellowed somewhat by the end of the visit by it.

As he prepared to leave, and the office gathered to say goodbye, Yong Qi turned to face them all and spoke.

"I would really like to say a few words before I go. Rest assured, this is not going to a long formal speech; if anything, Mr Shun, my Private Secretary here, is probably already wondering why I'm going off his meticulously planned schedule –"

His audience laughed, and the secretary in question only smiled slightly before giving Yong Qi a gesture with his hand to indicate that he did not mind the impromptu speech.

"First of all, I've already expressed my thanks to Ms Teng in the meeting room for receiving me today, but I would like to extend that thank to every one of you. It was my great pleasure to be able to be here today and learn more about the work Lumos is carrying out in various remote regions of our country. The things I've learnt today will not only undoubtedly help me as I meet your counterparts in the UK during my tour of Europe next month, but have also humbled me in showing me the never ending needs of underprivileged children in this country. I lost my own mother before I knew what it was like to have her in my life, and I am more cognizant now than ever that it is a loss that defines one for life. It is a loss shared by many of these children whom you are now helping, who never had any of the support or advantages that I have been blessed with in my life. I thank you for all the work you've done, and I sincerely hope that I will, with the help of the Empress Xiao Xian Foundation founded in my mother's name, have the opportunity to work with all of you again soon in a broader capacity than today. Thank you again for having me and I hope you all have a wonderful Spring Festival with family and friends; all the best wishes for the new year."

There was applause and Yong Qi went around to shake hands with everyone. When he came to her, he only gave her hand a warm squeeze and a smile, but fifteen minutes after he departed, she received a text.

*I meant everything I said earlier, but to you, I have to say it again. Today has been very eye-opening and I can't express how proud I am of you and what you're doing, Xiao Yan.*

She found herself sitting at her desk, staring at the text on her phone with a great smile on her face. The message was short and so simple, but she understood that there was so much more meaning under the words.

The visit hadn't been half as bad as she could have imagined it. On the contrary, Xiao Yan had been pleased to see Yong Qi getting to know the work she was taking part in and the difference she was helping create. For most of her life, she had been told that her life was destined to go a certain path, and it was implied that she didn't deserve more. She had refused to settle for such belittling implications, so now of course there was no way she would allow numerous other children like her to be trapped in the same dead-end. Not only were they not as blessed as he was, not all would ever be as lucky as she had been, either, somehow managing to stumble out of the darkness. Many, she knew, would never be given the strength to see beyond the murky road drawn for them. She knew that Yong Qi understood that, as well as why she needed to be where she was right now.

In many ways, meeting Yong Qi and allowing him into her life had convinced her, more strongly than anything else ever managed, that anything and everything was possible in life, and that bleak the past might have been, there was light at the end of it all. The children she worked with now might
never meet a prince or princess of their own, but what did that matter? That belief that there was light, that there was hope in the world was one Xiao Yan was desperate to spread to them all, especially when she understood on such a personal level how little reason they would have had to hope during the course of their short lives so far.

Xiao Yan told Yong Qi when they parted that she needed time to figure out what she wanted, where she was meant to be and all the things that were important to her, away from him. Now, she was beginning to find everything she set out to find, see all the things she was so unclear on when her vision was blocked by the expectations of being with him. Having found them and cleared her view, she was sure that she would never lose sight again. However, until today, until seeing his message on her phone, she had not realised just how very much she wanted to share her discoveries with him, to know that he was glad for her too.

She wanted to type back a very long reply: Thank you for understanding. Thank you for supporting me. Thank you for making me believe that change is possible and that I can affect it. Thank you for showing me and making me understand how much difference someone in a position of power could make. Thank you for helping me understand that I have that power and letting me go discover it. Thank you…

In the end, that was all the she could send back in reply to him, but she had to believe that he understood everything else too.

*Thank you.*
Baby, we're the new romantics
Come on, come along with me
Heart break is the national anthem
We sing it proudly
We are too busy dancing
To get knocked off our feet
Baby, we're the new romantics
The best people in life are free

— New Romantics, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2015
February

"What are you doing for lunar new year?" Xiao Yan asked Xiao Jian one day.

"Well, I'm going to be in Beijing since I'm not quite done with things here yet," he replied. "It would be nice to be in a country that actually celebrates it, for once. But honestly, I'll probably spend a lot of the holiday cleaning house."

"Cleaning house?"

"Yes, my adopted parents still have a house here, in Beijing. My adopted father had been lending it to his aunt to live in ever since they moved to America, but she recently passed away. That's where I'm living now. Anyway, they want to sell it now that they're not going to use it anymore. They have to come over to carry out the sale, of course, but they won't get to do that until the end of the year at least. Meanwhile, though, I need to sort out the things that are currently in the house and clear it of our things. It's a big job. There's a lot of stuff stored in the store-rooms and the whole top floor that was hardly used. It's probably going to take the whole holiday."

"That doesn't sound like fun," Xiao Yan said, which he answered with a shrug and a smile. "Well, I'm going to be having New Year's Eve dinner with some friends, and you're welcome to join us."

She wasn't entirely sure what induced her to make the spontaneous invitation. It wasn't that she felt sorry for him being on his own in the holidays. Xiao Jian didn't seem like the kind of person who would wallow alone; if he wanted company, he'd find it somewhere, she was sure. But there was no doubt that she wanted to make the invitation; she was sure that Liu Qing and Liu Hong wouldn't mind.

"Your friend the princess?" Xiao Jian asked with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

Xiao Yan laughed. "No. Well, the first new year I knew her, we did spend it together, but after that, she'd been spending it with her family, of course." Xiao Yan didn't feel like divulging that barring
last year, she had been known to spend at least a meal in the holidays with Zi Wei's family too. Shrugging at Xiao Jian, she added, "And she's not a princess, you know. Not in actual name, anyway."

"She is related to royalty, though." Xiao Jian looked pensive for a moment, then added, "And I noticed that you are a lot friendlier with her brother than you'd let on."

Xiao Yan carefully hid any obvious, incriminating reaction to that obviously probing comment. "I don't 'let on' much about anything relating to them, honestly," she answered. "Of course, obviously they don't appreciate gossip, so it is partly out of respect for that, but also it's to protect myself. Being too mouthy about it can attract trouble."

He looked at her curiously and asked, "Is that why you were so unenthusiastic about Rong Qin Wang's visit to Lumos, even though later it's obvious that you know each other well enough for him to be teasing you?"

Her brows furrowed. "Was I unenthusiastic?"

"You acted like it was the worst thing that had happened to you when Grace first announced it."

Xiao Yan considered him for a long moment, unsure how to answer without giving herself away, before giving him a crooked smile. "You really don't pay attention to gossip in the office, do you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?".

"If you had, you'd probably have figured out the answer to your question," she muttered low under her breath, half hoping he wouldn't hear.

"Oh?" he asked. "Should I start paying attention now?"

"No, he's come and gone, they won't be talking about it anymore."

_Thank goodness_, she thought to herself.

Wishing to change the subject, she said, "Well, if you don't end up having plans for dinner on New Year's Eve, I meant what I said about joining me and my friends. Consider it an open invitation."

"Thanks, Xiao Yan," he replied, smiling. "I'll think about it."

Xiao Jian did end up joining Xiao Yan for dinner with Liu Qing and Liu Hong.

By the end of the meal, Xiao Yan was almost regretting inviting him. It wasn't that Xiao Jian was in any way a bad dinner companion. To the contrary, he was friendly and helpful, enthusiastic in his praising of Liu Hong's cooking, and it was obvious that he and Liu Qing got on like a house on fire. At a certain point, Xiao Yan had to glare through Liu Qing telling Xiao Jian all sorts of embarrassing thing about her, and both teasing her about it.

It would all have been fine and normal and Xiao Yan would have taken it all in her stride, if Liu Qing and Liu Hong would stop giving her such silent, questioning looks every now and then.

The looks ceased to be silent when she and Liu Qing were in the kitchen together, cleaning up. (Xiao Jian had offered, but Liu Hong had been adamant that as the guest, he was not allowed.)

"How serious is it between you?" Liu Qing asked.
"What?" she asked incredulously, looking up from putting bowls and plates into the sink. She stared at him for a moment, before bursting out laughing. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't have to sound so defensive, Xiao Yan. It's been a year since you and Yong Qi broke up. Moving on would be the logical thing to do."

"Wait, wait," Xiao Yan said, still laughing, "do you actually think that Xiao Jian and I are dating?"

Liu Qing actually looked genuinely surprised. "Aren't you?"

Xiao Yan gave him an 'are you out of your mind?' look. "No! God, no, I don't see him like that at all!"

He didn't look convinced at all. "Really?"

"Why is that so hard to believe?" she asked.

"Well...there's nothing wrong with him."

"No," Xiao Yan agreed. "But that doesn't mean I'm dating him."

"Xiao Yan, even if I do write off your friendliness as you being...well, you, I do have to say that my assumption is still supported by how very attentive he'd been to you all evening."

"Because we're friends," she insisted.

Liu Qing looked at her sceptically. "Are you sure he knows that?"

Xiao Yan spluttered. "Of course he does! He – we're not – "

"Xiao Yan, I'm just saying, you invited him to have dinner with us because you didn't want him to be alone on the night everyone else is gathered around with their families. He agreed and spent the entire night asking us stories about you. Even the most cynical of person would still come to the appropriate conclusions."

"Well, we're not dating," she insisted.

"Then I guess my next question is, why not?"

"I like him, but not like that, Liu Qing."

Liu Qing looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodding with a slightly resigned sigh. "Meaning you're still not over Yong Qi."

She bristled. "Yong Qi doesn't have anything to do with this. We didn't break up so we could date other people."

"But you have. And so has he. However briefly," he pointed out.

Xiao Yan snorted. "One horrible date with a horrible guy hardly counts, Liu Qing."

"That's my point, though. It didn't count. You never got over Yong Qi. Don't you think you should consider why neither of you managed to make it work with anyone else after you broke up?" he asked. When she stayed stubbornly silent, he added, "If it was like you said, that you didn't break up to see other people, why did you in the first place? I know you said both of you needed to do your own thing, but you could have done that and stay together."
Xiao Yan was unable to hold back a sigh. How could she begin to explain it to Liu Qing, even now, over a year later, when she still couldn't quite understand it herself? "It's not that simple, Liu Qing," she finally said.

"Isn't it?"

"No, it's not," she said. "I mean, as long as we were together, there were things that I couldn't contemplate doing because I was with him, and just that is enough for his way of life to exert its expectations and norms on me. I needed the…the freedom to figure out what life could be like without him first, before I could be sure that he is what I want."

Liu Qing didn't offer an answer to her words and for a long moment, they washed the dishes together in silence.

Then, just as Xiao Yan was rinsing the last of the bowls, he said, "Then you still love him."

She shrugged again. Liu Qing clearly didn't expect a verbal answer, because he was drying his hands on a towel and making his way out of the kitchen.

"I don't think I ever could not," she confided.

Liu Qing stopped and turned around, his eyes shining with sympathy.

"Does Yong Qi know that?" he asked gently.

"I don't know," she said not very convincingly, her voice shaking. "I guess. I hope. But I'm not sure it would matter."

Cleaning out the storage rooms in his adopted parents' house was dull, dull, dull work. Xiao Jian had to sort out the possessions of his great aunt from those left behind by his parents then decide what could conceivably be thrown away, what needed to kept until he could send a full inventory to his parents for them to decide what was to be done, and what absolutely needed to be kept and shipped to his parents in America.

There was an endless array of boxes, suitcases, bags, crates, closets and cupboards to sort out. Xiao Jian wasn't sure why he was so surprised at the amount of stuff that had accumulated. He had known for most of his life that his adopted parents were incapable of throwing things out.

There were also shelves, with books. Lots and lots and lots of books. He hoped there were libraries or some other place in Beijing who would take donated books, as he didn't think he would like to hire the ocean liner it would take the transport this many books to America.

He worked methodically, not noting anything of real interest until coming across a shelf full of old photo albums in an unused bedroom. He wasn't planning to look through them and only intended to pack them into boxes, because this clearly would be something his parents would want shipped to them, when he accidentally knocked an album to the floor. It fell open and Xiao Jian was leaning down to pick it up when a photo made him freeze.

The album had fallen open on two portraits of a young woman in her twenties. The photograph was old – a few decades old, at least – but the woman was very familiar to Xiao Jian.

Actually…now that he was staring at the photo, it occurred to him there was more than one reason he knew the woman in the photograph.
The first reason had him pulling out his phone and opening a photo that had been taken of him and Xiao Yan when he had dinner with her and Liu Qing, Liu Hong. Xiao Jian stared from the digital photo on his phone, zooming it up to Xiao Yan's face, and then looked back at the woman in the photo album.

They were not the same person, of course. But there were obvious, impossible-to-miss resemblances. They both had the same oval-shaped face and strikingly large eyes. If he put the two photos side-by-side and covered the lower halves of their faces, it would look as if the two women had the exact same eyes.

The second reason was Xiao Jian knew exactly who the woman in the photo album was. It had been years since he had looked properly at her photo, so he wasn't entirely surprised that he failed to see the resemblance between her and Xiao Yan when he first met Xiao Yan. Now, it was impossible to miss.

How was this possible?

What did it mean that Xia Xiao Yan looked almost exactly like his birth mother did before she died? If Xiao Jian had to guess, his mother in the photo was about the same age as Xiao Yan was now.

Xiao Jian found himself sitting down, cross-legged, on the floor and flipped through the photo album. There were more photos of his birth parents. He focused on the images of his mother. The more he saw, the more he looked, the clearer it became that this wasn't some superficial resemblance of a single photo. No, the similarities between his mother and Xiao Yan were very, very real. They didn't look identical, but there were enough resemblances that Xiao Jian told himself this couldn't just be a coincidence.

It would have been easier to dismiss it all, to think that this was simply one of those cases of random people resembling each other – it wasn't entirely unheard of – if Xiao Yan hadn't told him herself that she was an orphan too, and that she had no idea who her parents were.

Xiao Jian found himself gathering up the photo album and scrambling to his feet. He glanced at the time on the phone. Just after 9PM. 8AM for his parents. He sent a quick text with Xiao Yan's photo to his adopted father, before starting up his computer and logging in on Skype, waiting impatiently.

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**March**

Xiao Yan loved her job, she really did. She could just do with less report writing.

It was towards the end of the day, she had reread this one page of her report about a dozen times already and was thoroughly sick of reading her own words. It was like whatever faculty in her mind was in charge of judging whether it was bad or good had been split down the middle. She didn't know how it was possible that she could think the passage she was reading was rubbish and in absolutely need of rewriting from the beginning and that it was good enough that she didn't need to change a single word at the same time.

Xiao Yan glanced at the clock; there was another hour before she could go home, but if she tried reading the report again, she was sure she'd explode. She propped her elbow on the table, dropped her chin into her hand, and stared unseeingly at the computer screen. Obviously, it was one of those things that she would need to put aside and come back to in the morning. Hopefully a night's sleep away might lead to her own words making more sense. Right now, the words might as well be unintelligible marks on the screen, sliding right out of her mind like grains of sand through an hourglass.
At that very moment, her phone chimed with a text and lit up. Xiao Yan reached for it idly, glad for something to distract her. It turned out to be a text from Yong Qi. The words were simple enough – *Wish you could see this* – but the photo that accompanied the text took her breath away.

Yong Qi was obviously standing on the peak of a hill or a mountain when he took the photo, as the scene overlooked a valley of lush emerald, a small village nestling inside it. Dotted among the sweeping grassland and trees, so green that it made Xiao Yan's heart palpitate, were white groups of houses, and she could just make out the tower of a church. There was a small river meandering through the middle of the village, running into a beautiful bay. Its water glittered beneath a clear blue sky, against which fluffy white clouds like cotton candy floated without a care in the world. The bay was framed by green mountain ridges on either side. The few boats floating on the water put the finishing touches on the scene that seemed to have come from a dream.

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Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:07 CST
Wow, where is this?

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:11 CET
Geiranger Fjord, Norway.
I want to die here.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:12 CST
I'm sure they'd call that an international incident :)
I hope you have a better camera than your phone, because I demand more photos.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
I do. My DSLR should take better photos, but still, it's hard to describe how beautiful it really is in real life.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:21 CST
So what part of a diplomatic tour includes trips to picturesque fjords?

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:32 CET
It's a UNESCO Heritage Site.
So lots of conversations about environmental management and preservation.
Very interesting and enlightening actually.
Besides, the Norwegians are eager to show off their natural beauties.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:33 CST
Bet you're not complaining.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:39 CET
No, not at all :)

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:40 CST
Should you be texting me?
You aren't alone are you?

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:49 CET
Of course not.
That's why my replies are a bit distracted.
Kind of have to pay attention to what Haakon's saying.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:50 CST
Go back to the Crown Prince, Yong Qi.
Email me the photos later?

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:55 CET
Of course.

Xiao Yan to Yong Qi
16:55 CST
Keep warm.

Yong Qi to Xiao Yan
9:56 CET
;

Xiao Yan saved the photo Yong Qi sent from his message and emailed it to herself, so that she could look at the bigger version of it on her computer screen. She was so focused on it that she didn't realise that Xiao Jian had approached and was standing in front of her desk until he called her name,
"Sorry," he said, as she looked up a little wildly, clutching the armrest of her chair in fright.

"It's fine," she said, shaking her head to clear it. Then tucking her clasped hands under her chin, she asked, "What's up?"

Xiao Jian didn't answer immediately and made a point of glancing around the room. Everyone else seemed focus on their own computers. When he turned back to face Xiao Yan again, he looked a little apprehensive.

"I was wondering if you are free this evening," he said.

Xiao Yan momentarily stared at him, wondering why he looked so nervous. What was this remark supposed to lead to?

"Yes," she said slowly, still unsure, but finding that it was probably safer to give the truthful answer than deliberate over it until he suspected that she might be lying. "Why?"

"Would you have dinner with me?"

Maybe it was the fact that he looked uncharacteristically anxious, but Xiao Yan couldn't help but think that this wasn't just a casual request like they've been making each other over the last couple of months. There was something more he wanted from her than just company at dinner...It couldn't be like Liu Qing thought...that Xiao Jian might have more than platonic feelings for her, could it?

"Um…sure," she said, though the hesitance was obvious in her voice. He could hear it.

"If it's not convenient – " he started.

"No, no," she said, smiling to reassure him. "I'm free, really. It's just...are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," he said, trying to return her smile, but not quite managing it. Seeing her still sceptical expression, he sighed. "I do have something I want to...talk to you about, if you don't mind."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I'll tell you later," he said vaguely, before flashing her a genuine smile this time, and walking back to his desk, leaving her all the more bewildered with his strange behaviour.

"So where do you want to eat?" Xiao Yan asked about half an hour later when they flagged down a taxi.

"I thought we can just call delivery to my house," Xiao Jian said, opening the door for her. "I really do have something to...discuss with you."

She slid into the car and raised an eyebrow at him, but it didn't look like he would divulge the reason for his mysterious behaviour in the car. He only leaned forward to give the address to the driver, before staring forward, looking preoccupied.

After five minutes of silence, she nudged him with her elbow. When he turned to her, she simply gave him a wordless, questioning look.

"I'm fine," he said with a slightly forced smile. "You'll understand when I can explain. I promise."
"Okay…" she said slowly, then when it became clear that he wasn't saying anything else, she sat back in her seat, shooting another quizzical look at him before following his lead to be silent as well.

The drive passed thus for several minutes before Xiao Yan caught the driver glancing at her through the rearview mirror. The familiar feeling of discomfort built at the pit of her stomach and she could feel a hot flush on her face as it became clear that he probably recognised her. She glanced at Xiao Jian and was slightly comforted by the fact that he was distracted enough to not notice anything yet. Nevertheless, she tried to shake out her bangs so that they shadowed her eyes a little.

Before she could even express a hope to herself that the driver would stay quiet, he suddenly said, his voice ringing clear in the quiet of the car, "It's you, isn't it? You're Xia Xiao Yan?"

Xiao Yan gave him the most falsely sweet smile in her arsenal. "No, I get that a lot. I just look like her."

She could feel Xiao Jian glancing at her, distracted from whatever was on his mind. She kicked him slightly in the darkness of the back seat, hoping that he sufficiently understood the message to stay quiet.

"I don't believe you," the taxi driver said.

"What am I supposed to do about that?" Xiao Yan asked in nonchalant tone. "I'm not her."

"She really isn't," Xiao Jian suddenly spoke up. Xiao Yan thanked whatever stars that encouraged him to play along with her ruse. "This is my sister, Fang Ci."

"Oh." The driver still looked sceptical, but at that moment, they had arrived at Xiao Jian's house, so he couldn't make any other comment. While Xiao Jian kept him busy with paying the fare, Xiao Yan kept her face down and pretended to be busy on her phone. It wasn't until they were out of the taxi and it had pulled away that she could let out a breath of relief.

"What was that all about?" Xiao Jian asked.

She shrugged, trying to brush the whole thing off. "Oh, you know, I do suffer from an unfortunate sort of fame from my associations with Zi Wei. That happens occasionally."

"Really?" he asked as they approached his door and he pulled out the keys to open it.

She nodded and didn't elaborate, hoping that he got the hint to not pry. Fortunately, he did because he simply stepped back to let her in.

"Everything's sort of all over the place, I know," he said as they stepped into his entrance hall. "I'm in the middle of packing."

"It's not a problem," she said.

In the next fifteen minutes, they settled into his dining room with a pot of tea. Once they have called for food delivery, Xiao Jian said, "Just…wait here for a minute, all right? I'll go get something, and then I can tell you about what I want to talk about."

She nodded and watched him leave the room. Now that she was here, she realised the curiosity burning in her, especially when she thought about how uncharacteristically cryptic Xiao Jian had acted not just that afternoon, but all week. Still, she couldn't begin to imagine what this meeting/she didn't even know what to call it, was about.
He entered the dining room a minute later with what looked like a photo album tucked under his arm. When he reached the table and sat down next to Xiao Yan, he placed the album down but did not open it. He simply stared at Xiao Yan for a long moment, long enough that it made her feel self-conscious.

"Can you please just say something already?" she asked nervously, looking around the room, at everything that was into the strange expression on his face.

"Xiao Yan...when I...when I told the taxi driver just now that you are my sister Fang Ci, it wasn't just a name I made up off the top of my head," he said quietly.

There was something in his voice that indicated he was talking about a topic so fragile that it merited the utmost care. She turned to look at him, brows knitted, hardly daring to speculate what this might lead to. Xiao Jian was still studying her as intently as he had been a moment before, but this time, Xiao Yan met his gaze with a questioning one of her own.

"The thing is...I don't even know how to begin to talk to you about this," he said, as if admitting some long-held secret.

"What...is 'this'?" she asked tentatively.

"The truth," he said simply.

She frowned at how mysterious he still was. "The truth about what?"

"The truth is...I...had...have a younger sister," he said.

Then he stopped.

Xiao Yan's eyes narrowed and she tilted her head at him, uncomprehending.

Xiao Jian ran a hand over his face. "The thing is, I've only been told this a week ago. About my sister, that is."

She stared, even more astonished and was still no more the wiser to how any of this had anything to do with her. "What do you mean? How is that possible?"

"I've mentioned to you before that my parents died and I was raised by their friends who adopted me. There is a lot more to that story...and I need...I need to tell you about it." Her confusion must still be apparent on her face, because he added hastily, "I know you don't understand right now, but I will explain. I just need you to have all the facts, first. Just bear with me, all right?"

What else could she do in this situation but nod?

"My parents died in a car crash when I was four. My sister, Fang Ci, who was just a year old at the time, and I were in the car with them, and we survived the crash. We were taken to an orphanage. There, at first, they had a hard time identifying us because there weren't any documents that survived the crash. Eventually, of course, they were able to identify our parents, and put a name to us. However, at the time, record keeping wasn't very effective. As far as my adopted parents could figure out later, my sister and I were definitely both taken to the same orphanage at first, but for some reason, my sister was transferred to another, and by the time my adopted parents tracked me down, no one could reliably tell them where my sister was. They spent a long time trying to locate her, but it was difficult, considering how young she was. They had photos, of course, but with an infant, she might barely look like her photo a few months later. There was no trace of any child named Fang Ci anywhere that my adopted parents look."
Xiao Yan listened to this account, feeling as if Xiao Jian was speaking to her from a barrier of glass. His voice sounded far away; her mind heard his words, but her emotions were throwing her entire self into chaos. She felt like she was physically straining against the conclusion her entire being was begging to jump to...A wild, untamed part of her seemed to be screaming at her that there was only one logical reason Xiao Jian was telling her this...

And yet at the same time, she didn't dare. She didn't dare to even whisper the words...the wish...that he was talking about her...

"The thing was...my parents told me that I suffered a concussion from the crash, which, according to the doctors, caused some trauma that led to me losing certain memories. Among them must have been the fact that I have a younger sister. Honestly...I don't remember anything about her; I've been telling myself that I was four - I have vague memories of what my parents were like, or at least I know I had birth parents, so I must know I had a sister once, right? I...don't. I didn't, until my adopted parents told me, a week ago."

"Why a week ago?" Xiao Yan dared to ask, and her voice sounded breathless.

Before Xiao Jian could answer, the door bell sounded. It sounded shrill, cutting through the tension between them, and made Xiao Yan jump. She looked around in something almost like panic, while Xiao Jian simply stood up.

"That's the food," he said quietly. "I'll get it."

Xiao Yan couldn't even nod. It was like she was frozen in her seat, only able to turn her head to look at him heading towards the door. Possibilities, questions, fears and doubts seemed to overwhelm her at once, so that she felt almost suffocated from it all.

"Fang Ci," she whispered, testing the name on the tip of her tongue. Was this name hers? Was it possible? After all these years...was she finally finding out who she was?

Xiao Yan.

Xiao Jian.

Their names – neither of them real names – were so familiar. Was that not simply a coincidence? Was the universe trying to tell them something all along?

A thrill of both exhilarating, terrifying joy and pain greeted her as she finally allowed herself to hope, and consider everything Xiao Jian had told her so far, and what it all might mean.

Xiao Jian returned and set the bag of takeaway food down on the table.

"Should we eat?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think I can...Finish what you were saying. Please."

He nodded and sat back down beside her again, turning so that he faced her.

"So, a week ago," he said. "I was cleaning the house, and I came across this."

Xiao Jian reached for the album he brought in earlier, and flipped it open. There, on the page he had bookmarked, was a photo of a woman whose resemblance to Xiao Yan was so striking, she inhaled sharply.
"You see the resemblance too?" Xiao Jian asked softly.

She tore her eyes from the woman in the photo and looked up at him, her eyes wide with bewilderment and desperate hope, begging him to confirm her unspoken conjecture.

"This…was my mother," he whispered, running his finger over the edge of the photograph. "The funny thing is I've seen photos of her before. If someone gave me her photo, I'd recognise it. But I haven't looked at one for so long, I didn't even realise that you looked like her when I first met you. I didn't realise until I saw her in this photograph a week ago."

"What does this mean?" she asked, feeling like she was drowning for breath, for truth, not daring to grasp the obvious for herself.

He didn't answer her question right away, and only continued to stare, lost in thoughts, at the photo. "When I saw the photo of my mother, I had to compare it to the photos I had of you. When the resemblance was obviously more than just my imagination, I contacted my adopted parents, and that was when they told me the things that I've forgotten about my sister."

He looked up at her now, and she could see in his eyes the kind of wild, abandoned, desperate and impossible expectation she was feeling herself.

"My sister was born in 1990," he said, his voice trembling now, "and she was a year old in 1991, the very year you were found on the doorstep of the Bai Yun Orphanage where you grew up. You don't know how you got there, or where you come from. What if...what if whatever happened all those years ago somehow brought you there, where they gave you a new name, and that was why my adopted parents never managed to find you? What if that is the explanation as to why..."

He trailed off, clearly too choked up with emotions to speak. Xiao Yan, too, felt so overwhelmed that it was several shaky breaths later that she managed to croak out, "Why what?"

"Why...why ever since the first time I met you, I've felt like there is some strange connection between us...like I should know you from somewhere..."

"You felt that?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know...how. I didn't know what it meant, or even what exactly I was feeling..." He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair nervously. "I don't even know if I dare to say anything for certain, even now..."

Xiao Yan glanced down at the woman in the photo, and swallowed the painful lump of emotions in her throat. Was this her mother? Her heart whispered that it was, but after so many years of false dreams, she had learnt to not trust those voices anymore, not even now, when it seemed more likely than ever to hold some truth.

"What was her name?" she whispered, feeling as if she was struggling to breath, as the longer she looked, the more resemblances she found between herself and the woman in the photo. Everyone she met had always told her, her eyes were the most unique feature of her face, the one by which she would be recognised...and if she was to allow herself to consider that this was her mother, then Xiao Yan got her eyes from her.

"Her name was Du Xue Yin," Xiao Jian answered, watching her carefully. "And our – and Father's
name was Fang Zhi Hang."

Xiao Yan took in a shaky breath and nodded, tucking this new information carefully away, deep inside her heart.

"So um..." She looked at Xiao Jian, trying to not tremble with fear that all this might come crashing down before she could quite convince herself to truly believe in it. "What do we do? I mean, how do we...find out for sure?"

"Well, honestly, I've tried contacting Bai Yun Orphanage to ask about you, but unsurprisingly they don't exactly give out files on their past charges to just anyone who asks. They required a whole load of proof before they would even tell me if you ever were there. I suppose they'd provide you with you case files if you asked."

"They did," she said, "when I left. There's nothing in them about where I come from. It's pretty much what I told you before. They found me one day, took me in, gave me a name, and that's it. I can show you all the papers they have on me, but I doubt you'll find anything hidden in them."

"Right."

She chewed on her bottom lip nervously for a moment before starting, "There is..." but even then, she couldn't go on. What she was about to suggest was obvious, of course, and surely Xiao Jian had thought about it, too. Perhaps he was just as reluctant to say it out loud as she, as it would mean opening themselves up to their conjectures being disproven and shot down.

"DNA tests?" he asked quietly.

She nodded.

"I suppose...that is the one way to know, once and for all, if we really are related or not," Xiao Jian remarked. "I admit...it is terrifying to think about, whatever the result might be."

"Yes..." Xiao Yan answered vaguely. In a flash, she suddenly understood what Zi Wei must have gone through four years ago. In realising this, she felt a desperate need to call her, to hear her friend's comforting voice, to have Zi Wei tell her that everything would turn out all right, because it had, in the end, for her.

"Do you want to do it, Xiao Yan?" he asked, looking closely at her. "I mean, I know it probably doesn't really matter anymore. I mean, it's not going to change everything that you've been through during your childhood. You're an adult now, so it's not like...it's going to really change anything..."

"Of course it will change everything!" she exclaimed, staring at him. "Do you know how long I've wanted to know who my parents might be, and at the same time trying to convince myself that I shouldn't care because all evidence pointed to them abandoning me? But now...to know that they didn't...it opens up a whole new world."

"Yes, you are right." Xiao Jian reached out and took one of her hands in both of his. "Xiao Yan, if this is true...if you truly are my sister, then you must know one thing. I don't remember a lot about our birth parents, but Mom and Dad – my...no, our adopted parents, that is – had never failed to reassure me that they loved us very much. It would have broken their hearts to know how you grew up."

She looked up at him, and suddenly she felt overwhelmed; her lips were trembling with the efforts to keep her emotions in check and tears were spilling from her eyes. She could only nod silently, both in acknowledgement of his words and in thanks for the rush of comfort they gave her.
"I don't even know why I'm crying," she said, her voice breaking. "I guess...I don't know. I've thought about so many scenarios about who my parents might have been, somehow it never occurred to me that they might not actually be alive..."

"Of course you wouldn't have wanted to imagine that," he said gently, stroking her hand comfortingly.

"Is that bad?" she asked through tears. "That I'd rather imagine they'd abandoned me than think they were dead?"

"No, no. I don't think there's any good or bad or right or wrong way you could have dealt with the childhood you were given, Xiao Yan."

She nodded and reached up to brush away the tears. "I suppose you should not call me Fang Ci yet," she said, almost to herself. "In case..."

"Mom and Dad call you Xiao Ci, but I think that maybe you've been Xiao Yan for too long," Xiao Jian said. "But I could call you Xiao Ci, if you want."

"No, not until..." she said, the trailed off. Then, clearing her throat, she added, "Even then, I guess it would be a tad confusing."

She gave him a small smile, and before she knew which of them had initiated it, he had pulled her off her seat and was hugging her, and she was clinging to the back of his shirt, resting her head on his shoulder.

"For what it's worth," Xiao Jian whispered against her ear, "my gut feeling says this is real. I have faith that it is, Xiao Yan, and so must you."

Their hug was interrupted a few seconds later by the sound of Xiao Jian's phone ringing. Xiao Yan reluctantly stepped away from him.

"It's probably Mom and Dad," he said as he pulled out the phone from his pocket. "Yes, it is. I told them I'd talk to you today and they'd want to know how it went. Would you like to meet them? I'll put them on Facetime if you want."

She stared at the back of his phone for a moment, before looking up into Xiao Jian's encouraging eyes. Taking a deep breath, she nodded.

Chapter End Notes

On Xiao Jian and his backstory: the thing about Xiao Jian's canon backstory is that he had this whole "you killed my father, prepare to die" thing. And in those days, avenging his father would have been an act of honour (you know, on a relative scale). Now, it's just straight up murder. And if "killing the emperor" is not actually a realistic goal anyone should have in the 21st century anymore, to have him be this angst-filled character with an epic grudge is so unnecessary, as he won't have an outlet for it. So yeah, Xiao Jian is basically just anti-monarchy, generally lowkey anti-establishment in this fic.

Also why is he American? The only real reason for it is because in canon, Dali is this
faraway place that takes a long time to get there. The modern equivalent to that is the other side of the world. Also, Qing Er. More on that later.
Chapter Notes

The first bit of this chapter is a crossover with the radio sit-com Cabin Pressure, so if you wonder why I'm going on about a fictional King of Liechtenstein, just know that it's all Cabin Pressure. More explanations in the notes at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2015

March – April

His Imperial Highness Prince Rong of China, representing his father, His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Xiang Yuan, will pay a series of official visits to Europe from 2 March to 10 April.

This will be the Prince's first solo diplomatic tour. The purpose of the 2015 European Tour is to enhance and strengthen the diplomatic and cultural links between China and kingdoms of Europe and their monarchs.

The Prince will pay visits to Liechtenstein, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands and Belgium, before ending his tour in the United Kingdom.

The announcement on the Imperial Household Department website was so simple, so succinct. And yet, the organisation of Yong Qi's first diplomatic test had taken who knew how many minds how many hours over the last six months to arrange.

He wasn't left alone to just wait until the departure date to get on a plane to fly half way across the world, either. If there was already an endless number of fittings for a frankly mind-boggling number of suits for all occasions, there were many more briefings he was required to attend before he even set foot off Chinese soil, not to mention the towering stacks of 'brief memos' he was required to comb through. Of course, the reason was simple: to ensure that Yong Qi was aware of all the pitfalls and dangers of multicultural diplomatic relations and prevent him from inadvertently starting World War Three.

So it wasn't exactly backpacking through Europe.

Still, even all the pressure and expectations couldn't prevent Yong Qi from feeling excited about the trip. And it was genuine excitement, not the kind that accompanied careful smiles and to be given as an answer at a pre-take-off press conference. After all, six weeks in Europe wasn't anything to ever be disappointed about. Even if his itinerary was scheduled to the minute, and he would be accompanied in those scheduled minutes by a small army of diplomats and retainers, his weekends were still blissfully free.

The first leg of his trip was Liechtenstein, which was to say Chinese Imperial Air One landed first in Zurich. Liechtenstein, tiny country as it was, didn't have an airport and all air traffic went through Zurich, which was a mere hour away. He was greeted on the red-carpet-covered tarmac by sharply dressed man in his fifties, who had been identified to Yong Qi by his diplomatic team as Count of Triesenberg, Master of the Household to King Maximilian VIII.
And so it began, Yong Qi thought. Six weeks of being introduced to people with names and titles that would never fit on a business card. Chinese titles were undoubtedly short by comparison.

The Count accompanied Yong Qi in a limo over the Swiss/Liechtensteinian border into his home country, where Yong Qi was received by Theresa, the Princess Regent.

"I am aware it is the middle of the school year," Yong Qi told Theresa when they were back in the limo, heading for Vaduz Castle, "and my team was not sure whether the King would be available before we left. Will I meet His Serene Majesty in Vaduz?"

He asked, for King Maximilian Alois Johannes Friedrich Albert of Liechtenstein, despite his overlong name and even longer titles which Yong Qi would never dare attempt without cue cards because he was sure he would leave something out, was eleven years old. He Ke had been wrong. China and Japan weren't the only monarchies living in the Middle Ages. Liechtenstein had male-preference law of succession as well, and it went without saying that the late king of Liechtenstein was quite the conservative. He had not rested until his wife bore him six princesses followed by Prince Maxi. He then lived only to see the boy through to his eighth birthday, and now King Maximilian VIII had the distinction of being the youngest reigning monarch in the world by a forty-year margin. Theresa, his eldest sister, twenty years his senior, acted as regent while he made his way through the most prestigious boarding schools England had to offer.

"Yes, Maxi will receive you, along with my mother, at Vaduz Castle," Theresa told him.

Yong Qi had met Theresa only once before, a few years ago, though not in an official setting as he would have expected, but in a rather unexpected situation. Apparently, the then-newly crowned and newly-turned nine King Maxi had demanded an overseas vacation as a birthday present, but didn't seem interested in any number of European destinations he could get to without much hassle. After suggesting a number of places they could go, hitting brick walls every time, Theresa ran out of patience and asked her brother where he wanted to go. She would later tell Yong Qi – after they had met – that she thought he simply pulled China off the top of his head because it sounded exotic and far away.

Theresa and Maxi's vacation to China would have gone off without a hitch, completely unknown to anyone in Chinese foreign affairs, let alone the imperial family, if an incident didn't take place during their visit to the publicly available outer court of the Imperial Palace. (Why Maxi went on vacation from one royal castle just to visit another royal palace, Yong Qi didn't understand till this day.)

He was also still hazy on the details, but apparently the incident involved the young king theoretically comparing the relative comfort of the Chinese emperor's throne with his own, a security guard's less-than-perfect grasp of German which led to exaggerated misunderstand and a whole lot of overreacting, ending in Maxi bursting into tears when the security guards wouldn't believe he had sovereign immunity. Er Kang, who was with Yong Qi nearby at the time, heard the commotion of communication between the guards on radio. This allowed them to arrive at the scene and interfere before any permanent diplomatic damage could be made. Granted, later, when identities were confirmed and security guards calmed, and Yong Qi had ushered Maxi and Theresa to a less public part of the palace for tea, the princess had stressed that, personally, she did not hold any grudges, and the whole misunderstanding was mostly Maxi's fault. This, of course, almost earned her another tantrum from the king.

In the conversation that took place in the hour that followed, Yong Qi found that despite her country's stuffy system and her rather demanding brother-slash-king, Theresa was the most relaxed royal he had ever met. It showed in the way she rarely afforded her brother his full title. Then again, the boy was then – and probably still, now – at a stage where he mistook arrogance for dignity and
did not need to be encouraged with everyone around him being needlessly deferential.

He also learnt, during that first unconventional meeting, that Theresa harboured a burning ambition to be a pilot; if Liechtenstein were a larger country, she might have been satisfied, even if it would only be through service in the air force. As it was, Liechtenstein didn't even have a standing army, let alone an air force.

"I hope you did not pull him out of school unnecessarily," Yong Qi said, as the car zoomed past Zurich landscape with the Alps standing as a backdrop in the horizon. "I would not have been offended if he had been unable to receive me."

Theresa smiled. "You are only with us for a couple of days, and it will not hurt him to miss that many days. Anyway, he was rather insistent on being home to meet you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," Theresa answered, laughing. "He'll deny this if you say it to him, but I think he rather likes you after you rescued us in Beijing."

Yong Qi had to laugh at that.

"My fiancé picked him up from England yesterday," Theresa continued, "and will fly back with him after your visit."

"You are engaged? May I offer my congratulations?"

She startled, and blushed. "Did I say fiancé? I meant to say boyfriend," she said, ducking her head.

She unconsciously twisted the signet ring she was wearing on her left index finger, not her ring finger. Yong Qi suspected that was the engagement ring – as unusual a choice as it was. He raised a quizzical eyebrow, wondering if she would explain her curious slip of tongue.

"It is not official yet," she added. "We want to keep it to ourselves for a little while longer. The moment my mother knows…well, all hell breaks loose. So, please…"

"Of course," Yong Qi said, smiling. "Your secret is safe."

He had never met the Queen Mother of Liechtenstein, but from all accounts, she was quite the dragon, and not in the benevolent deity sense that an Eastern person like Yong Qi was used to thinking of, but in the ferocious, fire-breathing sense of European lore.

"You will still probably meet Martin, though, unofficially, seeing as he'll be a guest at the Castle too," Theresa said. Then, she added, as if correcting herself, "Captain Martin Crieff."

Yong Qi couldn't help but feel there was a reason to her obvious emphasis of the word 'Captain' and asked, "What is he a captain of, may I ask? Seeing as you have neither an army nor a navy nor an air force."

Theresa smiled, a particularly goofy smile that he was sure she wasn't aware she was showing. "He is a pilot for Swiss Airways," she explained.

Well, that explained the goofy smile.

"Actually, he was formerly captain at this very small, British charter air firm, and then he became a first officer at Swiss Airways. He just recently received a command and became Captain at SA."
It was clear as day that Theresa of Liechtenstein was absolutely smitten with her pilot fiancé and Yong Qi couldn't help smiling at how endearing it was.

"So he is Swiss?" Yong Qi asked.

"No, British, actually. Quite, quite English," Theresa said. "To be honest, my mother is not very happy about that, but well…"

"But he makes you happy," Yong Qi pointed out. "Clearly. Forgive me if I overstep by saying so."

"No, no," Theresa replied, laughing. "You are right. He does. And I don't have to please my mother in this case."

"Does His Serene Majesty approve, at least?"

"Oh, it's Maxi," Theresa said, sighing. "He likes Martin, he really does, but then every other day he turns his nose up at the fact that Martin is a commoner. It's exasperating. But he doesn't worry me. He'll come around, once he grows out of the childishness."

Yong Qi smiled.

"Speaking of His Serene Majesty," Theresa said as if only just remembering this point, but her voice was still dripping with sarcasm at the three words, "despite what I said about him taking a liking to you, I do apologise in advance for how obnoxious he might still be, and for any of his attempts to pull precedence on you. Again."

"It is an official diplomatic visit, Theresa," Yong Qi said with a smile. "I would hardly not offer him his dues." Even if bowing to a child half your height was a particularly comical experience. Yong Qi could only hope that Maxi had grown a fair bit in the last few years.

"Of course, I have no doubt. But he will be obnoxious, nevertheless," Theresa said. "He still has not quite gotten over the last time we rented out the country yet, which he claimed was sacrilege. When I told him it cannot be sacrilege because he is not sacred, he argued that his title is God-given, so it is sacrilege."

Yong Qi had to stifle a laugh, both in imagining King Maxi's undoubtedly impressive temper tantrum and in remembering that yes, occasionally Liechtenstein did rent out certain privileges in their country to private persons and corporations with enough money. Theresa couldn't help a smile either, accompanied by an exasperated shake of the head.

"Anyway, that was when I reminded him that he was in England, where the last person who claimed the Divine Rights of Kings had his head cut off."

Yong Qi laughed. He wondered what would happen if his family were to claim the Mandate of Heaven in their own country nowadays?

What was also amusing was that from what Yong Qi remembered, Maxi was obsessed with the idea that, as king, he could (a couple of hundred years ago, but that detail was irrelevant to the King) have people's heads cut off. He threatened beheading to everyone and anyone on a regular basis on the logic that anyone who caused him the slightest bit of discomfort was committing treason.

The official ceremonial reception for Prince Rong of China by the Royal Family of Liechtenstein, presided over by King Maximilian VIII and the Princess Regent, observed by the Queen Mother, went off, surprisingly, without a hitch. Afterwards, a luncheon was held in Yong Qi's honour at
It was here that Yong Qi met the secret fiancé of Princess Theresa of Liechtenstein.

At first glance, Captain Martin Crieff didn't seem the type to catch a princess's eyes. He was, in a word, awkward, and clearly he knew it. The way he held himself said prissy more than confident, and overall, he just gave off the sense of trying too hard, which was to his detriment. Yong Qi supposed it wasn't fair to hold that last part against him. After all, Yong Qi himself understood too well the sensation of trying to appear more confident than you really felt in front of people who held much too much power and prestige. Even then…he had a feeling that this was the general air of Martin Crieff, and he wasn't this nervous just because he was in a drawing room full of royals and international diplomats.

Still, while they stood waiting for luncheon to be announced, Yong Qi allowed himself a moment of escape from various politicians to go over and strike up a conversation with Martin. There were several halting starts that made the pilot turn about as red as his thinning hair, but then they hit on the subject of Yong Qi's current duties with his country's air force. It became very clear then that the trick with conversing with Martin Crieff was simply to allow him to talk about aviation. He became a thousand times more animated and visibly more relaxed talking about planes and theorising the difference between flying airliners and different makes of military-grade planes than making small talks about the weather.

Yong Qi could see Theresa shooting him a grateful smile across the room and he acknowledged it with a nod, before the door to the drawing room was opened and a footman appeared to announce luncheon.

Yong Qi was seated at the place of honour, to the right of the Queen Mother and opposite the Prime Minister of Liechtenstein. So he spent the meal doing the job he was sent here to do and wooed the Liechtensteinians. He fancied that by the end of the meal, he had, probably, managed to make the Queen Mother smile. A little. Maybe.

After that, it was a flurry of scheduled events: a formal meeting with the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, a visit to the University of Liechtenstein followed by a dinner banquet given by the university's president, which one of Theresa's sisters – a student at the university itself – also attended.

Even after all the events, on the limo ride back Vaduz Castle, where he was staying as a guest, everything he had said, every interaction he had that entire first day seemed to be analysed and dissected by his diplomatic team. He managed to glean from their long-windedness that they thought the day went well. After that was finished, the briefing – which was anything but brief – for events of the next day began.

By the time he found the room he was staying in, counting the jetlag, Yong Qi thought even if the Alps were to crumble down about their ears now, he'd probably still sleep through it.

He wasn't released that easily, though. Yong Qi was only in the process of removing his tie when there was a knock on his door. Frowning, he opened it to find a footman standing there solemnly.

"Yes?"

"Your Imperial Highness, good evening," the footman said politely. "His Serene Majesty the King wonders if you could please come to his room for a few minutes. He has a request to make."
Yong Qi could not begin to imagine what Maxi wanted with him (and why he was even awake at this hour; surely it was past his bedtime). Still, he followed the footman to what he was sure was the other side of the castle, which held the royal private wing. The only good thing about the long trek was that it gave him time to retie his tie. In his state of daze, it was probably crooked.

The footman opened the door to the royal apartment for him, and he entered into a sitting room to find the still be-suited young king sitting in what Yong Qi was sure he thought was a grand manner on a large armchair. The reality was, the chair was too large for Maxi, and he just looked tiny in it.

"Your Serene Majesty," Yong Qi said, inclining his head. "What can I do for you?"

Before Maxi could say anything, however, the door pulled open again. Theresa stepped in, saying something in German before catching sight of Yong Qi. She gave him a 'what on earth are you doing here?' look, to which he just shrugged.

"Maxi, what are you doing?" Theresa asked, this time in English. "You should be in bed, and you should certainly not be bothering Yong Qi."

Yong Qi had to turn his head slightly to hide his smile.

Turning to him, Theresa added, "Though your being here does certainly explain why there's a Chinese agent outside. I'm sorry, Yong Qi. I know you've had a long day and it's an even longer day tomorrow. I'll walk you back to your room."

"I just needed to give Yong Qi this," Maxi whined, scrambling up from his chair and running to his desk, pulling an envelope out of a notebook.

"Oh, Maxi, not again," Theresa cried, exasperated.

Yong Qi looked at the envelope being held out to him in confusion.

"What's this?" he asked. Then, he added, for good measure, "Sir?"

He was sure Theresa caught the hint of irony in his tone because she stifled a laugh.

"You are going to Spain, right? Can you please deliver this to Sofia?" Maxi said.

"I am going to Spain," he replied, still no clearer on what this was about, while Theresa stood to the side, looking distinctly fed up. "But I won't be there for another three weeks. And you want me to deliver a letter to Queen Sofia – ?"

"The Infanta Sofia [1]," Theresa corrected in exasperation. "Second daughter of King Felipe."

"Oh, I see."

In honesty, Yong Qi didn't see at all. Why did Maxi want to deliver a letter to the Princess of Spain and why couldn't he just use the post? Yong Qi was sure, even as small a country as Liechtenstein was, they had a post system. Besides, wouldn't restricted royal mail from one royal house to another be slightly more secure than giving it to Yong Qi to carry around half of Europe?

"I am determined to only marry a royal princess – " Maxi started to announce in a tone that would probably have been more appropriate when paired with the royal 'we'.

Theresa groaned audibly. "Jesus, Joseph and Mary, Maxi, this is – "

(It took Yong Qi considerable self-control to not laugh at how Jesus alone wasn't enough to express
Theresa's annoyance.)

"I have to! Especially when you're going to marry Martin – "

"Who said I'm going to marry Martin?"

"It's sooo obvious," Maxi replied in childish taunting. "Really, Theresa, why must you fall in love with a commoner?"

"Maxi!" Theresa snapped. "This has to stop! You like Martin. You have to stop whining about him because he's a commoner. Even at your age you're old enough to know I'll be happier with him than I would ever be if I managed to snatch Harry of Wales!"

"You can't marry Harry of Wales either!" Maxi retorted. "He's not Catholic and he won't be allowed to convert!"

Yong Qi had a feeling both brother and sister had forgotten he was in the room, and looked from one to the other, torn between extreme confusion and extreme amusement. It was obvious that this was a very old argument, and he didn't know how he should even interrupt. His only other thought right now was that the idea of Harry, so very English and so very ginger, converting to Catholicism to marry someone would probably succeed in taking irony to a new height. [2]

"Again, for the thousandth time," Theresa cried, "Martin is not going to convert to Catholicism either!"

"But still – " Maxi continued to whine.

"Maximilian, you have six sisters, and you clearly want all of us to marry royals. Where do you imagine you will dig up that many single princes of suitable age for us, not even counting personal compatibility?" Theresa demanded.

Indeed. Princes of Europe were all too old, too young or too married for Theresa, let alone any of her sisters. Yong Qi realised vaguely that this meant – if they were inclined to intermarry – Harry probably would have his pick of the Liechtensteinian princesses if he so desired. The problem – religion aside – was, of course, that they were all dark-haired, whereas Yong Qi knew for a fact that Harry preferred blondes.

Maxi was glowering at his sister.

Yong Qi coughed.

Two pairs of grey eyes turned to look at him.

"I'm sorry, but what does this have anything to do with Spain and the Infanta Sofia?"

And me, he wanted to add, but he had to remember he was here for diplomatic reasons.

"Decidedly nothing," Theresa said resolutely.

"Everything!" Maxi said at the same time. "As I said, I will only marry a royal princess. But I can't marry heiresses apparent, or potential heiresses apparent because that would be a conflict of interest. So I can't consider Amalia of the Netherlands, Leonor of Spain, Elisabeth of Belgium, Ingrid Alexandra of Norway or Estelle of Sweden. Besides, the only one of them who is Catholic is Leonor. So, my choice can only be Sofia of Spain. I want you to deliver this letter to her. I've been learning Spanish this term."
"To woo the Infanta?" Yong Qi asked without thinking, which earned him a death glare from Theresa.

"You don't have to encourage him," she muttered.

"Sorry," Yong Qi mouthed at her.

"Yes!" Maxi said, looking very glad that Yong Qi had caught on. "So will you give this to her?"

"You want me to hand deliver a love letter to the Spanish princess?" Yong Qi asked, feeling like he would burst into laughter at any time. Sofia, last Yong Qi checked, was about seven or eight years old. The only thing that made this entire situation even more hilarious was that the letter was coming from an eleven-year-old king. He felt like he'd been dropped into the middle of a really weird modern adaptation of some comedy of Shakespearean proportions.

"Yes!" Maxi said again, more insistently.

"And...how do you think this will work, exactly?" Yong Qi asked. "I deliver your letter and then what happens? Will you marry when she turns sixteen? Will the Infanta brave the snowy caps of Mount Alps to travel to Vaduz to be your bride, as her ancestor, young Catalina, once crossed the treacherous North Sea to marry Arthur, Prince of Wales?"

He did not seriously mean anything he was saying, and only said them in hope that Maxi would recognise how incredibly absurd his plan was, but the boy king did not catch on. If he did, he clearly did not realise what Yong Qi meant by bringing up Arthur, Prince of Wales or what happened to said prince which prevented him from being Arthur, King of England. Then again, Yong Qi only made the argument because history of European royal houses was currently foremost on his mind, having gone through a detailed crash course prior to his departure from Beijing.

"Yes, that is exactly what will happen," Maxi said importantly.

Yong Qi couldn't help it. He burst out laughing.

"Oh Maxi," Theresa said, torn between amusement and exasperation as her brother looked at both of them, affronted. More firmly, she said, "That's enough, Maxi. Please put that away and go to sleep. Yong Qi needs to rest too."

This time, not giving Maxi any time to react, Theresa grabbed Yong Qi by the arm and pulled him out of the room, firmly shutting the door behind them.

She muttered to herself, annoyed, in German.

"He's not really serious, is he?" Yong Qi asked tentatively.

"I really can't tell sometimes," Theresa said, her accent more pronounced due to the irritation. "The thing is...I think it's his way of...coping. My father spent the few years they had together that Maxi can remember drilling into him what my father called 'his duties'. A lot of what the so-called duties involved would have died out by the twentieth century, let alone the twenty-first. But Maxi..."

"Don't worry, he'll understand better when he's a little more grown," Yong Qi said.

"Really? Isn't your younger brother this age? Does he draw up lists of royal princesses and lay down the pros and cons of them as potential consorts?"

"My brother is a few years older, but no, he has never shown that he was set on marrying a foreign
princess,” Yong Qi said, laughing. "But my sister probably wouldn't mind if he married Aiko. Though...I don't think she's ever serious about it."

Theresa shook her head. "Well, either way, Maxi should never have been so rude as to drag you to this side of the castle. I do apologise for that."

"Don't worry about it, Theresa," Yong Qi replied. "I have been this age. I can imagine the sorts of bizarre reasoning that is going through his head right now. But if you don't mind, I would go back to my room though. I'm in this stage of limbo where I can't even tell anymore if this jetlaggy feeling is making me feel sleepy or wide awake."

"I will walk you back," Theresa said. "Just to make sure you find the right room."

Even after he had said good night to Theresa, Yong Qi still didn't get to fall into bed right away, because his phone chose that moment to light up with a text.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:13 CST
Who's the red headed guy?

Yong Qi stared at the text from his sister, unable to decide whether it so really lacked sense, or his biological clock was just that off.

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:13 CET
?

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:14 CST
[photo of Yong Qi talking to Martin Crieff at reception earlier in the day]

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:14 CET
Where did you get this?

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:15 CST
Im Hsehold internal updates
This is your official reception in Vaduz right?

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:16 CET
That's Theresa's boyfriend. Why?

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:16 CST
Admiring the view, that's all.

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:17 CET

......
Seriously?

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:18 CST
Why not?

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:18 CET
No offense, but he looks like ET. Or an otter.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:19 CST
OMG you didn't say that to Theresa did you?

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:19 CET
Pfff. Of course not.
Admittedly, he's actually one of the more animated conversations I had today.
But you can't seriously think he's attractive.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:19 CST
Brother dear, I'm not surprised you and I have different ideas of what makes an attractive man.
But if you must know.
Those cheekbones are surreal.
And those golden blue green eyes? Are they real? Or is that just a trick of the light?

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:20 CET
Like I stared deep enough into his eyes to notice.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:20 CST
Urgh. You're useless.
But if they're real, then they're like from a dream.

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:21 CET
If you say so.
Just again so you know, he's not available.
And too old for you regardless.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:22 CST
Pity.

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:22 CET
Why are you up so early anyway?

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:23 CST
It's like half past 6.
I have early class.

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:24 CET
Is it? Good god, I thought it was only past 5 at home.
Get to class, Ke Ke, and let me get some sleep.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:25 CST
Oh I'm sorry did I interrupt your beauty sleep?

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:25 CET
Prevented it more like.
Seriously, sis, I need to sleep. It's been hell of a day.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:26 CST
Sure. Good night :)

Yong Qi to He Ke
23:27 CET
Good morning to you.
Seriously though, bye.
Love you.

He Ke to Yong Qi
6:28 CST
[heart] you too.

The second and last day of Yong Qi's tour of Liechtenstein went without any mishap. King Maxi did not attempt to slip any clandestine communications to him to be delivered. On the whole, he looked quite glum, but considering they were visiting the Liechtenstein War Memorial, it was a rather appropriate look.

Yong Qi went on from there to visit the National Museum and State Library, and did not see Maxi again until the afternoon. By then, he seemed to have cheered up considerably. Yong Qi was, therefore, more at ease when he bid farewell to the Liechtensteinian royal family. He would be driven back to Zurich, from where he would fly to his next destination: Oslo.

There was a lot of rinse and repeat for the rest of his tour of Europe. In every country, there was always the arrival, the red carpet, the bowing and curtsying, the inspection of the Guards of Honour, and the official welcome reception/banquet/sit-down meal with too many cutleries at a place setting. (By the time he got to Denmark, Yong Qi really, really missed chopsticks.)

Scandinavia in March was still cold, but the receptions he received were more than enough to drive the chill away. He was making his rounds and paying tribute to the monarchs of Europe but the visits were also teaching him something new every single hour, if not minute.

He felt a strange kind of pride as he hosted, for the first time on his own, an official reception for Chinese and local staff as well as dignitaries at the Chinese Embassy in Oslo, and then later in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Madrid, The Hague, Brussels and London.

Yong Qi was moved, intrigued and inspired when accompanied by the Norwegian Crown Prince on a visit to Global Dignity, a human rights organisation formed by Haakon himself. He and Frederik nearly arrived late to the banquet held by the Queen of Denmark in his honour when the Danish
Crown Prince went into a passionate discussion on climate change after he and Yong Qi visited the Greenland Climate Research Centre. They ended up engaging in a long, thought-provoking discussion which led them to nearly losing track of time. Even as they hurriedly parted to get ready for the banquet, Yong Qi made a mental note to put Frederik in touch with Qing Er; undoubtedly they would have much to talk about.

He stood in awe of the beauty of Stora Sjöfallet National Park in Sweden and the magnificence of Norwegian fjords. He made Crown Princess Mary laugh when they visited Hans Christian Andersen’s hometown. Little Estelle loved the stuffed panda that he gifted her with so much that she started following him all over Stockholm Palace, clutching the toy in her chubby arms, much to her parents’ amusement. He tried on Viking armour, learnt more about Norse gods than Marvel Studios could ever teach him, and resisted the urge to drag home too many memorabilia. He drove on the bridge that connected Sweden to Denmark and had his breath taken away by the vast seas on either side.

It was almost a shock to go from the snow-filled winds of Sweden to meet the warm, golden sun of Spain. In Spain, he fell in love with the Alhambra and longed for the time and freedom to get lost in Salamanca. In Spain, he met little golden-haired Sofia and ended up telling her father about Maxi of Liechtenstein’s ambitions for his daughter, which made Felipe laugh uncontrollably for several minutes. He watched one of the most exciting live football matches of his life – Barcelona vs. Real Madrid – and wondered whether Er Tai would kill him once he got back home for all the gloating he did.

In the Netherlands, after touring all the sites of international politics in the Hague, making so many speeches that they blended into one another, he made it to Amsterdam. There, he struggled to breathe all through the tour of the Anne Frank House, because the whole time it felt like there was something enormous weighing on his chest. He wished it was cold enough to try skating on the canals, but couldn't deny the peaceful charm of sitting on a boat and watch the ancient, cobbled city pass by. The museums filled him with a surreal feeling that the priceless arts in front of him couldn't possibly be real and yet at the same time, they must. In Dam Square, he was accosted by pigeons. He climbed the insides of windmills and learnt the process of making cheese and clogs at Alkmaar and was only disappointed that it was too early to see tulips blanket the fields.

From the Netherlands, he crossed into Belgium at Baarle-Nassau. He lived in a country so large that it seemed an insane notion that he only had to drive for less than two hours, then take a single step, before he was in another country. In Beijing, you drove for two hours and you'd probably still be in the same district if the traffic was bad. In Brussels he visited the EU and NATO and many more speeches were made. After a day and a half in Belgium, he took the Eurostar train through the Channel to London.

His schedule in London was more packed than ever, so that at one point, everything became a sort of blur of fleeting back and forth along the Mall between Buckingham Palace and various places. He met with the Prime Minister at Downing Street and was grilled by the Leader of the Opposition at Buckingham, before being accompanied by the Duke of York to meet the Dean of King's College along with an abundance of Chinese overseas students. From there, it was to the Palace of Westminster for yet more speeches, then to Clarence House for tea with the Prince of Wales and his wife.

And yet, from the beginning, it was always emphasised that politics was just one aspect of the tour. The second half of his week in London was filled with visits to major Chinese businesses in London and British charities with large presence in Beijing, which included Save the Children accompanied by its president, the Princess Royal, and Lumos accompanied by Catherine (where he made Jo Rowling laugh when he presented the entire seven-book set for her autograph).
Somewhere in the middle of that, he jokingly indicated to Catherine that he couldn't come to England without having fish and chips. He hadn't expected her to take him seriously, but it was funny when they left Lumos premises and stopped at a small restaurant just around the corner, which according to Catherine, was one of the best shops specialising in fish and chips in London.

They did not eat in, but they attracted enough attention (Yong Qi was sure, Catherine was the whole of the attraction) during the fifteen minutes it took for their takeaway boxes to be prepared that the "event" completely dominated tabloid and online headlines that evening and the next morning. People apparently couldn't seem to agree on who the third portion they ordered was supposed to be for (William). Apparently, some people speculated that Catherine was having two portions ("Well, she is eating for two," they wrote on social media), much to her annoyance and her husband's amusement.

For his part, Yong Qi didn't know whether he should cry at the fact that, the next day, if you asked a random person on the street, they'd imply the only thing he did that day was have fish and chips with the Duchess of Cambridge, or laugh at how easily good public diplomacy – if that it could be called – could be achieved sometimes in the age of the viral "journalism".

FA President William managed to find time for them to attend the FA Cup Quarter Final. It was Arsenal vs. Man U again. Yong Qi took a photo of the scoreboard and sent it with a single evil laugh emoticon to Er Kang when the match was over, which Er Kang, unsurprisingly, did not deign to reply, even though Yong Qi could see that he had read the message the moment it arrived.

Afterwards, he had tea with William and Catherine, where the inevitable discussion/argument that was just waiting to happen after nearly a week in England finally occurred.

"There is really, honestly no good reason why anyone would ruin perfectly good tea by putting milk in first," Catherine was saying to her husband.

"There actually is a reason," William countered. "If you are using delicate porcelain, pouring hot tea directly into the cup could cause it to crack. This is why the milk is put in first, to prevent this."

"All right, maybe that makes sense with very fine china and tea brewed in a pot," Catherine said stubbornly, "but in a good strong cup of builder's tea? It has to be tea first."

"Yong Qi, help me out here," William said, obviously expecting an ally.

Yong Qi, who had so far watched the conversation pan out with a small smile at the corner of his lips, now could only stifle a laugh and put down the cup he was holding: tea and nothing else.

"I'm sorry, I really can't, in good faith, enter into this discussion."

"Why not?"

"Because," Yong Qi said deliberately, "you forget, the British did not invent tea. You stole it from us, remember? I am willing to see that as a demonstration of Chinese generosity, but I would rather not discuss how to best ruin it with milk or sugar."

He quirked his eyebrow at them both, and suddenly all three of them burst out laughing.

"Well, actually I think we stole it from India, but I see your point," William conceded.

He spent the weekend before officially ending his tour as a guest at Sandringham, the Queen's private country home in Norfolk, where he lost his heart to the Windsors' thoroughbred horses, to the point where he spent an hour talking to the Queen's stock-master to figure out if it would be possible
to crossbreed them with the Arabian and Mongolian horses favoured by his family and exactly how much it would cost to start this venture. (The answer: too much.)

He raced Harry and William across the estate and they traded lessons in polo and archery. He and Harry ended up bonding over their positions as the younger brother to a future monarch and over the loss of their respective mothers. With regards to the former, they ended up sharing notes about their elder brothers and teasing William mercilessly about it.

Yong Qi's first diplomatic tour ended as his plane flew out of the royal airfield in London. On the entire flight home, the whole trip was broken down and analysed yet again, which was only to be expected, but the abundance of smiles and relaxed stances were enough to reassure Yong Qi that it had been a job well done. He had been well received abroad and the trip was considered a success at home, which was as good a result as could be expected.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaahh, the UK before anarchy :) when all people cared about was when Charlotte would come out. This chapter was written so long ago, it's really weird to post now considering all the things that's happened in the meantime.

[1] In the Spanish and former Portuguese monarchies, Infanta is the title given to a daughter of the reigning monarch who is not the heir-apparent to the throne.

[2] I probably shouldn't explain the joke, but in case you didn't get it: the whole bit about whether Harry can convert to Catholicism was an allusion to Henry VIII, who broke away from Catholicism and formed his own church so that he could marry Anne Boleyn. If you look at photos of Harry with a beard, he looks scarily like Henry VIII.

All of the royals name-dropped in this chapter are, of course, real people.

The major exception is the Liechtenstein royal family. In fact, Liechtenstein doesn't have a king. It's a principality with a reigning prince, not a king. As I said, that whole section about Liechtenstein was a cross-over fanfic with Cabin Pressure. Cabin Pressure is a BBC radio sit-com that I adore (not only because of one of its actors) about a British charter airline. One of the main characters is Martin Crieff, a pilot who later begins dating Princess Theresa of Liechtenstein whose brother is the very young King Maxi of Liechtenstein. (There's a writing reason why in CP, Maxi is the King instead of a reigning Prince.)

There are a lot references in the Liechtenstein section to a particular CP fic (For Hire by Euphoric Mandelbulb) that I love about how Liechtenstein sometimes rent out their country (which real life Liechtenstein did advertise but I don't think anyone with enough money ever actually rented them out) and some of the dialogue later about princesses is lifted directly from my own fic King Maxi and Marriage Politics of the Twenty-First Century.

Yong Qi's itinerary in the UK was adapted from the itinerary from Xi Jinping's real visit to the UK in 2015. For the origin of the fish and chips scene, Google "Obama bun cha".

Anyway, at first, I only planned to mention this European trip in passing, but then I started thinking about the itinerary and then everything else just sort of mutated from
there. Though, to be honest, I had a lot of fun writing this chapter precisely because of that. I actually wrote most of this way back when I was struggling with trying to get Zi Wei where she needed to get to with her father.

I suppose now that I've written this, there is a point to the extended coverage of both Xiao Yan and Yong Qi at their jobs. Having gone through the trouble of breaking them up, I do need to establish them in their own spaces before bringing them together again.

Next chapter, back to Xiao Yan and Xiao Jian.
2015, March (1)

2015

March

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
22:58 CST
PLEASE COME OVER!
NOW!
I HAVE TO TELL SOMEONE OR I'LL EXPLODE ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !

Zi Wei stared the abundance of exclamation marks on her friend's text message and didn't know whether she was supposed to feel excited or alarmed. She knew Xiao Yan was capable of getting very over-excited, but this exclamation mark abuse was a whole new level, especially when the text was sent this late.

She gave the message one last bemused stare before gathering her things and headed out to her car to go over to Xiao Yan's apartment. She couldn't deny that she was curious, of course, considering she knew Xiao Yan had just gotten back to Beijing from a work-related trip to Xinjiang; she couldn't begin to imagine what could have happened there to get Xiao Yan this excited.

When she arrived, Zi Wei had barely touched the door when it swung open to reveal a Xiao Yan who was practically bouncing.

"Are you all right?" Zi Wei asked, but at the same time, she was chuckling at the breathless, wide grin Xiao Yan had on her face.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Xiao Yan cried, pulling Zi Wei inside by her hand. Then, she threw her arms around Zi Wei. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, you won't believe what happened!"

"What happened?" Zi Wei asked, laughing and wincing as she pulled away from the high-pitched sound of Xiao Yan's voice. Whatever it was that brought Zi Wei here at eleven o'clock at night, it was something that obviously was making Xiao Yan almost manic with happiness, and it filled Zi Wei with an odd, floaty feeling of joy too, despite the ringing in her ear, though she didn't even know what was going on.

"Come in, I'll show you," Xiao Yan exclaimed, still unable to put away that impossibly wide grin. Then, she pulled Zi Wei into the living room, where Zi Wei sat on the couch and Xiao Yan shoved a piece of paper into her hands.

At first glance, the chart on the paper looked very familiar. Zi Wei had definitely seen something like it before; but this was different from the chart that contained her information which she first saw four years ago.

The title on top of the sheet was the same – DNA Test Report – though that itself made Zi Wei glance up at Xiao Yan, frowning in confusion. Her friend, however, was clearly too giddy to speak, as she only gestured impatiently for Zi Wei to continue reading.

Zi Wei looked down at the chart and saw, unlike her own test results which had two columns
comparing her DNA to that of her father, this report compared the DNA of "Mother", "Alleged Sibling One" and "Alleged Sibling Two". Just as with her own results, the following list of numbers were meaningless to the untrained person, but the interpretation at the bottom was in plain enough language.

**Combined Siblingship Index: 23,249**

DNA testing was done to determine siblingship of alleged siblings. Based on the results obtained from the analyses of the DNA loci listed, the probability of full siblingship is 99.995%. The likelihood that they share the same biological father is 23,249 to 1.

"Xiao Yan, what is this?" she asked, looking up at her still grinning friend in astonishment.

"I have a brother!" Xiao Yan nearly yelled, as if she had been holding back this declaration all this time and was finally able to say it out loud. "Zi Wei, I have a brother!"

Before Zi Wei could reasonably react, she found herself engulfed in a crushing hug by her friend, who was still babbling.

"I have a brother! A brother! Oh my god, I have a brother! Can you believe it, Zi Wei?"

Though Xiao Yan had yet to tell her how this extraordinary development come about, Zi Wei found herself laughing and putting her own arms tightly around her friend.

"No, I can't quite. How did this happen?" Zi Wei asked, smiling just as widely as Xiao Yan now when she pulled away to look at her friend.

Between breathless, wondrous exclamation of "I have a brother!", Xiao Yan told Zi Wei about Xiao Jian, how they met at work, and how he eventually came to believe Xiao Yan was his sister.

"Of course, we couldn't quite allow ourselves to believe it, no matter how desperately we wanted for it to be true, until we've done a DNA test. At first, I didn't think it would work, because I remembered when we were reading up on DNA testing way back then for you, and it said that tests between siblings without a DNA sample from a parent wasn't always conclusive. I mean, our parents died years ago, so short of exhuming them, it didn't seem like we'd have a DNA sample from either of them. Honestly, I'm still not used to the fact that I can talk about 'my parents'. Anyway, then Xiao Jian's adopted parents told us how years ago, they used an extracted wisdom tooth from our mother to do a DNA test for Xiao Jian to ensure that he was who he was. Apparently neither our birth parents nor our adopted ones were able to throw anything out because they still had another tooth from my mother left, here, in storage with the rest of their possessions, so we were able to send that to be tested with our DNA samples. The results came this morning to my email, but I was in Xinjiang without internet, so I didn't get to see it until now when I got home! Xiao Jian's still in Xinjiang, and I just got off the phone with him when I texted you, but I still can't believe it!"

It occurred to Zi Wei that she had actually never seen Xiao Yan so overflowing with this kind of pure abundance of emotions, the foremost of which was joy, so much of it that tears were leaking from her eyes. This was a different kind of happiness from anything she'd ever seen in her friend. This was Xiao Yan's dream literally come true, and Zi Wei suddenly felt as bursting with light as Xiao Yan looked.

Her own throat felt rather constricted, Zi Wei laughed shakily and pulled Xiao Yan into a tight hug. "Oh, I am so, so happy for you," she said sincerely. "This is just wonderful, Xiao Yan!"

As they pulled away, both of them were laughing and crying at the same time. Zi Wei squeezed Xiao
Yan's hands affectionately. "No one deserves this more than you," she whispered.

"I'm so happy. I mean," she said a little hoarsely and had to stop to clear her throat before continuing, "I am sad to have to learn that my parents have passed away...but at least now...now I know that all the worst case scenarios I came up over the years about how they abandoned me weren't true. And I still have my brother. And his adopted parents. And I just feel like I'm walking on clouds, but at the same time I don't know what to do with all this..."

She was gesturing wildly with her hands. She was laughing through tears, but at the same time, she looked overwhelmed and no less lost than she had always been.

"It's weird," Xiao Yan said croakily, "it's like I'm so happy, happier than I ever thought was possible, but I'm sad too, and terrified at the same time. Oh god, it's all just crashing down on me now..."

She gave Zi Wei a helpless look, to which Zi Wei could only smile sympathetically.

"I know the feeling, you know," she said, giving Xiao Yan a comforting hug. "Just give yourself time, and it will all sink in, and then you can sort out your different emotions." Zi Wei pulled away only to press her forehead against Xiao Yan's, whispering, "It's going to be all right. I promise."

Xiao Yan smiled and nodded profusely, as if Zi Wei's words were the only thing she could cling to that made sense. She inhaled deeply and shook her head, as it to shake away some of the abundance of emotions currently engulfing her, which she could not take all at once. Zi Wei realised this was why Xiao Yan had asked her to come so urgently. Even if they weren't best friends, Zi Wei was probably the only person aside from Xiao Jian who might be able to even begin to understand the emotions she was experiencing.

"I didn't think it'd feel like this," she confessed with a self-deprecating laugh. "I mean, I expected to be happy, and I am! I am! I didn't realise the happiness itself could be this overwhelming, let alone everything else! Oh Zi Wei, how is it possible to feel all this at once?"

Zi Wei could only smile affectionately.

"So when do I get to meet him?" she asked.

"Well, he comes back from Xinjiang day after tomorrow. Do you want to have dinner with us and Liu Qing and Liu Hong? I have to tell them too, of course. I haven't, and I probably should tell them in person. It's too much to go over on the phone."

"You're right. And of course I'll have dinner with all of you."

"I'll figure out the details and tell you later," Xiao Yan said with a grin.

"You said Xiao Jian has adopted parents who were your birth parents' friends?" Zi Wei asked.

"Have you met them?"

"Not yet. I mean, they live in America. I have spoken to them on the phone and Skype and stuff. Xiao Jian is finishing up at the office soon, so he's going back to America by the end of the month as it is. I might see if I can get time off and go with him to see them for a week or two."

"I think that'd be a good idea," Zi Wei said.

"I'm sorry for dragging you here this time of night, by the way," Xiao Yan added with an apologetic, sheepish smile. "I sort of screamed when I saw the results and called Xiao Jian, but I had to tell someone who didn't know already. I hadn't dared before we got the confirmation, but once it came, I
Zi Wei smiled and answered with mock sternness, "Do not apologise, Xiao Yan. I would have been quite angry if you hadn't thought to tell me immediately after you found out."

Xiao Yan grinned. "Stay, won't you?" she begged. "I mean, I'm sure I'm going to keep you up because there's no way I'm getting any sleep tonight, but I need someone to flail about this with. Please, please stay with me."

Zi Wei didn't need her friend's exaggerated pleading pout to say yes, but she laughed at it nonetheless. "Of course I'll stay."

When Xiao Yan arrived with her brother (three days, and she still could not stop feeling a rush of surreal joy whenever she thought about those two words) at Hui Bin Lou a few nights later, she found that Liu Qing, Liu Hong and Zi Wei had already gathered in a private dining room, waiting for them.

"You guys are early," Xiao Yan remarked, upon entering the room.

"Well, we own this place, so I don't think the idea of early applies," Liu Hong said, laughing, "but yes, Zi Wei was early."

Seeing as Liu Qing and Liu Hong had already met Xiao Jian, the only introduction Xiao Yan had to make was to Zi Wei.

"Zi Wei!" she squealed, pulling on her friend's arm, "this is my brother! Xiao Jian! Brother, this is Zi Wei."

Zi Wei smiled widely and shook hands with Xiao Jian. "Hi, it's really nice to meet you. You should know, she hasn't stopped smiling or talking about you in the last few days."

Xiao Yan had always found it impossible for anyone to meet Zi Wei with anything less than a smile, and was pleased to see that her brother was no exception.

"It's nice to meet you too," he said. "I have to say, Xiao Yan had told me quite a lot about you as well."

"Where's Er Kang?" Xiao Yan asked Zi Wei as they finished up the greetings and began to sit down around the round dining table.

"He's working tonight," Zi Wei answered. Turning to Xiao Jian, she asked, "So Xiao Jian, how are you getting used to the idea that you found your sister?"

"It's all a bit unreal, honestly, considering I didn't even remember having a sister until I saw the resemblance between her and my mother's photo."

"Really? How did you come to not remember?"

Xiao Jian explained a little about the situation surrounding the deaths of their parents and how brother and sister came to be separated. Some of this, Xiao Yan had already told Zi Wei before, but she still looked intrigued at Xiao Jian's explanation.

"Honestly, it was very disorientating, finding out that I have a sister, and I've been around her for weeks without realising," Xiao Jian concluded.
An amused smile blossomed on Zi Wei's lips. "I think I might understand that feeling more than anyone ever could."

"Could you?"

They talked a little about the similarities between Zi Wei finding her family, and Xiao Jian and Xiao Yan finding each other. Despite Xiao Jian's previously expressed disgruntlement with the monarchy, Xiao Yan was glad to note that he was as animated in talking to Zi Wei as he ever was with anyone else he met and liked. Then again, she supposed, liking Zi Wei was easy enough.

As they ate, the conversation between the five of them progressed, friendly and comfortable.

"Xiao Yan mentioned that your adopted parents live in America now?" Liu Qing asked.

"Yes, they migrated there when I was six and we became citizens a few years later."

"I've managed to get some leave from work so we're going to go over there to see them," Xiao Yan said. "My boss, Grace, wasn't entirely happy that I was taking so much leave at once, so I kind of had to tell her what was going on."

"My parents could have come here, of course," Xiao Jian said, "but honestly I think Xiao Yan just wants a trip to America."

"Why not?" she asked, grinning at him.

"It's really funny," Liu Qing said, laughing. "You know when you were spending lunar new year with us, I thought you two must be dating."

Xiao Yan rolled her eyes. "And didn't I tell you that you were wrong?" she asked, laughing.

"She did," Liu Qing said to Xiao Jian. "But her logic wasn't exactly 'we are related', so excuse me if I wasn't entirely convinced."

Xiao Jian laughed. "Well, to be honest, I found myself very drawn to Xiao Yan from the beginning. It's not any kind of attraction...just a kinship that I couldn't really place. It's strange how life works sometimes."

"Xiao Yan would know all about that, wouldn't you?" Liu Hong asked.

Xiao Yan was still too happy with everything to even mind the teasing.

"So what now?" Liu Hong continued. "Are you changing your name back to your birth name?"

"I actually haven't thought too much about that," Xiao Yan admitted. "I mean...on the one hand, it would be fitting, but I keep thinking I'd probably never remember to answer to it. It would be weird if every time I need to say my name I'd have to actually pause and think about it."

"I've told you, Xiao Yan," Xiao Jian said, "you don't have to. The fact that we found each other is more important. In case you haven't noticed, I don't actually go by my real name either."

"But that's different," she protested. "I mean, it's just a nickname. In all legal matters, you are still Fang Yan."

"And changing your legal name – not just part of your name, but both your given and family names – will be a massive hurdle," Xiao Jian pointed out. "You don't have to do it. I am sure both our birth and adopted parents would be happier about finding you at last and wouldn't really think much about
"Well, I am thinking about it," Xiao Yan said. "Though let's be real, even if I do change it legally, I'd still ask you all to call me Xiao Yan anyway. I think I've been Xiao Yan for far too long to change now."

"Exactly," Xiao Jian said. "I'm just saying there's no pressure, Xiao Yan."

She smiled. "I know."

"So, Xiao Jian, tell us about your parents. Your birth parents, I mean. What did they do?" Liu Qing asked.

"Honestly, I don't remember much about them. But our father taught Classical Chinese at Yong Le University, actually."

Xiao Yan was intrigued. "Really? It's interesting that I ended up there as well. I mean, it's a totally coincidence, of course, it's not like some force of nature told me I had to attend Yong Le or anything."

"An interesting coincidence, yes," Xiao Jian agreed, smiling. "Our mother was a doctor, which was how she first became friend with my adopted parents both; they were at medical school together."

"So your adopted parents are both doctors?" Zi Wei asked.

"Yes. They did hope I would follow the same path, but in all honesty, I never took to the idea..."

To Xiao Yan's continued delight, the rest of the dinner and evening passed in the same wave of relaxed conversation, with everyone so obviously and genuinely happy for her and her brother both. She had been almost afraid, at one point, that someone would during the conversation make Xiao Jian more aware than he should be of Xiao Yan's connection to Zi Wei's brother, but even that remained untouched for the moment. She knew that she probably should let him in on it now. It wasn't like she was consciously keeping it a dark secret from him before; she only preferred that he did not know when it had nothing to do with him at all. But it had some things to do with him now that she knew they were related, did it not? Surely at some point, it would come out. She was still in too much contact with Yong Qi, and not merely through Zi Wei, for her to pretend like it was all completely in the past. Certainly Xiao Jian should be told about something like this by her, not by the internet.

Still, she maintained that this wasn't the time, yet. They were still too new to this role of brother and sister, and she couldn't yet predict how Xiao Jian would react to a discovery like this. After all, they were off to America to see his adopted parents – she was supposed to train herself to think of them as hers, too – and surely the huge, complicated story of her and Yong Qi could wait for the time being.

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NEW LOVE FOR XIAO YAN?
AIRPORT REPORTS SHOW SHE REALLY MAY HAVE MOVED ON FROM RONG QIN WANG

21 March 2015

Xia Xiao Yan has sparked many rumours when she was spotted at Beijing Capital International Airport arm in arm with a mysterious man.

Could it be that Xiao Yan has finally moved on from a certain prince?
Xia Xiao Yan first became known to the public in July 2011 as the friend of Zi Wei Ge Ge, herself famous for being the long lost daughter of the Emperor. Xiao Yan reportedly first met both Zi Wei Ge Ge and Rong Qin Wang at Yong Le University in September 2010. Speculations that she was dating her friend's new-found brother Rong Qin Wang fuelled reports for many months until it was finally confirmed by the Imperial Palace in November 2011. Their relationship ended in December 2013, despite expectations and speculations of an engagement. Since then, both Xiao Yan and Rong Qin Wang have been linked to several different prospects, but none were confirmed by either. They were reported to still remain friends and in contact after their break up.

Rong Qin Wang is currently undertaking a six-week diplomatic tour of European kingdoms, widely believed to be his first challenge in the international arena. In his departure press conference on 26 February, the prince only smiled and remained tight-lipped when pressed on the possibility that he was leaving a lady behind.

Meanwhile, it would seem that over a year is enough for Xiao Yan to move on from her royal love. The above candid shots were snapped of her and an unidentified man at the check in counter for an international flight to New York at Beijing Capital International Airport. Reports posted on social media observed that Xiao Yan and her new man were all smiles and seemed "particularly close", with Xiao Yan being very comfortable linking arms with the man and leaning her head on his shoulder.

The man, despite his Asian looks, was allegedly using an American passport. There is, unfortunately, no other information on what his name might be or where the couple might have met. Sources close to Xiao Yan was unable to be contacted for insider information.

Weibo user with nickname "StrawberryCherry2387" claimed to have sat across the aisle from the couple on China Airlines flight from Beijing to JFK Airport, New York City. She posted that the duo spent a significant portion of the flight with their heads together in hushed conversation, and even spotted the former royal flame being pecked on the cheek by her new man. According to "StrawberryCherry2387", Xiao Yan spent much of the flight looking "radiant" and "giddy".

Edit: After this article was published, we were contacted by a reader who is a taxi driver and claims to have driven the couple to an address in - Street just over a week ago. The driver, who requests to remain unnamed, said that he recognised Xia Xiao Yan right away, however she tried to deny this. Her companion claimed that she was his sister, however it is widely known that Xiao Yan does not have any family.

See more photos of the couple strolling through Beijing Capital International Airport below.

Yong Qi was in Amsterdam when he first saw the photos.

It wasn't that he was in the habit of trolling the internet for poorly-shot paparazzi photos of his ex. In fact, none of the above could ever categorically be said to be true.

But being overseas also meant more reliance on the internet to catch up with news back at home. The news app on his phone were only lines of code; it didn't know that he really didn't have the kind of self-restraint required to ignore it when it dangled a gossip article with Xiao Yan's name in the headline under his nose in the "Trending" section.

Curiosity won over, of course. So he looked.

And he had no idea what to feel after reading the article.
On the one hand, it was more than obvious that he should be taking the whole report with a fistful of salt, considering the gossip sheet it was published in.

On the other, there were the photos.

Grainy, badly focused, shot surreptitiously by a phone as they might be, they still showed clearly enough Xiao Yan making her way through the airport beside Xiao Jian, their arms linked.

Undeniably, Xiao Jian made a rather strong impression when Yong Qi visited the Lumos office, in part because he was one of the few men in the team, but also because a considerable part of the meeting was spent talking about the evaluation work he was currently in China to conduct. Yong Qi remembered now someone obviously of great intellect and competent at his job. The short encounter in a professional setting did little to show Yong Qi how he might be outside the office, and certainly not how he might be with Xiao Yan in a less formal setting.

However, judging by these photos, they were obviously friendlier than just colleagues, especially if she was going on vacation with just him half way across the world. That wasn't even yet mentioning the fact that it was the middle of March. It wasn't exactly a normal holiday season.

It took a sharp pain in his mouth before Yong Qi realised that he was clenching his teeth at this idea and had accidentally bitten his tongue in the process. He flexed his previously clenched hands but found himself more agitated than ever. Shoving back the ornate antique chair he was sitting in, Yong Qi left the table, feeling unable to even continue to look at his phone on the desk even though by now the screen had turned itself off. At the window, Yong Qi stared out of his guest room at the Dutch palace and found little distraction in the bustling and busy Dam Square outside.

Xiao Jian was only employed as a part-time consultant, not based permanently at the Lumos Beijing office; he was to come and go as his work dictated. Yong Qi gathered that he must be finishing up his first visit and would probably be returning to Boston, where he normally lived. And here Xiao Yan was, going with him. As far as New York, at least. Even Yong Qi couldn't convince himself to believe her final destination was not Boston.

Why?

The question nagged at Yong Qi, more intensely than he knew he had the right to anymore.

Even if Xiao Jian and Xiao Yan were together (Yong Qi swallowed with difficulty the bitter taste of that possibility), was it possible that in such a short amount of time, things had progressed to the point that she would take such a trip with him?

Xiao Yan had never allowed him to take her anywhere outside of the country. A wave of disgruntlement swept over him with the comparison. She had always fought against him spending that kind of money on her, and in the end, she usually won.

Perhaps that was why.

Perhaps if she had been financially comfortable and independent enough when they were still together, they could have gone around the globe together if they so desired, because then she would have persuaded him into allowing her to share some of the expenses, so that she did not feel so completely kept by him. Those were, of course, always her arguments.

Except, this kind of financial freedom might have been harder to come by for her if they had remained together. Even if they managed to dig in their heels and resist the nosy pressures and expectations of marriage from practically every source around them except the ones that actually
mattered, she might still not feel free enough to build her life and career around what she wanted, instead of what was expected of someone so intimately connected to him.

After all, hadn't he himself thought it better to let her go explore life without all the restrictions that being with him imposed on her? It had seemed the sensible thing at the time, especially when he had so little time for her that it was clearly unfair to trap her so, when she was at a crossroad and should have been free to make her choice without being held back by him.

And yet, he didn't realise until now how freeing her then meant opening the way to other men to enter her life. Men like Xiao Jian.

He didn't even really understand – or perhaps he was unconsciously preventing himself from understanding – why the idea of a Xiao Jian so gnawed at his nerves, when others rumours that he had then known to be true never managed it. It had been easy before to dismiss Zheng Hao Ran because he so obviously was the last kind of man Xiao Yan would consider. But despite her joking remarks, not all the men Xiao Yan attracted were more interested in being able to boast having gone out with her than her as a person. As for Xiao Yan herself, she didn't do anything by halves, and that included falling in love.

Yong Qi had thought, recently he and Xiao Yan had managed to reach that tentative balance of friendship of two people who still cared more than platonically for each other. He had hoped – even if only in some small secret corner of his heart – that this might open up the road for them to find their way back to each other. Had he read it all wrong? Had it only indicated the opposite, that she was so thoroughly over him that she could now simply relax? Were these photos merely the proof of that conjecture?

He turned abruptly from the window and strode the length of the room, grabbing his phone from the desk. Finding and staring at a blurry photo, he couldn't help wondering why, in romance stories and novels, tension always came from nefarious outside forces keeping the couple apart, and when it came to them, it was just the two of them stumbling in their own way.

Was this photo, the one showing Xiao Yan arm looping around Xiao Jian while she looked up smiling so widely at him, the universe's way of telling Yong Qi he should be moving on as well?

"So, how's…Holland?" Er Tai asked Yong Qi over the phone several hours later.

"Yeah, I'm in Amsterdam," Yong Qi replied to the questioning tilt in his friend's voice. "It's raining. And there are too many cows in this country."

"Hah!" Er Tai laughed, but there was something slightly forced about it, as if his mind was on something else rather than the numerous cows of the Netherlands.

Yong Qi pulled the phone slightly away from his ear to look at the time and did a mental subtraction. "Are you just up exceptionally late or did you wake exceptionally early?"

"Up late. Haven't slept yet," Er Tai answered.

"Er Tai, it's five in the morning at home. Do you plan to sleep?"

"Not sure. We'll see. It's Sunday anyway so who cares?"

Yong Qi couldn't help frowning to himself as he asked the next question, "And the reason you're calling me at five in the morning is…?"
"Just want to touch base," his friend said, unconvincingly casual.

Yong Qi sighed exasperatedly. Sometimes, it really was a pain to know your friend so well. "You want to know if I've seen the photos?"

"What photos?" The fake innocence was telling, even on the phone.

"What photos," Yong Qi repeated mockingly. "The ones of Xiao Yan at the airport."

"Er…maybe? Possibly? I mean, they went a bit viral last night."

"Apparently so," Yong Qi said dispassionately.

Er Tai apparently was expecting him to speak more, because a long silence ensued between them, made even longer by the dissonance of an international phone connection. After a long while, Er Tai finally said, "Okay, so I asked Zi Wei about it, right?"

"What exactly did you ask Zi Wei?"

"Oh, you know, nothing too…obvious. Just generally who the guy was and stuff…It was all conversational, of course."

Yong Qi laughed incredulously, "Conversational? You think that's not obvious? Good god, Er Tai."

Er Tai ignored his implied the fact that Yong Qi was less than impressed, and simply continued over him. "Zi Wei didn't exactly gossip, of course. I mean, from the way she was speaking, I'm sure she is keeping some sort of confidence for Xiao Yan. But she did mention that Xiao Yan and this guy – "

"Xiao Jian," Yong Qi supplied, unsure why he felt the need to do this. His knowledge startled his friend.

"How do you know his name?"

"He works with her. I've met him, when I visited her office."

"You did?"

"Yeah. What did Zi Wei say?"

He couldn't quite keep the note of anticipation out of his voice, and Er Tai noticed. Yong Qi could practically hear his smirk. "Despite your disapproval, you clearly want to know what your sister said."

"Er Tai."

"Okay, fine, in the interest of pulling you out of your epic bout of brooding – "

"Who says I'm brooding?"

"I do," Er Tai replied matter-of-factly. "I know you. I know you're brooding. Do you want to know what Zi Wei said or not?"

Yong Qi sighed but said grudgingly, "Fine, go on."

"Apparently, Xiao Yan and this Xiao Jian are by no definition and in no way whatsoever a romantic couple."
"Zi Wei said that?"

"Yes. And you know she would not say it in such an obvious 'tell-Yong-Qi-this-so-he-can-stop-angsting-about-it-on-the-other-side-of-the-globe' way if it wasn't true. And before you doubt either your sister or your best friend, Zi Wei did also add that there is a reasonable explanation why Xiao Yan suddenly decided to fly to New York with this guy, but it wasn't her place to say."

"I cannot imagine what it might be," Yong Qi said, still unsure whether he should believe Er Tai's words or not. On the one hand, it went against every visual evidence before him. On the other, Er Tai was right; Zi Wei would not mention such thing if she didn't also mean for him to relay it back to Yong Qi and she would not give Yong Qi such information if it wasn't true.

"Neither can I," Er Tai said, "but let's face it, you of all people know how gossip works. How many times in high school did they bandy about the idea that you were in bars drinking at three in the afternoon and everyone in our class just found it hilarious because you were in fact in double Physics with us? Or the fact that my brother of all people, though he could be excused considering how he was in love with her, thought you and Zi Wei were a thing when you were meeting her to talk about the fact that you might be related."

"That thing between me and Zi Wei was an unusual situation though, even for us."

"Of course, but that just goes to show that there might be, as Zi Wei clearly believes there is, a completely reasonable explanation for those photos. The point is, you probably shouldn't worry about them."

"I don't think I have a reason to, in any case," Yong Qi said with a sigh.

"That doesn't mean that you won't be tempted to," Er Tai said. "If the curiosity is killing you that much, maybe you should just ask Xiao Yan out right."

"I can't do that!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "That would just seem stupidly bitter."

"How about being honest, instead?"

"About what?"

"About the fact that you never got over her?"

"Er Tai."

"Look, I understand why you thought it was a good idea to take a step back. I didn't agree with the logic, but I understand where you were coming from," Er Tai said patiently. "But Yong Qi, isn't the fact that you actually aren't over her and frankly clearly incapable of moving on from her saying something? And as a completely impartial observer, I'd say she's not that over you, either."

"I really don't think you count as impartial, Er Tai."

"I'm more impartial than either of you."

Yong Qi felt unequal to keep pressing this point and changed direction. "It doesn't matter if we're over each other or not. It's more complicated than that. The kind of life that she wants is one that I'm never going to be able to have with her."

Er Tai sighed audibly. "I know you're trying to do the whole 'if you love her you have to let her go' thing, but honestly, shouldn't it be her choice?"
"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you broke up with her. Maybe it's a bit useless to say this now, but don't you think that when you mentioned the idea, you've in some way taken the choice away from her? You think you're doing her a service by letting her go, but what if that wasn't what she really wanted? Even if she did then, she could have changed her mind since, but do you think she'd tell you that now when it was you who broke it off? Your position puts you in an inherent position of power imbalance, and I know you don't want to exercise that power, but it exists. And as much as Xiao Yan acts fearless, I think she is a lot less secure when it comes to you than you'd want to admit. She's not going to be the one who suggests a reunion no matter how she might actually want it. And whatever you might think about letting her go for her own good, she deserves to choose whether it would be for her own good to be apart from you."

Yong Qi was rendered momentarily speechless by Er Tai's impassioned reasons. He was unable to deny, even to himself, that his friends had good points, and in many ways, he was grateful for Er Tai being straightforward enough to lay them out so plainly.

"I suppose, saying all this to you now is not very helpful," Er Tai admitted when Yong Qi did not answer, "seeing as you're in Europe and she's in America for who knows how long."

"Did Zi Wei say?" Yong Qi asked dryly.

"I don't think she knows."

Yong Qi sighed. "I see. I guess, in that case, it's as you said, it's not helpful to dwell on it."

"That's not what I meant," Er Tai said pointedly.

"I know," Yong Qi said blandly, but before his friend could say another word on the matter, he changed the subject. It really was unhelpful to dwell too much on Xiao Yan now, while he was here and she was there and neither of them having any chance of seeing each other face to face in the immediate future. "How have you been? How's Sai Ya?"

Er Tai hesitated a little, clearly seeing through Yong Qi's obvious diversion tactic. However, he also recognised that it was truly useless to dwell on a couple currently separated by an ocean, and was eventually persuaded to talk about how Sai Ya's sister was currently visiting from Australia instead.
Some forty thousand feet above sea level, Xiao Jian felt Xiao Yan, who was resting her head on his shoulder, shift in her sleep. He should be asleep too. It would be another ten hours before they landed and the cabin was pitch-black and silent except the soft footsteps of flight attendants walking up and down the aisles. There was nothing that held his attention in the in-flight entertainment, and yet Xiao Jian still found it impossible to drift off to sleep. He kept thinking about how he was flying back to his adopted parents to introduce his sister to them.

When he first arrived in Beijing three months ago, this scenario would have been impossible to imagine. In fact, back in December, he had very little expectation of finding anything significant in Beijing beyond the work he would do and the usual tourist traps. Instead, his entire life had shifted and changed completely in a matter of a few short weeks.

It was still strange for him to think of Xiao Yan as his sister, and he still had to remind himself that it was even stranger for her. After all, she had spent most of her life trying to convince herself that her biological family were horrible people who abandoned her when she was little more than an infant. Xiao Jian understood that it was a self-defence mechanism, and the matter weighed less on her mind if she could push aside her biological parents as people who did not deserve her thoughts. Despite this, he couldn't quite help the slight twinge of pain when she first told him that this was how she had always seen their parents. Even then, he found the pain hard to explain and certainly startling. He might have grown up hearing tales of his birth parents from his adopted parents, it wasn't as if he had more of an idea of what they were like as people than Xiao Yan. To them both, they were faded photos in an album, stories told over spring meals and voices in a dream.

Perhaps the fact that Xiao Yan had such dark imaginings of their birth parents was distressing to Xiao Jian because it betrayed more about her childhood than she ever explicitly said. Even now that they were getting to know each other as siblings, and Xiao Yan was certainly more open with him about her childhood, Xiao Jian could still tell time away from the orphanage had allowed her to put a filter in her memories about her time there. She might be able to recount events and actions, but her general emotional response to her childhood still remained a vague 'it was a hard time, but it could have been worse'.

Xiao Jian had to admit, it was hard for him to imagine looking back at one's childhood with such indifference. He had grown up with loving adopted parents. It made the idea of welcoming another member to their family not so impossible to grasp. Meanwhile, Xiao Yan had to undo all her assumptions and preconceptions about the whole concept of family that she had been holding her whole life. Even though she was here now, flying half way across the globe to meet his adopted parents with him, Xiao Jian could still tell that she was a constantly shifting bundle of conflicting emotions.

He could only hope, finally meeting his Mom and Dad, and having them welcome her with open arms, would finally convince her that this all wasn't going to be taken from her in the blink of an eye. Xiao Yan had never confided in Xiao Jian this fear, but he could see it in her eyes, in moments when the happiness and the joy ebbed a little, and doubt crept in for just a second.

Twenty-four hours later, Xiao Jian no longer found himself so concerned about his sister. He really
shouldn't have been concerned in the first place. Even if Xiao Yan had doubts and hesitations, her natural optimism and cheerfulness was impossible to curb in the fact of an event as happy as meeting the closest connections she had to her parents. To Xiao Jian's delight, the first meeting between Xiao Yan and his Mom and Dad occurred without any of the discomfort or awkwardness that Xiao Jian might have vaguely feared. Then again, Xiao Jian knew Xiao Yan well enough by now to understand that she was incapable of artifice. She was eager to get to know Mom and Dad, and they were delighted by her bubbly manner as well.

By the third day back in Boston, everyone was so ease with each other that Xiao Jian found himself completely relaxed.

That was when, over breakfast, Mom asked Xiao Yan, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

In the context of their current conversation, this was the logical question to ask following Xiao Yan regaling his parents with an account of the glowing impressions Xiao Jian made on his young, female colleagues when he first arrived at the Lumos Beijing office, impressions which Xiao Jian was sure his sister was exaggerating, as he had until then been completely unaware of it. And yet, the question clearly came out of the left field for Xiao Yan, as she startled and blushed.

"Ah," she gasped, squirming a little, "no."

Xiao Jian could tell that while that answer was technically true – and if it wasn't, she certainly had never mentioned anything to him about this boyfriend – there was more that could be said on the subject.

Mom smiled. "A pretty girl like you?"

"I suppose a prince is a hard act to follow," Dad commented in a teasing tone.

While Xiao Jian was struggling to understand what was being implied, Xiao Yan positively gaped. At her wide-eyed expression, Dad added, more apologetically, "I'm sorry, do you not want to talk about it?"

"I – well – not exactly," Xiao Yan stammered, "but how on earth did you know?"

Meanwhile, Xiao Jian struggled to catch up. It was clear that his family had left him behind in the conversation without realising.

Mom said to Xiao Yan, "When Xiao Jian first told us about you, we tried to see if we could find any information on you, and Googled your name with the name of your orphanage. I must say, we were quite surprised at how abundant the search results were, and hardly any of it had anything to do with the orphanage – "

"Oh god," Xiao Yan groaned. She looked – and Xiao Jian didn't even know it was possible, or why – even more flustered, and actually buried her face in her hands.

"Wait, what are you all talking about?" Xiao Jian finally managed to cut in, looking from his parents to his sister, still exceedingly puzzled.

"Yong Qi," Xiao Yan explained with dread in her voice. "They're talking about Yong Qi."

Xiao Jian frowned, still not really seeing it. "The...prince? Rong Qin Wang?"

"Yes."
"What about him?"

His parents exchanged a look that clearly indicated they were surprised he did not know. Meanwhile, Xiao Yan heaved a long suffering sigh.

"He – We – I used to go out with him," she said reluctantly.

Xiao Jian stared at her. She might as well have told him she went out with the King of Heaven and he probably wouldn't be this shocked. He wasn't sure why he was so shocked, though. Now that he thought about it, things were starting to make an awful lot of sense.

Still, he couldn't help repeating with disbelief, "With Rong Qin Wang? The guy who came to our office?"

Xiao Yan looked like she would rather talk about anything else, but still, she answered, albeit through gritted teeth. "Yes."

Xiao Jian frowned, still trying to put the newly discovered information together. "You said he's Zi Wei's brother."

"Well, he is," Xiao Yan said, giving him a look that indicated that his question was entirely ridiculous and not to the point, so did not deserve a more intelligent answer.

"So aside from being your best friend's brother, you also used to go out with him?" Xiao Jian asked. He thought his face was sufficiently calm and not accusatory. He really was just puzzled why he was learning all of this now. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Why should I have?" his sister demanded, sounding defensive. "You were just a co-worker! It was none of your business!"

She meant before they discovered their relationship to each other, of course, but for a moment, Xiao Jian felt slightly hurt, and couldn't help showing it in his words as he said incoherently, "None – well – I guess, but – "

"But what?" Xiao Yan interrupted, a stormy expression on her face. "Do you know why Grace hired me? Because, apparently, she thought having Rong Qin Wang's ex working in her office would catch people's attention. And for months that's how practically everybody in the office treated me! It took my hilariously incompetent predecessor and an event crisis costing nearly ten thousand dollars for them to realise I had more to offer than a past relationship with a prince! So excuse me if I don't go around telling people that I used to date him! Not that I ever tell or have ever told anyone. Everyone just knows!"

Xiao Jian had to admit, this made sense. Of course, that just made him wonder, "How did I not know?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. Thankfully, she sounded calmer and even a little amused as she said, "I told you, you don't pay attention to office gossip."

"Clearly," he muttered.

"Xiao Jian, you really didn't know about this?" Dad asked, having just watched the conversation between the two of them like a tennis match.

"No," Xiao Jian admitted. "And I'm not sure how to feel about the fact that you and Mom know."
"It's really not a national secret, you know," Xiao Yan pointed out. "You really just have to Google my name. Obviously."

"Well, I don't make a habit of cyber-stalking my colleagues," Xiao Jian said wryly.

His sister merely sighed at this and didn't answer. Xiao Jian thought she looked rather relieved when Mom took advantage of the silence to change the subject.

"So was that time he came to the office the first time you saw him after you two broke up?" Xiao Jian asked his sister later when they were alone. His parents have gone to work while he would take Xiao Yan on a day of sight-seeing around Boston.

She was rummaging through her bag which was placed on the dining room table and must have not realised he was in the room, because she was startled when she looked up.

"Huh?" she asked, turning around to face him and leaning against the lip of the table. "Oh, are we back to this?"

She sounded a lot less on edge that she did earlier, but Xiao Jian felt the need to add, "Don't be angry. I'm really kind of just curious. We don't have to talk about it."

"Normal people would just Google," she said challengingly.

He smiled. "Yes, but if I don't cyber-stalk my colleagues, I definitely don't do it to my sister, either."

"I guess I should be glad that you're actually asking me," she admitted with a sigh. "As I said before, people do tend to just assume they know everything about us. And no, that time he came to the office was not the first time we saw each other since we broke up."

"But it was soon enough after the break up that the idea of him coming at all clearly made you uncomfortable," Xiao Jian pointed out.

She laughed, shaking her head. "God, no. By the time he came to the office, we've been broken up for over a year already. It wasn't the fact that he was coming that made me feel uncomfortable. It was the fact that everyone clearly expected me to be uncomfortable that made it uncomfortable, and also because it would put me right back where I started with everyone. I mean, get that at a certain point, after everyone got to know me, they did begin to like me for me, but still, some people are less successful at curbing their curiosity about Yong Qi than others. I guess, I do understand how from the outside, it can seem like an intriguing story, but when you're me or him, it's just annoying and wearying to know that people will be talking about you behind your back. It's not even that they'd say anything malicious. It's just the whole being talked about thing that is tiring. I do admit that I was glad that you were so oblivious for so long. It was a nice change because then I knew for sure that at no point did your treatment of me depend on who I used to go out with. It's not his fault. The excess of people nosing into business that doesn't concern them really just comes with being who he is. Honestly, I knew more or less what I was getting into when I allowed myself to get involved with him. But just because you know how something is going to be doesn't always mean you know how you will deal with it when it happens to you."

"You sound like you regret the whole thing," he said.

She had ended her last sentence with a sigh that was simply melancholic, and Xiao Jian couldn't help feeling concerned. He wasn't even sure why. After all, she made it clear that the relationship was over. And yet, it was intriguing that despite this, she didn't sound and certainly didn't act bitter towards Yong Qi. She admitted herself that it was difficult to take herself completely away from his
company. Everything he had been told so far made Xiao JIan wonder if it was all as over as Xiao Yan would have him believe.

"I don't," Xiao Yan answered, shrugging. "We're still friends, as you can probably tell when he came to visit."

"Yes, I could tell," Xiao Jian said. "Well, now, looking back, I can. He was practically flirting with you."

His sister laughed. "He really was not."

"Xiao Yan, he really was," he countered with mock seriousness.

She simply shrugged noncommittally and didn't comment.

"So why did you break up?" Xiao Jian asked, unable to curb his curiosity.

She hesitated a little, as if trying to weigh her words before speaking. "The world was suddenly talking about us getting married," she said slowly. "I was twenty-three."

He frowned. "So you ended it because you didn't want to marry him?"

"He ended it."

His frown couldn't help but deepen. "Because you didn't want to marry him?" he asked, a little more sharply than he intended.

She clearly recognised that he was about to become very indignant at Yong Qi, because her voice held a deliberate soothing tone as she answered, "No, of course not." She paused and looked deep in thoughts for a long moment, before admitting, "And I didn't say I didn't want to marry him."

One of Xiao Jian's eyebrows rose in astonishment, but he felt that she wanted him to stay silent. They had known each other for such a short time. This wasn't something he could ask her to confide in him. She had to volunteer to trust him with the secrets of her heart.

Finally, after long deliberation, she sighed. "It really just wasn't the right time for either of us. The thing is, being with him requires taking…precautions and being careful all the time, lest you become a source of ridicule which would then be reported on the front page of every newspaper in the country to be judged by a billion people. Back then, when I saw that everyone was practically taking bets on when we were going to get married, I realised that I also didn't want to look back at my twenties and see that it was spent being cautious and being scrutinised."

She paused for breath, and Xiao Jian had to admit, as little as he knew about the details of her relationship with Yong Qi, she was making a lot of sense so far. Even after spending over three months in Beijing, Xiao Jian still couldn't manage to wrap his head around what life as a royal must be like, let alone the fact that his own sister was apparently once deeply involved in such a life. She still was involved, even if only to a lesser extent, if what she had divulged so far and the way she and Yong Qi treated each other during his visit were any indications.

"Basically, until we broke up, I could divide my life into two stages," Xiao Yan continued. "One was the childhood at the orphanage where I was under constant surveillance and in the control of others, and the second was being with Yong Qi, where I was under constant surveillance anyway and in the control of his family's world, his family's way of life. I didn't really know what it was like to live the way I wanted to live. I think Yong Qi saw all that, which was why he broke it off. Because honestly, it was only to pre-empt me from doing the same, not necessarily because he
wanted the last word, but because if I had to admit that being with him wasn't enough, it might have hurt us both even more. It was simpler, to just say that his duties were preventing us from actually having any time together. That was true, too, but we had been working around that for a long time. We could have managed. But in some ways, it was better to break it off and miss each other than stay together but not actually be together and resenting each other for it."

There was a tinge of wistfulness in her voice, and that was when Xiao Jian realised his sister really was not as over the prince as she was trying to convey. Even Xiao Jian, who did not know her as well as both of them would like, could tell that there was a distinct difference – a softer, savouring tone – in the way she said Yong Qi’s name. Was she conscious of this, or was it simply a habit that she never managed to break? Xiao Jian wondered if it was because she lacked resolve, or if it was just because she didn't want to break the habit at all.

One thing was for sure, though, he was rather surprised she had shared this much with him. Even as he voiced his curiosity, he had been entirely prepared for her to shut down the subject altogether. Perhaps because she had volunteered to share with him so much of her feelings, he didn't have the heart to force her to dwell on what was undoubtedly an uncomfortable for much longer. So before Xiao Yan could become too lost in thought, Xiao Jian deliberately looked down at his watch and said with a smile, "It's getting late. Come on, didn't you say you wanted to see the harbour?"

Apparently, Xiao Yan was not dwelling on negative things, because at the reminder, she immediately grinned widely and zipped her bag shut. "Yes, let's go!"

Mid-morning, they did a pit-stop at a coffee shop by India Wharf. As they waited for their coffee, Xiao Yan was so effusive in her delight with the wisteria-draped pergola of Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park that they almost missed their orders being called. She was only distracted when they got to the counter and picked up their take-away lattes.

"Why does your cup say Becky?" she asked, squinting at the name on the cup her brother was starting to bring to his lips.

Xiao Jian hastily held the cup away and turned it his hand to look at the name.

Before he could answer, someone behind them said, in Mandarin, "Because that's mine."

Both of them turned around, and while Xiao Yan startled at the sight of the person in front of her, "Becky" simply held out the cup she was holding to Xiao Jian.

"I think this one's yours?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," Xiao Jian answered, smiling, switching cups with her. "I promised I haven't taken a drink from that one. Sorry for picking it up by mistake."

"It's all right." Then she turned to smile at Xiao Yan. "Hi, fancy running into you here."

Xiao Yan, who had been staring, amazed, all this time, could only ask in confusion, "Becky?"

Qing Er laughed. "It's a coffee name. It's too complicated trying to use my real name for coffee orders."

Granted, by now, Xiao Yan had figured it out too. Realising that they were standing in the middle of the coffee shop and causing some disturbance to the flow of traffic, the three of them started moving together towards a table.
As they walked, Xiao Jian asked, looking curiously from one to the other, "You two know each other?"

"Erm…yes," Xiao Yan said slowly. She suddenly realised that there was no easy way to explain what her relationship was with either Xiao Jian or Qing Er to the other. "This is Qing Er. She's…"

Xiao Yan's mind went blank.

"Friend of a friend?" Qing Er suggested archly, laughing.

"That'll do," Xiao Yan said, grinning back. "Qing Er, this is Xiao Jian, my…friend."

The brief flash in Qing Er's eyes told Xiao Yan that she didn't entirely believe the "friend" part, but it wasn't like Xiao Yan was ready to tell her the real relationship yet. She was thankful that Qing Er simply outwardly took her at her words and smiled in greeting as they three of them sat down on a table.

"So, Xiao Yan, what brings you to this side of the world?" Qing Er asked.

"Oh, you know, taking a vacation. You?"

"I live here, remember?"

"Still? I thought you'd moved back…"

"No," Qing Er said, smiling, "that was just for a visit. I'm still working here for the time being. So you two are touring the harbour? Do you want me to give you some ideas of things to see?"

"Actually, Xiao Jian lives here too, so I'm set," Xiao Yan said, patting her brother's arm.

She did find it a little strange that her brother, who as far as she could tell, usually has no problem talking to anyone, had been curiously silent so far. The feeling abated a little when they started talking about the places that he did manage to take Xiao Yan to see that morning, because then Xiao Jian did eventually end up being a little more animated. The conversation was interrupted some ten minutes later when his phone rang and he stepped away from their table to take the call.

Now alone, Qing Er turned to Xiao Yan and said, "Thanks, by the way."

"For what?"

"For…not divulging the whole of who I am," Qing Er said, running her finger around the lid of her coffee cup. Then, she added a little defensively, "Not that I'm trying to be a snob about it but – "

" – it's not something that you'd tell just anyone over here," Xiao Yan finished for her. "I get it, Qing Er, really. It's not like you choose to live half way across the world just to be treated with the same scrutiny that you get back home."

Qing Er looked towards where Xiao Jian was standing a little distance away. "So, he's just a friend, huh?"

The implication was clear in her voice and the way she turned back to look at Xiao Yan with amused eyes.

"Yes," Xiao Yan replied resolutely.

Qing Er laughed. "I'm not going to gossip about you to Yong Qi, Xiao Yan."
Xiao Yan sighed. "Would you believe me if I told you this has nothing to do with Yong Qi?"

"Of course!" Qing Er said. "After all, he let you go. Which I get why, but honestly it's his loss."

"Xiao Jian's not my boyfriend," Xiao Yan said.

She wasn't sure whether Qing Er really believed her or not; it was hard to tell by her expression either way. It was even harder to judge when Qing Er merely nodded at the statement, then changed the subject.

"So how much longer are you going to be in Boston?"

"Just for another week or so," Xiao Yan answered. "I have to return to work anyway. I think we're heading to the Aquarium next. Do you want to join us?"

"I'd love to, but I'm actually meeting someone for lunch in a bit." Qing Er pulled out her phone to check the time. "I should actually go, or I'll be late for that."

"Of course, don't let me keep you," Xiao Yan said.

"It was great running into you. I might see you in Beijing, soon actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'm flying home day after next for an event, so maybe we might run into each other. But anyway, for now, I hope you have a good time seeing the sights and everything."

"Thanks," Xiao Yan said, grinning. "Have a nice day, and hopefully see you in Beijing."

There was a quick smile, then Qing Er was gone, leaving Xiao Yan to wait for her brother to return.

"Where did Qing Er go?" he asked when he came and saw just Xiao Yan at the table.

"She had something to get to," Xiao Yan said. Then, before her brother could sit back down, she stood up. "Should we get going? The Aquarium awaits."

Xiao Jian laughed at her enthusiasm. "Sure, let's go."

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Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
16:52 CST
Have you told Yong Qi about Xiao Jian?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:12 EST
No.
I don't know how to tell him.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:14 CST
Do you want to tell him?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:16 EST
I guess.
I don't know.
I mean, isn't it just kind of weird to call him up to tell him something like this?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan  
21:17 CST  
Why is it weird?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei  
8:19 EST  
That's like assuming or expecting him to care.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan  
21:20 CST  
He does care about you, Xiao Yan.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei  
8:21 EST  
I know. I'm not trying to imply he doesn't.  
It's just we're in this weird limbo.  
This is a huge piece of news.  
News that significant people in my life should know.  
But Yong Qi is  
In an odd place for me.  
I mean, to say that he's not significant is not true.  
But to simply call him up and tell him something this huge is  
Weird  
I can't think of another word to describe it.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan  
21:28 CST  
I suppose that would be because you're thinking of telling him as telling your ex-boyfriend about a  
life-changing turn of event.  
I mean, short of telling him you're marrying someone else, there are certainly few things more  
awkward.  
What if you were to just envision it as telling me, or Liu Qing and Liu Hong or Han Xiang?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei  
8:33 EST  
It's one thing to tell myself that but reality is a different thing, Zi Wei.  
Unless you want to tell him for me?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan  
21:33 CST  
Certainly not.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei  
8:34 EST  
I guess I saw that coming.  
I never thought I'd see the day I miss when newspaper would print stories about me, you know?  
I wish they would just print something that he can just read so I don't have to tell him.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan  
8:42 EST  
Zi Wei? You still there? Or have you fallen asleep?
Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:43 CST
I'm still here. I couldn't answer for a moment because I was too busy laughing.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:43 EST
Laughing?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:44 CST
Yes.
I'm guessing you haven't seen the articles or the photos.
I can't blame you. You have more important things to do over there.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:46 EST
What are you talking about?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:47 CST
There were plenty of "news" articles about you and Xiao Jian.
They're just not particularly accurate.
Before you ask, Yong Qi has seen them.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:50 EST
How not accurate?
And how are there articles? How did they know?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:51 CST
Speculations could not be more off the mark.
Basically someone snapped photos of you and Xiao Jian at the airport.
Queue everyone on the internet thinking you're off for an expensive holiday in America with your new lover.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:52 EST
WHAT
REALLY?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:53 CST
Really.
Thought honestly with the information everyone else has, it's not an illogical conclusion to draw.
Especially considering how chummy you and Xiao Jian were looking.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:54 EST
Urgh.
What should I do?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:56 CST
About the articles?
Nothing?
I mean, what can you do?
You're not under any obligation to tell the world anything.
But that's partly why I asked if you've told Yong Qi about Xiao Jian.
He has seen the articles speculating Xiao Jian being your new boyfriend.
I tried to tell him in a really round-a-about way that there was no basis for it.
I think he kind of believes me.
Or not, I'm not really sure.
Anyway I think he'd be relieved to hear from you.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
8:57 EST
Why?
Why does it matter to him?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
21:58 CST
Just so you know I'm holding back as derisive a scoff as I could muster.
Of course it matters to him.
Whatever the two of you insist about the fact that you're not together any longer
Neither of you can deny that it would break your heart if the other were in that kind of serious
relationship with someone else.
You can't tell me you seriously believe Yong Qi doesn't love you anymore.
And at least don't deny your feelings to yourself, Xiao Yan.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:07 CST
Xiao Yan?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:10 EST
I just wish things were less complicated.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:11 CST
I know.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:12 EST
So you think I should call him?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:12 CST
Yes.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:13 EST
Should I wait until we see each other face to face instead?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:14 CST
Who knows when that is going to be?
He's going to be in Europe for another couple of weeks anyway.
When are you planning to come back home?
Or are you?

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:16 EST
Of course I am.
I fly back on the 3rd.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:17 CST
I think Yong Qi's flying back on the 5th.
Honestly? I think a phone conversation might be the easier way.
Of course I guess that means you might have to try and figure out time zones and his schedule.
But his schedule is pretty free during the weekend so try that.
Or you could just wait until you both are in Beijing.
But I just think that might just end up being procrastination that would then bring on more procrastination.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:20 EST
We are not that bad at speaking to each other.

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:21 CST
Sometimes you really could fool me.
I'm just saying, consider it, Xiao Yan.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:22 EST
Okay, I guess I will.
I have to go, talk to you later, okay?

Zi Wei to Xiao Yan
22:23 CST
Yeah I'm off to bed in a bit as well.
Good night.

Xiao Yan to Zi Wei
9:24 EST
Night.

Xiao Yan put off contacting Yong Qi by any mean for nearly a week, but couldn't extend the effort longer than that because he ended up calling her first.

"I thought you might want to know how my meeting with Lumos UK went today," he told her.
"And it really was very enlightening."

Xiao Yan laughed. "Really? 'Englightening'?

"The pun was unintentional."

"Appropriate, certainly."

"I suppose, yes," Yong Qi said, chuckling. "Anyway, I met with the Board of Directors, and later
with the team at the UK head office. I suppose, I should tell you at this point that I actually meant what I said when I was at your office about a possible partnership program between the Empress Foundation and Lumos Beijing. Back to the point, which is in my meeting with the UK team, there was quite a bit of time devoted to discussing a program they have in Eastern Europe – sponsor a child – and the possibilities of that being applied in China. Of course, actual, in-depth talks about the feasibility of that would have to be a conversation to have with your office. Who would we contact to get a start on that from your end, anyway?"

"Uh…that would actually be me," Xiao Yan said.

"Oh." He sounded slightly surprised but recovered quickly. "I guess I'll ask the Foundation to email you then - ?"

"Well, I'm on leave until the end of the week, so they should probably just email and copy in Ming Yue and Cai Xia. I suppose it's not urgent, though?"

"Of course, no. It's just an idea. Actually, I might wait until I get back to Beijing to talk to my people before coming to you with anything. But if it is you we'd be working with, then could we talk about it a little now?"

"Sure, okay."

As they talked about a potentially new endeavour for both their organisations, Xiao Yan couldn't help being overcome by the strangest feeling. Were they destined to try out every combination of relationship that could occur between them? After being friends, then being together, then being in the weird no man's land of friendly exes, was it inevitably time for them to try out being…what was this budding relationship? Collaborators? Business partners? She wasn't sure.

As their shop talk dwindled down, it was clear that the confusing multitude of relationships between them was on his mind too, as he asked in a tone that tried to sound casual but failed miserably, "So, you're not at work this week?"

"I know you know I'm not, Yong Qi," she said bluntly. "Don't play dumb. It's not nice."

The silence on his end of the line must only be a couple of seconds, but it felt like a lifetime, before he finally posed another question. "How is that?"

"How is what?"

"Your holiday, or whatever the reason is that you're on leave."

Xiao Yan snorted. "I can't believe our country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is trusting you to take a diplomatic tour of Europe when you are proving right now that you have the subtle point of a hammer."

Her words managed to make him laugh a little, though he sounded sheepish as he admitted, "To be honest, the reserves of my subtlety have all been used up on this trip."

She smiled to herself and couldn't keep the amusement out of her voice. "Fair enough, I guess." She paused for a breath, then deciding to just get to the point. "Anyway, I'm in Boston."

"Ah." He let out a rush of breath. "Of course."

"Of course?" she asked. It was impossible for her to fail to notice how his voice has gone unnaturally soft as he said the two simple words that was otherwise overflowing with hidden meanings that she
was not yet willing to unravel.

"Well, Xiao Jian did mention he lived in Boston, so..." he answered.

Why did he have to make his unspoken thoughts so obvious, and why did that hesitance in his voice cause such a sudden, uncomfortable hotness to press against her chest? It made Xiao Yan struggle to breathe and her voice became gruff despite her efforts to keep it otherwise. She told herself that this situation really should be funny, because there was, after all, no basis for the probing speculations that lurked beneath Yong Qi's words, and when she told him what was going on, he would see it too. And yet, she couldn't help but feel an absurd level of guilt for being the cause for his current obviously-conflicted feelings.

"You have seen photos, then," Xiao Yan said simply, as a way to prepare them both for the subject to come.

"Yes."

"I suppose I should tell you about why I'm in Boston."

He didn't immediately say anything, but she waited for him to indicate if he was willing to hear. Upon meeting the silence, he added, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to talk to me about it, Xiao Yan."

Of course, considering what she knew he believed about her and Xiao Jian, it was easy to understand why he thought it necessary to give her this way out of this conversation. Despite this, she couldn't help feeling like she'd missed a step going down the stairs. She didn't know why, but she needed some confirmation from him that he was still interested in knowing what was going on in her life, even if it might not have any effect on him.

It took her a moment to find her voice again, and in that lull in the conversation, on top of the confusing emotions, she couldn't help but realise how different silences were now between them. Once, they had been comfortable enough with each other to let the words fall into nothingness and smile in the quietness of knowing not everything needed to be said out loud. That they were all right with just knowing that there was the connection between them. Now, she simply felt impatient with both herself and Yong Qi. She had thought they had managed to reach a less awkward point than this. After all, hadn't they just spent half an hour in relatively easy conversation before reaching this halt? How did they both manage to totally lose their grips on their composure the moment their hearts made the slightest stir to enter the conversation?

"No, this is something big," she managed to say softly. "I want you to know about this."

"Okay." He hesitated once more, before adding, haltingly, "But don't feel like you need to...soften the blow or something."

Despite her own messy feelings, Xiao Yan couldn't help letting out breath of laughter. "There is really nothing that needs to be softened, Yong Qi," she said sincerely. "Really, I know what the world is speculating. It's the most predictable conjecture to come to, but I rather pride myself on not being so predictable. Besides, hasn't Zi Wei already told you what wasn't going on?"

"Well, she told Er Tai, who then told me," Yong Qi said.

"And did you believe Zi Wei would spread false information when she knew it would eventually find its way to you?"

"Honestly? I didn't know what to think."
Xiao Yan smiled to herself. "Okay, okay, I guess I can't really blame you for coming to wrong conclusions with insufficient information."

"What would the right conclusion be?"

Finally, Xiao Yan told him, admittedly not very succinctly nor effectively, about the newly discovered relationship between herself and Xiao Jian. Despite what was undoubtedly a confusing account, Yong Qi sounded genuinely pleased when he finally repeated the crucial point of it, "Xiao Jian's your brother."

"Yup."

She could hear him laugh self-deprecatingly, and it made her chuckle as well.

"Okay. I feel foolish now," he said sheepishly.

"If it makes you feel better, you weren't the only person who jumped to that conclusion. And I'm not talking about just the people who have nothing but gossip about us on the internet, either. Liu Qing, and I'm pretty sure Liu Hong as well, assumed it at one point. I'm sure they'd have come to the same conclusion if they saw those photos without my explanation beforehand."

"I am happy for you, Xiao Yan," he said, his voice soft with sincerity.

"Thanks."

"So, how much longer are you going to be in America? Or are you planning to go home at all?"

"Of course I'm coming home. I'm not moving to America."

"No?" He sounded genuinely surprised. Then, more dryly, he added, "It'd probably give you more privacy."

She laughed. "I have to say, the idea is very attractive, but no. I mean, it's not like Mom and Dad and Xiao Jian never suggested it. But honestly I can't imagine it. I think, in many ways, Beijing is too much a part of me."

"I have to say, I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Are you?"

"Of course."

Somehow, the two simple words from him managed to make her smile widely and involuntarily and she couldn't quite place her fingers on the reason why.

"I'm glad too," she whispered.

Before she could say anything else, Xiao Jian knocked on the frame of her bedroom door and poked his head in.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Oh, hold on," Xiao Yan said to Yong Qi on the line before removing the phone slightly from her ear. To her brother, she said, "Give me a moment? I'll be down in a sec."

Xiao Jian shrugged and said, "Okay," before leaving for his own room.
To Yong Qi, Xiao Yan said, "I've got to go. Email me what we talk about before?"

"Sure. Talk to you later?"

"Of course."

Xiao Yan hung up and began to gather her things to go downstairs. She had dinner plans with her new family.

Outside in the hall, she met Xiao Jian again.

"So who was that on the phone?" her brother asked.

Xiao Yan though about fibbing, but then realised she really had no good reason. "Yong Qi," she said, striving for casual.

"Really?" Xiao Jian asked, sounding intrigued.

Xiao Yan really wasn't sure how she felt about her brother's obvious interest in her she-didn't-even-know-what-to-call-it thing with Yong Qi. On the one hand, she knew he wasn't being nosy for the sake of it, and he genuinely wanted to learn more about her life and was perhaps also even concerned for her. He didn't know Yong Qi, so clearly he was struggling to understand what she wanted him to do in the fact of the obvious fact that she was far from being able to really let Yong Qi just be a part of her past.

The part of Xiao Yan that recognised all this wanted to confide in him, but simply didn't know how. How could she guarantee that he would understand that she didn't even know herself what she wanted out of the ashes of this relationship? How could she explain to him that knowing that neither Yong Qi nor she were over each other was perhaps the biggest obstacle currently between them? Neither of them managed to move on, so they strived to be friendly whenever they met or encountered each other, in the hope that somehow that would teach them to move away from each other.

Of course, the reality was, the keeping in touch, the texts, the phone calls, the "I saw this gorgeous scenery half way across the globe and I thought of you" gestures achieved the opposite. She didn't know why they didn't see that coming.

And yet…despite knowing that their efforts to walk away from each other had failed hilariously, it was somehow still a thousand times more difficult, now that they had stepped away, to take the few steps that would bring them truly back together.

So they had settled for this vague state of in-between that clearly satisfied neither of them, but not daring more.

It was all the kind of conflicting confusion and messiness that Xiao Yan had sworn she would never get involved in again.

But this wasn't like the last time.

This wasn't her being too much of a coward to find a way out.

This was her being too much of a coward to find a way back in.

Somehow, that was even worse.
So, it was unsurprising that Xiao Yan found herself unable to immediately reply when, seeing her pensiveness, Xiao Jian asked, "What is between the two of you now anyway?"

Xiao Yan found she could only scoff and laugh at herself. "If I knew, my life would be a lot less complicated."
2015, April

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2015

April

After two weeks in Boston, Xiao Yan returned to Beijing practically owning a house.

"Mom and Dad want to give you the house in Beijing," Xiao Jian told her two days before her flight back to Beijing.

She stared at him and yelped, "What?"

"You know how I told you the plan was that they would return to Beijing at the end of the year to sell it? Well, now they want to transfer the ownership to you instead. Of course, they'll still have to be in Beijing to do that, so it won't happen until the end of the year."

Xiao Yan was still perplexed and at a loss as to how to react to what she was being told. "But why?" she asked helplessly.

"Well, if you're not going to move over here – "

"Xiao Jian, it's not that I don't want to be near you all – " she protested automatically, feeling unreasonably awkward.

"I know," Xiao Jian said hastily, reaching over to put a calming hand on hers. "I understand, and Mom and Dad do too, that you've only just met us, and found out about this relationship. To uproot all that you have in Beijing to move here is a life changing decision, and we can't expect it of you. I will be coming back and forth, so we will still see each other, and it's not impossible to forge a relationship over the long distance anymore. Even if you had a more solid base to stand on, I am not surprised if you would still prefer to remain in China. Sometimes, we just belong to a place that we don't want to leave, and I get that Beijing is that for you. So don't think of the house as a way of pressuring you to feel like you owe us something or anything."

"And yet you're still telling me that Mom and Dad want to give me a house."

"Well, you should probably think of it as part of your inheritance from our birth parents," Xiao Jian said. "They didn't exactly leave us penniless, Xiao Yan. Now that we have found you, you obviously have a right to take possession of your share of the inheritance, but since, for such a long time, they weren't sure whether they'd ever find you, Mom and Dad have invested the assets in different ways. To liquidate it and transfer it to you would require a lot of legal procedures, and in the end, the cash value might not be durable as a house in Beijing, especially in that district. So Mom and Dad thought it might be better if, instead of selling the house, they would transfer the ownership to you."

"What am I supposed to do with a house?" she asked, wide-eyed with incredulity.

Xiao Jian chuckled. "Well, whatever you want. You don't necessarily have to live in it. Honestly, it is really too big and honestly would be rather a waste for you to live in it by yourself. It might be better for you to rent it out for now. And in the future, what you do with it is up to you. That's the
"Is it possible for me to think about this before accepting this huge offer?" Xiao Yan asked, laughing nervously.

"Do you have a reason to not want a house?" her brother asked.

"Do you know how strange it is, to have nothing your entire life, and suddenly someone drops a house on you?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I know you're going to need time to adjust to the idea," Xiao Jian replied sympathetically. "But Xiao Yan, as I said, it is your inheritance, and something you have a right to."

"If you're going to put it that way..." Xiao Yan said, before trailing off and shaking her head, still feeling bewildered. "It's still so strange to wrap my head around though."

"This entire situation is strange, Xiao Yan. I never thought when I took a short term job in Beijing, I'd end up finding a sister I barely even remember having, either."

Xiao Yan found that she could only smile wryly at the comment.

Through all this time of navigating the new found relationship with her brother and his adopted parents, she found her situation paralleling Zi Wei's life-changing discovery of her family more and more as each day went by. Obviously her situation lacked the royal titles and media exposure, something for which she was immensely relieved, but everything else, including the odd dance around each other, trying to figure out how to build a relationship that should by definition be immensely intimate with people she'd just met and barely knew, were all things she had seen Zi Wei go through before. At the time, she could barely imagine how it might feel, and now, she still couldn't quite decide what she was supposed to feel. All in all, there was just the general numbness of wondering when everything around her might begin to feel normal.

Zi Wei wasn't really helping the situation, when she refused to just tell Xiao Yan how to get over these feelings. In their conversations, she only continued to insist that the situations weren't the same at all, and the coping mechanisms that might have worked for her didn't necessarily work for Xiao Yan, and that Xiao Yan should just trust her instincts. The problem with that was her instincts were all over the place and couldn't make up their mind on what she should feel.

Unhelpful advice aside, Xiao Yan was still sure that she couldn't have coped with this huge wave which had drenched her life with questions and confusing emotions without Zi Wei. There was probably no one else in the world who might have as much patience to listen to Xiao Yan ramble aimlessly as she tried to work out her feelings. During her two weeks in Boston, more than once did Xiao Yan pause mid-sentence only to realise that she was keeping Zi Wei up at some wee hour of the morning, having forgotten that there was half a day of time difference between them. When she half-heartedly grumbled about how Zi Wei should have just reminded her it was late, Zi Wei had simply said with song-like laughter, "Oh really Xiao Yan, it isn't like you didn't sacrifice as much sleeping time to listen to me trying to figure out what I should do and how I should feel about my family."

Xiao Yan considered herself spoiled for Zi Wei's support, so it was easy to notice that something else was obviously afoot when, during their reunion in her apartment after she returned to Beijing, Zi Wei barely seemed to be taking in a word she was saying.

"Okay, what's up?" Xiao Yan asked. She peered at Zi Wei, concerning mounting as she considered the distracted expression on her friend's face. It was unlike Zi Wei to look so completely spaced out,
and that was not yet mentioning the reason for the pinched frown on her face.

Zi Wei was obviously startled by Xiao Yan's words. She turned to give Xiao Yan a slightly guilty look from the other end of the couch, before shaking herself, evidently trying to clear her head. "Oh I'm sorry, Xiao Yan. My mind is just all over the place right now."

"Obviously," Xiao Yan said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, no, it's fine. I mean, you have lots to think about already – "

Xiao Yan held back a sigh. Sometimes, Zi Wei's conflict aversion could make it so hard to get her to talk about it and get the problem off her chest, instead of silently brooding about it.

"Zi Wei, I know we've been talking a lot about my stuff lately, but that doesn't mean you have to push your own problem aside. Come on, tell me about it."

Despite Xiao Yan's sincere reassurance, Zi Wei's eyebrows still creased together anxiously. It was an expression that clearly called for more coaxing.

"Seriously, Zi Wei, do you think I can't tell when you have something bothering you? Please just tell me what's wrong?"

"You'll just tell me it's silly," Zi Wei said with a heavy sigh. "It really is, a little bit."

"Maybe. But you have to tell me first what's going on before I can agree or disagree with you."

"I kind of had an argument with Er Kang."

The announcement honestly took Xiao Yan by surprise. She wasn't sure what she expected Zi Wei to say, but it really wasn't this. Er Kang and Zi Wei didn't argue, and they rarely disagreed. In the times when they did, it was always settled in the calmest of manners possible. Xiao Yan always found herself in a sort of surreal, incredulous awe whenever she thought about how their relationship functioned with so few fights, but apparently it had been doing this for years. Looking back, she genuinely couldn't think of a time before when a disagreement with Er Kang had bothered Zi Wei so much that she would avoid talking about it.

"I mean, it's over now," Zi Wei added, "but I still can't seem to shake it."

"What about?" Xiao Yan asked. At the same time, she wondered how it was possible for the argument to be over when Zi Wei just admitted she wasn't over it.

"Apparently, Er Kang used to go out with Qing Er."

"Oh."

Xiao Yan realised, a moment too late, that her lack of surprise was obvious, and Zi Wei was not distracted enough to not have noticed. She looked at Xiao Yan suspiciously.

"Did you know this?" Zi Wei asked, while Xiao Yan tried to not look too guilty.

"Um… Yong Qi might have mentioned it, once?"

Zi Wei's frown deepened. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It wasn't really my business," Xiao Yan said, a tad defensively. "For one thing, apparently it ended years before he met you. If you were going to find out, I thought you should find it out from Er
"I guess you're right," Zi Wei conceded reluctantly. She seemed lost in thoughts for a long moment again.

"Are you saying that your argument had to do with Qing Er?" Xiao Yan asked.

"In a way. I found out that Er Kang and Qing Er used to be a couple by accident. The other day, I went over to his place, and as I came in, she was just leaving. Er Kang told me she was just dropping off something she was asking him to deliver to a mutual friend. I didn't think anything about it at the time, until He Jing mentioned offhandedly a couple of days later something about how they used to be together. She obviously thought I already knew, so what she said took me totally off guard. I asked Er Kang about it later, and he admitted that they used to be a couple, but when I met her at his place, she really was just dropping something off for a friend. As you said, it ended years ago, of course, and they barely ever see each other anymore now, so I shouldn't make a big deal out of it or let it bother me, but – "

"It does bother you, obviously."

Zi Wei sighed and said, rather vaguely, "I know I shouldn't let it get to me at all."

"Do you believe him about why she was at his place?"

"Yes," Zi Wei said slowly. To Xiao Yan, it was clear that Zi Wei didn't _not_ believe the reason Er Kang gave, but she also couldn't quite convince herself that that was all there was to the visit. As if to confirm her own ambivalence, she added, "I mean, I don't think Er Kang would actually lie to me."

Xiao Yan didn't think so either, but she could understand why Zi Wei felt so uncomfortable with the whole situation. "Does it bother you because they used to be a couple, or because he never told you about it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I mean, it's not like I was under the impression that he had never had relationships before. It's just...different, somehow, when I know her – "

"And she's also your cousin. Of course it's different."

"It's not just that, either," Zi Wei said. "Even as I told him I already knew about it, he was very reluctant to tell me about the fact that they used to date. I don't know, it feels like that just inadvertently proves that he went out of his way to keep this information from me before. _That_ was what we argued about."

"What exactly happened? You heard He Jing mention that they used to be together, remembered that you saw her at his place before, then went and confronted him about it? Did he try to deny it or something?"

"He didn't deny it. He just acted really strange about it. I wouldn't have been upset about it if he had acted...I don't know, normal when he told me about it. Instead, he was really reluctant to talk about it at all, and acted like he was admitting to some dark secret. Of course, when I pointed that out, he insisted that that was not true and he has nothing to feel guilty about. The strange thing is, I'm sure he didn't and doesn't. It just bothers me that after all this time, he clearly feels uncomfortable just telling me about these kind of things. It's not like I'm asking him for details."

"Well, I guess the discomfort might be because she's your cousin," Xiao Yan pointed out.

"But isn't that part of the point?" Zi Wei argued. "If she was some girl neither of us would ever have
a chance of ever running into again, I wouldn't expect him to tell me every detail about all his past girlfriends at all. But we are both guaranteed to be around Qing Er again, shouldn't he have realised that he needed to tell me about the two of them before now?"

"So when you said you guys had an argument, it was over the question of whether he should have told you he used to go out with Qing Er?"

"Yes. I told you it was silly. What makes it even more so is the fact that we've never had an argument this serious before."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I've never understood how you two managed to be together all this time and only now you have a big fight," Xiao Yan commented. "Maybe you're just overdue for one."

"We're not you and Yong Qi, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei replied with a wry smile.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you and Yong Qi thrived on the disagreements and debates – "

"You mean 'bickering'," Xiao Yan cut in.

Zi Wei smiled a little. "Maybe, but the point is you liked bickering. Er Kang and I…aren't like that."

"Honestly, considering how there is no 'me and Yong Qi' anymore, we could probably draw the conclusion that we disagreed on too many things," Xiao Yan said with a soft sigh.

"You didn't break up because of some disagreement," Zi Wei pointed out.

She was right, of course. If anything, the reason for their break up was something they actually agreed on. Sometimes, Xiao Yan found it difficult to reconcile herself to how absurd her life could be.

Shaking herself a little, Xiao Yan pushed the thoughts out of her head. Trying to going over her relationship with Yong Qi was not a useful exercise in this conversation.

"We're talking about you and Er Kang," Xiao Yan said. "You said the argument was over, but if you're still thinking about it, it obviously isn't as over as you want it to be. What did you want him to do anyway? He's already admitted he used to date Qing Er, hasn't he?"

"That's the thing. He 'admitted', because I already knew. If I didn't accidentally find out, he would have happily kept it from me. He thought there was no reason for him to tell me about Qing Er, and maybe he was right to a certain extent. But I just feel like the way he insisted he didn't want to make a big deal out of it, was him making a big deal out of it."

"What you're saying is, you wanted him to admit that he was wrong to keep this a secret from you?"

"I…I suppose so. Yes."

"Did he?"

"Eventually."

"But…?" Xiao Yan prompted when she still looked troubled.

"I don't know!" Zi Wei exclaimed, frustrated. "I just don't know how to deal with the fact that he felt he was right to keep something like this a secret from me! It feels like even though he thinks it's
resolved now, it's really not, and in the future, the issue will just rear its head again."

Xiao Yan frowned in confusion. "You can't believe that Qing Er has any, I don't know, designs on Er Kang still, do you?"

As Zi Wei stared at her, Xiao Yan realised that the thought hadn't crossed her mind at all, but now that it has been mentioned, it might have just become a new weight on her insecurity. Xiao Yan mentally slapped herself; she hadn't intended to put that idea in Zi Wei's head at all.

"Why do you say that?" Zi Wei asked, sounding a bit choked up. "Do you think – did Yong Qi say something that might mean – "

"No!" Xiao Yan cut in hastily before Zi Wei could totally finish her question.

That was one notion she wanted to banish cleanly, for Zi Wei's peace of mind. While she didn't always understand Er Kang, Xiao Yan understood enough about him to believe that Zi Wei really had no reason to doubt. He certainly would not want Zi Wei's mind to turn to these groundless speculations, and ironically it was probably because he wanted to keep these kinds of thoughts at bay that he avoided any mention of Qing Er to Zi Wei in the first place, leading to this confusing situation they now found themselves in.

Xiao Yan continued, "I don't mean that at all. All Yong Qi ever said to me was that things ended between Er Kang and Qing Er years ago and Er Kang really shouldn't be so uncomfortable with the idea of you getting to know Qing Er. So clearly that means the opposite of what you fear. I was trying to – ineffectively, clearly – ask a rhetorical question. Besides, ever since you met Qing Er, she clearly hasn't shown any sign of minding the idea of you and Er Kang, nor has she ever given you reason to realise that the two of them used to be a thing, so that must mean that she is over him as well, right? So I don't think you should worry about her."

Zi Wei sighed heavily. "I just never thought I'd be this suspicious, you know? It's not even that I don't trust him, because I am sure he means what he says and he wouldn't lie to me. I guess I'm just afraid of feelings that maybe he isn't even aware he still has. This whole revelation took me by surprise, and I don't want to be taken by surprise like that again."

"Okay, this might be the most obvious question in the world, but you have told him any of this?"

"No. I just can't think of a way to tell him that wouldn't just make me sound so petty."

"I thought talking about your feelings was what you and Er Kang were supposed to be good at."

Zi Wei smiled wryly. "We can't be good at it all the time, Xiao Yan."

"For what it's worth, I think you should tell him. And I don't think he'll think you petty. He just needs to understand what you're thinking and I know you guys practically read each other's mind and everything, but as you said, you can't do that all the time. So talk to him."

Zi Wei gave Xiao Yan a searching look, before chuckling. "You know, if I had to be honest, I didn't expect this to be your advice."

"Really? What did you expect me to say?"

"I don't know. Before, I was sure that if I told you about this, you'd probably just say 'screw it, he's not worth stressing this much over, let's just get drunk and forget the problem exists' or something."

"Do you want me to say that?" Xiao Yan asked, laughing. "Because I totally could."
"No, I think we can both skip the hangover in the morning," Zi Wei said, smiling.

"To be entirely serious, I wouldn't say that about Er Kang. I mean, after all this time, it's kind of obvious that he loves you and you'll work this out eventually. I wouldn't want you to lose him, especially over something like this. Besides, I've just spent the last two weeks doing nothing but have heart to heart talks with my brother and his adopted parents. I think I've learnt that there are benefits to the whole thing."

Zi Wei noiselessly let herself into Er Kang's apartment, wondering if he was home. While technically his working shifts were planned out weeks in advance, his job also sometimes took him away at a moment's notice, perhaps to cover for someone who unexpectedly found himself not in a fit state to protect the Crown Prince, or when suddenly a larger detail was required.

However, today, his day off, she found him at home as expected, though admittedly in front of his computer in his office. He looked up at smiled at her as she entered the room. She walked over to where he sat and perched herself on the armrest of his chair.

"What's that?" she asked, peering at his screen, which was showing something that looked like a blueprint of a building.

"The layout of a hotel where Yong An's attending a function next week," he answered. "There's going to be a wedding there at the same time, so security arrangements will be interesting."

Zi Wei made a little humming noise of acknowledgement in the back of her throat while watching him from her slightly higher angle.

The thing about rarely fighting was that when they did fight, they didn't know how to recognise the cues to understand when one or both of them have moved on from the reason for the fight, thus to understand that they should just continue about their lives as if nothing had happened. Even as she thought about this, Zi Wei realised that in her own way, Xiao Yan had been right. This particular fight wasn't something that they could just pretend never happened. At first glance, it might seem so very simple, but there were undercurrents to it that she didn't fully understand until this moment.

The anxiety that she had been carrying around with her all this time didn't really have anything to do with Qing Er herself. Truthfully, Zi Wei liked Qing Er. She found it hard to imagine anyone not liking Qing Er, which was, of course, precisely the problem. That logic extended to Er Kang too. He liked Qing Er once. He probably loved her once. Was it possible that those feelings could totally disappear, that he could let someone like Qing Er go to choose Zi Wei instead?

The nature of his job and his connections put him in contact with such a great number of people, and she was only one among them. She didn't know why it took until now for her to realise, relatively, how small a place she had been occupying in his life, and for how short of a time.

"Er Kang," she said quietly, "we should talk."

He looked up at her. She could see that he knew what she wanted to talk about, even as he asked, "About what?"

"Qing Er," she said. She slid off his chair and turned her back to him, walking away to put some distance between them. "Or rather, the fact that you never wanted to tell me about her."

"Zi Wei, I told you, there is nothing to talk about," he said with a hint of exasperation and weariness. She turned around to look at him from across the room. "For you, maybe. Maybe you have said all
you want to say. But I haven't, Er Kang."

He frowned, but thankfully, he also stayed silent and waited for her to speak.

"I know you think there's nothing to talk about where you and Qing Er are concerned anymore. But to me, it feels like unfinished business – "

"Zi Wei – "

"No, let me speak, please! Let me say this. You were with this amazing girl, who's also my cousin, whom I like. But I look at her and I don't understand why you ever let her go in the first place. You said her studies and your career got in the way then, but those aren't problems anymore now. She's in and out of our lives all the time. How do you know – how do I know – that what you had before won't just crop up again? The fact that you tried to hide the fact that you used to be in a relationship with her from me all this time, and were so reluctant to tell me about it even when I already knew just makes me wonder whether you were just in denial yourself all this time about the fact that you no longer have feelings for her. How can you be so sure that those feelings are truly disappeared and gone? What if they are just buried all this time? Can you be sure it won't ever come back up again?"

"Of course I can!" Er Kang exclaimed. "I am sure! Zi Wei, that's what I've been trying to tell you all this time. I am!"

He had risen from his seat during her speech and was now pushing back his chair to walk towards her. She stood frozen in her place and stared at him until he was right in front of her.

"Zi Wei, I can be sure that everything is truly over between me and Qing Er, because during all this time that we've spent talking about her, she hasn't been in my thoughts at all. Instead, it's been thoughts of you. Your face, your words, your smile, your name. It's always been you!"

Her heart felt assaulted from all sides as she listened to these words, spoken with such depth of truth in his voice; it was begging her to surrender to him. To give herself even the flimsiest of defence for just a little time longer, she forced herself to avert her eyes. It simply hurt to look at that serious, earnest expression on his face that was just so Er Kang, pleading her to believe his words. She wanted to. How she wanted to! It wasn't like she didn't know how Er Kang was incapable of dishonesty. Yet at the same time, why was it so hard for her to push away that voice in her head that was wondering if even though he might truly mean what he was saying, there was still the tiniest possibility that these words were just his way of trying to convince both himself and her?

Er Kang took her hand and held it to his chest. The touch made her stomach seem filled with butterflies, but she still couldn't quite look at him.

"Zi Wei, I know you think I'm just deceiving myself. I know you think I was wrong to have kept my previous relationship with her a secret from you, and now, seeing you so distressed over it has convinced me that you are right. I shouldn't have tried to keep it a secret from you. But I was only trying to spare you from this unnecessary uncertainty, Zi Wei. Ever since you found your father, I've watched you try to navigate all the new relationships coming into your life, and it always took you a long time to truly be convinced that people around you love you sincerely. You've always been so scared of losing the people you love, Zi Wei, and it hurts me to see you so scared. I didn't want you to do precisely this – to overthink about the fact that you might lose me, when it is the one thing that will never happen."

Zi Wei's face was still turned away, but she could see him looking intensely at her out of the corner of her own eyes. After a long, strained silence, she turned her gaze back to him, her resolve wavering when her eyes met his.
"Do you believe me?" Er Kang asked.

"I – I want to, Er Kang."

"But you can't be sure that I am sure that I am over Qing Er?"

She couldn't make a verbal reply, but she was sure he got his answer from the way her eyes teared up a little.

"Oh Zi Wei," he said with a long, soft sigh, rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb. "Do you want to know how I do know that both Qing Er and I are over each other?"

"How?"

"Because I was talking with her on your birthday last year, and even then, I wanted to marry you, and she was genuinely unbothered when I told her about it. Qing Er had always known her own mind; I have learnt to believe her when she says something, and she said she's happy for us. I was glad to know that, Zi Wei. If I wasn't over her, I would have been less pleased. Besides, even before I met you, Qing Er and I have thrown together plenty of times before. If there were unfinished business between us, we would have resolved them a long time ago. But neither of us ever remotely thought that was a good idea at all. So there really is nothing for you to worry about."

Zi Wei was aware that Er Kang had been speaking, but her thoughts were locked on a single phrase early in his speech, which caused her to only vaguely hear the rest. She must have been staring at him, because Er Kang became concerned when she didn't reply.

"Zi Wei?"

"You want to marry me?" she said. Her voice came out slightly strangled, and why did she suddenly feel like there was nowhere near enough air in the room?

He stared at her for a moment. She wasn't sure he looked so surprised because he actually said this, or because she was so surprised that he said it. "Yes." There was a short pause, before he added a little sheepishly, "Have we never talked about this?"

"Not really."

"Oh."

Zi Wei found herself laughing nervously. "Are you proposing to me right now?"

The question made Er Kang's expression turn suddenly quite alarmed, which in turn made Zi Wei feel like her stomach just dropped. Had she been too hasty with her assumptions? After all, he was speaking about half a year ago, had things changed in the meantime…

She clenched her hands, feeling her nails digging into her palm, which jolted her into pushing away these rampant thoughts of panic. After all, nearly four years together surely had earned her the right to that assumption.

He ran his fingers nervously through his hair, but he was chuckling shakily too as he answered, "I was supposed to have a whole speech, you know. This wasn't the plan." Er Kang reached out and grasped Zi Wei's hand, leading her to sit down on a sofa nearby. "But yes, of course I want to marry you. I didn't realise that we have hardly talked about it between us at all, but maybe that's because with all the arrangements I've been making at work, it feels like we're set and I just thought that of course you...you'd agree…"
Er Kang faltered, and the smallest hint of uncertainty appeared in his eyes. Zi Wei couldn't think of any other way to react but to take his face in both her hands, pulling him to her and kissing him.

"Of course I'd agree," she whispered when they broke the kiss.

He stared at her, dazed. "Yes?" His voice was still shaking.

She nodded, and Er Kang just pulled her to him and kissed her again.

Eventually, they did have to return to the subject of Qing Er, because it was never a good idea to get lost in the euphoria of the moment and leave an actual conversation about unfinished business unfinished. Admittedly, having expressed out loud where they both wanted to be with each other, and gone through the not-proposal, it became easier for Er Kang to convince Zi Wei that there really was nothing for her to worry about where Qing Er was concerned. It also probably helped that when Qing Er heard the news two days later, she called Zi Wei and sounded so genuinely happy for her and Er Kang that it was impossible to doubt her sincerity.

"So when is the wedding?" Xiao Yan asked a week later when they were sprawled out on Zi Wei's bed.

They had just finished laughing about how Er Kang, who always had everything planned out meticulously, ended up making the most off the cuff proposal-that-wasn't-really-even-a-proposal ever. ("He needed some spontaneity in his life," Xiao Yan pointed out.)

"Oh, let me guess," she added gleefully, "you can't really decide yet, as weddings in the imperial family is going to be insanely complicated and you're going to go through the whole three letters and six ceremonies."

Zi Wei laughed. "In a way, yes, you're spot on. I mean, technically, if you think about it, nowadays people do still go through all the motions of families meeting and discussing the wedding plans. They just don't call it by the traditional names anymore. Anyway, Er Kang and I talked to our parents about it, and basically it comes down to the three main ceremonies: nacai, nazheng and the actual wedding, qinying."

"What is the point of even having a nacai ceremony?" Xiao Yan asked. "Isn't it just for the families to make each other's acquaintance? Your families already know each other, the fact that you two are getting married isn't exactly the world's most shocking revelation. Come to think of it, what are you going to even do with wenming? It's not like you're not going to get married if on the off chance your eight characters don't match or something."

"It's more like I said, going through the motions. According to Ah Ma, it would be pretty simple anyway – "

"Coming from your father, I'd take that with a pinch of salt, to be honest," Xiao Yan cut in.

Zi Wei shook her head with a wide smile. "He just means nacai will be an entirely private ceremony between our families only. We haven't decided the scale yet, but we'll probably end up having an engagement party after the nazheng ceremony. I guess the good thing about not having any official duty in the family means that there won't be any debate on how much of the wedding will be televised."

"Even if it's not going to be televised, I bet it's going to still be pretty elaborate."

Zi Wei made a little noise in her throat before admitting, "It will be…traditional."
"How traditional?"

"We haven't worked out the details yet, but honestly if He Jing's wedding is anything to go by, it's going to be full traditional qizhuang, headdress, flower pot shoes, red veil, stepping over glowing coals, tea ceremony and everything."

"Do you want all that?" Xiao Yan asked, looking at Zi Wei curiously. "I mean, I know your family have certain expectations, but it is going to be your wedding. It should be the way that you want."

"Honestly, I've never really ever imagined what my wedding might be like, and even if I did, something like this is probably not what I would have thought of," Zi Wei said thoughtfully, but then her whole face transformed as a wide smile bloomed. "But I am so excited for it, Xiao Yan! I mean, I'm sure the planning and everything will be very stressful, but it's my wedding, it's going to be fun, right?"

Xiao Yan grinned and leaned over to hug her friend. "Of course it will!"

Chapter End Notes

Three Letters & Six Etiquettes of Traditional Chinese Wedding

Three letters

Three letters include Betrothal Letter, Gift Letter and Wedding Letter. Betrothal Letter is the formal document of the engagement, a must in a marriage. Then a Gift Letter is necessary, which will be enclosed to the identified bride's family, listing types and quantity of gifts for the wedding once both parties accept the marriage. While the Wedding Letter refers to the document which will be prepared and presented to the bride's family on the day of the wedding to confirm and commemorate the formal acceptance of the bride into the bridegroom's family.

Six Etiquette

Proposing - nacai, 纳彩

If parents of a young man identify a woman as their future daughter-in-law. Then they will find a matchmaker. Proposal used to be practiced by a matchmaker. The matchmaker would formally present his or her client's request to the identified woman's parents.

Birthday matching - wenming, 问名

If the potential bride's parents did not object the marriage. the matchmaker would ask for the girl's birthday and birth hour record to assure the compatibility of the potential bride and bridegroom. If the couple's birthdays and birth hours does not conflict according to astrology. The marriage will step into the next stage. Once there is any conflict, meaning the marriage will bring disasters to the man's family or the woman's. So the marriage stops here.

Presenting betrothal gifts - naji, 纳吉
Once birthdays match, the bridegroom's family will then arrange the matchmaker to present betrothal gifts, enclosing the betrothal letter to the bride's family.

**Presenting wedding gifts** - *nazheng*, 纳征

After the betrothal letter and betrothal gifts are accepted. The bridegroom's family will later formally send wedding gifts to the bride's family. Usually, gifts may include tea, lotus seeds, longan, red beans, green beans, red dates, nutmeg, oranges, pomegranate, lily, bridal cakes, coconuts, wine, red hair braid, money box and other stuffs. It depends on local customs and family wealth.

**Picking auspicious wedding date** - *qingqi*, 请期

An astrologist or astrology book will be referred to selecting an auspicious date to hold the wedding ceremony.

**Wedding ceremony** - *qinying*, 亲迎

On the selected day, the bridegroom departs with a troop of escorts and musicians, which will play happy music all the way to the bride's home. After the bride is brought to the bridegroom's home, the wedding ceremony begins.
Chapter Notes

Looking at it now
It all seems so simple
We were lying on your couch
I remember
You took a Polaroid of us
Then discovered (then discovered)
The rest of the world was black and white
But we were in screaming color

— Out of the Woods, Taylor Swift

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2015

July

Throughout her entire life, Xiao Yan only started attending a few weddings very recently – those of university friends or colleagues. Growing up, it wasn't like she had any family whose wedding she could come to. She was, therefore, a little low on reference of how normal wedding and engagement parties usually went.

Surely they weren't anything like Er Kang and Zi Wei's engagement ceremony and dinner though.

The ceremony itself was private enough; it consisted of the groom-to-be, accompanied by his family, presenting betrothal gifts to the family of the bride-to-be. This was followed by a tea ceremony. Everything was witnessed only by family and friends, though considering the diplomacy involved in who was considered family also meant that there was actually a sizable audience.

There was a photograph session afterwards, which took the better part of two hours, and Xiao Yan thought Zi Wei bore it with more grace than Xiao Yan certainly could ever manage, considering she was wearing a full set of three-layer qizhuang. Not to mention, the flower pot shoes she wore took some getting used to, to prevent yourself falling flat on your face. After all, even if you wore high heels on a regular basis, it was still necessary to remember that with these shoes, the heels were in the middle of your foot instead of at the back. Xiao Yan thought the deliberately modest banner headdress, adorned with red silk flowers, was the sole blessing of the whole look.

"Hey, your friend is getting engaged," Qing Er's voice rang out beside her, making Xiao Yan turn her head, "why do you look so…"

"Hi," she replied with a smile. "So…?"

"Puzzled is the only word I can think of. You aren't surprised about this, are you?"

Xiao Yan laughed. "Oh god, no. Honestly if I am puzzled, it's probably at what's taken them this long." She gestured to the scene before them, where the photographer was directing Zi Wei and Jin
Suo to where he wanted them in the shot. "No, I was just thinking, even if she doesn't look it, she must be dying, wearing all those layers and having the lights shining in her face."

"You get used to the outfit after a while," Qing Er said, chuckling. She tugged at one of her own sleeves, elaborately embroidered with images of butterflies.

"You're wearing three layers in July," Xiao Yan pointed out incredulously. "Though I guess that would explain why this room is kept so cold."

"Well, at least you have someone who is enough of a gentleman to lend you his jacket," Qing Er said, indicating Xiao Jian's suit jacket draped around her shoulders.

She laughed. "And considering you brought my brother as your date, I'm guessing you know that this is his jacket."

Qing Er merely smiled and shrugged.

"I'm still not sure I want to know how that came about," Xiao Yan added.

"It wasn't that complicated," Qing Er said. "We ran into each other in that coffee shop again, reckoned it couldn't be entirely a coincidence that we met for the second time in the same place, so we talked and things just…happened from there."

"Are you sure it was a coincidence the second time?" Xiao Yan asked.

Qing Er didn't have time to answer, because at that moment, Xiao Jian appeared with a flute of champagne for her.

"Of course it was a coincidence, Xiao Yan," he said with mock dignity.

Qing Er laughed and took the champagne from him. "Just between us, Xiao Yan, I'll tell you I agree with you. I've been trying to get him to say that he went looking for me and he's being stubborn so far. But I'll get you to admit it one day."

Xiao Jian simply smiled at her, while Xiao Yan giggled. But before she could say anything to tease her brother further, Zi Wei appeared and pulled her away for photographs. It was apparent that neither Qing Er nor her brother minded the abandonment.

Xiao Yan didn't see her brother again until the banquet hosted by the family of the bride started in the ballroom of Yuan Ming Gong. That part of the night could not be considered by any definition to be private, considering the number of guests invited. Qing Er obviously had to be seated with her family during that time, and Xiao Yan dragged her brother to join her, so that she could interrogate him on his relationship with the princess. She only found out the fact that the two of them were even an item the day before, when he mentioned that he would be attending Zi Wei's engagement party as Qing Er's date. To her frustration, he continually insisted that there was not much to say yet, despite the fact that she could see with her very two eyes that it was patently not true. It wasn't like Qing Er would bring just anyone to an intimate family event like this. Xiao Yan also thought he totally gave away the fact that things were a lot more serious between him and Qing Er than he would have her believe when they both disappeared during the second half of the evening, leaving Xiao Yan to mingle with Zi Wei and Er Kang's five hundred guests.

"Well, they want a small guest list for their actual wedding reception, so the compromise is that their engagement party would be a more social event. The idea is that those who wouldn't be attending the wedding reception can attend this banquet instead," Yong Qi told her later when the evening was dying down, as they stood watching the couple saying goodbye to some of the guests. She had
mentioned to him that she didn't realise Zi Wei would even be comfortable with this many people. "So really, their actual wedding reception would probably be about a quarter of this size."

"It's still going to be over a hundred people. Though I guess that is actually small, even by standards of people who aren't…"

"Us?" Yong Qi prompted, chuckling.

"Yeah." Xiao Yan glanced down at her phone to check the time then looked up, glancing around. "Have you seen Qing Er?"

"No. Why?"

"She went off with my brother a while ago…It's getting late, I've already waded into that crowd to say goodbye to Zi Wei and Er Kang. My brother's my ride home."

"Didn't he come here with Qing Er?" Yong Qi asked.

"Yeah, but he said he'd take me home as Qing Er will probably go with her parents."

"I'll take you home if you want." Yong Qi said.

"Are you sure?"

He smiled. "Of course. Honestly, I kind of want to get out of here too."

"I should probably call my brother to let him know or something," Xiao Yan said.

While Yong Qi slipped away to get his car keys, Xiao Yan managed to get nothing from her brother except the voicemail message. In the end, she just sent him a text telling him her plans, before following Yong Qi through the many hallways of Yuan Ming Gong.

"This isn't the way to the front door," she pointed out, when he led her away in the obvious opposite direction.

"No, we're going out the back."

"Why?"

"Because, honestly, I don't really fancy alerting security and having one of them insisting on coming with us."

Xiao Yan laughed, but at the same wondered if she should be proud of this plan, or concerned. "You're trying to give them the slip?"

"Yes. There are plenty of cars leaving right about now, it'll be easy enough for us to sneak away."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I'll get an earful in the morning, probably, but honestly, it'll be worth it," Yong Qi said, shrugging. "What's brought this rebellious streak on?" she asked.

He turned and gave her a rueful smile. "Oh Xiao Yan, don't act like you haven't noticed how one engagement brought on questions of another or two, and that Yong An and I have been hounded the whole night."
She tipped her head and looked at him with a puzzled expression. "And now you're sneaking off with me? You'd think that would be the opposite of a solution to that problem."

"The solution is a drive will clear my mind."

Xiao Yan gave a small smile and gestured before her. "I guess in that case, after you then."

As they opened one of the back doors of Yuan Ming Gong and slipped outside into the garden, they were met with a gush of humid wind.

It started storming about two minutes after they were clear of the palace's gates. Yong Qi and Xiao Yan were so far silent, listening to the rain pounding on the roof of the car and sliding in sheets down the windows.

"So, your brother's my cousin's date..." Yong Qi finally spoke, but then trailed off suggestively.

Xiao Yan laughed. "Honestly I have no idea what's going on there. I introduced them when we accidentally ran into her in Boston, but they spoke about two words to each other. Somehow, after I returned to Beijing, they accidentally met up again and now he's her date to events in the palace."

"So it's serious," Yong Qi observed.

"Serious enough that she has told him she's a princess, anyway. When I introduced them in Boston, she was very relieved I didn't mention her connections," Xiao Yan said. "Not that I would know any details...He's been back here for a couple of weeks now, for work, but he hasn't mentioned a thing to me until yesterday that he was seeing Qing Er."

"Maybe he thought you wouldn't take it well?" Yong Qi asked, glancing at her.

"Why not?"

"Because she's my cousin."

Xiao Yan sighed. "To be honest, by now I've stopped being surprised that somehow our lives just get...tangled together despite our best efforts to achieve the opposite."

"Does that...bother you?"

"Not bother, exactly," she said with a chuckle. "It just makes me feel like the universe is trying to tell me something. But I don't want to believe that the universe has any role in my life at all. If that makes any sense."

"Honestly, Xiao Yan, sometimes believing that the universe wants something is the only sane way to explain some of the things that happen in my life at all," Yong Qi said. "So Xiao Jian is here for work? I'd have thought he's here to see you."

"Well, it's basically both. He has been spending the last couple of weeks writing a report for us, and he's finishing up in the next few days. Still, he's planning to stay in Beijing for a few extra days after that to spend some time with me. Or with Qing Er. I'm not sure."

Yong Qi laughed. "He's staying with you?" he asked.

"No. There isn't any room. Our adopted parents have a house here, so he's staying there." Xiao Yan thought for a moment, before adding, "Now that he is with Qing Er, would that...put him in the public eye?"
"Well...it's different with my cousins," Yong Qi said slowly. "The media does still care about who they go out with, but not to the extent of fascination they have with me or my brothers. And Qing Er is in America half the year anyway, and there she is lowkey enough to be able to avoid foreign press. Though..."

"Though what?"

"Though, if a photo of Qing Er and your brother together is ever published here, people will realise he's the same person who was photographed with you at the airport. Considering they don't know his relationship to you, there will be all sorts of insane speculation. So you might want to prepare him for that."

"More like prepare myself," Xiao Yan muttered. "If I ever find out who took those photos at the airport..."

Yong Qi only chuckled in sympathy at her disgruntlement.

"What should I do about that?"

"About what?"

"About the fact that apparently people thought Xiao Jian and I were a thing. The timing is so close together...I don't want to have to read stories that...I don't know, somehow Qing Er stole him from me or something stupid like that."

"I'm not sure you'll have a choice," Yong Qi said. "Unless you want to put out there your real relationship. Even if you do - "

"Which I don't."

"Even if you do, there isn't really a...means to do that that wouldn't seem...weird. I mean, you're both private citizens. Xiao Jian isn't even a citizen. Either way, neither of you are in any way obligated to announce anything about your private lives to the world, even when you consider your...association with my family. I guess you could make a post on social media somewhere and let it go viral, which it probably will without much effort, but even then, do you really want to actively put yourself out there like that?"

"No," Xiao Yan said flatly. "If I do that once, people would only come to expect it of me in the future, won't they?"

"Yeah, basically. So honestly, I'd just not actively do anything. Even if they do eventually write stories about some imagined love triangle between you and Qing Er and Xiao Jian, everyone who matters to you or them would know the truth, and that should be enough, right?"

"Yeah, you're right, of course," Xiao Yan said, sighing a little. "But I can't help but feel like I'm waiting for a shoe to drop right now."

"Would it help to have fun and laugh at how surreal the whole situation is?" Yong Qi asked. "Take amusement in the fact that your life is eventful enough to be made into a TV drama."

Xiao Yan laughed. "That would comfort me, if it was ever my life's ambition to be dramatic enough for TV. But thanks for the thought, anyhow."

The rest of drive was long and cautious, with the weather getting steadily worse by the minute. By the time they arrived at Xiao Yan's building, even the large umbrella was doing little of its job
keeping the two of them dry as they made their way across her building’s parking lot. They were both shivering by the time they arrived at her door.

"It's storming pretty hard out there, you sure you'll be okay getting back?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Of course," Yong Qi answered, smiling at her.

"You could stay – "

She stopped abruptly, wondering how he would take that suggestion. He didn't say anything but she could see him visibly take a breath.

She started again. "I mean, the weather's pretty horrible. If it's going to be dangerous for you to drive back, then you can take my couch."

Yong Qi smiled. "I appreciate it, Xiao Yan, I do. But I'll be fine. It's just a little rain."

It wasn't just a little rain, but she didn't want to make it more uncomfortable for both of them by pressing. So she simply nodded.

They both leaned in at the same time – and perhaps it was due to the effects of the cold but she wasn't even sure what she was aiming for: a hug or a kiss or something else – and ended up almost bumping noses. She pulled only slightly away, and suddenly they were staring at each other, faces only inches apart. He gave her a crooked smile and she froze, allowing him the initiative. He pulled her in for a hug and turned his head for what passed for a kiss on the cheek.

"I'll see you soon?" he asked when he pulled away.

She smiled and nodded. "Bye. Drive safe."

With one last smile, and he turned towards the direction of the lift. She leaned against the door frame and watched him go, grinning and waving back when he turned towards her at the door of the lift to give a final wave in farewell. It was only until the lift doors opened and he disappeared into it that she finally straightened and closed the door to her apartment.

Leaning her back against the now closed door, Xiao Yan felt suddenly out of breath. Not wanting to agonise over why he still had that kind of effect on her, she turned her phone over in her hand to check the time. It was just past ten, which was actually earlier than she expected to be able to get back home in this weather.

She kicked off her heels; they had been too beautiful for her to resist buying, but after a whole day in them, she was starting to want to set them on fire. She had to resist the urge to leave them pell mell on the ground, and forced herself to lean down to line them up neatly against the wall next to her other shoes. As the pressure on her feet was reduced, and her mind taken away from that discomfort, she came to realise that after the rain started and the air turned much too humid to be humanly bearable, her tights needed to peeled off as soon as possible. If she didn't already foresee hopping on one foot and crashing into the wall or stubbing her toes on a table, she would have tried to take them off on her way into the bedroom.

As it was, she only made it as far as the couch before collapsing on it and freeing her legs. Then she stood up and headed into the bedroom, unzipping her dress on the way. Finishing undressing in the bedroom, she tossed everything in the laundry hamper before pulling on an old t-shirt and shorts.

She was sitting on the bed with her laptop some time later when the doorbell rang. She looked at the computer clock, which read 10:46. This did not explain who could possibly be at her door in this
She stood up and went to the door, peering at the peephole. It was Yong Qi, looking rather shivery and wet from rain, which probably made sense considering everything. She pulled the door quickly open.

"Are you okay?" she asked instead of a greeting.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he replied. In one hand he was shaking water from the umbrella they had used early to walk across the car park to the door of her building. If it barely did its job of keeping out rain then, it was even less effective now. The storm had clearly worsened in the following half hour, because his suit jacket was dripping on her doormat. Over his other shoulder was a leather messenger bag that did not go with the suit, at all.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh. Oh, yeah." Xiao Yan stepped out of the way and held the door open for him. "What happened?"

"Uh... I got about fifteen minutes away when the storm must have struck down a tree which was blocking the road, because there was a huge traffic jam. I was going to wait it out but it looked long and in this weather it didn't seem like clearing up would happen any time soon. I reckoned if I didn't want to be stuck in that line of cars all night I might as well turn around right away."

He leaned the umbrella against the wall, hung his bag on her coat rack and took off his jacket, and now proceeded to rummage in the pockets.

"I made the mistake of getting out of the car to check how long the line of cars in front was. I think that was when I lost my tie... somehow," Yong Qi continued. "And one of my contacts definitely fell out so if I'm squinting at you now it's because I'm half blind. Made for one hell of a drive."

"You drove back here with only one contact lens?" Xiao Yan cried, alarmed.

He looked up and grinned at her. "No, of course not. I took the other one out and I have a spare pair of glasses in the car but they're useless once I got out onto the rain so they're in my pocket now, which means I really can't see much of you right now."

He fished them out and tried to clean the lenses on the lining of his jacket, which was soaked, so accomplished nothing.

"Oh for Heaven's sake, I'll get you dry clothes and you can sort out your glasses situation then."

Looking up at her, he asked suddenly, "You don't mind that I came back, do you?"

"No, no," she exclaimed. "I said you should have stayed. Then you wouldn't be down one silk bowtie and one contact lens."

"Yeah, well, I don't think there's much choice now. Sorry."

"Yong Qi," she said exasperatedly, shoving him. "Come on, I'm sure I must have some of your clothes somewhere in my stuff that can get you out of that suit."

He grabbed his bag and then ducked into her kitchen to squeeze as much water as possible out of his suit jacket while she went into the bedroom to rummage through the closet. She came up with a hoodie and a pair of sweatpants she stole from him when they were still together.
"Here," she said, entering the kitchen and holding the clothes out to him.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, and went into the bathroom to change.

When he emerged, looking sufficiently less formal and with clean glasses safely on the bridge of his nose, thus no longer in danger of bumping into her furniture, she asked, "Do you want me to chuck your wet clothes into the washing machine?"

"In what universe do you think my suits are chucked into a washing machine?" he asked playfully. "I hung it up in your bathroom. It'll keep until tomorrow and I can take it to be cleaned."

She smiled indulgently, then held out a hot mug of tea, which he took gratefully despite teasing, "Teabag, really?"

"If you want loose-leaf or fancy blossoming flower in a glass tea set, this is not the place to get it, especially at 11 at night," she retorted.

They settled on the couch after that. She sat with her feet tucked under her at one end, and he on the other, hands curled around their mugs of tea.

"What was the bag for?" she asked.

"Nothing's in it except phone, wallet and keys. If I had tried to put my phone in my pocket it would be dead from the rain now."

"All things considered, today went well even with threat of horrible weather, which thankfully didn't come until it was all over," Xiao Yan remarked.

"Well, I don't think people generally cancel on attending events they're invited to by the emperor even if it were raining this hard when the party started."

"I'm surprised you didn't have a date," she said offhandedly. "It would have saved you some uncomfortable questions from some of the guests."

Yong Qi laughed. "Or invited a whole other host of more uncomfortable questions. Besides, who did you think I could have invited?"

"Sure there is someone," she scoffed, hoping she didn't sound too much like she was fishing.

Yong Qi smiled distantly and held his tea to his lips for a sip before shaking his head. "Xiao Yan, I spent all of March doing a tour of Europe and the months before that cramming all my other duties together to make room for the tour. How do you reckon a girl fit into that?"

"Oh."

"Even if there is anyone more recent, it would be too new still for me to consider bringing them to something like this."

Xiao Yan couldn't think of any reply to that other than "Oh" again, so she said nothing, and drank her tea.

"To be honest…" Yong Qi said hesitantly, "there hasn't been anyone really…news-worthy."

He didn't say it, but she knew he meant 'after you'. Xiao Yan didn't know how to meet that declaration, so she only smiled weakly.
Of course, she had more or less worked this out. Unless Yong Qi had somehow devised an extremely effective way of preventing the always vigilant and effective press from discovering the secrets of his personal life and thus managed to carry out an entire secret relationship that no one has so far discovered, it really was self-evident that after Xiao Yan, there had been no one serious enough for the press to pound on.

Not that roses were raining down on Xiao Yan's love life either, come to think of it. After the extremely ill-advised date with Zheng Hao Ran, Xiao Yan more or less threw herself into concentrating on work and barely gave the romance side of her life a thought.

Dwelling on all this while Yong Qi was sitting close enough to reach out and touch was not a good idea. After all, didn't the fact that they were here, together, like this, mean that they were practically daring one another to admit that neither of them managed to move on?

In what she was well aware was a transparent attempt to distract both of them from the giant elephant in the room, she tried to joke, "I think it that was probably for the best. Surely you met nice-looking blonde in Scandinavia or something?"

To Yong Qi's credit, he did laugh.

"Possibly, but since it was my first solo diplomatic tour, the idea, I think, is to avoid front-page-of-tabloid-worthy situations involving hot blondes."

"Fair enough. Anything interesting things happened during your otherwise totally-lacking-in-hot-blondes tour of Europe?"

"Plenty of interesting things happened," he said. "It started off with the King of Liechtenstein wanting me to play messenger in an international royal courtship that had me wondering if somehow I've travelled back in time."

Xiao Yan giggled. "What?"

He smiled mischievously and began telling her the story of Maxi and Sofia, which ended with Xiao Yan laughing with tears in her eyes.

"But that is so cute, though."

"Yeah, it kind of was, in a slightly alarming way," Yong Qi replied, laughing as well. "I mean, in his defence, he is eleven."

"Honestly, that's kind of more reason to be glad that kings don't have that kind of power nowadays," Xiao Yan said.

He continued to tell her of his time in Europe, along with the photos on his phone. The conversation led, eventually, to where the tour ended in England.

"I still can't believe you actually got a whole Harry Potter set signed for me," she said, giggling.

He shrugged but looked rather pleased with himself. "I was going to go out and buy a copy for her to sign for you anyway, I might as well get the whole set."

"Well, at least you didn't have luggage restrictions, otherwise I would feel guiltier about making you drag it all back from London."

Yong Qi laughed.
"So what would you say is the most interesting thing that happened during your tour?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Well, I don't know if this qualifies as the most interesting, but there was a memorable moment when the future King of the United Kingdom threw up on me."


"Or Charles?" he asked, which made Xiao Yan giggle uncontrollably.

She finally added when she calmed down a bit, "George actually threw up on you?"

"Yes. When he is not spewing the contents of his stomach at my white tie attire, George is otherwise very cute. His parents were very apologetic, of course."

Xiao Yan laughed again.

They were suddenly interrupted by Xiao Yan's phone ringing.

"It's my brother," Xiao Yan said. "So he's finally realised that he's lost me. Incredible."

Yong Qi laughed as she excused herself to take the call. It was swift, as she only had to reassure Xiao Jian that she had arrived home safely and he should just go back to do whatever it was he had been doing with Qing Er.

When she returned to the living room and put her phone back down on the table, she found Yong Qi looking at it rather strangely.

"What?" she asked.

"That ringtone, isn't that a Taylor Swift song?"

"Yes, so?"

"Xiao Yan, you hate Taylor Swift!" Yong Qi exclaimed.

She threw a pillow at his general direction, which he caught easily. "I do not hate her. You guys always say that, but I have never hated her. I just thought she was very problematic, at one time."

"But not anymore, clearly."

"Yeah, well, colour me very pleasantly surprised at her new album. I never intended to listen to it, but I caught a glimpse of Blank Space lyrics... somewhere and then I just had to listen to the song, and after that the album."

"So what's different now that's got you converted?"

"It's amazing, though, but her new album is proof that people can learn and grow, and it's even more satisfying to see that growth when they do it so publicly. Her songs had always been very 'oh this guy cheated on me and he should go to hell' or 'that girl stole my boyfriend from me and she should go to hell' or 'oh no I'm single, this guy I like won't like me back, woe is me'; she's always like the victim and thus really weirdly removed from the story because of that. And this new album is very much focused on her – and I don't mean that in a conceited, 'I'm the best' way. It's like she's now more concentrated on her personal growth and wellbeing and the satisfaction she can bring to herself, and that shows, so much, through this album. Even if a lot of the songs are still about breaking up,
"It's now more about, 'okay so the break up happened, it sucks, but how can I learn from that and recover from that?' It's also actually quite satisfying to see her embracing and make fun of the persona the media paints of her."

"And that's enough for you to like her so much now that you'd use her song as a ringtone?" Yong Qi asked, looking amused.

"Yes, of course! She's moving in the right direction. Why should I not support that? And for your information, I've always found some of her songs catchy. It's just the lyrics that rubbed me the wrong way."

"You should tell Ke Ke this. She'll be thrilled you've come around."

"I haven't come around. My opinion of her previous lyrics holds, but since they're basically etched into music history for all of eternity now, I can't blame her for it all still being out there."

Yong Qi laughed.

"Anyway, so did anything else happen in Europe other than a future King vomiting on you and a current King turning you into a courier?" she asked.

They talked about Yong Qi's tour of Europe for another half an hour. She hadn't realised before now how much she'd missed what it felt like, to simply be able to just sit and talk with him, uninhibited by anything, on subjects that twisted and turned and changed at the slightest of openings.

When they both finally thought to check the time, they found that it was past one in the morning.

"We should get some rest," Xiao Yan said. "You're going to be all right out here?"

"Of course," Yong Qi said, smiling and standing up with her.

They stood opposite each other for a tense moment. She started to step away, and Yong Qi, in trying to make room for her, misjudged her intended action and moved in the same direction and they nearly bumped into each other. They stopped and laughed nervously.

He was close enough for her to reach out and touch him.

There was something about the way he was looking at her now that made her head spun.

The overwhelming memory of the last time they stood like this, just as unsure of what they were to each other, hit her like a cold splash of rain, and she found herself shivering involuntarily.

Xiao Yan didn't know how it happened or who initiated it, but the next thing she knew, her lips were on his, she was kissing him and he was kissing back, his hands at her hips, pulling her in closer.

This wasn't the plan, she thought to herself. This definitely wasn't the plan when she let him into her apartment.

And yet…it seemed like the only thing that made sense at that moment.

She could feel the length of his body pressed up against her and their breaths had fogged up his glasses.

When they finally pulled breathlessly from each other, they ended up staring at each other for a long time. Her finger tips felt like they were burning, still pressed against his cheek. She felt like she was reaching for the sun; it should hurt, yet she could only savour the feeling in languid reverie.
"Xiao Yan…" he said, his voice hoarse and full of a familiar tenderness that he had not allowed himself to use for so long. Xiao Yan felt her heart ache at the sudden realisation of how much she missed it, needed it, wanted it.

Xiao Yan reached up and removed his glasses, placing them on the table. The obstacle that would definitely otherwise have fallen off at some other point only for them to tread on later was now safely put away; she gripped the neck of his hoodie and used it to haul him closer. The movement startled him, and they tumbled in a mess of arms and legs back onto the couch. He didn't break the kiss and she could still feel his mouth and his breath hot and gentle on hers. His hands had hitched up her shirt and were now slipping under the fabric; they felt warm and tantalising against the skin of her back and no, this wasn't what she'd expected, but it was exactly what she wanted right now.

Xiao Yan forced herself to pull back enough catch a breath and to speak. She was still lying on top of him and their faces were still inches apart. He could tilt his head up and recapture her lips if he wanted to, but right then, Yong Qi was breathing heavily, and his eyes were closed.

"We should probably just both ditch the couch," she whispered.

He froze for a moment beneath her, and his eyes flew open. "You sure?" he asked hoarsely.

She nodded firmly.

"Xiao Yan – "

"Don't," she said, raising a finger to his lips to stop him. "I just want – "

She wanted him. And if the wild, untamed look he gave her now was any indication, he wanted her just as much. He brought up a hand and traced the outside of her lips. "Xiao Yan," he groaned and for a moment she wondered if they would never make it to the bed after all.

Xiao Yan leaned down to kiss him, hard, again but he allowed her only a few moments of pleasure, before pulling away.

"Where do you think this is going, Xiao Yan?"

"I – I'm not. Please don't think. Maybe we both did too much of that before. Can we just not? Can we just – "

"– have this moment?"

He sounded so full of longing, so…god, so in love, and she could only feel her heart fill up with joy that it was all directed at her.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. She wondered how he thought she could say anything else, how she was supposed to pull away, to stop, when he was still looking at her like that, like she was the oasis he found after days lost in the desert…

Yong Qi tangled his fingers into her hair and pulled her down for a breathless kiss. The almost-forgotten sensation and the feel of his lips on hers sent desire and pleasure to the very tip of her toes.

It was with difficulty that she pulled away and stood up, only to hold a hand out to him. He took it and she pulled him to his feet, and away.

Chapter End Notes
And this last scene has been about four years in the making. Though to be clear, this isn't going to be the solution to all their problems. More like the opposite :)

For Zi Wei's engagement outfit, think **Ruo Xi's outfit at the Tenth Prince's birthday**.
When Xiao Yan woke the next morning, the clock on the bedside table read 9:30 and the other side of her bed was empty.

Her breath hitched at the realisation, everything suddenly became cold despite the sunlight pouring in from her window. She didn’t know why she felt so close to crying or where this sudden spike of pain came from.

No, actually, she did. Of course she did.

Even with her tendency and ability to deny her own feelings even to herself, it was only too clear to her now what the night before meant. To her, at least. She never really quite managed to convince herself that her feelings for Yong Qi could be gone forever and last night just proved that she only needed the smallest of sparks, the tiniest of encouragement...

Xiao Yan sat up on her bed and wrapped the sheets around herself, pulling her knees up to tuck under her chin. She rested her head down and briefly closed her eyes.

She had thought she understood everything in his looks, his words, his touches the night before.

If she had understood correctly though, then why was he gone now? Did they not mean so much after all? Had she really just been projecting her own feelings after all?

But of course.

He would not want to get hurt again.

Possibly he could not wait for her to be certain of what she wanted in life anymore. He could not afford for a murky road ahead with no goal, no foreseeable ending.

And she could not blame him at all, because she was still so, so unsure when it came to the only future he could offer them.

Xiao Yan let out a frustrated cry, punched a pillow and threw it off the bed. It was so unfair, because she was not uncertain about him.

So why couldn't the two things line up, ever?

Xiao Yan closed her eyes and preparing to fight against the tears and yet at the same time wishing for their relief.

They didn't come.

She just turned her head and stared at the empty side of the bed for a very long time.

Finally, she forced herself to leave the bed and look for clothes.
Sighing, she put the kettle on and then pulled over a chair to sit at the kitchen counter and laid her head down. The marble felt cool on her cheek but did little to soothe her.

Then, there was a sound of the key turning in the lock.

Someone was opening the door of her apartment.

Xiao Yan froze, frowning. She stood up so quickly that the chair nearly toppled over, and she grabbed it just in time before rushing out to the entrance.

Yong Qi was hanging her keychain on its hook next to the door. When he turned around, Xiao Yan was staring stupidly at him, brows knitted.

"Are you all right?" Yong Qi asked, smiling, as if nothing was wrong.

She nearly burst out crying, and wasn't even sure how she managed to hold herself back in time. She shook her head, still clouded with confusion. "I'm fine," she muttered.

"I got breakfast," he said cheerfully. Then he brushed past her and headed into the kitchen, still talking as he went. "Oh and I nicked your iron to get my clothes dried. Wouldn't have bothered putting these back on but the shoes don't really go with the other things."

That was when she realised that he held plastic bags with breakfast food in his hands and the fact that he was wearing his clothes from the day before, sans jacket and bowtie. Xiao Yan wondered how he even thought it was a good idea to go out this early to buy food in the vicinity of her apartment, and was it possible that no one recognised him? Then again, he was wearing his glasses, and he told her once, a long time ago, how people didn't often associate him with them, so usually it took them longer to recognise him if he wore them. He called it his Clark Kent disguise.

Belatedly, she also realised she needed to follow him into the kitchen. Clearing her throat and hoping she didn't sound too close to tears, she said, hurrying after him, "Uh, yeah, sorry, I really don't have any food in the house right now."

"I noticed," he said with a grin.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" she asked.

"You hate being woken up!" Yong Qi exclaimed. "I didn't want you to start half the morning being grumpy at me."

"Oh," she said lamely before sitting down at the kitchen table.

There was clearly something in her voice that finally told Yong Qi something was off, as he turned around to look closely at her and then sat down opposite her, knitting his fingers under his chin.

"Are you sure you're okay? You're very – "

"You weren't there!" Xiao Yan blurted out, horrified that she started tearing up a little.

"What?"

"When I woke up, you weren't there. And I thought - "

The tears fell and she wondered if there was any way this situation could get worse.

Yong Qi looked at her, bewildered, then understanding dawned. He said slowly, "You thought I'd
Xiao Yan looked quickly away and brushed the tears off. Yong Qi, on the other hand, still looked at her, absolutely perplexed.

"Xiao Yan," he said gently, "you know I would never – I mean, that would make this seem an awful lot like a one-night stand."

"Isn't that what it is?" she asked miserably.

He was startled and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, even though they hadn't slipped at all. "Is that what you want it to be?" he asked in a tightly controlled voice and she could see him swallowing hard.

"I – I don't know what this is. I don't want to know what I want."

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said gently, reaching out to touch her hand. "You were upset when you thought I left, why?"

She pulled away from him and buried her face in both her hands. "I – I don't know."

It was easier than telling him the truth. Perhaps she should have known that last night was a bad idea. Perhaps they could have stopped thinking too much then, but come morning, of course they would have to think. It was foolish to assume otherwise.

Yong Qi rose from his chair and pulled it around the table to her, sitting down next to her. He took her hands in both of his and said, "Xiao Yan, you know a part of me will always love you, right? No matter what happens, I'm not going to be able to help that."

Her lips trembled and she couldn't bring herself to look up at him. She wondered how much it took of him to admit that, and thought of how she probably never would have the courage to do the same, first. She scrambled from her chair and stood up, walking away from him.

"But you can't think – you can't want – " she stammered with her back to him.

"What do you want?" he asked when she trailed off. "Tell me what you want, and we'll see if we can work it out."

"I don't know what I want," she whispered, turning to look helplessly at Yong Qi, who had risen from his chair as well and was now standing opposite her, looking like one word from her would send him striding across the kitchen and take her into his arms, never letting go.

"Yes you do. You're just afraid to say it. Please, Xiao Yan."

"I want you!" she blurted out. She could see him take a visible intake of breath. The look in his eyes was so bright with hope that it should scare her. And she was scared; she was trembling with fear, but that fear just made the rest of the words fall from her in an uncontrollable rush. "I want us, to be us, again. But I'm afraid it'll just be another run of what we went through before and I don't know if I can bear the same ending again."

He was rendered momentarily speechless from the overwhelming emotions her words had obviously triggered. It seemed like it was all too much; he closed his eyes, looked down for a second, shaking his head.

"Xiao Yan," he whispered when he looked up at her again, his voice breaking. He swallowed,
cleared his throat and took the steps towards her. She watched as he slowly reached out and took her hands both in his. "It doesn't have to end the same way again."

"Doesn't it?" she asked, her own voice trembling. "Nothing's really changed."

"Do you really think that?" he asked, looking up at her with such gentleness that it took her breath away. "I think everything's changed, Xiao Yan. We tried to keep away from each other. It's been more than two years and I keep telling myself I should be over you by now. Maybe it doesn't help that we still see each other. Maybe it doesn't help that you're still my sister's best friend. But the truth is, I still can't forget how your laugh used to light up my heart or how I used to wake up, feeling the day was brighter because I'd see you. And I don't want to forget."

She stared at him, tears in her eyes.

He cleared his throat gruffly, then looked lost in thoughts for several seconds.

"When I was in Europe," he said slowly, "I met the fiancé of Theresa of Liechtenstein and accidentally got caught up in an argument between her and her brother about the man's suitability. What I realised then was that all royal houses have ridiculous parameters and requirements for potential partners, but sometimes the person who makes you laugh and for whom you would not mind being woken up at 4am to listen to them talk about their dreams and nightmares for hours on ends might be as far away from those parameters and requirements as possible. And maybe then, when you have found that person…you should never let them go, not even for – or especially for – those oh-so-important parameters and requirements that at the end of the day will not make you a fraction as happy as that person does."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying…you are all that for me."

He was looking directly at her, and Xiao Yan felt like she was running out of air. She didn't think she had ever felt so helpless in her entire life.

"I have always known it, but I was just too afraid before to allow myself to come to the natural conclusion," he continued.

He paused, and somehow she realised he wasn't quite finished, and it wasn't the moment yet for her to answer.

"I'm saying," he added, his voice as gentle as a kiss, "that maybe we should try again. It's not like either of us managed to make it work with anyone else."

She laughed shakily. "Now that you mention that…I wonder if I've been unconsciously not allowing any of the ones that come after work. I think I always keep expecting in the back of my mind that they'd be you and get disappointed when they are not. What does that say about me?"

"What does that say about us?" he asked with the hint of a smile.

She didn't answer immediately, but only went to sit down at the table again, feeling inexplicably drained. He slowly approached her and sat down tentatively next to her.

"When we...ended it, I said that we both needed to take a breath, to see the bigger picture…” he said. His hands were clenched on the table-top, and she wondered if he was simply fighting the urge to reach out and touch her. "I honestly didn't think that breath would be that long, that we would be able to stay away from each other for this long. I honestly thought, our feelings would bring us back
together before long, because I knew how I felt about you, even then. But...has that been just on my part?"

"No!" she cried, staring at him in amazement. "After last night, after everything I've just said, you still think that?"

"Xiao Yan, we could have gotten back together the moment you said the word. But you never did... you haven't, so..."

She stared at him, shocked. "I didn't realise you were waiting for that word from me!"

"What else was I waiting for? This always had to be your choice, Xiao Yan."

Instead of feeling more reassured by his words, Xiao Yan found herself suddenly panicked. "You can't put this...this responsibility on me!"

"Why not? This is your life...our life..." He had started the sentence sounding so sure, but the moment he spoke the word 'our', he faltered. Now, he was staring at her, desperation in his eyes. "Xiao Yan, I've already told you what I want. At some point, you're going to have to decide if that's what you want. And you will have to decide. I can't do that for you."

She knew Yong Qi was right, of course, but realising that did nothing to relieve her fears. If anything, it only managed the opposite. Her body seemed to burn with the frustration she was directing at herself.

"I can't...I can't think about this right now!" she exclaimed, gesturing wildly with her hands. "Everything's too confusing... My brother is coming to have lunch with me in an hour, for Heaven's sake!"

She stared at him, forlorn and expecting him to look at least a little upset with her. However, Yong Qi simply looked like he understood the storm that she was battling against internally.

He nodded. "In that case I suppose I should go. Save you the difficulty of explaining my presence here to your brother."

"He knows," she said, almost automatically. "About us, I mean."

"About us, before, surely?" Yong Qi asked softly.

He only managed to make Xiao Yan feel even more like a hand was squeezing her heart so tightly that she was struggling to breathe.

"It's all right, Xiao Yan. We can talk about this later. Maybe we both need time to really understand what just happened last night."

His words only managed multiply a thousandfold the guilt she was already feeling. She wanted to cry, but by now, her eyes were completely tear-free. As he gave her a sad smile and turned to leave, she suddenly felt like her body was being taken over by some force of nature that was not in her control.

"Yong Qi!" she called.

He turned back towards her, a complicated mixture of resignation and insane hope evident in his eyes.
Suddenly, she was reaching out and taking his face in both her hands, pulling him to her and kissing him passionately. She didn't pull away until they were both quite out of breath. Even then, only a miniscule distance was put between them, and she could see herself reflected in his eyes.

"Sorry. I needed…I needed to do that," she gasped. She let her hands fall away from his face and turned away, blowing out a long breath. "I'm sorry. I know my signals are all kinds of messed up right now…"

Yong Qi laughed shakily. "We don't have to…come to any conclusion or decision or anything right this minute, Xiao Yan. Honestly, it might be a good idea if we don't. We're both…confused right now, and to try to…commit to anything now might be the worst thing we could do."

She could only nod helplessly. When another moment went by, and she still remained silent, Yong Qi cleared his throat.

"I should go. Your brother is coming to see you, and you shouldn't have to explain to him what I'm doing here before either of us really understand the situation ourselves."

She sighed and tried to beat away the deeply uncomfortable feeling of knowing she was leaving so much unsaid. In the end, probably unfortunately, she prevailed against that feeling. She walked with him to the door where he gave her a small smile at the threshold.

"Can I call you later?"

"Of course. You're going to have to, if we want to figure this out at all," she said.

He leaned in and brushed the lightest of kisses against her cheek, before stepping away and walking down the hall.

Unlike the previous night, she didn't think she could trust herself to watch him go. She closed the door with a soft click as soon as he was clear, and then turned to lean heavily against it, sliding down to sit on the floor.

As she laid her head down on her knees and contemplated what a tangled mess her life had become, she realised that the most ridiculous thing about the last twelve hours was she really should have seen it all coming from miles away.

It was too uncomfortable on the tile floor, and Xiao Yan picked herself up soon enough, heading towards the kitchen to the breakfast that Yong Qi had bought and left for her. She had just finished when her doorbell rang. She opened to find Xiao Jian before her.

"Oh, hi," she said, stepping aside to let her brother in. She was glad that she sounded relatively normal and Xiao Jian did not have reason to look taken aback by her appearance.

"How did you get home last night?" her brother asked.

She walked ahead of him into the kitchen and replied offhandedly, "After you abandoned me, you mean?"

"I didn't – "

"I called you like three times, and you didn't pick up!" she said, turning around to face him. "What was going on with Qing Er that – you know what, never mind, I don't want to know."
"She's staying at her parents', so there was nothing like that," he said, managing to keep a perfectly straight face, but Xiao Yan wasn't sure she was entirely convinced.

"Of course not."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

She laughed. "No."

Xiao Jian seemed to think any defensive attempt at providing an explanation would just make her more suspicious, so he just shrugged and said, "I got your text. And I got home before midnight."

"Was that just because your car would have turned into a pumpkin if you didn't?" she asked with a smile.

"Haha. So how did you get home?"

For the first time in the conversation, Xiao Yan hesitated. Then she admitted, though reluctantly, "… Yong Qi took me home."

Xiao Jian's expression was far more curious than she was comfortable with, and she forced herself to look away. That didn't prevent her having to hear the suggestive disbelief in his voice as he said, "He did?"

"Yes." Xiao Yan hoped the curt reply would deter her brother from further questioning, but she was sadly disappointed.

"Interesting," he said, like he had just made a fascinating scientific discovery.

Xiao Yan tried, for a few seconds, to ignore his reply, but in the end, the mounting tension between them forced her to speak, just to fill the silence that had fallen with a resounding thud. "How do you mean?"

She was still avoiding his gaze, but in her peripheral vision, she could see his attention was entirely focused on her.

"Well, it's just that, it wasn't like he needed to go somewhere himself and just decided to drop you off. He went out of his way to drive you all the way here back to your place, and then went back to his, in that storm, no less…"

"What's your point?" Xiao Yan demanded.

For a second, she was afraid her tone might be too defensive, which might bring her brother to question whether Yong Qi really did make it back home in that storm. Thankfully, his reply was only slightly exasperated, and didn't show any sign that he realised an alternative course of event was possible.

"Xiao Yan, don't try and act clueless."

She sighed as well, and shrugged.

Unfortunately, Xiao Jian was not deterred by her silence. He merely raised an eyebrow, and persisted, "Do you really think that was a good idea? Allowing yourself to spend all that time with him?"

Xiao Yan gave him a disgruntled look. "You're going out with his cousin. You think you have room
to talk?"

Her brother just laughed. "We're actually going out, Xiao Yan. That's the point – "

"What is with that anyway?" Xiao Yan asked hastily, before he could continue badgering her about Yong Qi. "What's with you and Qing Er?"

He gave her a look that showed he knew exactly what she was doing, but she ignored it with a shrug. Apparently seeing that he could not move her, Xiao Jian just said, "We're just going out, Xiao Yan."

This actually made Xiao Yan laugh. "She took you to a family event, at Yuan Ming Yuan. That's really not 'just' anything, Brother."

Of course, Xiao Yan was aware that changing the topic of conversation from her relationship (or lack of) with Yong Qi to her brother's with Qing Er was hardly helping the situation. After all, it wouldn't exactly entice Xiao Jian to forget the topic of Yong Qi altogether. But right now, she would take any minor distraction she could get.

"I'm not kidding," she added. "At least to Qing Er, whether she's conscious of it or not, it's serious enough."

Xiao Jian didn't look particularly fazed about this, which was curious in itself. Before Xiao Yan could dwell too much on it, he asked, "Does that actually bother you? Qing Er and me?"

She gave him a slight smile. "What would you do if I said it did? Would you actually break up with her if that was the case?"

"I…I don't know," Xiao Jian said.

Xiao Yan stared at him, taken aback by his reply. "You know, I hope she never hears you say that."

He sighed. "I never said it would be an easy decision to make."

She frowned at him, feeling guilty now for asking the question. She hadn't been entirely serious. "You actually do mean that, don't you? You'd probably think about it, if I did say it bothered me?"

"Well, you are my sister."

For a moment, Xiao Yan wasn't sure whether to hug him or smack the back of his head.

"I'd be a crappy sister if I expected you to break up with your girlfriend just because she happens to be related to my ex," she said. Shaking her head, she added, "Though I do wonder. What is it about that family that we both can't stay away from them?"

"Do you believe in fate?"

Xiao Yan laughed. "Sometimes I wish I did. Then it would make it so much easier to accept the strange things that happen in my life."

"Me too," he said. "Though the truth is, when we're in Boston, it's never a conscious thought for me that she's related to royalty."

"She is royalty," Xiao Yan said. "And you're here now."

"Well, we haven't talked about it, that's my point."
"Talk. Then you'll probably see why Yong Qi and I are such a mess."

Xiao Jian narrowed his eyes at her. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you're trying to break us up in a very roundabout way."

Xiao Yan smiled. "I'm not. I just want to make sure, if it turns out eventually that it doesn't work between the two of you, the reason for that wouldn't be me."

"I'm sure it wouldn't," Xiao Jian said, though how he could be so sure, she didn't know.

"Anyway, my point is that you should talk to her and find you where you two stand," Xiao Yan said. "And in saying this, I am well aware of the irony of me giving you advice on how to go about dating royalty, but you know, Qing Er's not second in line to the throne, so at least you've got that going for you."

Zi Wei didn't know why, but she really did think being engaged would make her feel like someone different.

Er Kang had always been traditionally-minded, so there was no ring symbolising their engagement. Despite the entirely spontaneous way his proposal actually came about, whenever they spoke of marriage before, they always agreed that she didn't need a ring for the sake of simply having one as proof of their commitment. She hadn't changed her mind. She didn't just now suddenly decide that she needed that physical reminder of their being engaged. But perhaps, when she decided that the modern fad of following the Western tradition of a diamond ring was unnecessary, she had thought that when the time did come for them to start planning their union, she'd feel like a different person from how she felt when they were simply together. She'd expected to feel like an engaged woman.

Yet, here she was, sitting in Er Kang's kitchen waiting for him to finish a phone call in the next room. They were about to go have lunch with his parents. Aside from her own buoyant giddiness, the only other indication that something significant had happened to change her life forever was the lingering exhaustion mixed with exhilaration of the ceremony of the night before. Other than that, Zi Wei felt like she was still very much the same person as before.

The world hadn't turned upside down because they were now engaged. It still spun as before.

And when put like that, the whole idea seemed so silly that she had to laugh.

"What's funny?" Er Kang asked, smiling, as he stepped into the room.

"I was just laughing at myself," she answered, standing up and allowing him to take her hand. "I thought that being engaged would make me feel different."

"And you don't feel different?"

"I still feel that I love you as much as I did before, if not more," she said, leaning in to kiss him quickly before pulling away and smiling. "Maybe that counts as feeling different."

Er Kang laughed and returned her kiss with one of his own, before tugging on her hand. "We should get going. Ready?"

"Sure."

They left Er Kang's apartment hand-in-hand and smiling, a joy which was slightly dampened when they found out that one of the building's two elevators was shut down for maintenance.
"Let's just take the stairs," Zi Wei suggested when they had to let the only functioning elevator go down without them because it was full for the second time in a row.

"You don't mind?" Er Kang asked.

"No, not at all."

They walked into the stairwell, and managed to make it down one floor before encountering the horrifying scene.

At first, both Er Kang and Zi Wei were too engrossed in each other to notice much around them, but it was impossible to ignore the resounding thud of something being dropped to the floor near them.

Zi Wei looked away from Er Kang and the first thing she saw was a young man who could not be older than in his early twenties, standing just a few steps below the landing she and Er Kang had just arrived at, staring up in fear at the two of them, clearly taken by terrifying surprise by their arrival. His face was smeared with what looked sickeningly like blood.

Er Kang's alarmed exclamation prodded Zi Wei to drift her eyes from the man's face. At his feet, she saw, to her stomach's churning protest, two large, black garbage bags – obviously the thing that was dropped and caused the noise earlier. The bags were bulging, and having been dropped, it was now leaking blood…

Zi Wei wasn't sure how she managed to not throw up as she wondered and imagined what the bags must contain…

"Zi Wei, get out of here!" Er Kang said, low urgency in his voice.

She was sure everything so far must have happened in less than a couple of seconds, because the gory man was still frozen in place, shocked by their appearance and perhaps paralysed with fear of what they would do. But somehow, during that time, Er Kang had managed to taken out his phone and undoubtedly would have already managed to activate the app that would alert her security detail to the need for back up.

The thing was, she was in Er Kang's building, with Er Kang, so it was doubtful that there was more than one agent on duty, and he would have to make it up here from the ground floor.

Zi Wei suddenly realised in that moment that it was one thing to know that protocols dictated that in these situations, she should just get herself out of the scene and trust that Er Kang could take care of himself; to carry this out was another matter entirely. It wasn't just that she was reluctant to leave Er Kang. She found herself momentarily frozen by the horror and shock, and couldn't bring herself to even take a step back, especially when the blood-stained man was now brandishing a butcher knife, pulled out from the inside of his jacket. This, too, was stained with blood.

"Zi Wei!" Er Kang repeated, more urgency in is voice. His eyes were trained on the stranger with the knife, trying to work out how to disarm him.

Even as this happened, there were the pounding, echoing sounds of feet on the stairs, but so faint that the person making the sounds must be at least ten floors down from them. Sai Guang, her agent on duty, who must have received the distress signal, called Er Kang's name up the stairwell.

The new reinforcement obviously pushed the man with the knife into reacting in blind panic. He threw his knife at Er Kang, and though Er Kang tried to avoid it, it still managed to slice his arm. The pain made Er Kang stagger back, giving the man just enough time to grab Zi Wei. Her scream was cut off when a bloody hand clamped over her mouth. The nauseating scent of blood filled her nostrils
as she dry-heaved and struggled against the pair of arms that were now holding her in place.

But the man was no longer armed. Er Kang kicked the knife into a corner of the landing before approaching the man pinning Zi Wei against him.

"Let her go," Er Kang ordered, holding arms stretched, palms turned outward to show that he was not armed either. "You know who she is. You don't want to do this."

"No!" the man holding Zi Wei captive screamed. "You both have seen too much already! I can't – "

Zi Wei didn't know what he couldn't do, nor could she tell whether the way the man was shaking so violently against her was due to panic and fear or rage. She only had the wild desperation in his voice as a guide for his mental state, which could not be normal. For a second, Er Kang's eyes, which so far was still locked on her captor, flicked to her face. In that moment of eye-contact, she could see the rising panic in his eyes, which did little to calm her already racing heart.

Everything that happened next occurred so fast that later, Zi Wei would struggle to recall it all with clarity. She could only register the fact that Sai Guang came crashing into the landing. Then, the arms that had been pining her own arms against her sides gave her a heart-dropping push, and she was falling…

Then there was nothing but blackness.

Moments like this were supposed to happen in slow-motion, but for Er Kang, it was as if the world had sped up. Zi Wei was falling and he couldn't get to her fast enough. There was only the sickening sound of her head hitting the edge of a step as she sprawled out on the stairs, followed by a crash as Sai Guang slammed the now-unarmed, unencumbered-with-Zi-Wei man against the wall. Er Kang's senses were suddenly full of Zi Wei as he shattered down next to her now still form, pressing his trembling fingers desperately on neck, searching for a pulse. It was still there, but he could already see her hair being seeped with blood.

"Sir!" Sai Guang called, and Er Kang turned slightly to see that the agent had somehow managed to force his captured man to his knee, facing the wall, and to shrug off his suit jacket. With one arm still perfectly still and pointing a gun at the man's head, Sai Guang threw his jacket towards Er Kang.

As Er Kang made do with the jacket to press against the wound on Zi Wei’s head, the agent called for an ambulance and the police.

"If the ambulance comes first, you'll stay here and wait for the police," Er Kang told Sai Guang.

"Sir, my duties are with Miss Zi Wei – "

"And someone must stay here with him," Er Kang barked. "That is an order, Agent!"

The three minutes it took for the ambulance to arrive, and however long it took for the EMTs to move Zi Wei to a stretcher in a way that would not cause further damage to her to be transported down twelve flights of stairs, all the time everyone forcing themselves to ignore the two black bags still leaking blood abandoned a little while away in the landing, were some of the longest minutes of Er Kang’s life. It was only by focusing on Zi Wei did he somehow manage to not take the two steps over where Sai Guang was still holding the unnamed man at gun point and rip the weapon out of the agent's hand to shoot the man himself. It would not help Zi Wei, would probably end up destroying Er Kang’s career, but god, at least it would offer him satisfaction.
Xiao Yan was in a coffee shop with her brother when she received the news.

She had just returned to their table from the bathroom when her brother informed her, "You had a phone call."

There was something in the way he said this that made her raise an eyebrow.

"I might have looked at the caller ID," Xiao Jian admitted. "It was Yong Qi."

"And is there a reason you couldn't have just said that?" Xiao Yan asked, rolling her eyes.

Her brother shrugged, but before either of them could say anything else, her phone started ringing again.

She picked it up from where it was laying on the table and found that it was Yong Qi again.

"Something's wrong," she muttered to herself. Something must be wrong if he was calling her now, after they had just seen each other that morning and they had agreed that they would talk later. He should know that she'd be with her brother now. In any case, their conversation couldn't take place over the phone. Of course, the fact that he was calling her twice in the space of what must only be two minutes was also telling.

Sure enough, the moment she picked up and before she could actually say anything, Yong Qi said, "Xiao Yan, you have to get to Imperial Hospital right away."

His voice was shaking and she could hear muffled, urgent voices in the background.

"What happened?"

"It's Zi Wei," he answered in a hushed voice. "There's been an accident. From what we can tell so far, she and Er Kang interrupted someone disposing of a dead body in his building, and in the struggle, Zi Wei hit her head. Er Kang told us and we just got here barely half an hour ago so we really don't know how she's doing yet, but you should get over here."

"Of course," Xiao Yan exclaimed, standing up so fast that her chair crashed to the ground, alarming not just her brother but everyone in the coffee shop around them. "I'm on my way."

"What's wrong?" Xiao Jian asked urgently when she hung up. He had stood up when she did and was now looking at her with concern.

"We have to go," she said shortly, gathering her things.

"Yes, but what – "

"Not here, Xiao Jian!" Xiao Yan said quietly, glancing furtively around at the many people who
were looking at her curiously.

They left the coffee shop in a rush, and while they were trying to flag down a taxi, she quietly relayed to him the brief details Yong Qi told her.

For the next fifteen minutes, she sat stoic in the backseat of a taxi, staring impatiently out of the window, yet not seeing the route they were taking at all. At one point, Xiao Jian squeezed her hand and whispering, "She'll be all right, Xiao Yan."

She knew he was trying to ease her mind, and turned to give him a weak smile of gratitude. However, she was reluctant to talk about the situation when the taxi driver could hear, so only a nod followed. Though she was not particularly convinced by his words, she slid closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder.

Xiao Yan had no idea how she managed to make it from the taxi, through the hospital lobby and into the elevator taking her to the Imperial Wing. She could only register the winded feeling when she nearly crashed into the reception desk of the closed wing, out of breath. Xiao Jian followed at her heels.

"I'm here to see Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said, still breathless, to the nurse behind the desk.

The nurse's face showed that she recognised Xiao Yan, but that didn't stop her expression from turning apologetic. "I'm sorry, I am not authorised to allow you entry. This is a private wing, and unfortunately, without expressed permission, I can only allow entry for – "

Xiao Yan blew out an exasperated breath before the nurse had even finished and threw an annoyed look at the closed door leading into the closed wing, flanked on either sides by black-suited, expressionless agents.

"Never mind," she said vaguely to the nurse, pulling out her phone at the same time. She drew up her recent callers list and punched Yong Qi's name with more force than necessary, trying to release some of her own pent up tension.

Thankfully, he answered after a single ring.

"I'm at the reception desk," she said shortly.

"I'll come and get you," he answered before hanging up.

Xiao Yan removed the phone from her ear and heaved a deep sigh of relief. She turned to give the nurse, who was still looking at her apologetically, a tense smile.

A minute later, the doors to the private wing opened.

"Xiao Yan," Yong Qi called as he strode over to her.

"How is she?" Xiao Yan demanded immediately.

"We don't know yet," Yong Qi answered. Then, turning to her brother, he held out his hand. "Xiao Jian, hello again."

Xiao Jian shook his hand. "Wang Ye, hello. My best wishes for your sister's recovery."

Yong Qi gave him a tight, but sincere smile of gratitude. "Thank you."

"Well, I only wanted to make sure that Xiao Yan got here safely," Xiao Jian added. "I would hate to
intrude, so please excuse me."

Xiao Yan turned to him, suddenly feeling oddly guilty. "Are you – "

"I'll be fine, Xiao Yan," her brother said, giving her a reassuring smile. Then, with a kiss on the top of her head and a final nod to Yong Qi, he departed.

Xiao Yan turned to Yong Qi as they made their way into the wing. "So what exactly happened?"

Yong Qi stopped abruptly just as they cleared of the doors, which closed and automatically locked behind them. Xiao Yan stopped with him. It was as if the closing of the door flicked a switch in him, and he allowed himself to look tense and worried.

"It's more or less what I told you over the phone," Yong Qi said, keeping his voice low, as if he was afraid of tempting fate by speaking too loud. "Er Kang told us that he and Zi Wei ran into some guy with a knife and two bloody garbage bags in the stairs landing. Er Kang called for re-enforcement, but before Sai Guang managed to reach them, the guy managed to throw the knife at Er Kang, injuring his arm, and allowed him time to hold Zi Wei hostage. When Sai Guang appeared, the guy pushed Zi Wei aside, she fell and hit her head on the steps of the stairs. Sai Guang called in to report about twenty minutes ago that he's still providing evidence to the police who have come to take this guy into custody. He'll come report in person once he's done and hopefully we'll have the fuller picture then. Anyway, for now, Er Kang's wound is deep, but it's been stitched up and should be fine. The problem is with Zi Wei. She hit her head pretty hard, and the doctors are still with her now, so we don't know how serious it is yet."

"How's Er Kang faring?" she asked, as they started walking again.

"As could be expected," Yong Qi said, sighing. "He hasn't been speaking much except to tell us what happened."

They paused outside the closed door of a patient's room.

"She's in there?" Xiao Yan asked in an unsteady voice.

Yong Qi nodded, then took her hand and led her to a room a few doors away. "Let's go into the waiting room."

In the waiting room, Xiao Yan found the emperor, empress, He Jing and Yong An sitting on the sofa and armchairs in the room. Er Kang, on the other hand, stood at the window, staring out at the Beijing skyline. His left shirt sleeve was rolled up to his elbow and his forearm was heavily bandaged.

Just as Xiao Yan had greeted everyone in the room – her greeting to Er Kang met with a distracted turn of his head just enough to look at her and give her a grim nod – there was a knock at the door, and the doctor stepped in. That induced Er Kang to turn completely around.

The doctor's report was not what Xiao Yan would call encouraging.

"Miss Zi Wei has suffered, from what we can tell so far, mild closed head trauma. We have been keeping her in a medically-induced unconscious state in order to prevent additional injury while we examine her, but she should regain consciousness by herself within the next twenty-four hours. I expect to be some degree of internal bleeding or blood clots, however the extent of that, and the extent of the effects from the bleeding or blood clot, cannot be accurately measured or examined until she wakes up."
"What can we do now?" the emperor asked, because Er Kang looked too choked up to say anything.

"You can go in to see her now, Huang Shang," the doctor replied. "She should be closely monitored for the next two days; the nurses and myself will drop in at intervals, of course, but someone should be with her at all time. She is currently in a stable state now, so there is little we could now except monitor her and wait for her to wake up."

With that uncertain report, Zi Wei's family, plus Er Kang and Xiao Yan, made their way into her room. As Xiao Yan entered the room and saw Zi Wei lying there, deathly white, surrounded by tubes and wires and beeping machines, she couldn't help an unsteady gasping breath. Tears smarted her eyes and her chest felt like it was on fire. She felt as if it was only Yong Qi's comforting hand at the small of her back that held her up.

Er Kang approached Zi Wei's bed in a trance-like state and deposited himself on a chair by her side. He grasped her hand, and didn't look like he could be persuaded to move or let go of Zi Wei until she opened her eyes again. The emperor, standing on the other side of Zi Wei's bed with the empress, was stroking her hair back, and Xiao Yan could see his lips moving, but she could not hear the words. Meanwhile, He Jing and Yong An had retreated to the other side of the room from the door, staring at the still form of their sister on the bed.

For her part, Xiao Yan didn't know why her legs weren't obeying her, but she couldn't bring herself to step closer to Zi Wei. She could only stand from a distance away, watching helplessly. The only thought that she managed to register, swirling around in her head was that her best friend – her sister – was tethering on the precipice of life and death and that her whole world would surely shatter if anything happened to Zi Wei.

In the stillness, it was as the doctor had said. There was not much to do in that moment, except watch over Zi Wei, and hope, wish, pray that she would wake up, soon. Xiao Yan reached for Yong Qi's hand and squeezed tightly. She didn't know why, but it felt to her like by holding on to Yong Qi, she was somehow holding on to Zi Wei. Even if that didn't make sense at all, she couldn't find the strength in her to let go. She'd do all the silliest, craziest, most pointless things in the world now if they meant that there was a chance that she'd keep Zi Wei from slipping away from her…

It was unbearably clichéd, but Xiao Yan found herself suddenly flooded with memories of all the times she'd taken Zi Wei for granted. It was as if everything they'd ever said to each other suddenly decided to swim around in her head, and she asked herself why she hadn't been more grateful for every single one of those moments. Why did she keep teasing Zi Wei that one time about that one thing she didn't even remember anymore, when clearly Zi Wei had been uncomfortable and more than a little bit hurt? In all of those moments when she told herself she'd call or text Zi Wei, and simply forgot, why didn't she remember? Why didn't she tell Zi Wei more often how much she meant to her, and how thankful she was for Zi Wei simply being there and being her friend?

The worst thing was she seemed to be doing more of that lately. More missed calls, more missed texts. Simply because Xiao Yan was too caught up in the new-found connections to her birth parents. Sure, she'd called Zi Wei to share the news and freak out and seek her friend's advice, but hadn't it all been about Xiao Yan during those conversations? If Xiao Yan asked about how Zi Wei's life was going while she was half way across the world in America, it was more or less perfunctory. She'd assumed that Zi Wei would always be there for her to come back to. Zi Wei was the constant while everything else shifted. Except, there was no guarantee that Zi Wei would always remain constantly beside her anymore.

The night before, at Zi Wei's very own engagement, even though Xiao Yan had spent the whole day happy for her friend, she had stepped back to leave room for the numerous guests. She should have
stayed by Zi Wei's side. She shouldn't have allowed herself to wonder, for that one tiny moment, whether Zi Wei getting married would change things between the two of them. She couldn't help but feel like she was being punished for that moment of selfishness, that now she was left wondering, with her heart in her throat, whether she'd ever actually get to see Zi Wei married for anything to change…

Even that last thought itself was self-indulgence, and Xiao Yan hated herself for having it. She hated even more the paralysing fear that filled her, numbing her and at the same time stabbing her side, as she thought it.

She couldn't lose Zi Wei. She couldn't.

She'd splinter and fall apart if she ever did.

Yong Qi found that he had to guide Xiao Yan closer to Zi Wei. She now sat in a chair at the foot of Zi Wei’s bed, as unable to take her eyes of her friend as Er Kang.

Xiao Yan wasn't crying, but to Yong Qi, the look of frozen dread on her face was somehow worse. Each of her breath seemed to last for a century, and from the way she was holding his hand earlier, Yong Qi knew she was terrified, but was deliberately trying to not let it show. Xiao Yan always felt so deeply and expressed those emotions so readily. It was dangerous when she forced herself to keep them locked in. Yong Qi feared what would happen when Xiao Yan finally allowed her emotions to take over her and whether he'd be able to comfort her when she did.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. Yong Qi, who was closest, went to open it. Lu Jun stood in front of him, and Yong Qi could see Sai Guang standing at attention several feet down the hall.

"Wang Ye, Agent Sai Guang wishes to give a full report on the situation," Lu Jun said.

Yong Qi nodded and turned his head to look at his father. "Ah Ma?" he called quietly.

"I'll speak to Sai Guang, Lu Jun," the emperor said, striding across to the room to the door. Yong Qi stepped back to let him through.

Yong An must have felt he was superfluous in the hospital room, and left as well with his father, indicating that he would like to join the conversation. Looking at Xiao Yan now sitting watching over Zi Wei, with her back to him, Yong Qi hesitated for a moment, then decided that there was little he could do for Zi Wei in the already crowded room. It would probably be more helpful if he found out the details of what was going on from Sai Guang, so that when Xiao Yan finally thought to ask questions later, he could answer them. In the end, Yong Qi also followed his brother out, closing the door gently behind him.

They gathered in the waiting room, where Sai Guang stood in front of the three men.

"So, from what Er Kang has already said, he and Zi Wei ran into this man – " the emperor started, then paused for a beat before asking with a slight frown, "I suppose you now know his name?"

"Yes, Huang Shang. His name is Li Zhi," Sai Guang answered. A strange look passed over his face for a second before he added, "Li Zhi as in Emperor Tang Gao Zong."

"Are you serious?" Yong An asked, sounding slightly incredulous.
"Yes, sir. Though I can't tell if he really is deliberately named after the emperor or it is simply a coincidence."

"Let us assume the latter," the emperor said quickly. "So, according to Er Kang, he and Zi Wei came across this Li Zhi in the staircase, realised he must be transporting a body, at which point Er Kang called you for back up. However, before you could reach them, this Li Zhi has managed to injure Er Kang with his knife and was holding Zi Wei hostage. When you came to their aid, Li Zhi pushed Zi Wei away, causing her to fall and hit her head on the stairs, and you were able to subdue him. You called the ambulance and the police. The ambulance came and Er Kang accompanied Zi Wei while you stay behind to ensure Li Zhi is put into police custody. Is that correct?"

"Yes, it is, Huang Shang."

"Then what happened next?"

"When the police came, they took Li Zhi away, while I stayed at the scene to give evidence to police. Afterwards, due to the…high profile of persons involved in the scene, the police required my presence at the Dongcheng Police Station to prepare a signed statement and speak to the Police Chief. By the time I left, the police have heard enough from Li Zhi and gathered enough evidence from the crime scene to at least put together a rough story of what's going on."

Here, Sai Guang stopped speaking abruptly and grimaced like he had just swallowed something unpleasant.

"Yes?" the emperor prompted.

"This is…a disturbing story," the agent said carefully.

"Go on," the emperor urged.

"Apparently Li Zhi's girlfriend…or ex-girlfriend, I cannot say for sure, lives in the building. They either recently broke up or he recently found out that she was cheating on him. In any case, he came to her apartment, and from what I can gather, murdered her."

Having said this much, Sai Guang stopped abruptly and that same look of disgust he wore before passed over his face again. Yong Qi exchanged dread-filled look with his brother; apparently what the agent had described so far was not yet the disturbing part. The very thought made Yong Qi's skin crawl.

After a tense pause, Sai Guang continued, "In attempting to get rid of her body, he…dismembered her and carried her away in plastic garbage bags. When Miss Zi Wei and Agent Fu interrupted him, he was moving parts of her to his car. He was planning to dispose of the…of her body in a river. When I left, the police were dispatching a team to check Li Zhi's car to see which parts he managed to –"

"Okay, stop!" Yong An exclaimed, looking about as revolted as Yong Qi felt. "I think we get the idea."

Sai Guang fell abruptly silent and stood in stiff parade rest.

Yong Qi, as he fought to fight off the horrible shivers that erupted in his body, noticed that his father's eyes had closed the moment he realised the full extent of the horror of what Sai Guang was describing. It took a long moment, too, before he could open his eyes again and stare sternly at Sai Guang.
"You are not to tell Zi Wei about any of this."

Sai Guang's brows creased, and Yong Qi knew he must be struggling to express how unconvinced he was that such thing could be keep a secret. Apparently, Yong An felt the same, as at their father's words, he made a strangled noise in the back of his throat.

The emperor turned his eyes to his eldest son. "Yes?"

"Ah Ma, something this horrific is going to be a huge court case. It would be impossible that Zi Wei wouldn't read about it or hear about it on the news. Even if Zi Wei and Er Kang weren't involved in this – "

"Involved?" the emperor asked sharply. "They are not involved."

"They are, even if by just being in the wrong place at the wrong time," Yong Qi pointed out when his brother threw him a look pleading for assistance. "The best thing we can hope for now, I think, is that they won't be required to testify in the court case."

"Absolutely not!" the emperor exclaimed.

"Ah Ma, it's not like that's your decision!" Yong An exclaimed at the same time as Yong Qi said, "I don't think you can stop that."

"About that – " Sai Guang spoke up, before anyone could say anything else. "To put Huang Shang's mind at ease, the captain of Dongcheng Police Station assured me that he will try his best to keep Miss Zi Wei and Agent Fu from having to testify. He says that they would have enough evidence to prosecute, try and sentence even without their testimony. However, despite this, it would be very hard to keep the fact that they did interrupt Li Zhi in the middle of his crime out of police reports, and therefore a secret from the press."

"I honestly think that's the best we can hope for in this situation," Yong Qi said.

"Besides, it's not like an innocent woman hasn't just been killed and here we are debating how to save face for this family or anything," Yong An said under his breath. This earned him a look of aghast from his father. Immediately feeling guilty, he added, "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for."

"No," his father said with a heavy sigh, "you do have a point."

"So do you, that we should focus on Zi Wei's recovery. It won't do to lie to her if she asks, but we could keep the gory details from her as long as possible," Yong Qi said.

"Let us hope it is for a while, if only for her peace of mind," his father said. Then, turning to Sai Guang, he added, "Your presence and assistance to Zi Wei and Er Kang is a blessing today, Sai Guang. Things might have gone worse if you weren't there."

The agent looked flustered at the emperor's words. "I feel that I have failed, and should have come to their aid a lot sooner, Huang Shang. If I had not been all the way downstairs – "

"Do not blame yourself. It was only because they were in Er Kang's building that it was deemed safe enough for you to keep that much distance. No doubt, there is a case to be made for tightening security after this, but this incident cannot be said to be your fault."

"Thank you, Huang Shang," Sai Guang said.

Then, with a handshake to the emperor and each of the princes, Sai Guang left the room.
A heavy silence descended down on the room as the door closed behind the agent.

None of them quite knew how to process the terrifying chances that had Er Kang and Zi Wei stumbling into this horror show they had just been told about and somehow made it out alive.

For now, anyway. Who knew whether Zi Wei would…

Yong Qi clenched his hands and shook his head, determined not to continue thinking so pessimistically. There was no reason yet to assume it would be so bad.

He was thankful to be broken out of his silent thoughts, which threatened to turn darker by the minute, when the door opened and his stepmother stepped in.

"I'm about to head home to let He Ke and Yong Yan know what's happening," she said. "Doctor Hu said we should have someone here with Zi Wei at all time. At the moment, it doesn't look like either Er Kang or Xiao Yan are leaving any time soon, so some of us should go home, so that we'd be able to relieve them later."

"Honestly I don't think you'll have much success convincing Er Kang to leave before Zi Wei wakes up, no matter what," Yong Qi said. "But one of us should probably still be with him regardless."

"Yes," she agreed. "We should divide up the shifts and make sure everyone gets enough rest."

"You're right, of course," the emperor said. "I need to speak to Household about how we're dealing with all of this in the press, and that's a conversation that will have to happen sooner rather than later."

"He Jing is attending the Women in Leadership and Politics conference and dinner tonight," the empress said, "so Yong An, Yong Qi, if one of you can stay – "

"I'll stay," Yong Qi said to his brother. "I'm sure you all might need to rearrange schedules for the next few days at least."

"You sure?" Yong An asked.

"Yes, of course."

"I'll come back later in the evening," his stepmother assured him.

With the arrangements made, they all left the room, and as his family walked down the hall together, he could hear his stepmother asking his father and brother what Sai Guang had reported. Yong Qi couldn't help but grimace to himself, thinking about the fact that Xiao Yan would probably ask him the same question.

Turning back to Zi Wei's room, he was just reaching for the doorknob when the door itself was pulled opened, startling both him and Xiao Yan, who was behind it. After yelping in surprise at his sudden appearance, she looked over her shoulder to see if they had managed to disturb Zi Wei or alarm Er Kang, but that didn't seem to be case. Xiao Yan stepped out of the room, closed the door and pulled him by the wrist a little distance down the hallway. Then, releasing him, she let out a long, shaky breath.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking at her with concern.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she said, even if her voice was breaking and she was waving her hand in front of her face as if that could keep back the tears that were already shining in her eyes. A
trembling hiccup escaped before she could hold it back.

In two strides, Yong Qi was next to her and was pulling her into his arms. "Oh Xiao Yan," he whispered as she gripped the back of his shirt and buried her face into his chest.

"It's horrible, but I can't just sit in there and look at her like that, look at Er Kang look at her like that," she mumbled, her voice muffled against him.

"She's going to be all right," Yong Qi said. It was both a prayer and an attempt to comfort Xiao Yan. "She has to be."

Xiao Yan's grip on him seemed to tighten even further as she shoulders heaved.

It was several moments before she was calmer again.

When she finally stepped away from him, she asked, in a voice that was obviously meant to be calm, but was not, therefore her words were just an attempt to distract herself, "Has everyone left?"

"Yes. We thought it would be better to take turns being here, so that there will be one of us here at all time."

"Er Kang's never going to move from that spot until she wakes up, really," Xiao Yan said with a sniffle.

"No, I don't think so," Yong Qi agreed. "And you?"

Xiao Yan bit her lip nervously. "I'll stay for now, but I'll probably have to go home later. I have work tomorrow. I could take the day off...I would, if that would ensure she'd wake up...but if not... I'd rather have something to occupy me rather than just sit here waiting..."

"Go to work, Xiao Yan," he said. "This is going to a hell of a court case as it is, and I'm not sure how long we can keep Zi Wei and Er Kang's part in it secret from the world, but let's not raise any suspicion with anyone before the news break. I'll let you know if she wakes up while you're not here."

"What happened anyway? Er Kang – well, it's not like I could really ask."

With a grimace not unlike Sai Guang's earlier, Yong Qi told Xiao Yan slowly and in a hushed voice what he himself had just been told.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Xiao Yan said, looking pale, once he finished.

"It's horrid. I don't think I've managed to believe something like that really happened."

"I can," she muttered under her breath.

He frowned in question.

Xiao Yan sighed noisily. "You forget I used to go out with a guy who is probably very capable of doing something like that."

Her answer made Yong Qi pale visibly. "Does this bring back bad memories?" he asked with concern.

"Not...exactly," she answered slowly. "Mostly I just...I mean, it's such a horrible thing, I wished it never happened at all, let alone that Zi Wei, of all people, had to be caught up in it."
Yong Qi sighed as well. "I know."

Both of them were quiet for a moment. Then, Xiao Yan looked at him pensively and added, "I guess it would be really bad form if we were to have that talk right now."

Yong Qi gave her half a smile. Under the circumstances, even that felt like too much effort. "Are you in any emotional state to have it?"

"I don't know," she said. "I guess, on the one hand, all this reminds me of how fragile all our lives are...how much I should appreciate the things and the people that are around me...But I can't possibly concentrate on the future when Zi Wei..."

"I wasn't really suggesting we talk now, Xiao Yan," he said gently. "It is hardly the right time, or place for that matter."

"You are right. I guess – "

"Yes?" Yong Qi asked when she faltered.

She shook her head, trying to clear her head. "I guess I just can't decide whether all this is just the universe's way of throwing us together or telling us that horrible things happen when we get together."

"Trust me, Xiao Yan, a life time of having people make a big deal about every mundane thing I do has more than taught me that I don't have that much power," Yong Qi said with a rueful smile. "Unless you're saying you do."

She laughed shakily but didn't answer.

"You want to go back inside?" Yong Qi asked. "Just to make sure Er Kang is okay?"

Xiao Yan nodded and took his hand as they headed back to Zi Wei's room.

When Xiao Yan opened the door to her apartment again, it was past midnight. It felt like a week had passed since she and Yong Qi had that painfully unfinished but truthful conversation in her kitchen, even if her head knew it really was only that morning.

Both Xiao Yan and Yong Qi had been silent on the whole drive from the hospital back to her apartment. Given the lateness of the hour when she could finally tear herself from the still unconscious Zi Wei's bedside, Yong Qi offered to take her home, and she couldn't think of a reason to deny him. However, she was glad that she managed to convince him he didn't need to walk her to her door. It wasn't that she wanted to be rid of him. She just wasn't sure after the last twenty-four hours that they had, she'd have any resolve to allow him to leave her door.

Her relief was multiplied when she found that her brother was still waiting up for her in her apartment.

"How's Zi Wei?" he asked with genuine concern as she dropped her bag down on the door of the living room, collapsed on the couch and closed her eyes, feeling more drained of energy than she previously realised. "It must be bad if you've been gone the whole day."

"Hmmm...."

To Xiao Jian's credit, he didn't press her for an explanation, nor did he show any sign of annoyance
at her incommunicativeness. He only patted her leg and then she could hear the sound of him walking towards the kitchen. A few moments later, he returned, with a clinking sound of a mug being placed down on the coffee table.

Xiao Yan's eyes cracked open and she found a mug of chrysanthemum tea on the table. Sighing, she swung her legs up into the air and pulled herself into a sitting position. She reached for the mug, wrapping both hands around it, inhaling the comforting scent, and murmured, "Thank you."

Half a mug of tea later, she finally found her voice to give her brother some information on Zi Wei's situation.

"When you left, she hasn't woken up?" he asked.

"No," Xiao Yan answered, sighing despondently.

Even as she said this, she realised she was nodding off into her tea. Xiao Jian recognised this too, and took the mug from her.

"Go to sleep, Xiao Yan."

"You staying?" she mumbled.

"No," Xiao Jian answered. "I'm coming into the office tomorrow and I don't have work clothes here. You coming to work tomorrow?"

"Probably, if nothing drastic happens," Xiao Yan answered, yawning. "You can let yourself out?"

"Sure. Sleep, Xiao Yan."

"'Night, Brother."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, so blame canon for what's happening to Zi Wei. But as much as it is just pure drama to throw a wrench into Zi Wei's life, it will also give Yong Qi and Xiao Yan a kick up, so it's sort of serving a purpose.
Zi Wei's head was pounding.

She hurt, everywhere it seemed, but nowhere as excruciating as the side of her head.

There seemed to be nothing to feel except the pain.

It was as if she was being pushed back and forth on currents of pain, desperately grasping for something to hold her in place, but finding nothing. It seemed like the only concrete thing she could feel was the hammer that was attempting to crack her head open.

She wanted to open her eyes, but like the rest of her, her eyelids didn't seem inclined to obey her commands. She could hear, faintly, someone calling her name…

Not just someone.

Er Kang…

She reached, against the tide of her pain, towards the sound of his voice…If she only she could hold on to it, she knew his voice would bring her to consciousness.

After what seemed like an eternity, she thought that she could control more of her body again. Again, she tried to open her eyes.

She thought she had managed it.

But still, somehow, she was still shrouded in darkness.

"Er Kang…"

He was grasping her hand – she could feel his touch – and he was calling her name. "Zi Wei! Zi Wei! Come back to me! I'm here, just come back to me!"

"Er Kang," she called again.

And even though she still struggled to open her eyes to look at him, she couldn't help but feel some of the pain abated as Er Kang pressed his lips against her forehead, sighing shakily with relief. She could even feel his tears wetting her skin. She wanted to reach for him, to touch him and comfort him, but her body was still refusing to do as she bid. She could feel, but she couldn't direct it to do what she wanted.

Vaguely, she realised they weren't alone, because someone else was squeezing her hand, and it was He Jing's voice that said, "I'll go let Dr Hu know you're awake."

Now that she had come to, she seemed aware of everything in her surrounding with painful clarity. She didn't need to see to hear He Jing's footsteps across the room and the sound of the door opening, then clicking shut. The beeping sounds of machines and the dizzying smell of anaesthetics told Zi Wei she was in a hospital. She must be; after all, the only thing she remembered before this wave of pain driving her to consciousness was falling, then hitting something hard.
Most real of all to her senses, overwhelmed by pain, was Er Kang's touch as he pressed his forehead down to where her hand was resting in his on the bed, whispering words of thanks that she had woken up with such sincerity that on top of physical pain, she felt a jolt of pain of a different kind when she wondered how long she had been unconscious and how much he must have suffered during that time.

"What happened?" she asked Er Kang.

"You hit your head on the stairs," he answered, smoothing back her hair. "You're in Imperial Hospital. You've been unconscious for over a day now. We've all been so worried."

Zi Wei nodded slightly, not having the strength to do more than acknowledge Er Kang's words. Before her could say anything else, the door opened again and from the sounds, Zi Wei knew it couldn't have just been He Jing and Dr Hu walking in, so she was unsurprised to hear her father's voice, as relieved as Er Kang sounded earlier.

"Zi Wei, you're awake, thank Heaven! How are you feeling?"

"Everything hurts," she murmured. "Specially my head."

"You're going to be all right," her father said, kissing her hair. "You're awake now, which is the important thing. Is that not right, Doctor?"

"The pain is to be expected, Miss Zi Wei," Dr Hu said kindly. "You've had quite a fall."

She wanted to protest, when Er Kang started reluctantly retreating, but didn't have the energy. Logically, she knew he was only trying to make room for the doctor to examine her, but she couldn't help but feel the loss of his touch, so much so that she clutched the hospital bed sheet beneath her.

"I'm going to test your pupil reflex, Miss Zi Wei," Dr Hu told her. "You just woke up from a fall, so the light might be a little unpleasant."

"Doctor, I can't open my eyes," Zi Wei managed to whisper.

"I'm sorry, Miss?"

There was something alarming about the overly-restrained sound of the doctor's voice. It made Zi Wei's stomach twist painfully.

"I can't seem to open my eyes," she forced herself to repeat. "My head hurts too much."

Everyone in the room seemed to have fallen into an eerie state of hush. For a few moments, the only thing Zi Wei could hear was the ticking of the clock on the wall.

"Miss Zi Wei," Dr Hu finally said, his voice too carefully calm, "could you please try and close your eyes for me?"

"Close my – " Zi Wei started, confused. She must not be hearing right. Perhaps the pain was having an adverse effect on her. "How could I close my eyes when I haven't been able to – "

That was when the realisation came to her: great and terrible and crashing down like another blow to the head.

Her eyes were open. They had been opened all this time…

She just…thought they weren't because…
Because she couldn't see…

She just couldn't see anything…and she was otherwise in too much pain to realise before why…

"No!" she gasped, trying to sit up, but the moment she tried to move, a blinding pain shook through her body and she crumbled just as fast as she tried to move. There were several exclamations of alarm, and she felt someone guide her back down to the bed. "No…"

The second 'No' came out as broken as she was starting to feel. She couldn't even tell if the way Er Kang had rushed back to her side and grasped her hand comforted her, or pained her more.

"Miss Zi Wei, please do not make yourself uneasy just yet," Dr Hu said.

His calm voice should help Zi Wei follow his advice, but somehow, simply hearing and not being able to see the person giving the advice made panic rise even more rapidly in her. She could only grip Er Kang's hand painfully tight in an attempt to be anchored to the current reality and not drift off to speculations of a future where she might never see again.

Dr Hu continued, "It is impossible for me to give an accurate prognosis at this point. Tests and scans would be required for conclusion of any kind. But seeing as you have experienced blunt head trauma, it is very likely that there is some damage to the visual cortex. I cannot yet say how extensive or how long lasting this damage may be, until we run some tests."

"But it could be permanent?" she asked in a tight voice.

"I…would rather not say at this stage, Miss," the doctor said.

Zi Wei swallowed the enormous lump that had been forming in her throat. It was like swallowing a handful of shrapnel, but she willed herself not to break down in tears, even if her body was screaming at her to let the tears take over, that they might offer some relief.

But relief from what? Whatever Dr Hu said, the fact that he would not say anything for definite now meant that there was a possibility, however minute, that she would never see again.

How was it possible, that she had to even contemplate the idea that she might never see again? No, it was agonisingly wrong. It wasn't how her life was supposed to go…She was engaged to be married, oh Heaven, she was engaged – how long had it been? It could not have been a full two days…

She was supposed to have a world of possibilities in front of her…her whole life…

…And now, would the darkness consume it all?

The very idea made her entire body shake with terrified sobs. Arms wrapped around her, and she could hear Er Kang's voice murmuring panicked comfort in her ears. She heard the sound of his voice, but her mind was too terrified of the darkness to understand his words. Still, he was here, he was beside her, and the only thing she could do was clutch at him, like he was the only thing keeping her tethered to the world as she knew it…

She felt like every single bit of her energy was being spent in holding on to him, and yet, she could not push away the feeling that the darkness was still, at this very moment, wrenching her away.

How Zi Wei wished she could see him!

Xiao Yan was thoroughly late to work that morning.
The concept of 'on-time' at her office was a blissfully flexible one. Grace didn't have a problem with people arriving any time between eight and nine, as long as the work was done, and you stayed late if there was work to be done.

That morning, however, it was a little past nine-thirty when Xiao Yan finally stepped out of the elevator on their floor, and ran straight into Grace coming back from the bathroom.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," Xiao Yan said upon meeting her boss's raised eyebrow.

"Lucky for you, Xiao Jian did mention you might be late today," Grace said.

"Did he say why?" Xiao Yan asked warily.

"No. Why?"

"Er – family emergency?"

Technically, it was true, even if Grace didn't seem to believe her, judging by the look Xiao Yan was receiving. But she was thankful when her boss simply clucked her tongue and sighed.

"Just make sure to tell me yourself next time if you can't make it on time."

Xiao Yan gave her a perfunctory sheepish smile, before ducking into her desk, half hidden by her cubicle. It was only when she could hear Grace's office door close that Xiao Yan let out a breath of relief. She wasn't particularly concerned with the reproach. If anything, it proved that somehow Zi Wei's injury and admittance to hospital had not made the news yet, which was a good thing for the time being.

She spent the next half hour checking the news online, which confirmed her deduction. While news reports of Li Zhi and his horrific crime were everywhere, there were no mention of either Zi Wei or Er Kang in any of them. The articles only mentioned that Li Zhi was interrupted in the middle of moving his ex-girlfriend's body by a neighbour, but did not identify them. Xiao Yan thought it was probably the only relief to be found in this situation, even if reading articles after articles to find evidence of Zi Wei or Er Kang's names made her stomach churn as she was retold over and over the details of the crime they walked into.

After about the tenth article, Xiao Yan hastily shut down her internet browser, shaking with the chills that had been sent through her body. Opening up her email, she tried to force herself to turn her mind to other things instead.

Xiao Yan spent the rest of the day getting a surprising amount of work done. Making herself focus on other things was apparently the only way she could get through the day. She purposefully pretended to be busy and avoided joining in her colleagues' discussion of the crime which had apparently gone viral. She could well understand how, for them, it was a horror show to be spooked about. For her, it was horrible entirely different ways, ways which could not be talked about or discussed over a cup of tea.

"You're going back to the hospital?" her brother asked quietly at the end of the day as they left the office together.

"Yes," Xiao Yan answered, sighing. Then, she turned to look guiltily at him. "I'm sorry, I know we're supposed to be spending some time together - "

"Xiao Yan, Xiao Yan," he cut in and placed his hands on her shoulders, "it's fine. You're worried about Zi Wei, I get that. She also needs you right now, so don't worry about me. Okay?"
She gave him a watery smile before throwing her arms around him, squeezing tightly. "Thank you for understanding."

"Just let me know if you're going to be back late, okay?"

She nodded and leaned in to hug him again and started to head off to see Zi Wei. Before she could even leave the building, however, her phone rang.

Xiao Yan immediately picked up. "Jin Suo? Where are you?"

"I went back to Jinan yesterday morning," Jin Suo said. "What's going on?"

Jin Suo was sounding much too calm to be aware of what was going on with Zi Wei, and for a moment, Xiao Yan wasn't sure how to verify that conjecture. Jin Suo didn't seem to notice anything wrong with her hesitancy, because she kept on speaking.

"It's only that I took the early train back to Jinan yesterday morning, and my phone battery was dead for the whole trip. By the time I got home, I was dead tired so I didn't realise I had a missed call from Zi Wei until late last night. I tried calling her back several times today, but she hasn't answered any of them. I couldn't get to Er Kang either. I don't know, I just have a bad feeling that something's happened."

Xiao Yan looked around where she stood; it was the end of the day, the lobby of her office building was milling with people.

"Hold on," she told Jin Suo, before ducking into the stairwell. (A chill ran through her body as she remembered what exactly happened to Zi Wei in a stairwell, but there was nowhere else private enough that she could hide to have this conversation.) "When was your missed call from Zi Wei?"

"Er, about afternoon? Around three, I think?"

"Then it was probably someone else using her phone to call you. Probably Yong Qi."

"Why?" Jin Suo asked warily.

Xiao Yan took a deep breath and in as calm a voice as possible, told Jin Suo what happened.

"Is she all right? Is she all right?" Jin Suo asked, sounding breathless with worry.

"When I went home last night, she was still unconscious. I've been at work all day and haven't heard anything. To be honest, I'm not sure how to take this silence. On the one hand, I'm sure Yong Qi would have told me if things had taken a turn for the worse...but if the fact he hasn't said anything all day means she still hasn't woken up, that might mean something very bad...I don't know. Anyway, I'm heading off to see her now."

"I can't believe I missed that call!" Jin Suo said, and from the wobbly sound of her voice, Xiao Yan could tell she was holding back tears and failing.

"There wasn't anything you could have done, Jin Suo," Xiao Yan said comfortingly. "You were already on the train."

"Yeah, but I would have turned right around once I got to a station!"

"Are you going to come back?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I'm not sure I can now..." Jin Suo said, anxiety filling her voice. "I'm swamped at work at the
moment and I only managed to get a day off to come to Zi Wei's engagement because I told my boss out right that was what I needed the time off for. But I guess I can't exactly reveal this…"

"No," Xiao Yan said regretfully. "By some miracle, their names are being kept out of all the articles reporting that incident for now, and I think everyone would want to keep it that way."

"Wait, it's that murder that was all over the news today?" Jin Suo said faintly, sounding ill.

"Yes."

Jin Suo let out an extremely shaky breath. "You said you were heading off to see Zi Wei now?" she asked after a pause to gather herself.

"Yes. I'll call you after I get there to update you on her situation, all right?"

"Thank you," Jin Suo said, her voice still unsteady. "I'm going to try and get time off to come up tomorrow and be with her, but I'm not sure I'll get it. But I'll definitely come up Friday night."

"I'll talk to you later, all right?"

"Bye, Xiao Yan. Thank you for tell me all this."

"Take care, Jin Suo."

"You too. Bye."

Arriving at the Imperial Wing, Xiao Yan was surprised when the nurse stationed at the reception desk simply nodded at her and without question, pressed a button on her desk which opened the doors.

"That's a change from yesterday," Xiao Yan muttered to herself, but she supposed Yong Qi probably had a hand in that.

As she walked into the hall, she could see the door to what she remembered was the waiting room open, and Yong Qi and He Jing stepped out. Even from a distance away, Xiao Yan could tell both were agitated and she hurried towards them.

"What's wrong?"

"Well, Zi Wei's awake," Yong Qi answered.

Somehow, that was not as reassuring as she'd thought it would be.

"So why do you look like she's taken a turn for the worse?" Xiao Yan asked.

Yong Qi exchanged a decidedly ominous look with He Jing, which did nothing to calm Xiao Yan. Then, he took her elbow and led her into the waiting room.

"Yong Qi, tell me what's going on!" she said as she walked.

"You should sit down first," he said gently, gesturing a chair. Xiao Yan was almost tempted to not sit just to be contrary, but then there was something about the look on his face that told her she shouldn't make what was coming more difficult than it already was.

She sat.
Yong Qi and He Jing pulled up chairs and sat opposite her.

"What's going on?" she asked again, liking the tension between them even less now.

"As I said, Zi Wei's awake," Yong Qi said slowly, with a calmness that Xiao Yan could recognise as restrained, "but there are complications."

Xiao Yan stared at him, waiting. He reached out and took her hands in his.

"She woke up this morning – "

"And you didn't tell me!"

"I didn't want to tell you, only to worry you! I wanted to wait until we have more information about her situation before saying anything to you. As I said, there are complications."

"Such as?" Xiao Yan asked impatiently.

Yong Qi exchanged another look with He Jing, who had so far remained silent.

"Xiao Yan, Zi Wei hasn't been able to see since she woke up," He Jing now said.

Xiao Yan stared at her, uncomprehending. Suddenly, it felt as if she was underwater, trying to listen to words being spoken above the surface. It all washed over her and she couldn't bring herself to understand…

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"Dr Hu said, the fall and the impact to her head affected her ability to see," He Jing said. "They have been running scans and tests all day to determine how…permanent this loss of vision is…"

Xiao Yan heard the words, but she couldn't seem to understand. The whole concept seemed impossibly unreal. She sat, hardly aware of the way Yong Qi was stroking the back of her hand with his thumb in comfort and unable to move. There seemed to be only one thought going round and round in her head, yet she couldn't comprehend it at all.

"Where is she now?" Xiao Yan asked, her voice cracking. She sprang up to her feet, unable to sit there and deal with the voices of disbelief in her head.

He Jing and Yong Qi both stood with her.

"She's in her room. Ah Ma and Er Kang are in there with her now," Yong Qi said. He reached over to put a light touch on her arm. "Mama has a thing to attend, and since we're trying to keep this secret for now, it won't do to attract attention by cancelling too many engagements."

"How – how is she?"

Xiao Yan's voice was trembling now, and she was too numb to even brush away the tears that had fallen. The salty taste they left on her lips did nothing to comfort her.

"I think…I think she's been mostly numb," He Jing said softly. "She hasn't said a lot. I don't think she could quite believe it yet. Or maybe she just can't bring herself to have any kind of reaction before the doctors come back with some more permanent diagnosis. You should go over and see her."

"Yes," Xiao Yan agreed. The word came out in a shakier voice than she intended, and she had to
clench her fists together to try and calm herself.

Yong Qi's hand drifted from her arm down to wrap around her hand, squeezing it tightly. "Come on, let's go see Zi Wei."

When Yong Qi led Xiao Yan out into the hall with He Jing following behind them, they found Dr Hu also approaching Zi Wei's room. As soon as they were close enough to speak, the doctor told the three of them that he was on his way to report on Zi Wei's test results. In that moment, his face was impossible to read. Xiao Yan supposed that was his job, to not let on either the good or bad news before they could be revealed properly.

And so, Xiao Yan could only follow the doctor into the room where Zi Wei was, to a sight that broke her heart even before any bad news was declared.

There, Zi Wei sat on the bed with her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Meanwhile, Er Kang and the emperor stood on either side of Zi Wei's bed, looking helplessly at her. At a glance, it became too obvious to Xiao Yan that any attempt at physical comfort offered by either of them had been rebuffed. Zi Wei had already closed herself off, not just emotionally, but physically as well. It was obvious in the way she was trying to ball herself as tightly together as possible. It was as if limbs were supposed to be her own cocoon, protecting her from whatever fears that might lurk in what was now an inky black world.

Xiao Yan wondered what was protecting Zi Wei from the fears and demons of her own mind?

At the sound of their entrance, the two men in the room turned around, and Xiao Yan could see in their eyes that they were desperate for Dr Hu's appearance to mean something good. The doctor clearly understood, because he did not wait for any urging to begin delivering whatever verdict he had come to give.

"We have received the results of your scans and tests, Miss Zi Wei," the doctor said. "It is as I would have predicted. The kind of blunt head trauma as you have suffered is sometimes severe enough to cause a cerebral contusion, or bruising in the brain."

As the doctor started speaking, Zi Wei had lifted her head from where it was previously dropped down on her arms. She turned towards the sound of Dr Hu's speaking, but there was still such a blank expression on her face, so fearful and devoid of hope, that it made Xiao Yan's heart want to break. Desperate for some comfort herself, Xiao Yan's hand reached out, almost as if of its own violation, and found Yong Qi's again.

Dr Hu continued, "From the scans, what we could see is that there was some degree of bleeding into and swelling of the brain tissues as a result of the trauma. I believe, it is this swelling that is affecting your visual cortex, leading to your current loss of vision."

"And how permanent is this vision loss?" the emperor asked gruffly, when the doctor briefly paused. "It is difficult to judge the extent of the damage to the optical cortex at this point," Dr Hu answered. "We would have to continue monitoring your condition while you are here, Miss Zi Wei. There are also several scenarios that might possibly come to pass. The best case, of course, is that once the bleeding stops, and the swelling subsides, the pressure on the nerves in your brain will be relieved, and your vision will return. This can take anywhere from a few days to many weeks…"

"But that is just one possibility," Zi Wei said, her voice cracking, but her expression seemed to harden. "There is a possibility that I might stay blind forever?"
Xiao Yan wasn't sure the sharp pain she was feeling now was due to that possibility that Zi Wei just mentioned, or the way her friend was so ready to consider it. It was as if, in the darkness, she could see no hope for recovery. That loss of spirit somehow was more terrible to Xiao Yan than the loss of Zi Wei's sight.

What made it all the more unbearable was, by the brief expressions that pass through the emperor's face, Xiao Yan could tell, this wasn't the first time Zi Wei so insistently asked about the possibility of the blindness being permanent. It was clear, this was a question that had haunted Zi Wei for the whole day since she first woke up and found out she could not see.

"I would rather not say anything definite at this point – " Dr Hu started to answer hesitantly, as if he too, could understand the emotional burdens which led Zi Wei to ask the question.

"But there is a possibility?" Zi Wei asked, more sharply. She was clutching at the sheets of the hospital bed beneath her, as if the white fabric bunched in her fists was the only thing keeping her from a total emotional breakdown.

"Yes," Dr Hu reluctantly said, but then hastened to add, "but even with vision loss, there are varying degrees of it. Very few people who suffer vision impairment, either due to trauma or from birth, live in total darkness. There might be different levels of light perception experienced by different people. In vision loss due to trauma, partial loss is more common. There is the possibility that even if full vision does not return, you can still see shadows and shapes, or the loss could be contained and you can still regain vision in a limited field. But at this point, you require time and rest, Miss Zi Wei, before we can say anything more about your condition and how long it might last."

Once Dr Hu finished speaking, Zi Wei froze for a moment, as if contemplating the words, before nodding and turning her face away from the direction of his voice. The message was clear. She had heard enough to be consumed by the despair of the worst case scenario, that no reassurance of a chance of recovery could even be comforting.

The emperor approached Dr Hu and gestured towards the door. The two men left the room and the door closed quietly behind them.

Meanwhile, back inside, the silence was deafening. Er Kang was staring helplessly at Zi Wei, clearly having no idea how to comfort her. Xiao Yan wondered how many ways he had tried during the day that was soundly rebuffed.

It was, surprisingly, Zi Wei who broke first.

It was as if the tension in the room was suffocating her, because she abruptly unravelled herself and swung her legs to the side of the bed.

Her movement shook all of them into action, and all four of them moved, but it was Er Kang, who was closest, who got to Zi Wei's side fist.

"Zi Wei!" he exclaimed, placing a hand on her arm, "what do you need?" Then, seeing that she was trying to slide off the bed, he added, "Where do you want to go? Let me help you – "

"No!" Zi Wei cried, shrugging Er Kang off, frustration clear in her voice. "No! Let go of me! I can do it myself."

"Zi Wei, you don't have to. Let me help you," Er Kang begged, but to no avail as Zi Wei continued to push his arm away.

A few steps away, Yong Qi, Xiao Yan and He Jing watched, unsure how they could help or even
who they should help: Zi Wei in her misplaced attempt at independence in this moment when she probably needed someone to lean on most, or Er Kang in his heartbroken attempt to convince her she could lean on him.

"What do you need? Where do you want to go?" Er Kang was still asking desperately. Zi Wei had slid off the bed but either it was because she could see little, or because her head still hurt too much, she was unstable on her feet. Er Kang's arms were both hovering barely hand's width away from Zi Wei's body, ready to catch her if she fell.

"I need to go to the window," Zi Wei said. She tried to take a step, but she was so unbalanced that she would have fallen face-first into the floor if Er Kang hadn't been there to catch her. She allowed Er Kang to help her straighten, or perhaps she was too dizzy to prevent it, but immediately after, pushed his arms away again. "I need to look out the window."

It was like a punch to the stomach, but suddenly Xiao Yan understood what her friend was trying to do. It almost made her sob out loud, and she pressed a hand to her lips. Tears only ran down her cheeks as she continued to stand there helplessly and watch Er Kang's valiantly trying to convince Zi Wei to take his arm and let him guide her.

"No! I don't need you to hold my hand like a child! Don't you dare turn me into some useless thing," Zi Wei cried.

"Zi Wei, you're not - " Er Kang started, but he was interrupted.

"There can't be more than ten steps to the window! If I can't even walk ten steps in this tiny room by myself, how am I going to live in the future?"

The question came out more or less in a shout, which scared Xiao Yan even more than if Zi Wei had broken down crying. It would have been a relief to see the tears from Zi Wei now, to know that at least she was beginning to accept the situation, that it hurt but she would allow the tears to heal her. But what Zi Wei was doing now – desperately trying to prove that she was all right, trying to walk blindly and alone, by pushing away Er Kang, holding back her fears and tears – was only demonstrating that she didn't want to face any of this reality at all.

It took Er Kang frantically calling directions and moving obstacles out of Zi Wei's way, but after what seemed like forever, Zi Wei reached the window seat. They were on one of the top floors of the high-rise building that housed the hospital, and from the window, one could see the golden, curved roofs of the palace nearby.

Zi Wei couldn't see. That much was clear in the way she pressed her forehead so desperately against the window, pounding her fists on the glass, in too much turmoil to even make more than choked sounds from the back of her throat.

It was too much, and Xiao Yan couldn't take it anymore. She ran the few steps towards Zi Wei and took her friend's face into her hands, turning her so that they were almost nose to nose.

"Don't do this! Don't do this to yourself, Zi Wei!" she said through tears. "You have to believe that you'll get better, that everything will work out eventually, and that means for now you have to let us help you! You'll always have Er Kang, and me, and everyone else who loves you. You just have to let us help you. Please, Zi Wei!"

Apparently, it took Xiao Yan's voice – or maybe it was her words – for Zi Wei to break down. She seized Xiao Yan into a hug and suddenly the tears came. Each sob seemed to be torn from her throat, but she was crying, wetting Xiao Yan's shoulder, hands clutching at Xiao Yan's shirt like she had
clutched at her bedsheets earlier. Xiao Yan was crying too as she rested her head against Zi Wei's, running her hand in long strokes against Zi Wei's back.

"It's all right. You're going to be all right. There is still hope that you'll be all right. I believe it, Zi Wei, and you must too…"

Xiao Yan didn't even know if she really believed her own words, but how did that even matter? What mattered now was that she had to keep Zi Wei from this despair which made her turn into herself like this. Zi Wei might not want to lean on anyone, not even Er Kang, but that didn't mean that she didn't need it. And Xiao Yan would be damned if she allowed Zi Wei to turn away from the help and support she so desperately needed, no matter how much tried to deny it, not matter how much it hurt to admit it.

The large clock face on the side of a bank opposite the hospital showed that it was over half an hour later before Zi Wei's body totally calmed from her tears. She released Xiao Yan, exhausted, and leaned her head back against the window. Xiao Yan still didn't let go of her hand.

"Er Kang," Zi Wei called, her voice hoarse and hollow.

"I'm here," Er Kang cried, hurrying over and kneeling so that he was level with her. He took Zi Wei's other hand in both of his and raised it to his lips, kissing it. "I'm here."

"I know that we just got engaged in a very public way," she said, still in that flat, emotionless voice, "but considering this, everyone would understand if we don't – "

Xiao Yan tried to look comforting as Er Kang shot her a dismayed look when they both began to understand what Zi Wei was saying.

"No!" Er Kang interrupted before she could even finish her sentence. "We are not having this conversation, Zi Wei! We are not going down this road. We are getting married because we love each other, and because we want to. Two days can't have changed that!"

"Of course it's changed!" Zi Wei cried, wrenching her hands from both Xiao Yan and Er Kang's grips. She stood up suddenly, and both Er Kang and Xiao Yan rose with her, both in order to continue speaking to her and to steady her. There was a different kind of heart break and desperation in Zi Wei's voice now as she said, her voice cracking, "Don't you see how everything has changed? You can't marry me now that I'll be a burden to you, and I can't use you as a crutch, Er Kang!"

Er Kang put both his hands on Zi Wei's shoulder to keep her stumbling away from him. "I can, and I will marry you, Zi Wei. You will never be a burden to me!"

Xiao Yan sighed and stepped away from them. She was with Er Kang, of course, but Zi Wei taking this stance was hardly a surprise.

Yong Qi beckoned to Xiao Yan from where he stood by the door, and when she got closer, he opened it. The two of them stepped out into the hall.

"Let's give them some privacy for that conversation," he said.

Xiao Yan could not agree more, and nodded. As much as she loved Zi Wei, it wasn't something that she could get involved in. Er Kang would have to convince Zi Wei herself that her noble self-sacrifice was entirely misplaced and he would not stand for it. Xiao Yan had no doubt he would, eventually, but not before Zi Wei had made all her points as well. In any case, it would undoubtedly be a long, heart-wrenching conversation that did not require an audience.
"Where's your Jiejie?" she asked Yong Qi instead.

"She's gone home to tell the others the news," Yong Qi said. "Ah Ma is the other room. I don't think Dr Hu could tell him anything more positive when they spoke together, so it's all pretty hard on him. Not to the extent that Zi Wei is feeling it, but – "

"No, of course…"

"He came back earlier but it didn't seem like a good idea to interrupt you when you were just starting to get her to allow you to comfort her."

"I'm not sure how comforting I managed to be," Xiao Yan said, shaking her head, "if at the end of it, she still got into her head the idea that Er Kang would be better off without her."

"If Zi Wei were more clear-minded, she'd realise that Er Kang would never entertain even the idea of it."

Xiao Yan sighed. "To be honest," she said, "I understand why she's acting like this."

"Pushing Er Kang away?"

"Pushing everyone away."

Yong Qi raised an eyebrow in question.

Xiao Yan sighed again. "I suppose it would be hard for you to imagine. You have a big family, and you grow up surrounded by people whose jobs are to take care of you. That's not a criticism, but it does mean that you think asking for help and having people be there for you – either because they genuinely care about you or because they're actually paid to do it – are all perfectly natural things. Zi Wei was raised by a single mother. She's had to learn to be self-sufficient. It's hard to totally let go of the mentality that in times of crisis, the only person you could truly depend on is yourself, and you shouldn't expect anyone else to be there for you."

"You'd think after all these years, Zi Wei would have learnt that she could depend on Er Kang, if not anyone else," Yong Qi said. "That she could trust him to be there for her."

Xiao Yan gave him a melancholy look. "I'm not saying it's rational. It's not even an issue of trust. It's just very scary to allow yourself to dependent on someone when you're already a vulnerable situation like this? It's not easy, letting go of instincts that have roots almost from birth. I'm not saying he can't convince her to lean on him. If anything, if anyone could convince her to allow herself to be helped, it's Er Kang. Right now, the idea just terrifies her, so she reverts back to her default. Er Kang will just have to convince her how things had changed."

"Yes, of course," Yong Qi said sorrowfully. "I've just never seen Zi Wei so hopeless and in that much despair before, so it's shocking, to say the least."

"She'll be all right, as long as Er Kang is there," Xiao Yan said. "They'll be all right." There was a beat. "If they, of people, can't get through this together, I'm not sure I can believe there is such thing as true love anymore."

Yong Qi looked at her, startled. "Really?"

She gave him a thin smile. "They're Zi Wei and Er Kang. In case you haven't figured it out, they're basically the most stable and healthy romantic relationship I've ever actually watched forming and reaching this stage."
He gave her a strange look that she couldn't quite figure out, until he said, "But their relationship wouldn't have suited you." That was when she realised he must be thinking more of them than of Er Kang and Zi Wei. There was such an unguarded yet quietly thoughtful tone to his words that Xiao Yan wondered if he even realised he actually said them out loud.

Perhaps it was because Zi Wei's situation was forcing her to face a reality she would have pushed aside at other times, Xiao Yan found herself throwing caution to the wind and answering honestly, despite the fact that the more self-preserving thing to do at that moment would be to pretend she didn't understand the not-so-well-hidden meanings in his words at all.

"No, you're right. I don't want to be Zi Wei and Er Kang. I want to be us," she said, hardly daring her voice to be louder than a whisper.

This startled Yong Qi, and he turned to her, clearly unsure if he had heard – or understood – correctly. He stared at her and seemed to freeze for a long moment, waiting for more. When she didn't do anything other than looking up at him with a small, sad smile, he said in barely more than a whisper, "Xiao Yan…"

"I know it's terrible timing right now," she said in a more normal volume, twisting her hands together nervously. Then, she let out a shaky laugh, half-mocking, half-reproaching herself. "And I would have liked to keep on thinking that I don't need all these horrible things happening to realise what is precious to me. But the truth is, after seeing Zi Wei and Er Kang being so happy one moment and then having their lives turned upside down the next like this, I can't help but think that it's some kind of wake-up call. Or at least, a reminder. Of how fragile life could be. How things that seem so important one minute could be completely eclipsed the next. Last night, when Zi Wei was still unconscious, when we weren't even sure if she would...I don't know, I kept thinking of all the little ways I should have appreciated Zi Wei more. And somehow…somehow it made me think, if it was ever you…"

She stopped abruptly and shook her head, feeling an irrational need to shake away any bad luck she might have just invited in with such a statement.

Yong Qi still didn't speak. It was as if somehow he knew that she hadn't said all that she needed to say yet, and was waiting for more. To Xiao Yan, it was almost like a challenge, to stop running away from this, to face what was in front of them both, what was obvious to both of them.

She took a deep breath.

"I wouldn't be able to live, if it was in a world without you," she said finally, meeting his eyes perfectly.

Yong Qi took a step closer. The silence hung between them, begging to be broken. Xiao Yan looked down at her shoes and shook her head, laughing and crying the tears she didn't even realise was forming in her eyes. She leaned forward and rested the crown of her head against his chest, closing her eyes as she felt him bring his hands up to rest at the back of her neck.

"I don't know why it feels like such an enormous thing to say. It's not like it's that shocking a secret," she murmured after they had stood like this for several moments. Then, she looked back up at him, finding that he was still staring at her, more dazed than ever. She gazed back for what seemed like several hours, before she heard herself saying, the words sounding like they were being shaken out from the deepest corner of her heart, "I love you. You know that, right?"

He nodded and she could see him swallow with difficulty. Then, in a croaky voice, he said with a small, hopeful smile, "That's never been our problem, though."
"I know," she whispered.

Another a pause stretched on, and this time, Xiao Yan felt like the very air between them seemed to have changed. Every assumption between them had changed, but neither of them were in any way equipped to deal with it, or knew how to even react.

"We really need to have that talk," Yong Qi said finally.

"Here? Now?" Xiao Yan looked pointedly at the closed door to Zi Wei's room. "I think we need to work on our timing."

At that very moment, as if to punctuate Xiao Yan's point, there was the sound of a door opening, making them both turn towards it.

"Ah Ma," Yong Qi said.

It wasn't until he had stepped away from her to approach his father that Xiao Yan realised how close they had previously been standing together. She was only glad that, if the emperor noticed it, he didn't say anything.

While Yong Qi spoke to his father, Xiao Yan took several deep breaths to try and calm herself, before pulling out her phone, to find that she had...more than a few missed calls and anxious texts from Jin Suo. When she looked up from reading the messages, she found that the emperor had gone back into Zi Wei's room, and Yong Qi was standing at the open door, looking expectantly at her.

"Are you coming in?"

She waved her phone and said distractedly, "In a bit. I just have to call Jin Suo...and let her know what's going on."

Yong Qi nodded. "Oh, of course. I called her yesterday from Zi Wei's phone, but couldn't reach her."

"I know. She called me just as I left work earlier. I told her what I knew then, but considering...well, I have to update her."

"You're going to be okay?"

Xiao Yan gave him as much of a smile as she could muster. "As soon as I figure out how to tell Jin Suo all of these new developments, yeah."

"You want company?"

"I'll be fine, Yong Qi."

He hesitated for another second before giving her an encouraging nod and a smile. Then, he followed his father back into Zi Wei's room.

Xiao Yan turned around, took a deep breath and dialled Jin Suo's number.
The next afternoon, when Xiao Yan arrived back at Zi Wei's hospital room after work, she found her friend in the room quite alone.

When Xiao Yan entered, Zi Wei was sitting with her chin on her knees, but the sound of the door opening startled her. She straightened abruptly.

"Who is it?"

"It's just me," Xiao Yan said, sitting down on the edge of Zi Wei's bed.

She looked around, and saw that there was a handbag on the sofa nearby, which probably meant Zi Wei wasn't as alone as she'd previously thought. Whoever was keeping her company probably just stepped out.

Xiao Yan reached for Zi Wei's hand. "How are you?"

"Fine, considering," Zi Wei said almost sullenly, which was not a tone Xiao Yan had ever heard from her before. Then again, Xiao Yan thought she probably earned the right to sulk a little.

Xiao Yan squeezed Zi Wei's hand, which just made her sigh heavily. Taking the hint that Zi Wei didn't really want to talk about herself or what was happening to her, Xiao Yan simply asked, "Where is everyone?"

"Er Kang's parents finally convinced him to go home around noon," Zi Wei answered.

Xiao Yan wasn't sure how to take the note of relief that was in her friend's voice as she said this. Of course, Er Kang, who practically refused to leave Zi Wei's hospital room since the accident, needed the rest. Xiao Yan just wasn't sure Zi Wei sounded relieved because Er Kang finally agreed to take that rest, or simply by going home, Er Kang was giving them a reprieve from their continued argument how or if Zi Wei's prognosis would affect their relationship status. When Xiao Yan finally tore herself away to go home the night before, it didn't look as if the issue was anywhere near settled, even if practically no one agreed with Zi Wei's morose stance.

Xiao Yan said none of her own thoughts on Er Kang out loud. Zi Wei probably heard enough of what other people thought she should do. So, even though knowing Zi Wei couldn't see it, Xiao Yan only nodded as she said, "He Ke is here, but she's gone to get something to eat."

"Have you eaten?" Xiao Yan asked.

"No, but Ke Ke is going to bring something back."

"And will you eat when she does?"

Zi Wei sighed. "Don't nag, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan tried to laugh, though it was hard considering how low Zi Wei was looking. "You know, it's usually me who says that."
"Xiao Yan…"

"You need your strength, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said, her voice turning soft. "Not taking care of yourself is not going to…change anything."

"I know."

There was a sound like sob threatening to break out, but Zi Wei somehow managed to choke it back in time. Xiao Yan couldn't be glad for that. She put her hand on her friend's and wished she knew what to say that could offer Zi Wei some comfort.

"I just…I feel so helpless, and I hate to think that I'd have to be so dependent on everyone around me…" Zi Wei finally admitted.

"Wouldn't that mean that you shouldn't be making everyone around you worry about you?" Xiao Yan asked matter-of-factly. "You'd feel a lot less dependent if you weren't making everyone feel so concerned about you. Er Kang especially."

"I know that." Zi Wei sighed heavily. "It's just that accepting…accepting everything that's happened is easier said than done. It doesn't help that no one would tell me what exactly happened that caused all this."

Xiao Yan had no answer to that last sentence, and apparently her silence was conspicuous.

"You know what happened, don't you?" Zi Wei asked. "You know what was going in that landing."

Xiao Yan sighed. It felt like a year had passed since she was told what happened that led to Zi Wei's accident, but at the same time, she shivered to think of it. She knew that if she were in Zi Wei's position, she'd want to be told and couldn't blame Zi Wei for being annoyed that everyone around her was coddling her by not telling her. At the same time, it wasn't like Xiao Yan didn't understand why no one told Zi Wei the truth. It was so horrible…Xiao Yan didn't want to put that burden on Zi Wei either.

But then, Xiao Yan realised, most of all, she didn't want to lie to Zi Wei. Not now of all times.

So she said, "Yes."

"What happened?"

Even having reached her conclusion, Xiao Yan still couldn't help doubting herself. "Zi Wei – "

"Don't!" Zi Wei cut in. "Don't start tell me about how I shouldn't worry about it, or that it doesn't concern me anymore, or all the other things everyone has been telling me! I might not be able to see now, but I could see then, Xiao Yan! And I remember what I saw in that staircase! It was – it was horrible. And honestly…half the reason I can't eat is because I can't sleep, not when every time I close my eyes – "

"They just don't want you to be distressed about it, Zi Wei."

"And you think the memories aren't distressing? It's better if I just know what exactly happened, instead of trying to guess based on what I saw…"

Xiao Yan still hesitated.

"Xiao Yan, please. You'd want to know."
Xiao Yan winced at how much the point stung. "All right," she said finally. "Just know…it's not pretty, okay?"

"I know it's not. I saw enough."

Xiao Yan told Zi Wei the whole story, or at least as much as she knew.

"Do you know what her name was?" Zi Wei asked, voice shaking after spending several minutes heaving, trying to push away all the overwhelming emotional and physical reactions caused by the horrors of what she had just been told.

"No," Xiao Yan said, sighing sadly. "I think they have identified her, but her family has requested to not reveal her name. The news reports haven't published her name, or your and Er Kang's involvement for that matter. To be honest, I'm surprised it's been contained for this long, but I doubt it can be kept back much longer. I think maybe your family might want to keep a media blackout on this entire case at least until you're discharged from hospital."

"I'm not sure that's possible," Zi Wei said. "Dr Hu said this morning that I might be in here for a couple of weeks more, at least."

"That long?" Xiao Yan asked, dismayed. "But you're – I mean, aside from – you're all right, aren't you?"

"Well, I feel…I don't know, there's pain in my head, it comes and goes. Basically, Dr Hu wants to make sure there's no…other permanent injuries…"

"Oh."

Xiao Yan didn't know what other permanent injuries there could be, and whether they could be worse than what they had already discovered. She also didn't want to tempt fate, so she decided not to ask.

Apparently, Zi Wei wanted to change the subject too. She asked, "Did you come here straight after work?"

"Yeah."

"So you haven't eaten either?"

"I'll wait for He Ke to get back and go grab something to eat then. Oh, I should tell you before I actually forget. Jin Suo asks you to call her if you feel up to it. Just to put her mind at ease that you're awake. I told her and tried to reassure her…but I think she'd feel better hearing your voice. She says she'll come up in the weekend to see you."

"Of course. I can't believe I didn't think of calling her – "

"Zi Wei, you're injured. You're not supposed to think of things like this. And honestly, only call her if you feel up to it, okay? She wouldn't want you to exert yourself – "

"It's just talking on the phone, Xiao Yan. I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"I guess." Xiao Yan pulled out her phone and dialled Jin Suo's number, before putting the phone in Zi Wei's hand. "Here."

"Thanks."
It was later in the evening. He Ke returned earlier with more than enough dinner for all three of them. After they had eaten, He Ke had left. She had intended to stay until Er Kang undoubtedly show up again later in the evening, but with Xiao Yan there, she was assured enough that Zi Wei would be good hand.

The two of them were searching for apps for Zi Wei's phone that would help her cope with her sudden loss of sight. Xiao Yan privately thought that the very fact that they were actually doing this was already a miracle, because it meant that at least Zi Wei was somewhat on her way to accepting what was happening.

Quite suddenly, Zi Wei asked, "How are you and Yong Qi anyway?"

Xiao Yan was so startled by it that she nearly dropped the phone in her hand. "What do you mean?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound too defensive.

Zi Wei chuckled. If they were talking about literally anything else, Xiao Yan would feel glad to hear the sound. As it was, it only made her squirm.

"Really, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said.

"There isn't a 'me and Yong Qi', Zi Wei," Xiao Yan answered evasively. "You know that."

"Isn't there?" her friend asked mildly, in atone that clearly said she knew otherwise.

"Why are you asking this?"

"This morning, when Yong Qi was here, he mentioned that you'd drop in later today after you finished with work."

Xiao Yan waited for more account of what else Yong Qi might have said. But apparently, that was it.

"And...? What's special about that?"

"He volunteered talking about you, Xiao Yan, with half the family in the room. After you broke up, he hardly ever brings up the subject of you anymore, and if he does talk about you with so many people in the room, it's usually a lot more hesitant. Not because he has some sort of grudge, mind you. He just doesn't want to invite question or curiosity from everyone."

"And you think because he can tell you with half your family in the room that I'm coming to see you later means that something's changed? Good grief, Zi Wei, you nearly died! I'd hope he'd be able to just tell you that I'm coming to visit and it'd be considered normal."

"You know, I know what your voice sounds like when you're trying to protest too much."

Xiao Yan spluttered. "I am not!"

"Xiao Yan."

"Zi Wei."

"Just call it a hunch, Xiao Yan. I can't explain it, but I do think something's different."

"Well, you're wrong," Xiao Yan said. Even she could hear the falseness in her own words.

Zi Wei knew it, too, but she didn't look or act angry or frustrated that Xiao Yan was refusing to be
truthful with her. She just said, in that impossibly knowing voice that she possessed, that always managed to make the uncomfortable prickling feeling of guilt for trying to shut Zi Wei out in the first place fill her, "Are you sure? He took you home the night of my engagement, didn't he?"

"How did you know about that?" Xiao Yan thought that this time, at least, she managed to sound quite calm, considering the turn the conversation had taken.

"You both disappeared at the same time. He wasn't in his room. His car was gone."

Xiao Yan couldn't think of anything to say, even when she knew by not saying anything, she was giving Zi Wei everything she needed to know.

Sure enough, Zi Wei straightened up. "So it's true? Something did happen? Are you two – "

"No!" Xiao Yan interrupted before Zi Wei could get her hopes up. "We're not – "

"But something did happen?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. She wasn't sure whether the fact that Zi Wei couldn't see her was a blessing or not. On the one hand, she wished she could talk about it to Zi Wei. On the other, it felt so much like selfishness to lay her confusion and uncertainty on Zi Wei right now.

Zi Wei sensed her unease, even if she let them sit in silence for a long while. Xiao Yan fiddled with Zi Wei's phone, but not really seeing anything on the screen.

Then, just as she thought the subject might be forgotten, Zi Wei said softly, "You know what everyone's been telling me the whole day?"

"What?"

"That Er Kang loves me, and that I should let myself trust him. Trust the love between us. That we can get through this together, as long as we have each other."

It was obvious that Zi Wei was trying to draw a parallel between the two of them and their respective relationships.

"It's not the same, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said with a sigh.

"I know," Zi Wei said gently. "But the point is that you do love him. And he loves you. And I think the question you need to ask yourself is whether you think either of you have any chance of finding that same bond with anyone else. If the answer is no, then the next question should be what does that mean for you both. I think you would have an easier time getting over each other if you weren't still so connected through me. But the fact that you are...the fact that you always find each other...don't you think all of it means something? That you could run away from each other all you want, but you'd never get over each other?"

"That's not the problem."

"What is?"

"You know what it is. I'm not really cut out to be a prince's wife, Zi Wei."

"And do you think I ever imagined myself a princess?"

"But you're not," Xiao Yan said with sudden a teasing grin. "As you keep telling everyone who calls you that. You don't have official duties."
"No, but I do have to live like I do. It's practically the same thing. Do you think you can't do what I do?"

"Except that when you get married, you'd get a break from that life. I'd have to marry into it."

"And you're scared, because you think you'll have to deal with it by yourself. But the truth is you won't be alone, Xiao Yan. You'll have Yong Qi there with you. And to be honest, if I've taken in anything from all things I've been told in the last couple of days, it's that it's more important to stay together. All the other questions of how, all the uncertainty and fears, could be overcome, if you allow yourself to trust each other."

"Are you trying to tell me that, or are you trying to convince yourself as well?" Xiao Yan asked.

"I don't know. Probably both," Zi Wei said with a tearful smile. "But if I need to learn to believe that, then maybe you do too, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan didn't like to think her behaviour exposed so much of her thoughts and feelings to the world, but it very soon became clear that this must be the case, as Zi Wei was not the only person who noticed that there might be something different between her and Yong Qi.

Her brother, too, asked whether the last few days meant that anything changed between her and Yong Qi.

"Zi Wei could have died," she told him. "Even if it might feel like something had changed between us, I am definitely sure I shouldn't be trusting that feeling."

Even as she said it, she knew the words were less true that she would like her brother to believe. After all, Zi Wei's accident couldn't change anything that happened before. She wasn't saying this to her brother because she was in denial, exactly. It was just that, with everything still so uncertain, she, too, was too wary of asserting too much.

"It didn't change just because of what happened to Zi Wei though," Xiao Jian pointed out, nearly in sync with Xiao Yan's own thought that she winced. "Even if you want to tell me that nothing happened the night of Zi Wei's engagement, can you really convince yourself of that?"

Xiao Yan sighed heavily, automatically looking away to avoid her brother's eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her voice might have implied that her brother should let the conversation end there, but she was starting to realise he was about as stubborn as she could be. So she wasn't happy, but wasn't surprised either, when he refused to let the subject drop.

"You never seem to want to talk about him," he pointed out, "but you still spend time with him. Have you ever thought that maybe that's not going to help?"

And yet, she had almost expected him to sound judgemental, so she was surprised when it was only gentle. This was the only reason Xiao Yan wasn't angry at him for asking questions she knew she should be asking herself, but could not bring herself to face. Even then, still found herself unable to say anything in reply that wouldn't ring obviously false. They were in her apartment, and she had been walking into the kitchen to get a drink. At his question, she stopped, turned away and walked into the living room instead, simply to try and distract herself.

Xiao Jian followed her. "Xiao Yan…"
She whirled around, facing him, stubbornness set in her eyes. "I know you're trying to be my brother, but this isn't...this isn't something you can understand."

"I'm trying to," he said patiently, reaching out to touch her arm.

"It's just that, I can't understand it half the time," she continued as if not hearing him. She didn't know why she had managed to have a relatively honest talk with Zi Wei about this just the night before, but now it was so much harder to speak of the same subject with her brother. Perhaps it was the realisation that it was one thing for Zi Wei, who was her best friend, to know her wants and feelings before she was ready to admit them, it was quite another thing to realise that she was so transparent even to Xiao Jian, who, though her brother, was not supposed to know her as well as Zi Wei. "I don't know how I can explain it to you."

"Well, if you want my opinion, you obviously are still in love with him," he said, still unbearably kind. She suddenly felt tears stinging her eyes and turned her face to try and discreetly brush them away. "And if you ask me – " which Xiao Yan didn't – "if what I saw at Zi Wei's engagement is any indication, the feeling is completely mutual."

She knew she really shouldn't ask, because there was no point of trying to put herself through this, but in the end, her curiosity still took over. "What did you see?"

"The way he looked at you." There was such a twinge of wistfulness in Xiao Jian's voice that she couldn't understand. "I didn't realise before, when he visited the office. In retrospect, I guess obviously both of you kept your distance. It was different, that night. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought he wasn't at his sister's engagement ceremony but – "

"No!" she cried, her eyes widening in horror at what her brother was obviously going to imply. "Don't! Don't go there!"

"I'm just saying, if you are that bad at staying away from each other, why are you even trying?"

Xiao Jian spoke these words as a rhetorical question, echoing all the similar questions she had been asking herself ever since she found herself kissing Yong Qi that night. It didn't help that everything that happened since only served to pull them together in each other's company even more.

None of it was fair, and it was exhausting. She wanted to give in to what her heart was demanding, to what even her brother saw clearly she wanted. It really should be the easy thing to do, especially considering how she had admitted to him – to herself – that she still loved him. Especially now when Yong Qi had made it clear that everything hinged on one word from her.

And yet, she still found herself remembering when she had first agreed to go out with him, how it felt, even then, like she had already said yes to a marriage proposal. It would feel even more overwhelmingly so now, if she were to allow herself to take that journey back into his arms again.

She had a feeling that all this would be a much less complicated question to answer had she lived a few hundred years ago. Then, she would have had little choices or prospects as a woman anyway, and marrying him might have ended up being the way to give herself the power to do anything that mattered.

Now, she didn't have to depend on anyone. It was a reason to be grateful, but it just made decisions concerning the two of them so much more terrifying to make, even when their feelings were so out in the open. Especially when their feelings were so out in the open. After all, if she ended up making the wrong choice, if they ended up crashing and burning ten years down the road regardless, there would be no one to blame but themselves, because they willing walked into it.
To carry that potential weight of regret – either hers or his – was a burden Xiao Yan never wanted. And yet Yong Qi had been right. In the end, it always had to be her choice, because it would be her life turned inside out. As if it didn't already do that from the very moment she met him.

"Xiao Yan?"

Her brother's voice sounded as if it was coming from miles away, and Xiao Yan shook herself. She blinked owlishly at him, wondering how long she had stood there lost in thoughts that caused him to look so concerned.

"Look, I won't pry if you don't want – "

"No, it's all right," she said, shaking her head, all her budding disgruntlement with him suddenly fading. "Honestly, at this point, if you didn't pry, I might just end up pushing everything back into the abyss of denial, and as much as that would be a big relief for a while, it's probably neither helpful nor healthy. Besides, you're not the first person to ask me that question. I just wish that after agonising over it for so long, I knew how to answer it."

"Maybe the problem is that you're agonising over it?" Xiao Jian asked. "Maybe you should just take the leap."

Xiao Yan turned away so that her brother could not see her face and smiled wanly to herself. What her brother didn't realise was, she had taken the leap before, and knew how much it hurt when she fell. Now, she needed someone – or something – to push her off the precipice, because she wasn't sure she knew where to find the courage to cast herself into the same trajectory once more.

Her talks with Zi Wei and Xiao Jian kept Xiao Yan in restless sleep for the next couple of nights. Still, it was the weekend before she and Yong Qi could talk.

Well, try to, anyway.

Somehow, despite as candid as they managed to be that morning after, a few days of being distracted by so many other things had made both of them doubt themselves, and each other, again. She could feel it in the tension that hung in the air between them. Both of them were clearly terrified of being so open, so vulnerable again, even though it was probably the only thing to do that made sense, after everything that had happened in the last week.

After they spent an unreasonably long time sitting opposite each other from either side of her coffee table in her apartment, staring down at their tea, Xiao Yan finally broke the silence.

"You know, I have a feeling our problem would be so easily solved if we lived a couple of hundred years earlier," she said, striving to sound casual, and probably failing.

"How so?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. "Well, you could just marry someone suitable and appropriate as your first wife and let her take on all the boring duties, and I would be able to do whatever I want."

Yong Qi raised an eyebrow, looking entirely too unamused by her obvious attempt to lighten the mood. "And you'd be willing to share?" he asked. Considering the subject, she didn't think he could be at all serious, despite his straight face.

She gave an over-dramatic sigh. "I guess there's the catch."
They caught each other's eyes and suddenly both found themselves laughing. For Xiao Yan, it was the sight and sound of his laughter that made her laugh too, half in relief. It felt so strange, and yet she was glad to find, that they were still able to do that together, especially in their odd limbo state.

Then, more soberly, Yong Qi said, "Look, I know at some point my brother scared you off with a big speech –"

Xiao Yan stared at him, startled. "How did you know about that? Did he actually tell you about it?"

"No, I doubt he ever intended for me to know. He just inadvertently implied he said something to you once. When I heard that, I wasn't going to leave it alone."

"So he told you what he said to me?"

"Not word for word, but he did eventually tell me enough of the general idea."

There was nothing in Yong Qi's voice that clued Xiao Yan in on how he might have felt about what, to him, must surely be unsolicited interference.

"And how did you feel about that?" she asked carefully when he didn't elaborate.

"If you must know, I didn't appreciate his meddling. Still don't."

Xiao Yan nodded, considered the new information for a moment, then frowned in confusion. "When was this? When did you find out?"

"Soon enough after we broke up that it felt like salt to the wound," he said, painfully matter-of-fact.

"Oh," she said faintly. "I…didn't realise that you ever found out about it."

"No, you wouldn't have," he replied softly. "We weren't exactly sharing that kind of stuff anymore. Speaking of not sharing, you didn't tell me either, when you two had that talk."

"Are you angry about that?" she asked softly, searching his face for some sign. "That I didn't tell you?"

He simply sighed. "Not angry, no. Just…concerned. Why wouldn't you tell me?"

"Because it didn't matter…At the time, when Yong An and I had that conversation, the very idea of breaking up hurt, and I was so sure we would never do it..."

Yong Qi looked at her with a sad expression, as if to remind her that they did, in the end. It made her feel a kind of uneasiness that made it feel like she was sitting on glowing coal. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Were you very angry at Yong An?" she asked, only to divert both their attention for a second.

"Yeah."

"But you two seem…all right."

"Of course we are, now," Yong Qi said. "I'm not going to hold a grudge against him for it for the rest of my life. And it's not like I think Yong An was actually the reason for our break up. I just didn't like the fact he felt the need to say anything to you at all. Before you say he meant well, I know."
"Well, he didn't want us to break up either," Xiao Yan pointed out. "If he did scare me off, we would have broken up very soon after that conversation, Yong Qi. But it didn't happen until like a month later."

"That doesn't mean that what he said didn't play some part in all the strain we were going through at the time, consciously or otherwise."

"I'm not saying it didn't." There was a prolonged pause as Xiao Yan considered what to say next. "But even if Yong An didn't say anything, I think we would have needed...that time away from each other, sooner or later. You said so yourself."

"And I also said to you the other day, I didn't think that time would stretch quite this long..."

"Why didn't you say anything?" she asked, almost accusingly. "If you wanted to get back together, why didn't you say anything?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Yong Qi asked quietly.

She felt like she was burning under the intensity of his gaze. And yet, Xiao Yan was quiet, daring – no, needing – him to say it out loud, himself.

He sighed. "It would be too hard, to say it, only to find that you liked the freedom our break up has given you more...It's...it's about self-preservation, you see..."

Xiao Yan found herself suddenly glaring at Yong Qi. "That's so hypocritical, you know that?"

He was clearly startled – and shocked – by the forcefulness of her words, apparently so much so that he could say nothing in reply. He just stared at her, looking hurt.

She heaved an exasperated sigh, annoyed that he didn't understand. "You didn't want to tell me what you want, how you feel, because you're afraid I'd reject you," she explained reluctantly. "But you somehow expected me to do what you won't? It would have been worse for me, to be rejected by you!"

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

Xiao Yan laughed, but it didn't come out as derisively as she intended. "By all the evidence before me! You can break up with a girl – with me – and move on to whoever you want. Sure, everyone would annoy you by mentioning me or comparing your exes every once in a while, but they'd accept that you've moved on. But do you think anyone's going to meet me and look at me, and not see you lurking behind me? I'll always be your ex-girlfriend, Yong Qi!"

He had been watching her speak with a stunned expression on his face, like he had just been unexpectedly punched. And of course, he looked pained, guilty and concerned, all at the same time. She wished she could feel satisfaction, but the truth was, she hated that making him feel that way. As much as she was all for making him face the reality of his privileges, it didn't mean she liked the kicked-puppy look he would wear when that happened.

"Xiao Yan, I'm so sorry. I – I've never thought about it like that, but I feel horrible now for never realising – "

He trailed off helplessly, looking at her with an expression that made her start to feel as breathless as he sounded. Definitely kicked-puppy, she thought with a sigh.

"I don't blame you for it. I know it's nothing something that you ever want or can control," she said,
more softly now. "But it's something that's there, Yong Qi. And as much as I don't regret the time we spent together, it makes everything so much more complicated...once we weren't together anymore. I've spent the last couple of years wondering about the reason why I never managed to move on, to get over you. Is it because my feelings won't let me, because I don't want to be over you, or it is just because the world, with its constant reminders, won't let me get over you? I don't know, I really don't."

"Xiao Yan – "

Not being done, she spoke over him. "And it's not like that's the problem. I would have been okay, you know, not being with anyone. I think I could still be happy without someone to hold me at night. Or I want to think so anyway. But the truth is...sometimes, in the most random of moments, I'd miss you. Not the idea of someone. You. Specifically. Particularly. Absolutely. And I don't know what to do about that."

Xiao Yan took a deep breath, sipped her now lukewarm tea, and then looked up at him.

"I'm done now," she added, when he seemed to be waiting for more.

Yong Qi hesitated for a moment, before standing up from where he was sitting in an armchair opposite her, separated by the coffee table. He rounded around to sit next to her on the couch and held his hand out to her gingerly, but his expression brightened visibly when she slid closer to him and took it.

"I know it's hard for you. Sometimes maybe I don't quite grasp just how hard, but I know it's more than you deserve."

She didn't know what to give as an answer to that that wouldn't just be restating the obvious or upsetting them both further, she gave a vague shrug. Yong Qi must have understood the reasons for it, as he smiled weakly.

Eventually, he took a deep breath and said softly, "I told you the other night that there hasn't been anyone really news-worthy...but what we didn't face that night – and maybe we should have – is the reality that we've both struggled to move on. And I struggle to not see that as some kind of sign."

"Me too," she admitted.

He looked down at her hand, resting innocently on his, and ran his thumb gently over her knuckles. Looking up again, he gave her a hopeful smile. "Sign or not, it's time isn't it? We need to figure this out. It would be a lot more liberating, no matter how it turns out, instead of...continuing like this, neither of us really happy."

While she knew that was the whole point of their intended talk that day, Xiao Yan still found herself involuntarily removing her hands from his and twisting them together nervously. She asked, not very coherently, "What...How much do you want to try and figure out? Are we just getting back together, or is there supposed to be more? Down the road? And don't ask me what I want, please. I want – I want everything, and nothing, at the same time. Which I realise doesn't help." She looked at him pleadingly. "What do you want?"

He stared at her for such a long time with such intensity that she almost forgot to breath. "I want you," he said finally.

These words did take her breath away. She was suddenly so overwhelmed with a need to smile and cry at the same time that she had to look away.
"And…just thinking about us, then nothing's changed. I do want forever, with you," he continued, emotions making his voice shake a little. He stopped and tried to gather himself, during which time Xiao Yan finally could turn back to look at him, her heart thumping in her chest. After a prolonged pause, Yong Qi said softly, "I meant what I said that morning, Xiao Yan. Everything might have changed, by my feelings haven't. If there is even a possibility of us getting back together now, I do want to know that we will get married down the road. But Xiao Yan, that could be quite a way down the road. As far down as you need it."

Xiao Yan gave a shaky sigh of relief. "I'll admit that is more than just a little reassuring."

"Just reassuring?" he asked.

With a small, slightly unsure smile, she answered, "If we're going to go back to things we said that morning, then right now, I just…I guess the most obvious thought is still what I said then. We didn't work once. What's going to stop it the past from repeating itself? I know it's been over two years, and things have changed. I see that. But there are other things that won't ever change, like what you are and all the responsibilities and expectations that come with it. Do you really think we can overcome all of it now, just because it's two years on?"

Yong Qi didn't answer straightaway, which, to Xiao Yan, was a source of relief and reassurance of a different kind. It meant that he wasn't about to say just anything to try and put her mind at ease. He must have had these wonders, too, and the fact that he had to think about how to answer her at least meant that he would give her more than just words in reply.

"Maybe the way to go about it isn't trying to overcome anything, but to work out how to live with it. And to do that – and I know it might sound like the most unhelpful thing to say at the moment – we need a little faith," he finally said. "Not in some unknown force that will have everything working out without a glitch. But in each other, that we could work it out together. I think, two years ago, both of us… or at least, I was too caught up with trying to prove myself to really realise how much work we needed to put into each other. I was too busy trying to prove that I can do something useful despite living the first twenty-odd years of my life off a silver platter. I kept thinking there would always be time for other things later. It's different now. I know I still have a year of service left, but after that, it will be less restricting for me, Xiao Yan. And I think despite what I said back then, I don't think either of us were ready, two years ago, to think very seriously about what marriage meant, which was why it was so easy to feel blindsided by all the expectations and speculations. We were essentially running away from all of that, rather than from each other. I hope we are a little more prepared now. Or at least, have less to distract us from considering it seriously."

"The idea of marrying you still terrify me. You know that, right? It's not you. It's…"

"Everything else?"

"Yeah."

"How can I…lessen that? Tell me, Xiao Yan. Tell me what you need. I don't know – I don't want to guess what you need right now."

"I guess…it would help if we were to…face the possibilities a little."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, twisting her fingers together, "before, we've sort of let the idea of long term… forever…"
She struggled for a moment to get the right words out; she knew what was lurking at the tip of her tongue, but wondered if she could actually say it. She was thankful that Yong Qi simply waited, not showing any sign of his own nervousness – which couldn't be less than hers.

She took a deep breath and started again. "For almost as long as our relationship lasted, the question of marriage was always there. I know we talked about it, and you've always made it clear that you've thought about it and wanted it. There's no point to pretending to be coy now…I loved you then, Yong Qi. I would have happily married you – just you – then."

She paused again, almost wondering if she could give voice again to her current feelings.

But no, she had to take these things by stages. One step at a time. Everything around them was confusing enough. She didn't need to tangle all the complicated feelings at all the different points in their lives together in one huge mess.

"What I'm trying to say is," she said, "yes, we knew we loved each other enough to want to get married. But it was always about just us…pretending to be two normal people, wanting to get married. We've never really thought about what it would be like, to get married, as, you know, you, the prince. If we were two normal people getting married, my life outside of you wouldn't change that much. But marrying you as a prince would turn my life inside out. And we never talked about it. So I never really knew what I was facing. All I had was these vaguely looming, nameless fears hovering over me. That was what scared me then, Yong Qi, not anything that your brother said. Now that I've had some distance, I've realised that if I could name the challenges ahead, list them, maybe they wouldn't seem as scary as they did."

"You're right," Yong Qi said. "We should have talked about it. I guess, back then, I was waiting for my time in military service to be over, before I sat down and think about it myself, because I felt it was something that deserved all of my attention, and I couldn't give that much at the time. I guess because I could see more of what lay ahead of us, that I didn't realise it was much less defined for you. I'm sorry."

She gave him a crooked smile. "So I guess you are right. We were hopelessly unready back then."

"And now?"

"Now…my heart is telling me, I want to be with you. But my head is also telling me, even if I do start learning what it means to be married into your family, I can't guarantee you that the moment I see the full extent of it, it won't be the very thing that scares me off again."

She wasn't trying to discourage either of them, and he must have understood that, because instead of looking hurt like she half expected, he only gave her an encouraging smile.

"Oh Xiao Yan, you saw how we didn't just drop Zi Wei head first into imperial life and expect her to figure out what to do on her own, right?" he asked, reaching out for her hands, cradling them between his. "We're not going to do that to you either. Everything can start small, and we're proceed at your pace, not anyone else's. As I said, have a little faith that you can do this. That we can do this. I do."

She nodded quietly and absent-mindedly entwined her fingers between his. It made him smile. They sat like that, hand in hand, for a few minutes. She knew that the idea of being together again had been more or less implied, but one of them still needed to declare it out loud.

Then, another thought occurred to her, and she found herself saying anxiously, "Another thing, I wouldn't be able to keep my job if we got married, would I?"
"Well, no," Yong Qi replied slowly, "but that doesn't mean you can't do anything useful. If anything, if I guessed the reasons you went to work at Lumos right, you might actually be able to do more. Have you ever thought about the influence you could make, in any cause you want, in a position of power?"

"I suppose…I haven't. But now that you mention it, having that kind of voice would be useful, wouldn't it?"

"You see, it's not all stuffy disadvantages," he said with a smile.

"I never said it was," Xiao Yan said with exaggerated mock dignity.

Yong Qi only laughed and shook his head. Then, the sound faded into an expectant silence.

She knew what he was waiting for, but it took her another moment longer to be able to put it into words.

"I know I said once that I wanted to find out where I'm meant to be," she finally said. "And after the last two and a half years, after the other night, after…everything that's happened this week, everything has made me realise that…I can't let us walk away from each other again… Where I'm meant to be, is with you."

Yong Qi's expression turned to such simple, adoring happiness that for a second, Xiao Yan wondered why she ever thought it was a good idea to doubt at all that they belonged to each other.

"Are you sure?" he asked, clearly trying to hold back an elated smile, and failing.

She reached up to drape her arms around his neck. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Yong Qi closed his eyes, let out a shaky breath, his smile widening even further, and rested his forehead against her in relief. Xiao Yan observed all this, and couldn't help but smile herself as she realised how much she missed this feeling, of being so close to him like this, so open, both of them being on the same page again.

"I think we still needed all that time to figure this out, though. Both of us," he said.

"Yes, of course," she said, moving her hands from the back of his neck up to cup his cheeks. "It was hard then, with all the talks and speculations around us, to be really sure whether what I was feeling was really what I was feeling, or if I was being influence by what everyone around me wanted. So I did need the time. And now I know. I do love you. This is real, and it's not going to go away, and that it hurt to stay away from you. I wasn't sure then, you know? I wasn't sure that it all could last. But now I am."

Yong Qi reached for her hands, kissed them once and held them against his chest. "Then I am very glad."

Such simple words from him really shouldn't make her smile this widely, but they did. Then, thinking of how they got to this point, she couldn't help but give herself an exasperated sigh.

"What is it?" Yong Qi asked.

"Nothing," she said, laughing and shaking her head. "I just hate how I have to tell Zi Wei now that she was right."

Yong Qi chuckled too, but she was glad that it was only for a second, before did the much wiser
thing of deciding to silence them both with a kiss.
"So, erm, I have some news," Xiao Yan said with a smile that was both anxious and sheepish.

Xiao Jian just looked at her, expectant. He had called her an hour earlier, thinking she would be with Zi Wei, and was surprised when she asked him to come over to her apartment. Apparently, Jin Suo was with Zi Wei, and Xiao Yan needed to talk to him.

"So," she said nervously, drawing out the syllable, as if trying to detain the next words for as long as possible, "Yong Qi and I are back together."

It was obvious that Xiao Yan expected him to be at least surprised by this development. Admittedly, before she told him, Xiao Jian would probably not have guessed that this was the topic of conversation she intended. But now that she had announced it, he did not find it particularly shocking.

Xiao Yan met his silence with apprehension, chewing on her bottom lip. "Say something."

"Well," he said, offering her a small smile, "I can't say I didn't see it coming."

"You can't?" she asked with wide eyes, somewhere between disbelieving and worried.

"Honestly, Xiao Yan," he said with a shake of his head, "I have truly never met any two people who were as bad as hiding their feelings for each other as the two of you."

She glared half-heartedly at him, but he could see there was relief in her eyes.

"Did you think I would be less…agreeable to this news?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said defensively. "With a little less…acceptance, probably. I mean, you've been pretty vocal about how you think he represents unfair privileges and all the inequality that comes with it."

"We had that conversation before I met him, or even realised just how well you know him, and how much he means to you, even not taking Zi Wei into consideration," Xiao Jian said. "Even if I were to ignore all that, as much as I do want to hold all that we talked about against him, I have to admit it's not entirely his fault."

Xiao Yan laughed. "And you are also dating his cousin."

"Well, that too." He smiled for a moment, but then his expression turned more serious. "I would love to baby-sister you, but you are an adult now. It's not as if I would accomplish anything by throwing a fit about your choices you make. I am sure, in this particular situation, everything is difficult enough for you as it is. I would hate to add to it."

She gave him a smile that was a little wobbly and impulsively reached out, hugging him. "Thanks. It means a lot to me that you say that." She pulled away from him to look at his face. "You know that, right?"
"Yeah. Of course."

"You do worry, though," she observed, looking closely at him.

Xiao Jian sighed. "I have... concerns. They're not exactly about you, or Yong Qi. I just... if I could say something, I'd say that I hope, before you make any... permanent decision, you'd consider all the consequences."

Xiao Yan gave a shaky chuckle. "You don't have to worry about that," she said. "We let this run away from us once before. I'm sure both of us are desperate to not let the same thing happen again."

Xiao Jian titled his head and looked at her with a slightly smile for a moment. Then he said, "If by that, you're trying to convince me that you two are taking it slow, then I have to tell you, Xiao Yan, I'm not sure I'm convinced."

"Why not?"

"Because of that hickey blooming on your neck."

Xiao Yan's hand flew to her neck. She turned red and gasped in embarrassment, before turning away from him and fleeing into the bathroom, slamming the door more aggressively than she probably meant to do.

Left behind, Xiao Jian couldn't help chuckling a little to himself, despite the fact that on the inside he was still a lot less comfortable with the whole situation than he could let on.

Xiao Jian had to admit, the instinctive negative wariness he felt when he thought about his sister and Yong Qi was mostly due to the circumstances of his birth. The fact that Xiao Jian was very cognizant of this, and was also dating Qing Er, meant that he had to force himself to face the reality that these feelings were, at best, silly and, at worst, prejudicial.

That didn't mean that he didn't have legitimate concerns about Xiao Yan re-entering a relationship with Yong Qi. There was, after all, as Xiao Yan herself observed, a fundamental difference between Qing Er and Yong Qi. Qing Er was not in line for the throne. Yong Qi was. And even if his prominence in the line of succession was to decrease over time, he would always remain much more in the limelight. He could hardly disappear off to a different country and escape it all for the better part of the year like Qing Er. Even then, Xiao Jian was sure Qing Er twisted some arms to be able to enjoy the life she has.

Still, Xiao Jian understood well enough that his concerns were not exactly news to his sister, so there was no purpose in voicing them. After all, this was their second try at it, and clearly Xiao Yan and Yong Qi had agonised over this for longer than he had even known Xiao Yan. The very fact that she was an adult capable of making her own decision and dealing with its consequences probably meant that she had second-guessed herself enough before coming to this decision. Any more questioning from him would only serve to distress her even further.

He had to trust her. He did trust her, to at least know that the road ahead was difficult. He could only hope that she realised she could trust him to help her if she ever needed it. More fervently, he hoped that, in time, he could trust Yong Qi not to hurt her. At the moment, as much as Xiao Jian wanted to say he did trust Yong Qi, he knew too little about the man to really swear on it.

"It's not that bad," Xiao Yan said, breaking him out of his thought. She had come out of the bathroom, and despite her words, still looked slightly flustered.

"You ran off before I could tell you that," he said innocently but could not completely hold back a
teasing smile.

Xiao Yan huffed, before turning and heading into the kitchen.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," he said, in a more mollifying voice, as he followed her. "It was hidden by your hair when I first arrived, and I didn't notice it immediately, so you should be fine."

"I know," she said with a shrug, opening the door of the freezer. "Anyway, I didn't want to just share the news. I wanted to ask you something as well."

She had taken an ice cube out of the freezer and was looking around the kitchen. Xiao Jian grabbed a cloth draping from a chair nearby and threw it to her with a questioning raise of his eyebrow.

"Have dinner with us tomorrow," she said.

"You actually want to bring us together?" he asked, only half teasing. "Aren't you worried I would scare him off?"

She rolled her eyes. "He survived meeting Liu Qing," she said, shrugging, holding the ice cube wrapped in cloth to her neck. "Honestly, I'm not sure you're more intimidating than Liu Qing."

He gave her a mock offended look. "I can totally be more intimidating than Liu Qing."

She just laughed. "Let me give you a reason to not intimidate him then. Yong Qi and his brother about as close as Qing Er gets to having older brothers. Maybe you should be more concerned with not giving them a reason to intimidate you."

Xiao Jian scoffed.

"Seriously, though, will you? Meet him, properly?" Xiao Yan asked, anxious now. "I mean, I know you've met, but hardly. The first time was for work, the second time was at Zi Wei's engagement, and then the third time when you took me to the hospital to see Zi Wei. None of that could really count as really meeting."

"No, of course I get it," Xiao Jian assured her gently. "And I know this is important to you. I'm not trying to get out of it. In fact, for your sake, I do want to get to know him properly."

Xiao Yan gave him a small smile. "That's good to know," she said in relief. "So, tomorrow night?"

"Okay. But where?" he asked.

Of course, the implication of that question was "Not in the palace, surely?", which thankfully, Xiao Yan understood.

She laughed. "I think here will be best. I'll cook."

"You cook?" he asked. He could hardly help being surprised, considering in all the time he'd known her, he didn't think he had actually seen her cook anything.

She shrugged. "How hard could it be?"

It turned out, cooking was really hard. For Xiao Yan, anyway.

After Xiao Jian and Yong Qi arrived at her place, Xiao Yan determinedly shooed them both out of the kitchen, and into the living room. Their resulting conversation was effortful, but not entirely
uncomfortable. It was certainly more successful than whatever Xiao Yan was attempting to do in the kitchen, considering how the conversation was interrupted by the high-pitched scream of the smoke detector.

Upon hearing the noise, both Yong Qi and Xiao Jian rushed into the kitchen to find a smoking pot on the stove and Xiao Yan coughing.

Xiao Jian rushed to open the kitchen window, while Yong Qi peered into the pot to see...well, he couldn't really identify what was in the pot. It was just black.

"Are you okay?" he turned to Xiao Yan and asked. He placed a hand on her shoulder in concern, but at the same time, was trying not to laugh at her disgruntled expression.

"Yeah, yeah," she said, waving away the smoke which was making her tear up, and dabbing her eyes.

Meanwhile, Xiao Jian had managed to turn off the smoke alarm. He turned to her, also half amused, half concerned. "I thought you said you could cook?"

"I said, how hard could it be?" she mumbled.

Her words were so deliberately jumbled that it took a moment for Yong Qi to understand. When he did, he couldn't help but laugh as he put his arm around Xiao Yan's shoulders, squeezing affectionately. "Oh, Xiao Yan."

She pouted, then shrugged out from under his arm and went to inspect the pot of charcoal. "This is a disaster," she muttered.

"So, is this just an accident, or are disasters like this a normal thing with you in the kitchen?" Xiao Jian asked. The amusement in his voice earned him a slap on the arm and a dirty look from his sister.

Despite that, he looked towards Yong Qi for an answer. It was obvious that he would not get one from Xiao Yan.

Yong Qi chuckled. "Well, honestly, she had never tried to cook for me, so I wouldn't know. I can see now that maybe that was a blessing."

"Urgh, I hate you both," Xiao Yan groaned.

She tried to shove Yong Qi's shoulder in mock anger, but the effects were ruined by the fact that she couldn't hold back a sheepish chuckle either. Just like that, suddenly, all three of them were giggling at the absurdity of the situation.

"What were you trying to make, anyway?" Xiao Jian asked, when they stopped laughing for long enough to regain their breaths.

Yong Qi missed Xiao Yan's answer, muttered at her breath, as he pulled out his phone and dialled.

"What are you doing?" Xiao Jian asked.

Yong Qi grinned. "Calling takeaway."

While they waited for their food to be delivered, Yong Qi and Xiao Jian helped Xiao Yan clean up the kitchen. The blackened pot was probably a lost cause, even if Xiao Yan did half-heartedly put it in the sink to soak regardless.
Their food arrived, and by then, Xiao Yan had admitted that they should have just done this from the start.

"So, the takeaway – no pun intended – from this is that you can't cook. How did you survive living on your own all this time?" Xiao Jian asked, laughing, as they sat down with plastic boxes.

"I dunno," Xiao Yan said. "I mean, I guessed when I lived with Liu Hong or Zi Wei or even Han Xiang, really, I just let them do the cooking for me. I can cook…like eggs and instant noodle and stuff. And rice."

"What were you trying to do anyway?" Yong Qi asked, amused at her flushed expression.

Xiao Yan pursed her lips. "It was caramel for the braised pork. I guess I burnt the sugar instead."

"At least you didn't burn the building down," Yong Qi said, patting her arm. If he meant to comfort her, he failed miserably considering there was still an enormous smile on his face.

"Just to be safe, next time we do anything like this, maybe I should do the cooking, Xiao Yan?" her brother asked.

Yong Qi tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a laugh, which earned him a glare from Xiao Yan.

"And you can do better?" she asked her brother with a challenging look.

"I lived alone and cooked for myself in college, and I'll have you know I neither starved nor burnt down any building," Xiao Jian said smugly.

Xiao Yan gave him a disgruntled look but despite her efforts to appear irritated, the truth was, she wasn't entirely mad at either of them. After all, it was difficult to be mad when it was clear to her that the atmosphere between Yong Qi and Xiao Jian was a lot more relaxed now than before when she left the two of them together to go into the kitchen. Whether that was result of their ensuing conversation, or the whole fire interlude, she wasn't sure, but whatever the reason was, she was too glad to notice it.

She looked over at Yong Qi as she contemplated this. He apparently mistook her look for something else.

"Well, don't look at me!" he said. "I'll be the first to admit that I can't cook."

"Like you ever have to cook for yourself," she muttered, but couldn't help smiling at him.

"I'll admit that, too."

"So the moral of the story is that it doesn't matter that Xiao Yan can't cook. As long as she's around you, she won't need to anyway?" Xiao Jian asked.

"More or less," Yong Qi said.

Xiao Yan didn't know why, but the playful expression on his face made her chuckle, which in turn set all three of them off with laughter, as they finally begun to dig into their food.

"How is she?" Er Kang asked Jin Suo when he arrived at the hospital that Sunday evening. Zi Wei was asleep, and Jin Suo was sitting by her bed.

"I don't know," she replied, looking back at Zi Wei on the bed with a pinched, worried expression.
Er Kang could see why. Even in sleep, Zi Wei's expression was not completely relaxed. He never realised before how the restlessness of the sleeping expression she wore now contrasted with how she normally looked in sleep. It served as a reminder that, though in the last couple of days, he had caught glimpses of when Zi Wei would momentarily forget, and allow herself to smile with Xiao Yan and Jin Suo, most of the rest of the time, she was still lost in the dark, which in turn darkened her mood. Xiao Yan and Jin Suo seemed to be the two people most likely to draw a smile out of Zi Wei, and somehow – and it pained him to face that reality – Er Kang had become the least likely to do so.

"Mostly she wanted me to distract her," Jin Suo continued, unaware of the internal turmoil in Er Kang's mind, "but I don't know how it's even possible to distract yourself from the fact that you suddenly can't see."

"You do manage it, though, occasionally."

Jin Suo gave a smile that was decidedly watery. "Yeah, but it's all ups and downs…but I guess that's to be expected. I guess right now, it a miracle that we get her to even momentarily forget what's happening at all. And I'm just glad somehow she was able to fall asleep just now. From what she told me, she hasn't been sleep well. But you know, considering the last thing she actually saw…I'm surprised she sleeps at all."

"I didn't really want to tell her what happened," Er Kang said gruffly. "If I had been there, I'm not sure I would have let Xiao Yan tell her."

Jin Suo turned to look at him, and he could not read if, by her expression, she agreed with his view at all. "Are you upset at Xiao Yan for that?" she asked, in a voice even more difficult to discern.

"No," Er Kang admitted reluctantly. "I mean, I wish…I wish I could protect her from that, but I get why Xiao Yan told her."

"You wouldn't have been able to keep the whole story away from her forever anyway, Er Kang," Jin Suo said softly.

"I know." That didn't mean he couldn't try. He shook his head, but he wasn't sure what the expression of exasperation was directed at. Sighing, he tried to change the subject. "How was she before she fell asleep?"

Jin Suo bit her bottom lip nervously before answering. "Smiling a little more than she was this morning. I don't know if she's really rallying her spirits or she was just trying to not worry me before I have to leave."

"Even if it was just trying not to worry you, the fact that you do get her to smile is enough, Jin Suo," Er Kang said. "I can't thank you enough for it."

Jin Suo gave him a long look, before giving him a sad, sympathetic smile. He realised that she had somehow seen the burdens underneath his words. "I know it feels like you might be the one person she opens up to least right now, but Er Kang, that's because you're the one she's most afraid of losing. So you just need to be patient with her, all right?"

"I know. It's just…hard, I guess."

Jin Suo sighed and shook her head. "Believe it or not, this isn't about you. It's more difficult for her."

"I know," he admitted, feeling frustrated with both himself, for not being able to do anything, and feeling impatient about it, and with the whole situation in general. The feeling gnawed at him,
constantly making him feel like he was on fire, and there was little Er Kang could do but admit that nothing short of the truly miraculous would offer him relief for those feelings now.

The issue was, he admitted to himself, that he had rarely ever felt so helpless. He was not used to dealing with problems he could not solve, especially one which was so completely out of his control, and made him feel so complete powerless. It probably made it even worse, that he knew he could never truly understand the depths of Zi Wei's fear and despair at that moment. He could imagine, but he wished that she would open up to him, and talk to him, and allow him to share in her pain and her fear. And if she would not speak to him, he wished that she would show any indication that she heard, and believed, his reassurances that he loved her. Instead, most of their interactions since she woke up, and faced the possibility that she would be blind forever, had been closing in on herself, refusing to be anything but silent, or tearful, whenever he was with her.

It really didn't help that Jin Suo and Xiao Yan both seemed to think the reason she was doing this was because she was afraid to lose him. And yet, it felt like the only coherent thing he had been able to tell her, ever since they plunged into this darkness – both the literal and metaphorical – was that nothing would cause her to lose him. Not even this.

She could not seem to believe it; it tore Er Kang's heart into shreds and he wished he knew how to convince her.

Zi Wei was to be discharged from the hospital three days later, which was actually much earlier than Dr Hu previously predicted.

"To be frank, we have conducted all the tests we can, for the time being, and while it wouldn't hurt for Miss Zi Wei to remain for us to ensure that there are no other immediate effects of her injuries, the truth is that it's clear being here is doing her more harm than good," Dr Hu told the emperor and Er Kang the day before. "Hospitals aren't the most uplifting of places at the best of time. Her spirit will likely improve better at home, where there's familiarity."

Er Kang had hoped that this development would cheer Zi Wei up a little, but as he entered her hospital room that morning, it was as if she hardly realised he existed, even though he knew she knew he was in the room. She had turned her head towards the door when there was the sound of it opening.

She was sitting at the window seat; Er Kang wondered how she got from the bed to there, though perhaps a nurse helped her.

"Hey," he said, kissing the top of her head, before sitting down next to her and taking her hands in his.

He wasn't quite sure whether he should just be glad that she didn't pull them away, or pained that she didn't do anything else, either.

"You ready to go home?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

Er Kang tried not to sigh audibly, and struggled for something to say. Painful silences like this wasn't supposed to exist between them.

"You are taking me home?" she asked, after a minute.

Er Kang didn't even know how he was supposed to take that question. When did the idea that they
would be alone together sound like such an effort?

The emperor and the empress had both wanted to be here when Zi Wei was discharged, but the thing with trying to pretend to the world that nothing was wrong was that engagements involving parliament could not be cancelled at the last minute.

Er Kang swallowed the painful lump in his throat, then said, "Yong Qi and Xiao Yan are coming in a bit."

The mention of Xiao Yan and Yong Qi managed to pique Zi Wei's interest.

"They're coming together?" she asked. Apparently, this was significant.

Actually…now that she mentioned it…perhaps it was. Xiao Yan and Yong Qi tended to be the most unsubtle people in the world when it came to each other. Er Kang had a feeling that if he hadn't been so preoccupied with Zi Wei, he probably would have picked up whatever it was that made her tone turn so curious.

"I think," Er Kang said slowly, staring at the pensive look on Zi Wei's face.

A hint of a smile appeared on her face.

It gave him something like a sliver of hope.

Thus encouraged, he asked, "How are you feeling today, really?"

The glimmer of shine that appeared so suddenly on her face disappeared just as fast and she was silent.

Still, Er Kang forced himself to persist. Looking down, he told himself to be relieved that her hands still stayed in his.

"Do you think…are you any better?" he asked, moving his head in front of her, watching for reaction. There was none. Reaching out, he tilted her head towards him, "Can you try to look at me?"

She shook her head miserably. "If I start to try at all, my head hurts."

Even though her words were far from positive, at that moment, Er Kang was just relieved she was speaking to him at all.

He lifted her hands up to his lips and kissed them. "If it hurts, don't try then," he whispered fervently. "Let's just get home, and you can sleep in your own bed, all right? It can't have been comfortable here. Maybe a night at home would make you feel better."

He wished he was as positive as he tried to sound. Apparently, so did she, as she only gave him the barest of a perfunctory smile.

"Have you taken your medicine?" he asked gently. "Can I get it for you?"

Zi Wei, who had so far been staring unblinkingly at a corner by his shoulder, now finally turned her head towards where his voice was coming from. She gave a shaky sigh.

"Er Kang, are you scared?" she asked finally.

He didn't know why, but the question almost broke through every sense of control he'd developed
for himself. Another push, and he would be lost in a mess of emotion. Somehow, he just managed to rein it all in. "Yes," he admitted, voice shaking nonetheless, "I'm terrified."

The emotions wobbling in his voice made Zi Wei clench her teeth visibly and she squeezed his hand painfully.

"I'm terrified, because I can only understand the basics of what the doctor says is happening to you, and even if I could understand more, I don't even know how to help you get better. I'm scared, and worried. If...if..."

Er Kang could not go on.

Zi Wei moved her head to the side, urging him to go on. When he could not, she pressed, "If what? You don't have to protect me from the truth. How bad could things get now? Just tell me what you want to say."

"I'm just afraid this isn't the worst of it," he said after a long silence, clutching at her hands as if they were a lifeline. "I'm afraid that you'll suffer even more. I don't think I could bear to see that. Zi Wei, I used to think that I am brave. But when it comes to you, I know that I am not. Zi Wei, I'm afraid. I'm very, very scared."

She reached up to his face, and felt his tears wetting her fingers. They startled her. "You're crying," she gasped.

The truth was, he hadn't realised. Then again, he felt like he could cry until he could no more, and wouldn't feel even a tiny bit better.

"You're afraid you'd lose me," she said, as if that was a source of wonder at all.

"Yes," he said, his voice gruff, bowing his head against her shoulder, because the truth was, he didn't think he would have the courage to admit all his fears if he looked into her eyes, which did not see, but still seemed able to pierce through his soul. "Before you woke up, I was afraid you'd die. Now, I'm afraid you'd collapse from the pain of losing your sight. I'm afraid of how you are closing yourself off from me and not letting me in, not letting me help you. I can bear this pain with you, Zi Wei, but I can't bear that. I'm afraid if you do that, you'll convince yourself you don't need me anymore, and I can't live with that."

Zi Wei reached up to put her hand on the side of his head, cradling it against her neck. He could hear the sound of her breathing, shakily, and it was a moment before she could answer, in a decidedly brittle voice, "I know I have to face what is happening to me, and bear it. But you don't have to, Er Kang."

Er Kang lifted his head and stared at her, wondering how she could believe that at all. "Yes, I do," he said, his voice threatening to break. "There is no question of that, Zi Wei."

"Am I really worth it? For you to go through all this? To bear this? The burden of having to care for me? Would you really be content with having to hold my hand for the rest of your life?" she asked.

Er Kang closed his eyes for a second to try and compose himself.

"What else were we doing, then?" he asked when he could finally open his eyes. "What did we do when we decide to get married, but agree to not let go of each other's hands for the rest of our lives? Zi Wei, you must know that you are the most precious thing in my life. You hurt, and I hurt too. You smile, I smile. If you collapse and lose hope, I would too. If you close yourself off from me, if you don't let me help you, to me, that is even more painful than if you were to cut off one of my arms. Do
you know how deep that cut it, and how painful it feels?"

Er Kang could feel, even as he said these words, how the emotions rose inside him, threatening to
overwhelm him and silence him, but it was clear from the changing expressions of her face that Zi
Wei felt just as overcome. When he could not speak any longer, a silence of expectation hung
between them, and for the umpteenth time since this all descended on them, he found himself
wondering what she was thinking. It wasn't something he was used to wondering about Zi Wei.

He couldn't remember ever feeling this relieved, either, when she finally reached out and placed her
hand against his cheek, running her thumb gently against his skin.

"Er Kang," she said, her voice hardly louder than a whisper. She sounded as if she was confessing
some great secret. "I know you want to help me, and I haven't been letting you. I just keep thinking,
if I let myself lean on you, that's all I'll ever do from now on. That, more than even the darkness,
scares me the most right now."

"But you know it doesn't have to be that way," Er Kang told her. "You can learn to live with this, Zi
Wei, but that doesn't mean you have to do that alone. Just let me – let everyone around you – help
you. You don't have to do everything by yourself, but that doesn't mean you can't do some things by
yourself, either."

"I know," she admitted. "A part of me knows that, but the moment I feel like I could begin to believe
it, all my fears and despair just want to take over and try to tell me it's not true. That maybe I'm
deceiving myself. And then I also just think…how arrogant is it that I think my problem is so unique.
I cannot be the only person who have ever gone through something like this. People have suffered
like me before, and many have learnt to deal with it, with help. Those who have to deal with it by
themselves are those who truly don't have anyone to lean on. How ungrateful must I be, if I act like I
don't have you, and Jin Suo, and Xiao Yan, and Ah Ma, and everyone else…"

To Er Kang, it felt as if a new hope sprouted up with every word Zi Wei was saying, that perhaps Zi
Wei was beginning to be able to think through the darkness she was engulfed in, and allow herself to
take more of the comfort everyone around her was offering.

"Oh, Zi Wei," he breathed, but that was all he could say. He did not know what else to say, and was
reluctant to speak now, even if he did have something to say, because he did not want to cut her off
now that she was finally beginning to confide in him,

"The truth is, I have always felt, as long as I have you by my side, I would never be afraid of
anything," Zi Wei said with a soft sigh.

He didn't think he had ever heard anything so calming, so rewarding in his life. For an instance, Er
Kang had to press his lips tightly together to keep himself composed. Still, after the wave of emotions
passed, he couldn't help but smile, as he listened to her next words.

"I love you. I have always loved you and I always will. Even if I am blind now, I still have you. I
know I've tried to convince myself that I've lost you, but that was because I was afraid. I was trying
to preparing myself, for the eventuality, so that if that fear ever came true, it might not hurt as much if
I was expecting it."

"Oh Zi Wei, you must know it would never come true."

"I do," she said. "All I could think of was how it would hurt, if it was ever to happen. But I have
always known, deep down, even if I couldn't bring myself to admit it, that it couldn't. All you have
done since all of this happened is to show me how much you love me, how much you need and
cherish me, even despite of my disability. I realise now, that if I can't even love and cherish myself, and take care of myself, to ensure that I recover, only then am I not worthy of your love."

Er Kang new knew before what it meant to feel lightheaded and faint, but he did now. The fact that she had come to this conclusion was such a relief to him that it felt like a gasp of air after holding his breath for days. He couldn't speak, but he could her hands and squeeze them tightly, conveying all the emotions he couldn't put into words.

"Er Kang, don't be afraid," Zi Wei said, sliding closer to him and, for the first time in days, allowed herself to lean against him. "I won't die. I won't lose hope. I will live and be happy. For your sake. I won't shut myself off, I won't push you away. Even if I never see again, I will be a happy blind person. Even if my eyes are blind, my heart won't be to your love."

For a moment, it was all he could do to rest his cheek against her hair and wrap his arm tightly around her, to relish in having her in his arms again. Finally, he managed to say, gruffly, "That's the Zi Wei I fell in love with. Zi Wei, no matter what happens, you are still the same person. Nothing that's happened could change the way I feel about you, because your kindness, your goodness, your spirit, will always be the things I love most about you and am I proudest of."

Zi Wei gave a shaky laugh, before wrapping her arms around his middle, burying herself deep into his arms. She pressed her face against his chest and inhaled deeply. "How did I get so lucky as to be able to meet you?"

"I ask myself the same question every day, Zi Wei. Every day."

Er Kang and Zi Wei broke apart when there was a knock at the door, but Er Kang couldn't bring himself to let go of her without placing a soft kiss on her forehead. The fact that it drew a smile from her warmed his heart.

He went to open the door to find Yong Qi and Xiao Yan standing there. He could have sworn that Yong Qi had only just dropped Xiao Yan's hand the moment there was the sound of the door opening.

Before he could comment, however, Yong Qi spoke first.

"You look…cheerful."

Er Kang noted the teasing tone, but he was so relieved at the progress made that morning that he could have blurted it all out to Yong Qi and Xiao Yan, if he didn't remember that maybe talking about how progress was made might actually remind Zi Wei what she was progressing from. So he simply smiled, which made Xiao Yan look rather shocked, before she pushed past him and made a beeline for Zi Wei, talking rapidly.

Er Kang looked around and was relieved when Zi Wei looked happy at Xiao Yan's entrance. He turned back to Yong Qi to find an inquisitive look directed his way.

"Everything's better today," Er Kang said, before stepping aside to allow Yong Qi to enter the room.

Yong Qi looked at where Xiao Yan was animatedly telling Zi Wei something on the other side of the room, and smiled. "Yes, I think it must be."

Er Kang was sure Yong Qi meant to speak of Zi Wei's obviously brighter expression only. But he had been watching the way Yong Qi had been looking at Xiao Yan ever since they appeared, and knew that there was probably more than one reason for his smile.
"You know," Er Kang said conversationally, "Zi Wei may not be able to see, but I see just fine."

Yong Qi’s head whipped around to look at Er Kang, looking both immensely surprised and mildly alarmed, so fast that Er Kang winced in sympathy pain.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Er Kang chuckled. "You know what I mean."

To his credit, Yong Qi did not look quite like a deer caught in the headlight as Er Kang half expected. He just froze for a second, before making a show of looking sceptical. "Are you sure you do?"

It would have been more successful if he didn't follow it up with a grin, and he knew it, as he only laughed sheepishly as Er Kang shook his head and chuckled in mock exasperation.

Then they both proceeded to deny to Xiao Yan and Zi Wei that anything very amusing was being talked about as the sound drew the girls' attention and they demanded to know what was going on.
Yong Qi did tell Zi Wei, eventually, the recent developments between him and Xiao Yan.

He was, at first, surprised that Xiao Yan did not do this herself, either during or after the short drive from the hospital back to the palace, where Yong Qi drove and Er Kang sat in the front seat, leaving Xiao Yan and Zi Wei talking in the back.

But whatever Xiao Yan did not say, Zi Wei must have guessed, whether from changes in Xiao Yan's expressions and conversation, or in his, Yong Qi wasn't sure. Whatever his sister suspected, it was enough for her to ask him about it later that evening.

Unlike Xiao Jian's first reaction being apprehension, Zi Wei was effusive with happiness when Yong Qi finally told her the news that he and Xiao Yan were together again. He might have tried to be evasive with Er Kang, but he couldn't think of even a good reason to not tell Zi Wei, especially considering how it would be something that would actually bring her unadulterated pleasure. Zi Wei was too good to take his good news with anything less, despite whatever she might be going through herself.

"We should get married together!" Zi Wei exclaimed after she had finished expressing how happy she was with the news.

On the one hand, Yong Qi was relieved that she had recovered emotionally and psychologically enough from her accident to speak of her wedding as a sure thing again. On the other, it was bordering on being a horrible idea that he had to laugh.

"We really shouldn't," he said between chuckles.

Apparently, Zi Wei was not joking as Yong Qi thought.

"Why not?" she asked, sounding disappointed.

"Your wedding is in a few months, Zi Wei. There is no way Household will agree to plan mine in that amount of time."

"With everything that's happened, I don't think we'll manage the original date," Zi Wei said.

"Even then. It would still be too soon."

"They won't have to plan anything extra."

That made him laugh even harder. "Oh Zi Wei, that is actually funny. You know that your wedding can't be my wedding, right? My wedding will be a spectacle of politics and diplomacy. None of us really have a choice about that. It's going to be the opposite of the nice private affair you and Er Kang are planning. Besides, Xiao Yan and I are just getting back together. We are not getting married yet, and we are certainly not getting married within half a year."

Zi Wei actually pouted at this declaration. "So you don't want to marry her – "

"That's not what I said."
Zi Wei thought for a moment, then sighed. "I guess you have a point. There is no time. But if you don't want a spectacle, couldn't you ask for it to be toned down?"

"No," he answered. "My only comfort is Laoda's wedding will have to be even more over the top. Anyway, even if I could convince everyone to keep my wedding simple, I'm not sure a double wedding is a good idea, Zi Wei."

"Why not?" she asked, confused.

"There's a…legend, if you will. About the last time – and really the only time – they tried to hold a double wedding in the palace. It was around the Qian Long era. Apparently there were two princesses – twins or something – who were getting married on the same day, and they were being given away from the same place. Basically they mixed up the brides and had them brought to the wrong groom. With brides not being allowed to speak until the veil was removed, it wasn't like anyone noticed before it was too late. Record keepings about princesses were rubbish at the time, so there were only contemporary story-telling to go off of. Some people wrote they switched the princesses to their rightful places, and redid the whole wedding all over again. Others wrote that they just pretended that there was no mix up, and the princesses switched places the next day. There were also others than said they didn't bother switching back at all and just lived with the mistake. Basically, since then, no one's attempted a double wedding in this court ever again."

Zi Wei laughed and tried to swat his arm. She missed and her hand batted at air instead. "That's not true. You're making that up," she said.

"I'm really not," he said, smiling. Then, more seriously, he said, "It would be too soon for us nonetheless, Zi Wei. I can't put that kind of pressure on Xiao Yan."

This time, Zi Wei sighed, then nodded in understanding. "No, I suppose not. But if you're back together, you will eventually marry, will you not?"

"I hope. We both want it to work out in the end, but considering what changes it would bring to Xiao Yan's life, we've decided to just take everything one step at a time."

"That's a good idea," Zi Wei agreed. "Who have you told?"

"You. Her brother. I should probably tell the rest of our family soon."

"And beyond that?"

"Beyond our families and friends…well, honestly I'm not sure I want to say too much right now. I mean, on the one hand, it's hardly going to stay secret for long. If we don't say anything ourselves, when the news eventually breaks, it'll come out in some click-bait headline that we got caught in the act or something. But I don't want to go and announce this to the world as if we owe them anything, either, you know?"

"I think even if you do announce it, there'll be plenty of places that will be too happy to twist your words into click-bait screaming headlines," Zi Wei said. "So really, you should just not say anything if that's what you would rather."

"Speaking of announcing things, the world is still clueless about your time in hospital, which so far is a miracle."

That statement added a definite heavy atmosphere to their conversation.

Zi Wei sighed. "Ah Ma told me yesterday that there's a press release set to come out tomorrow now
that I'm discharged. At least I won't be able to read any of the articles that follows, right?"

Yong Qi's couldn't laugh at her uncharacteristic dark humour, especially following a day when her mood seemed so improved. Then again, how much could it have improved, truly, when the reality for Zi Wei was the same?

"Your phone and computer all have screen reader app and software now, don't they?" he asked as a way into the conversation.

Zi Wei nodded. "But it makes me jump every time…On the computer, literally every time you touch something, it speaks, which is I guess the point but the voice just makes my skin crawl a little, especially when it always feels like it's the middle of the night right now." She shook her head and momentarily buried her face in her hands. "I'm sorry," she said, when she looked up.

"For what?"

She sighed. "I got hurt because Er Kang and I discovered someone's been murdered, Yong Qi. She died, horribly and unfairly and painfully. Compared to that, and considering what I still have, I should be complaining less about it all."

"You know, the whole thing about quiet, heroic suffering that the world has been glorifying since the beginning of time is really not that healthy," Yong Qi said, reaching over to rub her shoulder in comfort. More softly, he added, "What happened was horrific, and that woman definitely did not deserve it. In the end, justice will be served to the murderer, and it won't change anything, but at least it might help her rest in peace. But you don't deserve this, either, Zi Wei, and admitting that you're having a hard time dealing with it is the only way you could begin to learn to deal with it."

"Thank you for saying this," she said. "It's not like I don't know this. It's just...sometimes it does feel like I'm beginning to make peace with it. But...the other half of the time, it feels like such a relief to wallow in self-pity. At the same time, I keep feeling impatient with myself that I feel like that. It's like none of what I'm feeling is right but I can't help feeling them either."

"I don't think there's supposed to be a right way to feel any of this," Yong Qi said. "You're not really supposed to be know how to deal with something like this. But I think the one thing you should know is that we are all here with you, to support you. You do know, don't you?"

Zi Wei's hand found his and she rested her head against his shoulder. "Yeah, I do."

Xiao Yan could hear the buzz of conversation even before she opened the door to the office.

The conversation came to an abrupt halt when she stepped into the room, though. Half of the girls in the office were standing huddled in a semi-circle in the middle of the room, and they all turned to her when she walked in.

"Is it true?" Ming Zhu asked hastily, reaching out to pull Xiao Yan into the throng. "Zi Wei Ge Ge was actually involved in that headless murder?"

Xiao Yan glared at her. "Couldn't you have phrased that so that it sounded a little less like she was actually doing the murdering?"

Ming Zhu just shrugged and looked at Xiao Yan expectantly. Apparently, this wasn't the time to worry about semantics.

Xiao Yan wondered if they would actually leave her alone if she told them she couldn't say anything.
From the way everyone – including Ming Yue and Cai Xia – was looking at her, she didn't think they would. And yet, looking into their faces, she realised that they were all wearing genuine concern, rather than just morbid curiosity.

"What does the news say?" she asked wearily, giving in to her colleagues' quest for information.

"It just says that the palace announced this morning that the reason that guy – Li Zhi – was caught with the body of his girlfriend because Zi Wei Ge Ge and her fiancé accidentally saw him when he was disposing of the body. It says that there was a struggle and Zi Wei Ge Ge has been in hospital since then."

"Did you know?" Chan Yu demanded. "You must have known. You knew, didn't you? All this time? That she was in hospital."

Xiao Yan shrugged. She wasn't willing to confirm what Chan Yu was demanding of her, but what was the point of trying to deny it either?

"Is she okay?" Cai Xia asked anxiously.

"Did the news say?" Xiao Yan asked back.

"Would you actually tell us anything or are you just going to ask us what the news say and then confirm it?" Ming Zhu asked, a little petulantly. "If that's the case, I'd just go back to reading the news."

Xiao Yan sighed.

"Oh, give Xiao Yan a break, guys," Ming Yue said, coming to her rescue. "It's not like she could go babbling everything she knows to everyone who asks."

"Thank you," Xiao Yan muttered, before giving Ming Yue a grateful smile.

Before anyone could say anything else, there was a loud gasp. They all turned and found that Chan Yu had returned to her cubicle and was staring at her computer screen.

"What? What?" Ming Zhu demanded.

"There's a new article. It says here that Zi Wei Ge Ge was injured during the struggle and 'the resulting trauma has led to the loss of her vision. It is unclear whether this condition is permanent.'"

If this conversation was about anything else, Xiao Yan would have laughed at the way everyone's heads turned in complete synchronisation from staring at Chan Yu, to staring at her. But right now, she could only sigh again.

"That's true," she said.

Her confirmation was met with a babble of talk that she didn't really want to concentrate on listening to. Some of them were talking among themselves, some were directing questions at her, but she just shook her head, indicating she couldn't and didn't want to answer. Thankfully, before anyone could really insist on her talking, the door to the office opened again, and Grace walked in. That successfully halted the conversation and sent everyone to their own desks, even if some still shot glances in Xiao Yan's direction.

Grace seemed to loiter for a moment, waiting for everyone to arrive at their own desks, before pausing at Xiao Yan.
"How are you?" she asked. She sounded casual enough, but it could hardly be just a social greeting. Xiao Yan looked up and forced the corners of her lips into a smile. It probably looked more like a grimace. "Fine," she said succinctly.

Grace stared at her, as if judging the truthfulness of her answer. Xiao Yan stared back. After a moment, Grace merely nodded and headed for her office.

As soon as she was out of sight, Xiao Yan couldn't help letting out a long sigh, which she tried to keep quiet.

A few minutes, it was all quiet in the room, save for the clicking of mouse and clacking of keyboard. Then, Xiao Yan heard the swish of Ming Yue's chair sliding across the carpeted floor.

"I – I hope Zi Wei Ge Ge makes a full recovery soon," Ming Yue said, leaning close so that only Xiao Yan could hear. Her voice was hesitant, as if she was ready for any backlash from Xiao Yan in reaction to what she must have felt was inappropriate nosiness.

"She's not a Ge Ge," Xiao Yan said vaguely, mostly out of habit, and to have something to think about than just dwelling on Zi Wei's condition. Then, though she had had longer than her colleagues to get used to the reality of Zi Wei's condition, she found herself unexpectedly emotional, answering in a small, almost cracking voice, "But I hope so too."

Even though her colleagues were less probing for the rest of the day, that didn't mean that Xiao Yan could avoid the questioning looks and obviously curious atmosphere. So it was a relief, when the clock finally struck five. She didn't think she had ever bolted so fast from her computer, only calling a cursory goodbye over her shoulder.

She had walked exactly one block of building away from her office when a car pulled over to the curb near her. She probably would have missed it altogether, if she didn't hear her name called. Looking around, startled, she found Yong Qi had rolled down the window of the passenger seat and was peering at her through the open window from the driver's seat. Her eyes widened and she looked around, almost as if guilty of something indecent, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found that she was the only person on her side of the sidewalk who could actually see into the car and recognise its occupant. But people would be spilling out of offices soon. Thus, deciding to save interrogating Yong Qi about his unexpected appearance later, she hastily pulled open the door of the passenger seat and slid in.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, when he had the car moving again.

"Picking you up," he said.

"I can see that," she said, giving him the side eye. "But why?"

He was clearly confused. "Why? Is that even a question?"

"Do you want to be seen near my office?" she asked.

"I might not necessarily want to announce the fact that we're back together, but that doesn't mean I'm willing to sneak around like thieves, either, Xiao Yan," he said matter-of-factly.

Xiao Yan huffed, but she wasn't even sure what she was supposed to be reprimanding him about.
"How was work?" he asked, when she didn't say anything else.

That made her sigh. "Are you asking just to ask, or do you really want to know how it was for me, considering the bombshell that was dropped this morning?"

Yong Qi reached over to squeeze her hand briefly. "The latter," he said gently.

"People wanted to know what was going on," she said. "Stuff that wasn't reported. I spent the whole day feeling so uncomfortable about the fact that suddenly it's this topic of water cooler conversation. The more that I think about it, the more I don't get it. Why would you have to go out of your way to announce these kinds of development in your life? It's like inviting people to poke their nose into your business."

Yong Qi sighed. "There is really no justification for announcing these kinds of meteors in our lives except the fact that we're more or less public figure, and are expected to share these kinds of things. But there's always that catch. You're announcing it in that completely impersonal way because you want to imply that you don't want to enter conversation with random strangers about it, but at the same time, by sharing you're also implying to people that they're welcome to talk about it. To even talk to you about it. And when they do talk to you about it, they expect you to say everything, because haven't you already overshared by announcing this to the whole world?"

"There's no way out of this crazy circle of contradiction, is there?" Xiao Yan asked with a poor attempt at a smile.

"Unfortunately, no," Yong Qi said. "So did they ask you anything?"

"Of course they did. As if I could avoid the questions. You know what the most frustrating thing is?"

"What?"

"I know that they're not asking because they want to be vicious or rude. I mean, if I were them and were a complete stranger to Zi Wei, I'd probably gossip about it, too. It's just another perspective, when it's someone I know and care about. And it's just so much more noticeable that there's only one topic of conversation people care about all day when it's an office of fifteen people."

"You know, Xiao Yan, if you like your colleagues, you're actually allowed to share some things with them," he said.

"I know," she said, resting her head against the car window and looking over at him with a drained expression. He looked back at her with an encouraging smile. "It would probably have been more comfortable if I actually volunteered to share anything. This morning, though, it was more like an interrogation."

"What were they asking?"

"Oh, you know, what isn't the palace telling the public? Was Zi Wei and Er Kang's part in the whole fiasco a lot more serious than what was reported? Is the palace holding back information about Zi Wei's condition? Is her prognosis really worse than they say? I didn't read any of the articles, so I wouldn't know what they are saying, let alone what they're not."

"So, all in all, not a great day?" Yong Qi asked.

Xiao Yan sighed again. "Not really. I feel like I should have worn a sign that said 'I don't know anything, stop asking' or something."
Yong Qi gave her a sympathetic smile.

She shook herself to try and clear her head. Wanting to change the subject, she asked, "How's Zi Wei settling in at home?"

"It's... an adjustment," Yong Qi said slowly. "Er Kang has been at Xian Fu Gong the whole day, I think. But he also errs on the side of trying to help Zi Wei too much, and I think that stifles her."

"She wants to learn to get around the place by herself and he's trying to hold her hand?" Xiao Yan asked.

"Both metaphorically and literally, yeah," Yong Qi answered. "What's the plan for tonight?"

Xiao Yan gave him a slightly guilty look. "I know between everything that's happened, we haven't really had a lot of time together, but I really should have dinner with my brother. You can join us."

"Are you cooking?" he asked, deadpan.

She wacked him on the shoulder for it, but she couldn't help but laugh with him as well.

"Is your brother going to be in Beijing much longer?"

"He's off next week back to Boston."

"I think that's when Qing Er is flying out, too."

"How does she do that?"

"Fly?"

"Yeah."

"She flies commercial. Business or first class, granted, but you know."

"She can do that?"

"She can. I can't. Unfortunately."

Xiao Yan laughed. "I'm not sure being unable to fly commercial airlines is such an unfortunate thing, especially when the flight is trans-Pacific."

Yong Qi had to chuckle at that. "I don't think they're flying together though."

"No," Xiao Yan said, dragging out the word for effect, "not if she's flying first class."

"So is your brother going to be here for your birthday?"

Xiao Yan smiled. "Not-my-birthday, remember?"

"Right. It's not, is it? I just got used to thinking... When is your real birthday anyway? You do actually know now, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know. I've got my real birth certificate now, though I don't know what I'll do with it. I mean, after twenty-five years of being Xia Xiao Yan, I don't think I'll ever be able to adjust, let alone completely turn myself into Fang Ci."

"But it's good to know, yeah?"
"Yeah," she admitted, grinning.

"So when is it? Your birthday?"

"Oh, March 12."

Yong Qi simply nodded.

"What?" she asked when he didn't say anything.

He smiled to himself. "Just filing away for future reference."

She didn't know how to answer, except look out the window, trying and failing to fight the involuntary smile appearing on her face.

Next to her, Yong Qi chuckled.

"It's not that funny," she grumbled half-heartedly.

"Yes, it actually is," he said. "You know why? Because, right now, you basically have two birthdays – one official one on your papers, and one actual one. The only person who has that is like…the Queen of England."

Xiao Yan groaned. "You did not just compare me to the Queen of England."

He shrugged, laughing.

"So, are we going just ignore your July birthday now, or do you want to do something?"

"Do you have anything in mind?" she asked, then immediately realised it was probably the wrong question to ask, considering the suggestive grin he gave her.

"I could think of a few things," he said casually.

She buried her face in her hands. "I hate you," she said, muffled through her fingers.

Yong Qi laughed, but when she finally looked up, he winked at her. If he wasn't driving, she thought would have kicked him. Instead, she tried to regain some sort of dignity by glaring at him instead. Of course, Yong Qi was hardly fazed and just smiled smugly at her.

There was a moment of quiet between them, during which time Xiao Yan didn't realise that her gaze on him had turned soft, almost bashful.

"So are you coming to dinner?" she asked.

He turned to smile at her again and reached out to squeeze her hand. "Yes, of course."

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**August**

All things considered, Zi Wei's twenty-fifth birthday wasn't as depressing as it could have been. It wasn't quite the birthday she was expecting, a month ago, but she had her friends and family around her.

The loss of her sight felt like her life's equivalent of Sichuan earthquake, and by the time she thought she could even begin to make peace with it, it also simultaneously was as if she had been blind
forever. She knew it wasn't true, of course, but there were moments when she couldn't seem to make herself remember, what it felt like, to be able to take sight for granted.

Then, a visit to the Beijing School for the Blind put her whole situation into a whole perspective.

It was He Jing's idea. Her sister even went as far as to encourage Zi Wei to schedule the visit for when Er Kang would be working, and she would therefore make the visit without him.

"Of course you need Er Kang's help dealing with all of this," He Jing had told Zi Wei. "But that doesn't mean you have to lean entirely and completely on him either. There is a difference between independence and alone. You are not alone, but you do still need to learn to be independent."

It made sense, of course, even if Zi Wei was sure Er Kang thought the visit was still too soon after her accident. But the fact that he still felt the need to smoother her in bubble wrap was actually the determining factor for Zi Wei to go through with He Jing's advice.

It was one thing to mourn the fact that a horrible thing had happened to her, but it was almost impossible to think too much about herself as she talked to children who had lived in the darkness far longer than she, and certainly far longer than any of them deserved. Some truly never knew what light was at all. Despite this, they all approached her and talked to her with such genuine depth of warmth that made Zi Wei cry. And yet, listening to their experience, their stories, even their advice, she was also comforted. Somehow, despite the fact that everyone around her had been saying it constantly, and despite the fact that she knew they meant it and she accepted it, it was only here, smiling and laughing with school children, trying to learn the basics of Braille and finding herself to be hilariously bad at it, that Zi Wei knew, she was truly not alone.

Following the court trial of Li Zhi while trying to learn all the new ways to access information now that she could not rely on her eyes to read the papers anymore was all kinds of overwhelming emotions. The only blessing was that the case was open-and-shut, though Zi Wei couldn't tell the extent to which that was a result of the fact that she and Er Kang had been involved. She was not naïve enough to not consider the possibility that the Palace might have put in a word, urging the court and the judge who had been assigned the case to reach a swift conclusion. Though it wasn't exactly a surprise, either, that the trial was completed and a sentence reached so swiftly; the evidence was all pretty damning.

Still, when it was reported that Li Zhi would receive the highest sentence – a death sentence – for his crimes, Zi Wei couldn't help her insides quenching. It wasn't that she thought the sentence harsh, or that he didn't deserve so much. Considering what she had seen with her own two eyes – indeed, it was the last sight she was able to see, and will never unsee even in her darkness – and what she had been told, death was perhaps even too kind for such a crime.

But she wondered if the family of the woman he killed could truly ever be comforted by such punishment. How could they? Li Zhi's death would not bring her back. Her name was still unknown to the world, because her family preferred it that way, because they didn't want her name to be a source of notoriety. At the end of it all, though, they would still have to live with the loss, and even the knowledge that their loss caused further loss of life as well. Somehow, in the face of that, Zi Wei thought that knowing Li Zhi could never cause the same pain to anyone else was but a small comfort.

Li Zhi's family would lose to. How perverse was it, that a punishment, aimed at the criminal, should end up punishing those who remain behind? After all, it wasn't as if he would know anything more after his sentence was carried out. In a century or two, he would probably become a horror story, or urban legend, and his victim, probably all but forgotten.
"You really shouldn't feel guilty about this, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan told her. "I know it's not helpful to hear, but it needs to be said."

"I'm not sure what I'm feeling. I'm not sure guilty is it," Zi Wei said.

"Of course it's guilt. It's like…survivor's guilt. You thought that since you were in that landing, you should have somehow been able to save that woman. But she was already dead. If anything, it was your presence that brought him to justice that much sooner."

"It doesn't feel like such a good thing."

"It's not, really. And I don't think what you're feeling is unnatural, Zi Wei. I'm only sorry that you have to feel it at all. I wish I could take it away from you."

Zi Wei sighed. "I'm stuck with it, I suppose."

There was a long moment of silence, during which Zi Wei was, for once, relieved that she could not see whatever expression that was on Xiao Yan's face at that moment. It would probably torture her even more to see – as opposed to only feel and hear – the worry and concern that Xiao Yan and everyone else around her must be feeling on her behalf.

Zi Wei forced herself to think of something else. After all, on the subject of the now infamous murder, none of them had any control or real involvement, and yet having been physically presence in the scene, Zi Wei couldn't quite detach herself from the situation either. It was a painful place to be, and it would probably continue to haunt her to years and years to come. She had to allow herself to move away from it lest it turn her ill, in more way than one.

"Can we please talk about something less morbid," she begged. "I can't – I can't dwell on this anymore."

"Do you want to go out and do something?" Xiao Yan asked. They had been having this conversation sitting on Zi Wei's bed, and now, Xiao Yan stood up and pulled Zi Wei up with her. "Come on, let's just go out and get bubble tea or something?"

Zi Wei gave her a small smile and nodded. Twenty minutes later, the two of them were tucked into a small table in a corner of a bubble tea chain store just outside the palace. The place was crowded enough that if they kept their heads down and their backs to the entrance, no one would really pay any attention to them.

And yet, despite her plea to talk about something else, Zi Wei found she couldn't yet let go of their earlier topic of conversation.

"Now that things have quieted down a little, I can't help but think…how incongruent life could be."

"Incongruent?" Xiao Yan asked, wrinkling her nose over the top of the straw of her drink, not understanding Zi Wei's point.

"I mean, one moment, I was getting engaged and everything was perfect, then the next, I've just witnessed this horrible thing and the world felt like it's collapsed around me. But at the same time, you and Yong Qi got back together – have I told you how happy I am about that?"

"Only about twenty times so far," Xiao Yan answered, unable to help chuckling at little.
"Well, I am. Really," Zi Wei said, smiling.

Xiao Yan reached out and squeezed her hand. "I know, Zi Wei."

"But that's the thing. I want to be happy for you, and I am, but then I think about...other things and I..."

"...feel churlish for being happy at all?" Xiao Yan prompted when she trailed off.

Zi Wei nodded with an air of defeat. She propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her palm.

Xiao Yan sighed.

"I think...I think you do have to allow yourself to accept that you have multitude of emotions. If you force yourself to put aside all the good things happening personally to you because someone else out there might be going through something horrible, and think it's insensitive of you to be happy in the face of that, then you'll never be happy. I mean, I know that the whole thing with Li Zhi is slightly different from knowing that someone died of natural causes or illness or something, but still."

Zi Wei idly sipped her drink, mulling over Xiao Yan's words. They made sense, of course, but she found recently sometimes the things that made the most sense was also the hardest to accomplish. Just because it was logical didn't mean it was easy.

"I guess...I just keep thinking that I want to meet her family, and talk to them, pay condolences, that sort of things. Then maybe I could get some...I don't know...closure? But then, it's such a selfish thing to want, isn't it? What's closure for me compared to what they're going through?"

"It's only selfish if you put it like that," Xiao Yan said. "You are allowed, for your own mental health, to want that closure. And even without that meeting, you are allowed to move on from it, Zi Wei. Don't dwell on it. You can't change it."

"I know," Zi Wei muttered.

They were both lost in their own thoughts for a long moment. Then, as Xiao Yan was tapping her straw against the side of her cup to dislodge a tapioca pearl which had gotten stuck in it, Zi Wei asked, "You and Yong Qi are okay, aren't you?"

"Yes," Xiao Yan answered, looking up at Zi Wei, feeling startled. "Do you think we're not?"

"No, not at all," Zi Wei said reassuringly. "I wasn't trying to imply you weren't. It's just..."

"Just?"

"I get the sense that he's more...tentative, talking about the two of you."

"I guess it's because we are," Xiao Yan said pensively. "I think it's hard to not be tentative, when everything still feels so new now. I just realised that we were broken up for about as long as we were together in the first place, and during that time, both of us changed. I don't want to say it's a completely new relationship now, because it's not, because there are things that are just so familiar now that it sort of takes me by surprise. But there are things that are different, too, definitely."

"Good different?"

"Yeah." Xiao Yan looked down and swirled her tea with the straw. "I don't think I realised...I didn't
realise, until we got back together, how much I missed him. I mean, I missed him, of course, but I never realised to what extent."

To that confession, Zi Wei simply smiled.

"I can't decide whether to be glad or not that the media has been too occupied with other things to pick up on us," Xiao Yan added. "On the one hand, it's nice. On the other, if it's going to happen anyway, I wish they'd get on with it so we could get it over with."

"Be careful what you wish for, Xiao Yan," Zi Wei said, smiling. "It will come, and you'll end up regretting you ever wanted it to come, whatever the reason."

The news did break, eventually, of Yong Qi and Xiao Yan being back together again. Xiao Yan woke up that morning to text messages from practically everyone she knew alerting her to the fact.

Yong Qi called her while she was brushing her teeth.

"You saw them?" he asked when she answered.

"I glanced at a couple of the headlines," she said, "but haven't read any of them. I don't think I'll actually want to."

"Yeah, well apparently they're pretty tame, so don't be too distressed."

"Apparently?"

"I didn't read them either."

Xiao Yan laughed. "You have people to do that for you."

"Exactly."

"So, are we engaged yet, according to the papers?" she asked casually.

Yong Qi laughed. "It'll probably happen next week if not secretly already."

She shook her head in exasperation as she tried to juggle her phone and clothes at the same time.

"Do you want me to pick you up for work?"

"You have time?" she asked sceptically.

"It might be a bit of a rush," he admitted.

"Don't worry, Yong Qi. I'll be fine. We'll see each other tonight?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Well, have fun, Xiao Yan."

"As if," she muttered, which makes him laugh. "If I could get through the day without feeling annoyed at anyone trying pry about us, I'd call it a success. I wouldn't go as far as to hope for fun."

"Text me if you want to talk, okay? I'll see if I can call you."

"Don't about me, Yong Qi. As I said, I'll be fine," she told him comfortingy. "I've got to go, though. Love you, 'kay?"
"Love you, too," he said. She could hear the smile in his voice, and it made her smile, too. "See you tonight, Xiao Yan."

Despite her words of reassurance to Yong Qi, which she did mean, when she reached the floor of her office, Xiao Yan almost had to force herself to open the door and step inside.

It was early enough that she wasn't entirely shocked that the office looked empty, though she wondered if that could be counted a blessing. She would rather have gotten all the gossip and questions over with.

As she went into the pantry to drop her lunch off in the fridge, however, Xiao Yan found that the office wasn't as empty as it suggested out front. Everyone was, instead, gathered beside the microwave, cradling their cups of tea. Their eyes lit up the moment they caught sight of her. Chan Yu, who was standing closest to Xiao Yan, grabbed her left hand and turned it over.

"Oh," she said, sounding disappointed. Xiao Yan rolled her eyes and tugged her hand not very gently away. That didn't deter Chan Yu from asking, "So are you really not engaged, or is there just not a ring?"

"Seriously, you guys?" Xiao Yan asked the room at large, giving them all an exasperated look. "Of course there's no ring."

She knew she shouldn't have tried to be vague and hoping that they would just let the subject drop. The moment the words were out of her mouth, another question came.

"But you are engaged?"

Xiao Yan decided that if she was going to have to listen to this, she might as well not let it bother her. So instead of feeling annoyed, she just gave the women around her a grin before answering with a shrug, "That's not what I said."

"Are you?" Ming Zhu pressed.

"Guys, guys," Xiao Yan said, waving a hand. She was well aware that everyone was watching her every move. "Do you honestly think I would actually tell you even if I were?"

"So you're not?" Chan Yu pressed.

Xiao Yan raised an eyebrow in challenge. "If you all wanted to get rid of me so badly, you could have just said."

That statement was met with a storm of protest, which made Xiao Yan smile to herself in satisfaction.

She let them try to coax her into confiding secrets for a few minutes, not entirely because she got a kick out of it, but because she knew they probably enjoyed the thrill of trying to gossip but being stopped in their tracks. Finally, Xiao Yan just said with a laugh, "I've got work to do." Then, with a grin, she ducked around Ming Yue to put her lunch box in the fridge, before weaving her way back into the office.

Fortunately, everyone apparently realised they really wouldn't get anything else out of her, as they all followed her back into the main office, grumbling.

Chapter End Notes
I played around with the idea of a double wedding at one point, but the two couples really are in completely different places right now. Also, the fun of mixup is pretty much less likely to happen in a modern wedding. So the double wedding goes, which means that I actually have to write two weddings, which is good for you as readers...not sure how good it's being for me... :)

2015, October (1)

2015

October

There was something gentle about learning to fit into each other's lives again. Xiao Yan found herself enjoying the experience, and was determined to not think too much about where they were heading towards in the future. After all, it was enough, for the time being, to know that they were together again.

Still, life, as they said, went on. It would eventually intrude on the calm waters she and Yong Qi managed to find. The thing about life in the Palace was that when it was it was mundane, it was utterly, completely unremarkable. When something extraordinary happened, however, it tended to crash in with the force of a tidal wave.

It started out a normal Sunday. Xiao Yan and Yong Qi had just had lunch, and were walking back to Yong Qi's car laughing about some joke Er Tai had told Yong Qi the day before. That was when a shrill noise sounded from Yong Qi's phone. It was not a normal text alert, and sounded more like an alarm. His laugh turned immediately into a frown as he dug the phone out of his pocket. Xiao Yan couldn't help an unsettling feeling making its roost at the pit of her stomach when, almost at the same time as Yong Qi pulling out his phone, Sai Wei nearby touched a finger to his earpiece, obviously receiving some information or instruction.

Xiao Yan turned back to Yong Qi and found him standing absolutely still, staring at his phone. Her unsettled feeling turned to alarm as she noted that his face had turned a sickly white colour, and he seemed to be gripping his phone unusually tight.

"What is it?" she asked, leaning over his arm to look at message he was still staring at on the phone.

It was from his father, and was succinct.

Go home, now. SP A4.

Before Xiao Yan could ask Yong Qi what the cryptic message meant, Sai Wei had suddenly appeared next to them, his face grim.

"Wang Ye, I have received directive that we are on Security Protocol Alpha 4. We have to go."

That explained nothing to Xiao Yan, but whatever it meant, it caused Yong Qi to finally look up from his phone to stare at Sai Wei, as if he, too, was as uncomprehending as her.

"Wang Ye!" Sai Wei said, urgently now. "Extraction has begun. We have to move. Now."

Xiao Yan didn't know what it was about the agent's words that shook Yong Qi out of his stupor, but he was noticeably more alert.

"Yes, of course," he said crisply, shoving his phone back into his pocket before reaching out and taking Xiao Yan's hand. His grip was so tight it would hurt if they remained this way for a long period of time, and he was not gentle, tugging her along as he walked rapidly, Sai Wei following closely behind. "We have to go, Xiao Yan."

Xiao Yan was not comforted when she saw Sai Wei discreetly checked the gun in the inside of his
"What's going on?" she asked breathlessly, almost stumbling to keep up with Yong Qi's rapid pace.

The answer she received was short. "Later."

When they reached Yong Qi's car, they found that another had pulled up beside it. Neither Yong Qi nor Sai Wei seemed to be surprised at the appearance of the second, and they puzzled Xiao Yan even further when Sai Wei opened the door of the backseat of the new car, instead of Yong Qi's car, for them.

As Xiao Yan slid into the seat beside Yong Qi, she decided to just ask.

"Why – "

"This car is bulletproof," Yong Qi said shortly before she even managed to say more than just the first word.

She stared at him, at a loss for word and understanding nothing. She didn't even know where to begin to think, to try and work out what in the world was going on.

Still, it obviously wasn't the right time for her questions, so she stayed silent as the driver of the car they were in left to drive Yong Qi's car instead, and Sai Wei replaced him as their driver. That was when Xiao Yan realised that there was another agent in the front seat in front of her, who she thought was named Gui…something.

Sai Wei started the car.

Yong Qi reached over and took her hand, holding it tightly. From the look of pure dread on his face, she wondered if the contact was for her comfort, or for his own.

It felt more like the latter, because the moment they got out into the road, they were joined – and flanked on all four sides – by several more security cars. Ahead of the whole motorcade were two policemen on motorbikes, clearing the road with sirens.

Yong Qi turned to Xiao Yan. "Security Protocol Alpha 4," he said, cutting through the suffocating silence in the car, "means that…" – he seemed suddenly overcome by emotions that it took a second to compose himself – "…the Crown Prince's life is on the line and that all other princes are to be extracted and secured to safe locations."

Xiao Yan's eyes widened and her heart gave a painful lurch. Now that she understood the source of Yong Qi's agitation, she felt her entire body flooded with fear as well. She couldn't begin to imagine what could have happened for the situation to be characterised by such words.

"What do you mean, on the line?" she demanded.

Yong Qi didn't answer her, but addressed the agent in the front seat.

"Agent Gui, talk to me."

The agent in question turned around in his seat to face them. That was when Xiao Yan realised he was holding an iPad.

"Wang Ye, as you know, the Crown Prince was opening a new wing at the National Museum today," Agent Gui said. "There was an explosion there about half an hour ago."
"What kind of explosion?"

"Everything is still under investigation. The preliminary view is that it wasn't a premeditated attack, but an accident involving a gas leak. If that is the case, I believe there will be an investigation into the contractor who was responsible for installing the gas line in that wing of the museum. But really, the communication is that it's too early to conclude anything for definite right now."

"My brother," Yong Qi said, choked.

"Yes, of course. The explosion happened near enough where the Crown Prince was that he was severely injured by falling rubble. Fortunately, he has been extracted from the scene and has been transported to Imperial Hospital. Huang Shang is on his way there now. The Third Prince is secured at Yuan Ming Gong, and we are making our way to the Palace."

"The Palace?" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Shouldn't we be going to the hospital too?"

"No, Miss. Huang Shang is currently there," Agent Gui said, as if that was supposed to explain why they weren't going.

"Considering the current security status," Yong Qi said quietly to Xiao Yan. "Ah Ma, either of my brothers and I cannot all be at the same place right now. I will be able to visit Laoda after Ah Ma leaves."

Xiao Yan blew out a breath. The idea made sense, of course, but that didn't prevent it from seeming rather idiotic at the same time.

"So we don't know what his condition is yet?" Yong Qi asked Agent Gui, his voice trembling a little.

"No, sir."

"I don't suppose there is a tally of damages just yet?"

"No," Agent Gui answered. "But there are already reports of some deaths."

At the mention of deaths, Xiao Yan noticed that Yong Qi had gone even whiter. He removed his hand from hers and clenched it in his lap. Closing his eyes and nodding curtly, he turned away to stare out of the window with a grim look on his face. The agent seemed to realise what his words had inadvertently implied as well, because he looked flustered and fell silent.

After a few tense seconds, Xiao Yan asked, "Do you have the news coverage?"

Agent Gui nodded and handed her the iPad he was holding. Already loaded was a news article with live update coverage of the new developments. But Agent Gui has covered everything there was to know thus far. Xiao Yan handed the iPad back to him, before turning her attention back to Yong Qi. He had not moved in the meantime, and was still staring unseeingly out at the passing streets, where people seemed to still go about their normal lives, not many aware that some enormous change was threatening to descend down on them all. Xiao Yan gingerly reached out to touch Yong Qi's arm again. When he didn't pull away, she looped their arms together, and took one of his hands in both of hers, leaning her head against his shoulder. She was relieved to feel his tense body sagging a little as he rested his head against hers, receiving her wordless comfort.

They spent rest of the ride back to the Palace in silence. All the while, Xiao Yan was desperate to stop herself from connecting the concept of death to Yong An. That would only make her consider what that meant, for Yong Qi, and in turn, for her, and for the two of them.
They were met at the gate of Xian Fu Gong by He Jing, who had her phone held to her ear as they stepped out of the car. She rushed over to pull Yong Qi into a hug anyway as he got out of the car.

"Yes, yes," she said into the phone as she let go of Yong Qi. "Yong Qi's home...Yes, I'll tell them."

"Who's that?" Yong Qi asked.

"Ah Ma," He Jing answered with a sigh. "Zi Wei's inside."

"Is there any news?"

"Come inside, I'll tell you both and Zi Wei inside."

They went into the sitting room to find Zi Wei sitting there with the television on. On the screen was the image of dust still settling around a huge pile of rubble that was previously a brand new museum building. Headlines chased each other at the bottom of the screen, but seemed to tell no clearer a story of what Xiao Yan and Yong Qi already knew.

At the sound of their entrance, Zi Wei turned towards the door.

"Jiejie, is that you?" she asked, her voice frantic and she made to stand up.

"Yes," He Jing answered while Xiao Yan pulled Yong Qi over to sit next to Zi Wei on the sofa, pulling her back down with them.

"I'm here too," she whispered as she gave Zi Wei a hug while He Jing reached for the TV remote to turn it off.

"I've been trying to call Ah Ma, but I can't get through," Zi Wei said, her voice trembling. "Er Kang – Er Kang is working today. He would have been there with Da Ge. I haven't been able to call him either..."

"I just got off the phone with Ah Ma," He Jing said, "that's probably why you haven't been able to call him. Zi Wei, Er Kang was there with Yong An."

Zi Wei gave a frightened gasp, while Xiao Yan took her hand.

"Is he – "

"It's understandably at little hard to put together an idea of what happened near Yong An when the explosion went off, considering everyone near him were also caught in it, and are all injured as well. But they managed to salvage one of the security cameras with footage intact just now, and it appeared that when the explosion happened, an entire column crashed down, and that's what caused most of the injuries. Er Kang tried to shield Yong An from the crash, but they were both injured."

Zi Wei let out a weak cry of distress and gave Xiao Yan's hand a painful squeeze. Xiao Yan felt helpless to comfort her, and could only run her hand in circles on Zi Wei's back. She wanted to be able to say something that might reassure Zi Wei, or make her feel better, but what was there to say, when it seemed that both the lives of her brother and her fiancé were hanging by a thread? It didn't seem fair, that after everything Zi Wei had been through lately, this newest distress had to crash down on her now. Surely it would be too cruel of whatever god that was out there for the worst to happen now?
"He was taken to Imperial Hospital with Yong An, along with a dozen other people who were
injured," He Jing continued. "They are still trying to extract injured people from the scene. Ah Ma
said there has been reports of at least some of our agents' death. Er Kang and Yong An are both in
the emergency room right now, and Ah Ma hasn't been able to get any more information about their
conditions."

"Would we be able to get update any time soon?" Yong Qi asked. He sounded like he was exerting
every fibre of his being to keep his voice steady. "Assuming Imperial is overflowing right now."

"Yes," He Jing said with a sigh. "Imperial was the closest hospital, so those with most severe injuries
were taken there. I think they've tried to spread out those with more minor injuries to other hospitals.
We won't be able to demand exclusive attention from the hospital like usual, but everyone knows
what's at stake, so I don't think the doctors at Imperial will keep us in suspense. Ah Ma said he'll be
there until there's some definite news."

"And we're doing what? Just sitting here waiting?" Yong Qi demanded impatiently.

"Unfortunately."

"No," Zi Wei gasped, looking around in distress, "I have to be there. I want to be there. I must go to
them…I need to be with Er Kang…"

He Jing reached out and took her hand to still her and stop her from standing up again. "Zi Wei,
waiting there in the hospital and waiting here is no difference. You'll feel worse there. It's only a five-
minute car ride, so if we know anything, you'll be able to get there. In the meantime, I think you
should stay home. I know it's not what you want, but security's stretched over its limit as it is. Let's
not tax them any more than necessary by having too many of us there at the hospital right now."

Zi Wei bit her lower lip and twisted her hand together, looking for a moment like she would protest.
After a long moment, she let out something like a tearful sob, but nodded reluctantly and sitting back
down, burying her face in her hands. Xiao Yan wrapped both her arms securely around her.

"I thought this was an accident?" Yong Qi asked, his voice as brittle and as sharp as glass. "It wasn't
an attack, right? Why is security acting like we're in a war zone?"

"Well, so far, the consensus is that it's an accident," He Jing said. "But they can't rule out an attacked
being disguised as an accident yet, so everyone's a little on edge right now. It's to be expected,
considering the losses in the explosion itself. The insistent message right now is that we stay at home
until there is news. With everything in such chaos, having too many of us at the hospital would only
get in the way of the doctors and nurses."

Yong Qi sighed. "Yes, of course," he murmured.

"Where's everyone else?" Xiao Yan asked. She only started to loosen her grip on Zi Wei to allow
her friend to wipe away the tears. "I know Yong Yan's at Yuan Ming Gong, so the empress and He
Ke are there as well?"

"Yes, they called me before Ah Ma did to tell me they're going to stay there for now," He Jing said.
"They were actually about to come here when the news came. Mama will probably come in to see
Yong An when there's more news, so that Ah Ma could come home to give us a chance to go see
him. Uncles are at home, too. Third Uncle said he'd wait until later to call Qing Er. It's really early
right now her time anyway."

"Has anyone told Meng Yue?" Yong Qi asked.
"Mama said she would call her." He Jing rubbed her eyes. "I hope that Mama manages to get her before she sees it on the news somewhere. Meng Yue deserves that, at least. Everything's just happened so suddenly."

Yong Qi nodded, absent-mindedly entwining his fingers with Xiao Yan's.

"Is there anything we could do now?" Xiao Yan asked, rubbing her thumb against the back of Yong Qi's hand in comfort.

"Nothing but wait."

So they waited, though thankfully the wait was not updateless as to be torturous. The emperor checked in occasionally to tell them that both Yong An and Er Kang had to go into surgery, that Er Kang's parents and Er Tai have arrived, then later to tell them when the doctors and surgeons thought the surgeries might be finished. They passed the time chiefly by watching the coverage of the explosion on TV, which didn't comfort, but gave updates of the injuries and death reported, and what was continuing to happen at the scene, in between relaying delayed updates of the Crown Prince's condition.

None of them talked much. It was too painful. There was nothing to talk about, anyway. They could not sit and speculate about what would happen. They could not guess whether either Yong An and Er Kang would pull through. They had to hold on to the belief that both would, because it was too horrible to think otherwise.

Yong Qi, especially, could not face even the suggestion that his brother might not… None of them had dared raised that possibility out loud yet, though he knew it peeked and scratched at the back of all of their minds. He preferred it that way.

In the hours that followed, even with the TV flashing images of the explosion in front of his eyes, and the constant drone of TV anchors and reporters narrating the images on screen in dispassionate voices, Yong Qi felt as if the only thing that was real, that held him to the world that apparently was still spinning, was Xiao Yan's touch. Her hand in his, her fingers tracing random patterns against his palm and the back of his hand. Her head on his shoulder. She would turn, occasionally, to press a kiss on his cheek. There was nothing Yong Qi could do but to hold on to her, like she was a lifeline. His lifeline. His brother's lifeline. Because, really, right now, it felt like the two were one and the same.

There were moments when he wanted to pull Xiao Yan out of the room, so they could speak alone, because his heart felt like it would burst with things he wanted to say to her, before it all became too late. They were things that he should have said a long time ago, but never had the chance, or the courage, to lay it all out for both of them to see. But every time he tried, he couldn't even form the words tell her he wanted to get away. His throat felt constricted and closed. It was as if it knew, if he could speak, he would blurt out all his fears and dreads to Xiao Yan. Right now, that felt too much like tempting fate…

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, but would only have been over four hours, his father came back to them with news. Yong An and Er Kang were both out of surgery, for now, but there was no telling when either was wake up. They were both in intensive care and under close monitoring for surgery complications, which meant that neither was out of the woods yet. The injuries that so far could be listed between the two includes collapsed lung, broken ribs, fractured skull, head trauma, burns and too many lashes and cuts and bruises to list.

"You all should go and see the two of them," the emperor concluded. "Your Mama is there with
Yong An, and they let Er Kang's parents in to sit with him, so you should be able to see them."

"I'll drive," Yong Qi said as the four of them stood up.

"No, do not drive," his father said sharply. "Call for a car."

"I can – "

"Yong Qi."

He sighed, but nodded. "All right."

"We'll call if there's any change, Ah Ma," He Jing added.

They got to the corridor of the private wing at the Imperial Hospital to find Meng Yue, Yong An's girlfriend, arguing with a flustered looking nurse at the reception desk.

"As I have informed you, Miss Meng, I am unfortunately only authorised to permit family in to visit," the nurse was saying.

"Surely I can be included," Meng Yue argued. "Do you know who I am? You know who I am, right?"

"Yes, of course, but – "

"Let her in," He Jing said to the nurse as they reached the desk. "Hello, Meng Yue. Did you just arrive?"

Meng Yue turned around, looking harried. "Yes," she answered, letting out a long, harsh breath. "I was in Shanghai when the empress called me. I took the first flight back that I could get. Did you all just get here as well?"

"Our father was here earlier," Yong Qi explained. "He just arrived home earlier to give us some updates here, and to let us come see our brother."

By this time, they had reached the patients' room. Xiao Yan reached out and touched Yong Qi's arm.

"I'm going to take Zi Wei into to Er Kang's room. You are going to be okay?"

He squeezed her hand and nodded. "Yes, I'll be all right." He reached out and touched Zi Wei's shoulder. "I'll come see Er Kang in a bit, all right?"

Zi Wei nodded before allowing Xiao Yan to lead her down the hall.

That left Yong Qi, He Jing and Meng Yue to enter Yong An's room. Looking over, Yong Qi could see Meng Yue trembling. If he was collected enough himself, he would have offered her a comforting word or look. As it was, he could only take a deep breath and square his shoulders, as He Jing opened the door to allow the three of them inside.

The empress looked up at their entrance. "You're here," she said softly as He Jing went over to hug them. Meng Yue, meanwhile, rushed to Yong An's bedside and ghosted her fingers against his hand which lay on the white hospital bedsheet, finger trapped in the oximeter. She was trembling even harder now, and looked as if she was afraid to reach out and touch him, as if that would cause him even more physical harm.
Yong Qi could only stand at the foot of his brother's bed, grasping the metal frame so hard that his knuckles became white. He didn't know how he could stand there and look at Yong An lying there, his face a sickly off-white that seemed to match the walls of the sterile hospital room, surrounded by lines and tubes, machines and monitors. And yet, stand he must, watching the zigzagged lines of the heart monitor, which seemed to be measuring not just Yong An's heartbeats, but his as well.

Yong Qi was vaguely aware that at some point, his stepmother, after speaking to He Jing, left to return to He Ke and Yong Yan. He Jing came to stand with him then, and took his arm in a gesture of both to comfort and to be comforted.

The three of them – Yong Qi, He Jing, Meng Yue – kept their silent vigil. Yong Qi couldn't tell how many minutes, or even hours passed, before the silence, only punctuated by the beepings of the machines, which admitted sounded morbidly and terrifyingly like a clock counting down, became too much for Meng Yue. She stood up shakily and mumbled something Yong Qi couldn't quite make out to him and He Jing, before leaving the room in tears.

He Jing sighed softly beside him, before squeezing his shoulder. "I'm going to go make sure she's okay. You'll be all right?"

Yong Qi turned to give his sister a weak smile and nodded. She patted his hand before following Meng Yue out of the room, closing the door with a soft click behind her.

Yong Qi didn't move from his position at the foot of Yong An's bed, even though he was more than aware that he was now alone in the room with his unconscious brother, and there was more than one chair around. He felt like if he dared to tear his eyes away, his brother would be lost to him.

It was as if the implications of the whole accident took until now to truly sink in. Yong An's life, he knew, was hanging by a thread. By extension, the world as Yong Qi knew it was too.

If Yong An died…

No. Yong An could not die. It didn't matter how unsure the doctors sounded that Yong An would make a full recovery, he had to.

Because he'd promised. He'd promised both Yong Qi and Yong Yan, a long time ago now, that he'd always be there, that neither of them would ever have to worry about the huge burden that was seat of the emperor.

Then again, a small voice spoke in Yong Qi's head, your elder uncle probably said that to your father once, and look how that turned out.

But his uncle's death, which led to his father inheriting the throne despite being the second son, had been due to prolonged illness, and had been expected. His father didn't wake up one day with the weight of inheriting the throne on his shoulder. This…this was too sudden, and it was unfair.

"Don't you dare do this to me," Yong Qi found himself saying out loud, staring at his brother, as if willing him to wake up and hear him. Then, the words became a plea. "Please don't do this to me."

It did not seem as if Yong An could hear him. Yong Qi let out a shaky breath, before clasping his hand on the bedframe, as if in prayer.

That was how Xiao Yan found him later.

"Hey," she called, making him turn. For the first instance, he could only stare at her, standing there a few feet away. How much longer could he have her like this? How much longer will it be, before
everything he knew changed?

Xiao Yan walked over and slid her arms around him, pulling him into a tight hug. Despite everything, the warmth of her embrace did make him feel better. When she released him, he took advantage of their closeness to brush a kiss on her forehead.

"So, Meng Yue and He Jing are outside, talking," she said.

"I know."

"I thought He Jing didn't like Meng Yue?"

Yong Qi gave a shaky laugh. "She didn't, but it's been long enough that she's mellowing."

Xiao Yan nodded, then looked over at Yong An's still form.

"You all right?" she asked.

"I will be when he wakes up," he answered with a sigh. "How's Er Kang?"

"Much the same. Unconscious. I think Zi Wei's going to stay the night."

"Hmmm."

At that moment, the door opened again and the two of them turned to find He Jing and Meng Yue returning.

"Meng Yue and I will stay with Yong An," He Jing said. "Yong Qi, you should go home and get some rest."

"I can stay as well," Yong Qi protested.

"There's no sense in all of us staying," He Jing said. "We'll all have to take turn to be here with him in the near future as it is, Yong Qi. Meng Yue and I can take tonight. Go home and rest, then come back tomorrow."

Yong Qi was still reluctant, but he saw the point his sister was trying to make. It wasn't as if there was anything he could do here except stare at his brother. If he could somehow stare Yong An into consciousness, he'd stay. Otherwise, his sister's words made sense.

So he straightened, and allowed Xiao Yan to lead him from the room.

"I'll go see Er Kang first, before we leave," he told He Jing.

She nodded, then called after them, "Make sure he does get some rest, will you Xiao Yan?"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

When Xiao Yan stirred awake some hours later, Yong Qi was not beside her.

"Stay with me," he had said to her in the car ride from the hospital back to the palace.

That had been her plan before he even voiced the request, so she only nodded and pressed a kiss against his shoulder, whispering, "Of course."

Now, she got out of bed and crept out of his bedroom. She found him sitting with his legs up on the
sofa in the sitting room. All the lights were off, so the only reason she saw him at all was by the illumination of the iPad he held his hands.

"What are you doing?" she asked, padding softly into the room.

Her entrance startled him, and he looked up from the iPad, staring at her. There was something in the way he was looking at her, his face only half-visible to her in the darkness, that made her feel short of breath. The silence that stretched from him to her felt like he was afraid she might disappear from his sight, against his will. It froze her to her spot half-way from the door for a prolonged moment.

Pinching herself to stir herself out of the stupor, Xiao Yan drew closer and slid onto the sofa next to him, curling up against his side. Her heart dropped when she saw that on the iPad, the video of the explosion was playing on what seemed to be loop.

"Why are you looking at that?" she asked, aghast.

He sighed, but put his arm around her shoulder, drawing her closer, kissing the top of her head. "I don't know. I guess...it's just...the explosion was so massive, and somehow they managed to survive that. I think I'm just trying to tell myself that that is a miracle enough, and that maybe in the end...it'll be more of a miracle."

Xiao Yan took the iPad away from him and turned off the screen, which dropped them into the darkness. "Stop," she whispered. "Don't look at it anymore. You should try to get some sleep."

Yong Qi rested his head against her. "I've tried. Can't."

She slid her hand into his in the darkness and cradled it against herself.

"Yong Qi...I know right now, you're worried, and scared," she said. "But right now, you also need to take care of yourself. You should also have hope. There is still a chance that everything will turn out all right."

"I am scared," he said. His voice was already wavering, but to her, he sounded even more vulnerable in the dark. "I'm scared of that chance that things won't be okay. And the truth is, the odds are all against things turning out okay. And I can't bring myself to think about what the future will be like, if things don't turn out okay. Most of all, I'm just scared...that that future will cause me to lose you. All over again."

Xiao Yan's eyes widened, and she sucked in a noisy breath, understanding the implications of his words, even if every part of her was yelling at her to fight against even facing those possibilities.

"Yong Qi," she said weakly, choked. But then could say nothing else. What could she say? She could advise him not to think too much, but it would be futile. He could not help thinking of the possible future, and fearing it. It wouldn't do for her to make him have to contemplate those fears alone.

There was a moment, where the only sound Xiao Yan could hear was the soft sounds of their breathing in the silence of the night. Yong Qi's fingers threaded into the soft locks of her hair, stroking it.

"I had this whole plan, you know?" Yong Qi said. His voice was as unstable as hers had been earlier. "I mean, even before today, it's been obvious for a long time now that, for Laoda, it's going to be Meng Yue or no one. I think my whole family have come to accept that. Ah Ma and Mama have been talking about having serious talks with the two of them about a wedding, about lessons for Meng Yue. To me, it was a relief. Once my brother is married, I'd be released. It seems so selfish to
Xiao Yan didn't know until the moment he said the words, but suddenly she felt as if she had also been waiting for the same thing. Because, of course, if Yong An got married, all the implications about the future would change for Yong Qi, and in turn, for them. Now, they were on the cusp of another, entirely different, sort of change; one that could only be dreaded.

"Yong Qi..." Xiao Yan said slowly. Again, she wasn't sure, after calling his name, what else she could say, but she felt the need to say something, to just let him know that she was there with him. Somehow, she knew, if there was light, he would be staring at her with that same expression that he had worn when she first entered the room. She saw now, in the darkness, how terrified he must be that somehow she might slip through his fingers and that he would be as successful in holding onto her as he would water.

"I know it's unfair to say all this to you now," he admitted, his voice sounding close to breaking point. "But Xiao Yan, there are things...things that perhaps I should have said before today. Things that, after today, I'm afraid will never be right for me to say to you again. Please just let me say them?"

Xiao Yan let out the long breath she wasn't even aware she was holding. She realised that she felt like crying, even if no tears could fall from her eyes despite the dreadful, painful weight on her chest that left her heaving for relief. She turned Yong Qi's hand idly over in hers, delaying for a moment, before drawing another deep breath.

"Go on."

"I had this whole plan," Yong Qi repeated, his arm almost painfully tight around her shoulders. "I knew you needed the time to figure out what you want to do and make your place in the world, to build a career of your own. And Xiao Yan, I do believe that you are on your way to do that. One day soon, if it hasn't happened already, people will look at you, and my name won't be the first thing that come to mind. I can wait for you, Xiao Yan, for as long as you need it."

As Yong Qi stopped to draw breath and to compose himself, Xiao Yan sniffled back the tears that had silently fallen, and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

"I thought, during that time, there would be time for my brother to get married and have a child. It doesn't even matter if it's a girl. I'd do everything to make sure that even if Laoda only have girls, they'd get the same opportunities as if they were boys. I've always thought...once Laoda's future is settled, once my life and expectations are a little simpler – and they would grow simpler – that we could finally..."

He stopped, sighed, and she could feel him shaking his head.

Then, he added, "You don't have to say anything now, about whether you would have wanted any of this...I don't even know if it helps either of us for me to say this out loud right now, like this. I just...I just feel that I need to tell you, to let you know, so that even if it all comes to nothing, you'd know, at least."

"Do you really think, after everything we've been through, to be here with each other again, that it could all come to nothing again?" she asked softly.

"Couldn't it?" he asked. "If things change, would you consider still staying?"

Xiao Yan mulled over her thoughts, trying to figure out how to put her admittedly now confusing
feelings into words. She knew Yong Qi was trying to curb his own expectations and hopes in the face of future possibilities. She too would have to take care not to hurt him with promises she might not be able to keep.

"Yong Qi, for you alone, of course I would stay where I am," she said, bringing his hand up to her lips for a kiss. "I have never doubted that I want to be with you. It was everything else that I wasn't sure I could navigate and accept. Even now, I still need time to figure that out."

"And before we've managed that, that everything else may now grow exponentially," he said shakily. "What does that mean for us?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But Yong Qi, I don't think this is something we should speculate about, like this. Isn't it something that we would only really know how to react to when it's already happened? Must we really need to think so morbidly right now?"

Yong Qi idly toyed with their entwined fingers for a moment, thinking.

"I shouldn't," he said after a while, with a heavy sigh, "but I can't help it. If...if it does happen, I'd rather that I'm prepared to face all of it. If it was only for myself, I'd have more courage to face all the implications of what may happen. I would still be terrified that I would never be able to meet all the expectations that come my way when it does happen, but it would still only be pressure on me, and really, what is new about that?"

"For what it's worth, I have total faith that you can do anything Yong An can," Xiao Yan whispered.

"I know. I'm just not sure I can do it without you," he said candidly. "I don't want to be in denial about that, Xiao Yan. It would feel too much like I'm lying to myself, and to you. And that, really, is what weighs on me most of all right now."

"What?"

"The choice I have, when it comes down to it. Whether I could really ask you to step into this future role of the empress, which will never allow you to do things anything the way you want, or whether I could let you go. Let's be real. It's not like there'll ever be anyone else like you."

"What if," she asked contemplatively, "it's not a matter of whether you could bear to ask, but a matter of whether I could bring myself to decide?"

"Could you?" Yong Qi asked, obviously trying too hard to avoid sounding expectant.

"I don't know," she said truthfully. "Right now, I don't know."

She heard him inhale deeply and felt him nod with a palpable sense of resignation.

She added, before he could allow himself to wallow in disappointment, "But Yong Qi..."

"Hmmm?"

"I love you." There was a pause, because even though she knew the words were coming, it still overwhelmed her to say them. The lapse seemed to be a blessing, though, as she could hear and feel Yong Qi's quickened breaths as he let the words sink in. More softly, Xiao Yan repeated, "I love you, enough for me to be able to say to you, right now, that if you ask, if you want to share that possible future with me, I will seriously think about it, and consider it, and try to put myself in it, for you. It will scare me as much as it does you, but I won't let that fear make me cut and run the moment I must face it."
Yong Qi turned and pressed his lips against her hair, letting out a shaky laugh. "Thank you," he whispered.

"I mean it."

He nodded, and tightened his embrace around her, pulling her closer. "I know. I don't doubt it. Perhaps I even knew it, before you said it, but I am glad you said it."

"I've realised by now, Yong Qi, that some things are worth saying out loud." She wrapped her arms tightly around his middle and rested her cheek against his chest. "I know that with everything up in the air right now, you feel like you should be prepared for anything. But Yong Qi, forcing yourself to face things that isn't reality yet really wouldn't help. You'll only make yourself ill. So it's all well and good that we've had this conversation, but I think you really shouldn't dwell on this much more. Don't do that to yourself, or feel that you must try and face it all yourself all at once. No matter what happens, we can get through this together. I promise, I will be there with you, through everything, because you need me right now. All right?"

In the dark, he reached for her and tilted her chin up so that he could kiss her gently. "All right," he whispered as he pulled away just long enough for her to pull him close again, burying her face into the crook of his neck.

As she felt the warmth of his skin against her and listened to the sound of his heartbeats, she was confronted with just how very much she, in turn, needed him in her life. Two years apart had seemingly allowed her to sometimes forget this, but somehow just a few months back together had been more than enough to imprint it into her heart again.

This time, she realised, there was no forgetting.

This time, no matter what happened, no matter how things turned out with Yong An, for her, Yong Qi was forever. So she knew the uncertainty of her earlier words were just the surface denial. She already knew, in her heart of heart, what the true answer was. That it frightened her only confirmed that it was there.

Some things needed to be said out loud. Some other things needed to be said, but with the right timing. She didn't think it was a bad thing that she couldn't express it all to him right this moment. Perhaps, that was for the best. To promise him forever right now might in some way seem too much like she was trying too hard to comfort him in the midst of a tragedy waiting to happen. So she stayed herself. She would tell him, when there was less at stake. After all, she would rather he was sure she came to the conclusion that she wanted to be with him all on her own, and not pushed to it by any dire circumstance. He deserved that from her, after all this time.

They stayed like that, wrapped in each other, for several more moments. Then, Xiao Yan stood up and tugged at Yong Qi's hand. "Come on, it's late. We should at least try and get some rest."

He sighed, but allowed her to pull him up off the sofa, before following her back to bed.
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October

Zi Wei thought, becoming blind was the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

It was a thousand times more excruciating to sit here by Er Kang’s bed in her unseeing state. The fact that she was drenched in fears and worry wasn’t as debilitating as the fact that she felt totally helpless. All around her was a flurry of activities, and she knew everyone from nurses and doctors to his parents and his brother were moving about, doing something. The fact that she could only sit and clutch at his hand, knowing he was hurt and in danger, but she could not see him, let alone do anything to take care of him, was agony.

Time seemed to tick by at an unbearable pace, and almost every one of Zi Wei’s senses felt overstimulated. She was too aware of the squeeze of Xiao Yan’s hands in hers, the soft sound of her breathing and of the clock on the wall ticking, the nausea-inducing smell of hospital, that dizzying combination of medication and bleach that tasted so bitter. And yet, the one sense she wanted to work, the one sense she was desperate for and was begging for remained dormant, refusing to let her see Er Kang, to at least gain some relief in the sight of him breathing.

She wondered now, if this was how he felt, when she was the one lying there on the hospital bed. Had it been barely three months since? Why was it that when tragedy struck, it all seemed to come tumbling down at once?

Even as Zi Wei sat here, by Er Kang’s bedside, she was all too aware that Yong An, too, was fighting for his life in the very next room. And yet, it was as if the implications of Yong An’s life or death was too enormous for Zi Wei to fully grasp in her current vulnerable state, and she did not seem able to bring herself to face it, let alone really think about what it truly meant, for more than just her family.

It was harder to avoid these thoughts when Yong Qi stepped in to check on Er Kang before heading home himself.

"How's Yong An?" she found herself asking.

Yong Qi’s hand on her shoulder clenched, and it was the pressure of that contact that told Zi Wei far more about both her brothers’ current state than what Yong Qi managed to say in gravelly voice, "He's stable for now, but the doctors will have to monitor him through the night. Jiejie has convinced me that I should go home."

Of course he should, Zi Wei realised. After all, it would be too much of a security risk for Yong Qi to remain here at that moment, especially when there was nothing any of them could do but wait for either Yong An or Er Kang – preferably, Heaven willing, both – to wake up.

Zi Wei reached out and hugged Yong Qi, trying not to notice how the fact that he held on to her longer and tighter than he usually did betrayed the fact that he must feel like his whole world was on the verge of collapse.

"They will both be all right, Zi Wei," he whispered in her ears: an attempt to comfort the both of them, and a prayer.
Zi Wei didn't know how to reply that wouldn't either sound hollow in the face of their unknowing state, or be tempting fate, so she only kissed Yong Qi's cheek and gave his hands a squeeze.

"Xiao Yan," Zi Wei called, knowing that she must be nearby, if Yong Qi was here.

"I'm here," Xiao Yan came over and took her other hand. "We're heading off now. Maybe you should come with us?"

Zi Wei shook her head. "No, I'm staying," she said determinedly.

"Maybe you should go with them," Er Tai said gently. "Mama and I will stay with my brother. You should get some rest."

"No!" Zi Wei exclaimed again. "Do any of you imagine I could get any rest tonight? With Er Kang so injured, do you really think I can just not be here? I will stay, and nothing any of you say can change my mind."

"She should stay," Yong Qi said softly, but it was enough to cut off whatever argument Er Tai and Xiao Yan must be preparing to make. "Er Kang will want to see her when he wakes up."

Zi Wei nearly burst into tears at her brother's word. She hoped that he was right, and that his certainty that Er Kang would wake up would pay off. Her voice stuck in her throat, she could only give his hand another grateful squeeze. Yong Qi gave her another hug, before walking over to speak to Er Kang's parents. Xiao Yan, meanwhile, put her arms around Zi Wei and squeezed.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" she asked quietly.

"No," Zi Wei said, wiping away tears. "Yong Qi needs you. I'll be fine with everyone else here."

"Then call me if there's anything -- "

Zi Wei only nodded quietly.

Yong Qi and Xiao Yan left a few minutes later, leaving the Fu family and Zi Wei to resume the silence that seemed to press into their hearts from all sides, watching over Er Kang.

Despite Yong Qi's protest, Er Tai walked with Yong Qi and Xiao Yan down to the hospital lobby, and exchanged concerned looked with Xiao Yan.

"Stop it, both of you," Yong Qi snapped at them in the elevator, clearly noticing their silent exchange. "I'm fine."

"Are you?" was Er Tai's reply, to which Yong Qi could not give an answer. Er Tai sighed and draped his arm around Yong Qi's shoulder as they stepped out of the elevator. "Let's all just hope for the best."

Yong Qi turned around and gave his friend a tight smile. He nodded then turned and took Xiao Yan's hand. She gave Er Tai a reassuring smile and a signal that seemed to say, "Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

Er Tai watched until the two of them had disappeared into the street where a car was waiting. Then, trusting that his parents would manage without him for another minute, he pulled out his phone to call Sai Ya. She had called him earlier, but he had missed it, and if he didn't return her voicemail now, he was sure to forget until the morning. She had sounded uncharacteristically anxious, and the
last thing Er Tai needed right now was to make her worry about him too.

After the phone call, Er Tai finally turned around to call for the elevator to take him up to where his brother still lay unconscious, all the while trying to take his own advice to Yong Qi. It would not help to dwell too much on what the next few days would bring, for either his family or for Yong Qi's. He had never thought that their friendship, which they both always knew would allow them to share their joys and sorrows, would one day meet this kind of double, mirroring pain. And yet, as unbearable as it was for Er Tai to be so helpless, waiting for development of his brother's condition, he knew how much it was worse for Yong Qi. Er Tai knew, despite his comfort, despite everyone's comfort, Yong Qi must still be swimming in a sea of fear and uncertainty that so few could truly understand, even Er Tai or Xiao Yan. He could bear the crippling weight of the worry and the fears now, if only he had the slightest of hope that things could turn out for the best for one of them, at least.

These kinds of thoughts continued to plague Er Tai through the long torturous night, which seemed to pass at an achingly sluggish speed; the details seemed all blurred together in Er Tai's mind. His father spent it pacing the length of the room, occasionally stopping at the foot of the bed, resting his hands on the bedframe and staring at Er Kang as if the force of the stare would wake him up. Er Tai himself could only remember sitting next to his mother, holding her hands tightly between his own, feeling all the weight of her sighs as they waited for some change in Er Kang's condition.

Zi Wei, on the other hand, refused to even budge from Er Kang's bedside. She sat by him, one hand holding his, and running the other through his hair.

Time passed, though none of them noticed how much, and none of them cared, if it did not accompany a change in Er Kang's condition.

Some hours later, Er Tai was drifting in and out of fitful sleep; Zi Wei's indistinct words whispered by his brother's bedside was his lullaby…

When Er Tai opened his eyes again, it was morning. Looking around, he realised that at some point, his father had led his mother from her chair, to the spare hospital bed, where she now lay sleeping. His father was sitting on a chair by her side, his head laid down on the mattress.

Zi Wei, on the other hand, had not moved at all. She was still by Er Kang's side, and she was staring at his face, as if she could see him. She was, otherwise, absolutely still.

Er Tai yawned and raised his arms over his head, stretching out of the uncomfortable position of having spent a night sleeping in a chair.

At that same moment, Er Kang stirred, coughing.

Er Tai glanced his parents, but the sound had not yet disturbed them out of their sleep.

"Zi Wei," Er Kang managed to gasp.

Zi Wei took his hand in both of her, squeezing it. "I'm here. Er Kang, I'm here."

Er Kang stared at her, and seemed to want to say something more, but then coughed again.

"Let me get you some water," Zi Wei said.

Then, before Er Tai could even react or get out of his chair to offer to get the water for her, Zi Wei stood up and walked around Er Kang's bed without need to touch it to guide her way at all. She went directly for the jug of water placed on the bedside table on the other side of the bed and poured some
water into the glass next to it.

Er Tai could only stare her, speechless. Er Kang, too, seemed shocked into immobilisation, so that he could not react at all when Zi Wei leaned over and said, "Let me help you sit up."

Just like that, Zi Wei helped Er Kang up, placing extra pillows behind him to prop him up, to the continued astonishment of both him and Er Tai.

Feeling like he was rooted in his place, Er Tai continued to watch the whole miraculous scene play out before him. He vaguely realised that the movements in the room had woken his parents, and that his mother was about to call out to Zi Wei, before his father placed a hand on her shoulder, holding her back.

Zi Wei was holding the glass of water to Er Kang's lips, but he only turned his head and stared at her in shock. Her brows creased a little and she looked – she actually looked, Er Tai could see the movement and way the sight registered in her eyes, even from his place – from the glass of water to Er Kang.

"Why aren't you drinking?" she asked, her voice as soft and as natural as anything, as if it had not even occurred to her yet that she was doing the impossible.

"Oh," Er Kang said breathlessly, "I'm drinking."

Then, he sipped from the glass Zi Wei was holding to his lips, but his eyes were still glued to her face and her eyes in wonder. He looked fearful that at any moment, the whole sight would vanish, or it would all turned out to be some hazy dream that was born of a mind-numbing concoction of multiple painkillers.

When he had drunk the whole glass, he continued to stare at Zi Wei, asking hesitantly, "Could I have some more?"

Zi Wei nodded. Er Tai glanced to his parents and they exchanged astonished looks, before turning back to watch with as much amazement as Er Kang; Zi Wei turned back to the bedside table to pour another glass of water.

Er Tai couldn't help but wonder if the sun rose in the west earlier that day.

Zi Wei turned back to Er Kang, but she didn't seem to notice his still astonished expression. Instead, she was looking at his shoulder, and gasped.

"You are bleeding," she said, staring at the wound on Er Kang's shoulder, caused by falling rubble, which had indeed started bleeding through his striped hospital shirt. "Let me call the doctor!"

Er Kang looked down at his shoulder and then back up at Zi Wei. "I'm not bleeding," he said, his voice wavering despite his obvious efforts to keep it nonchalant.

"You are, look!" Zi Wei said, gesturing to the blood. "I'll go – "

But as Zi Wei turned to go, Er Kang reached out and tugged her back. In one swift motion, he had wrapped his arms tightly around her, making the glass she was in the process of placing back on the bedside table crash to the ground. Neither of them seemed to notice.

"What are you going?" Zi Wei cried, struggling against Er Kang's hold. "I'll hurt you. And your wound is still bleeding!"
"Let it bleed," Er Kang said, sounding more jubilant than Er Tai had heard in the last few months. "If my blood could give you back your sight, I won't miss it!"

And that was apparently the first time Zi Wei realised she could see, because she slowly lifted her hand up and stared at it, frozen for a second, before looking around the room, finally noticing the way Er Tai and his parents had been watching the whole scene with wide eyes. She looked at each one of them with the same shock in her eyes, before pulling away, staring at Er Kang.

"Er Kang, I can see…" she whispered, clearly not really daring to believe it. "I can see you. I can see your blood. I can see your face. How pale you look!"

For the next moment, it was as if neither Er Kang nor Zi Wei could do anything else but to stare at each other. The silence was shattered when Er Tai laughed, half in relief, half at the insane surrealness of the scene. Then, it was as if that was the triggered, because suddenly, all five of them in the room were looking at each other, smiling and laughing and crying at the same time.

"I'll get the doctor," Er Tai said, giving his brother and Zi Wei a grin before leaving the room.

Both of them would need a doctor.

When Er Tai came back, it was not only with Er Kang's doctor and a nurse, but also with He Jing, who headed straight for Zi Wei, who was sitting, shell-shocked, at the foot of Er Kang's bed. He Jing pulled her up and took Zi Wei's face into her hands.

"You can see? You can really see?"

"Yes," Zi Wei answered shakily, grasping her sister's arm. "I can see!"

The doctor and nurse looked astonished as everyone else in the room, but they made their way to Er Kang first, examining his wound and rebandaging it first. Meanwhile, Er Tai cleared up the broken shards of the glass Zi Wei dropped earlier. Then, he alternated between exchanging looks of wonderment with his father and suppressing the urge to go out into the hallway to call Xiao Yan or Yong Qi to give them the good news. The news could keep, until they knew how permanent this development was.

Of course, it turned out, there was no way to know that before a copious number of tests and scans had been done. It made sense, naturally, even if it was rather frustrating and put a dampening mood on what was turning into a morning of good news under the circumstances. Of course, they should have expected this; no doctor would give a definitive diagnosis when something as serious as complete vision loss corrected itself overnight for no apparent reason whatsoever. Still, Er Tai had a feeling both Er Kang and Zi Wei were too excited about the development to care much about how it came about. He hoped, for their sakes, that whatever the reason was for Zi Wei to regain her sight, no further complication would develop. After all, they all needed the reassurance of hope that was brought on by this rather miraculous cure.

After being sure that both his brother and future sister-in-law were in good hands with everyone else in the room, Er Tai stepped out into the hall to call Xiao Yan.

The hallway of the hospital was completely silent in the early morning as he listened to the echoing ringing tones, waiting for Xiao Yan to pick up. Just as he thought the call would go to voicemail, she did, sounding groggy, "Er Tai?"

"Why did it take so long for you to pick up?"
"It's like 6am," she said, and that was the first time Er Tai realised just how early it was. "What's happened?"

"Good news," he said as a way in, because, now more alert, Xiao Yan was sounding a bit more concerned. "No change with Yong An, but my brother just woke up, and so far, the doctors think he'll be fine."

He could hear Xiao Yan sigh in relief on the other end. He waited for a beat, allowing that news to sink in.

"Also, Zi Wei can see."

There was a beat of shocked silence.

"What do you mean?" Xiao Yan finally asked, sounding breathless.

Er Tai grinned to himself. "I mean, she can see again. She woke up this morning and started walking around and pouring water for Er Kang as if nothing was wrong. She didn't even realise what she was doing until Er Kang pointed it out her."

"She can see again?" Xiao Yan cried, so loud that it startled Er Tai and he had to pull the phone away from his ear a little. "She really can see?"

"Yes. But we don't know yet if it's permanent or if not, how long it would last," Er Tai said, suddenly feeling the need to stress this in the face of Xiao Yan's excitement bubbling up.

"Yeah, but she can see now?" Xiao Yan asked impatiently. "How? What happened?"

"Well, that's the thing. We don't know what exactly happened. The doctors want to do tests before they can say anything definite. For all we know, this might not be permanent, or there might be other complications. But fingers crossed, she might be really cured."

"Oh my god, oh my god!" Xiao Yan was saying excitedly. "This is so good! Yong Qi – "

And then, suddenly, Yong Qi must have taken the phone from Xiao Yan, because the next thing Er Tai knew, Yong Qi's voice was speaking to him. "Er Tai? What's going on?"

Er Tai dutifully reported the developments again. While he could tell that Yong Qi was deflated by the news that there was no change in Yong An, he was also genuinely happy about the fact that Er Kang was awake, and that Zi Wei had somehow miraculously regained her sight.

"I should get down there," Yong Qi said.

"Go tell your parents first, will you? I think the doctors will whisk Zi Wei off to do tests soon and she probably won't have time to tell them. He Jing might get to them soon, but she's in with Zi Wei now. But anyway, I think they'll want to hear this in person," Er Tai said.

"Yeah, I'll go over to Yong Shou Gong to tell Ah Ma now," Yong Qi said, sounding much more animated than he did the night before. "Call me if there's any changes, all right?"

A part of Zi Wei told her that she shouldn't get too swept up in this world full of light and sight, in case it might not be permanent, but how could she help rejoicing at having her sight back? Even after a full morning of scans and tests and all her doctors being cautiously pessimistic by saying that they could not say for sure that this was permanent, that a lot more monitoring was required, Zi Wei could
not bring herself to feel disappointed or despair. She knew, her doctors needed to say such things, because they were all speaking scientifically, and through that lens, there was no real conclusive answer nor even logical reason for her improvement. But Zi Wei was more than glad to content herself with hope, with the instinctive certainty she felt that this miraculous cure – however it came about – was to stay.

Everything that seemed so ordinary to her before now seemed so much more beautiful to look at, after even such a relatively short time in the dark. So when Xiao Yan and Yong Qi arrived later, Zi Wei ran towards them and threw her arms around them both amid their exclamations of happiness for her. Then, once she pulled away, she couldn't help taking both of Xiao Yan’s hands and spinning her around.

"You can see! You can really see!" Xiao Yan exclaimed as they slowed to a revolving stop.

Zi Wei could only nod repeatedly and excitedly, while Yong Qi was watching them both with a slight smile, shaking his head slightly at the dreamlike development. Then, leaving them to their celebrations, he turned to Er Kang, who – probably buoyed by Zi Wei’s recovery – looked more relaxed and happy than Yong Qi had seen in days, albeit rather pale due to his injuries. Nevertheless, he was sitting up, supported by many pillows behind him, which Yong Qi took as a good sign that he, too, was on his way to recovery.

"Where is everyone else?" Yong Qi asked, as it turned out that before he and Xiao Yan arrived, Zi Wei was the only other person in the room with Er Kang.

"Er Tai managed to convince my parents that they needed to go home and get some rest. He's taken them home and will probably be back later," Er Kang said, turning to Yong Qi. He had been watching Zi Wei, and under the relief and the happiness, Yong Qi could tell he was still rather afraid this might be either a dream or temporary.

Yong Qi sat down next to Er Kang’s bed. "You really are feeling better?" he asked, hoping to distract him.

"Yes, but I think – " Er Kang turned back to look at Zi Wei, who was still smiling happily as she spoke animatedly to Xiao Yan – "that had something to do with it."

Yong Qi nodded. "I am relieved, Er Kang, to see you on your feet again," he said sincerely.

"I'm not sure about on my feet," Er Kang said.

"Well, on your way to being that, in any case."

Er Kang nodded. Then, as if some thought suddenly occurred to him, and he frowned. "Yong Qi… I'm sorry. You must blame me."

Yong Qi looked at him, confused. "For what?"

"Yong An – "

"Oh Heaven, don't," Yong Qi cut him off before he could say any more. "That was not your fault. What could you have done? It was an accident."

"Was it?"

"Yes. The investigation so far has shown no sign or evidence of ill will or any kind of attack, so this was an accident."
Still, Er Kang looked troubled. "Even then, I just feel like I should have done something more," he said. "Even if it was an accident, I should have been able to protect him more. It defeats the point of my job that my injuries are less serious than his."

"Less serious?" Yong Qi asked, staring at Er Kang. "You have no idea how much you scared everyone, do you?"

"That doesn't mean…"

"Er Kang," Yong Qi said seriously, cutting him off before he could spiral into endless guilt, "don't blame yourself. It was an accident. There was nothing anyone could have done. I am very glad that you are getting better."

"And Yong An?"

"I just spoke to the doctor. He'll be all right when he wakes up…if he…"

"He will wake up!" Er Kang said, before Yong Qi could get pessimistic. "We must have faith."

"Yes," Yong Qi said, staring off. "I suppose we must."

"Do you have the report of what happened?" Er Kang said, to draw Yong Qi out of what was undoubtedly morbid thoughts.

"Yes, but I'm not giving it to you."

"I need to read it, Yong Qi."

"Of course you do, but not right this moment," Yong Qi said. "Just…get discharged first, please, before you dive back into work? You won't achieve anything or help anyone."

"How many?" Er Kang asked with a grim expression. It was as if he hadn't heard Yong Qi's advice at all.

"How many what?"

"How many people died?"

Yong Qi sighed. "That is in the report, which you will get when the doctors clear you, and not a minute sooner."

Er Kang looked like he would protest, but Zi Wei walked up to him and took his arm.

"Yong Qi is right, Er Kang," she said. "You can't think about work right now."

He sighed heavily, but considering he had no ally in any of them in this argument, he had no choice but to give in.

"I'm glad you're listening to Zi Wei, at least," Yong Qi said. "And Zi Wei, you look happy. Though that isn't exactly a surprise."

"I am," she said, giving him a smile. "I mean, I am worried about Da Ge, but right now…I just feel like, there is hope, you know?"

"I hope you're right," Yong Qi said, smiling back at her.
"Also, I've never realised before, what beautiful colours flowers come in," Zi Wei said, stroking the petals of the flowers in the vase by Er Kang's bedside. Then, she ran to the window. "The sky is also so beautiful."

Xiao Yan burst out laughing, looking out at the smoggy, luggish sky of early winter. "You are kidding, right?"

"Well, at least I can see the sky!" Zi Wei said cheekily. Both Yong Qi and Xiao Yan laughed with her. "And the skyline! I never thought I'd miss this skyline."

Er Kang watched her through all this with a soft look in his eyes. When she turned back to them from the window, he held out his hand. She made her way back to him and sat down beside him on the bed. Taking both of her hands in his, he whispered, "The most beautiful of all, are your eyes. So bright, so happy and so lively. I am so happy. I know your brother is still not out of the woods and I am in part responsible for that, but for now, I can't help but be happy, because you can see again."

Xiao Yan turned away and tried to stifle a giggle and failing. "I'd tell you to get a room, but I guess this is the room." She reached out and took Yong Qi's hand. "Yong Qi, I don't think we're needed in here anymore."

Zi Wei turned around, clearly embarrassed. "You don't have to – " she started to say, even if Er Kang didn't look like he agreed with her.

"Don't worry, we're going," Yong Qi said reassuringly to Er Kang and smiling at a pink-faced Zi Wei.

Zi Wei couldn't help but smile sheepishly back and watched as they left and closed the door behind them. Then, turning back to Er Kang, she gazed at him, so light-hearted that she felt like she could actually fly.

"Er Kang, long time no see," she whispered, bringing up a hand to stroke his cheek. "I almost feel like I've come back from the dead, to be able to see you again like this."

He was looking back at her with wonderment still in his eyes. "Zi Wei, I am really too happy to be able to catch your eyes again." His voice sounded breathless, but Zi Wei knew, it was from happiness, rather than exhaustion or pain. "I've always counted to be able to find your eyes in the crowd. Before, whenever our eyes met, my heart always beat faster. When you couldn't see, I could only see the blank expressions in your eyes, and you don't know how much that hurt. I know you suffered so much by losing your sight, and I can tell you, it hurt me just as much."

"I know, I know." Zi Wei slid her arms around his middle, rested her head down on his uninjured shoulder, and pulled him close to her. Dreamily, she continued, "You remembered those first few months after I became part of the family, and there were all those new duties and events and protocols that I had to learn? Through all those difficult first days, you were there by my side, always encouraging me. Back then, whenever I saw you, I had more strength, more hope to believe that I could get used to this whole new life that I was now part of. In the past few months, when I couldn't see, I kept remember the way you looked at me then, encouraging me to get through this new stumbling block."

"Really?" Er Kang asked. "You've never told me this before."

"It never seemed…necessary before," she admitted. "But now…I want you to know everything."

"In that case, from now on, my eyes will follow you whenever we are together." He gave her a smile
that was both teasing and adoring. "I just hope it won't become an annoyance for you."

Zi Wei chuckled and raised her head, only to lean in to kiss him. Only later, when they broke apart, did she whisper, "It would never."

"Yong Qi."

He turned to find his father standing there at the door to his bedroom. He had returned to Xian Fu Gong, after spending most of the day at Yong An's bedside after leaving the jubilant Zi Wei and Er Kang. It was now nearly midnight, and he could not sleep. Clearly, neither could his father.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'd be better if everyone would stop asking me that," he said gruffly.

His father gave him a sympathetic smile that also contained a sigh. "I know how you feel, you know," he said, stepping into the room and sitting down on the kang.

"I know," Yong Qi said, sitting down opposite him. Then he admitted, with a trembling laugh, "That's what terrifies me."

"I don't want to speak like there's no hope, but the pressure would feel more bearable if you could accept that the possibility that causes the pressure in the first place exists."

"What if I don't want to accept it?" Yong Qi asked, staring at his father. "When did you accept it?"

His father sighed and shook his head. "Your uncle's illness was long and drawn out. His death was not unexpected by any means. Of course, we all hoped he could be cured. He was so young. But…" He sighed again and for a few moments, seemed lost in memories. When he finally came back, he added in an even heavier voice, "I had plenty of time to face the possible future before it became reality."

"Do you believe it makes it easier, to have time?" Yong Qi asked.

"No, I don't believe it does. If anything, time…time gives one the chance to dream. To hope, to wish. Even despite all the evidence."

Yong Qi propped his elbow down on the low table between them and rested his head down on his palm. "I can't do it, Ah Ma," he said, his voice shaking.

His father looked at him for a long time. Then, he said quietly, "I never thought I could do it, either, Yong Qi. But when it comes…you won't have much of a choice. You won't think then whether you can. You just get on with it."

"It was different, for you," Yong Qi said. "You were fifteen when Da Bo died. You had time…"

"I'm not about to drop dead, Yong Qi."

"Even then." Yong Qi shook his head, feeling more than ever the weight that was hanging over him, ready to drop any second. He realised then that the waiting made it all the worse. "It's not fair."

The words were so very childish, but if anything, Yong Qi felt now the thing he needed most was the unerring faith of a child.

"There is very little about the life we lead that is fair," his father said, taking his words seriously
nonetheless. "I have learnt that much over the years I don't intend to give up hope, or persuade you to give up hope. I just…want you to know, no matter what happens, I do have faith in you. Remember that."

Yong Qi looked up and gave his father a weak smile. "Thank you, Ah Ma. I think I need that."

His father reached out and patted his shoulder. Then, he gave Yong Qi a curious look. "How is Xiao Yan taking in all of this?"

"Better than me, I think," Yong Qi said shakily. The realisation occurred to him just as he said it, and he couldn't help but chuckling a little. Then, with a heavy sigh, he added, "For me, I just…I don't want to feel like, when it comes down to it, that she might have to give up the life she wants, that she deserves. But I don't think…by now…I can let her go, either. So…"

"So let her choose," his father said. "I know you want to protect her from these difficult choices because you know she would agonise over them. But in the end, she is the one who will have to live with it. She understands more, by now, of the implications of the choices before her. Let her choose, and respect the dignity of her choice. You can't shield her, Yong Qi, and you shouldn't try. You can only trust her."

"My head knows that. I just wish my heart was more amenable to it."

"For what it's worth, I think you, and by extension our whole family, are very lucky to have her."

Yong Qi could only smile quietly at that and nodded.

His father exhaled and then glanced at the clock on the wall. "It is late, we should both get some sleep."

Yong Qi stood up and walked the couple of steps to the door with his father.

"Don't stay up. Go to sleep. Understand?" his father said.

He nodded and watched as his father left the room. "Good night, Ah Ma. Be careful on the way back."

Long after he was gone, Yong Qi finally closed the door.

He couldn't decide whether the talk with his father had comforted him, or only managed to make him feel even more on edge, like waiting for a blade to drop down on his neck. On the one hand, it was some comfort to hear his father say out loud that he had faith in Yong Qi to fill Yong An's shoes, if required. At the same time, Yong Qi never actually thought that his father didn't believe in him. With the reality being none of them wanting Yong Qi to fill Yong An's shoes, the statement seemed to only manage to increase the dread that he was carrying around and that weighed on his heart.

Yong Qi dropped down onto his bed and picked up his phone, staring at the good night text Xiao Yan had sent him earlier. She had called him earlier before sending the text, and their conversation had meandered from his brother to other subjects, which Yong Qi was grateful for, because it did manage to distract him. He longed to call her again, but knew he shouldn't. She would certainly take his call, but she had work in the morning, and if they started talking now, they would either end up falling asleep halfway through the call, or neither of them would get any sleep at all. So in the end, he settled for scrolling through their text conversation and imagining that she was here beside him, until he finally fell into a restless sleep.
It was early afternoon two days later. Yong Qi stared at the text from He Jing, before coming to his senses and bolting up from his seat, running down the stairs.

"Wang Ye!" Sai Wei called as he raced out of the front door of Yuan Ming Gong.

"Hospital. Now."

"The Crown Prince – "

"– is awake."

"Oh."

Yong Qi saw the relief fill Sai Wei's face as well, as they stopped by his car. He was about to let himself into the driver's seat when Sai Wei stopped him.

"Perhaps I should drive, Wang Ye."

Yong Qi stared at the agent and thought for a second to argue. But then, it wasn't worth it.

"Fine."

He soon found, however, being in the back seat when you were in a hurry to get somewhere was always the worst.

"Can we go any faster?"

"I'm skirting the speed limit as it is, Wang Ye."

Yong Qi sighed and stared out of the window. "Screw the speed limit," he muttered.

Sai Wei actually laughed at that. "With all due respect, Wang Ye," he said, a teasing tilt in his voice, "I am rather partial to my license and would rather not part with it. Granted, if we are pulled over, I am sure there are several cards we could play, the being pulled over alone would delay us. So I will stick to the speed limit if it is all right with you, and we can both be glad it is not rush hour."

Yong Qi gave him a disgruntled look through the rear-view mirror. "Just drive, Agent."

As his car slowed in the parking lot of the hospital, anxiety filled Yong Qi again, and he wasn't sure he could allow himself to truly believe that Yong An was out of danger until he saw his brother with his own two eyes. So when he hastily opened the door to his brother's hospital room a few minutes later, his heart seemed to drop for a moment as Yong An looked as unconscious and unmoving as ever. Nevertheless, Yong Qi rushed to the side of his bed, barely keeping himself from colliding with the bed.

At the sound of his approach, Yong An's eyes opened. His movement was slow and he still looked as white as the immaculate hospital walls, but his eyes were open, and he was unmistakably awake. The sight so winded Yong Qi that he more or less dropped into the chair next to the bed with relief.

For several minutes, neither of them spoke.

Then, Yong An asked raspily, smiling weakly, "Did you think you'd get rid of me that easily?"
Yong Qi couldn't say anything in reply. He could only rest his forehead down on the bed, laughing unsteadily.

It was a long time before he could look up at his brother, his vision blurred. "I wish, right?" he said, half laughing, half crying.

Yong An reached out and gave him a punch on the arm so weak that it was more like a poke. "Yeah. Besides, I did promise, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did."

Yong Qi cleared his throat and turned away to try to get some semblance of control on his emotions.

"So, what kind of odds were they offering on me dying?" Yong An asked in a too obvious attempt at a jest, though Yong Qi could not bring himself to call attention to it.

"Don't know. Kind of have been avoiding any media discussions of your condition, for obvious reasons."

"You could have at least gotten a bet in."

Yong Qi glared. "Not funny."

"I know," Yong An said with a sigh. "I'm sorry."

"I guess if it's a coping thing – "

"No, I meant, I'm sorry for scaring you." He was looking at Yong Qi with absolute seriousness now.

"Oh." For a second, it was as if there was an enormous lump stuck in Yong Qi's throat. After several painful swallows, he managed, "Yeah, that you've better be sorry for."

There was a moment of silence, when the only sound in the room was the occasional beeps of the machines and the whirling sound of the air conditioning system.

"Please tell me you and Xiao Yan are still together," Yong An said abruptly.

Yong Qi looked at him, startled. "Of course we are."

Yong An probably attempted to hide just how relieved he was, but it showed regardless. "Just wanted to check," he said. "You know, just in case…"

"In case one of us freaked out at the prospect of you dying and what that would have meant for me?" Yong Qi asked with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah," his brother admitted.

Yong Qi sighed and self-consciously smoothed the bedsheet at the edge of his brother's bed. "We… talked about it," he said finally. "Looking back, considering what was happening, it was a surprisingly calm and mature discussion. I really didn't know we had it in us."

Yong An scoffed when Yong Qi added the last part with a grin, but he knew his brother was pleased.

"Now you're the one being facetious."
Yong Qi laughed. "Yeah, I am. A little."

"Just so you know, if I had died, and you let her go because of that, I'd probably come back and haunt you for all eternity for being stupid."

"Can we please stop talking about you dying?" Yong Qi said, giving his brother a sidelong glare.

"I mean it."

"I know," Yong Qi said quietly. Then, giving his brother a reassuring smile, he added, "Xiao Yan and I will be fine, Ge. And...really, considering how Meng Yue has hardly left your side these past few days, you two will be all right too."

Yong An smirked. "I already knew that."

Yong Qi only looked around. "Where is she, anyway?"

"I persuaded her to go home just before you arrived. Jiejie is here, though she's probably still outside calling everyone. Ah Ma is on his way."

Yong Qi nodded. "You are all right, though?" he asked. "I mean, does anything hurt?"

"A lot of things hurt," Yong An answered. "But the doctor has assured me I won't die."

Yong Qi grinned, relieved, but before he could say anymore, the door opened. He Jing stepped in with their parents. As Yong Qi stepped away from the bed to allow them to be by Yong An's bedside, he didn't think he could remember his father ever looking so relieved. That felt quite on par with how Yong Qi himself was also feeling.
October

The overwhelming sense of relief made for a confusing aftermath. It was as if the country was waking up from some drunken, crazy dream. After all, Yong An's life had been in very real danger, and however short a time that might have been, it was certainly enough time for everyone from mainstream newspapers and networks to the everyday social media user to discuss and speculate what would happen if the impossible had happened.

Now, the news broke that the Crown Prince was expected to make a full recovery, the internet, which had so morbidly discussed scenarios in which he would die the day before, now suddenly was filled with expressions of relief. Xiao Yan felt as if the whole world was giving an awkward, nervous laugh of embarrassment about what they were all talking about just mere hours earlier.

She was glad that, when it was all still going on, Yong Qi managed to shut himself away from all the discussions, the coverage, the gossip and the speculation. Even though it pretended to be about Yong An, it always came back to, in the end, whether Yong Qi would be enough. She hoped that, what he didn't see before, he would never stumble on by accident. After all, even now that it was all over, it would not be comfortable to know that millions of strangers felt they owned enough of him to pass judgement on whether he could do a job he never wanted, and was never supposed to hold, and to do it all online for the whole world to see and join in.

And yet, the internet was forever.

Still, she couldn't help but wonder if some of the discussions and talk found its way to him anyway, when she arrived at Xian Fu Gong after work that day to find a stack of the previous week's newspapers on a table during her wander through the palace to look for Yong Qi.

She finally found him in his bedroom with his laptop. As she entered, he closed the laptop and pushed it away, putting his arm around her as she sat down beside him.

"You're not actually on the internet reading what people have been saying these past few days, are you?" she asked.

He gave her a slight smile and shook his head. "There is never any good to come out of that."

"But there are newspapers outside? It's kind of the same if you're reading them."

"They're delivered every morning and they've just been accumulating in the last few days. I haven't actually looked at them. And usually when there are things like this happen, I don't look."

"That's probably a good thing."

"It's not exactly because I'm afraid of what they say. When things like this happen, of course people are going to write about it. I understand that for everyone else in the world who isn't involved, these are matters of interest to be discussed. But for my brother and I, the fact that he comes first and I come second, the fact that if the worst had happened I would have to fill his place, was never anything that we had a choice on. So reading other people's opinion on the pros and cons and"
whatever of each scenario is entirely pointless."

Xiao Yan looked up at him thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "You don't have to explain
yourself to me, Yong Qi."

He smiled at her, and said, "I know." Then, entwining their fingers together, he tugged her hand until
she rested her head down on his shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Just relieved." There was a long pause as he stroked the back of her hand with his fingers. The
contact seemed to calm them both. "And you, are you all right?"

She laughed. "You're asking me that? After all of that?"

"I can choose to avoid the discourse both online and offline, and people don't talk about it to my
face," he said, pulling away to give her a rueful look. "But I can't imagine that your colleagues didn't
discuss this. It couldn't have been comfortable for you to be in the middle of all that, especially when
the news of just getting back together was made public not that long ago."

Sitting up straight, she scrunched up her nose as she recalled how uncomfortable it felt to be caught
in the middle of all the speculations during the time when everything seemed to be up in the air.
"Well...I did get asked a few times whether I'd like to become the empress," she said with a shudder.
"I don't know how anyone thought I would answer a question that actually implied whether I'd like
your brother to die."

"Well, I think the implication is more what would you do, if something did happen. It is, after all,
something we talked about ourselves."

"Because it's a matter that actually concerns us." She sighed and shook her head. "Though I guess I
do understand that with my colleagues, their questions most of the time is just because they genuinely
are concerned about me. I can't grudge people who I spend eight, nine hours a day with wanting to
know what's going on in my life. And I can say I don't want to talk about it and it isn't like they'd be
able to do anything to me. But sometimes...having to stay quiet while knowing the whole world is
talking about it is even more uncomfortable to bear."

Yong Qi simply nodded in understanding and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm not complaining - " she started to protest, to which he only laughed.

"Xiao Yan, it's not going to get easier to bear, and it'd be worse if you can't even complain about it."

"I don't want you to think that all this is making me rethink anything," she said anxiously.

"I know. I haven't been thinking that."

She could tell that he strived to sound nonchalant, and in some way, he probably did mean what he
said. Nevertheless, there was still relief in his eyes that she couldn't miss. It filled her with a strange
sense of guilt mixed with determined resolve.

"I meant what I said before, Yong Qi," she added seriously, "and I still mean it now. I said I'd be
there with you, through everything, no matter what. That hasn't changed. If anything..."

She paused, unsure for a moment how to continue. He simply looked at her, waiting.
"When Zi Wei's accident happened," she said, starting again, "I told you that sometimes it takes some great disruptive strife for me to realise what is really important to me. This time…it was no different. I would have thought, myself, that when I am suddenly faced with these wide open possibilities, I would begin to question it all again. I don't mean that I expected to question the…the idea of us, but just…whether I can…whether I want to take what might come."

She stopped again and chewed on her bottom lip nervously. She looked him, herself unsure whether it was to reassure him, or to seek reassurance from him. But the soft expression on his face and the understanding in his eyes gave her courage. It was enough to know that he understood that she needed to speak her thoughts out loud, to sort them through, and that he was giving her the time to do that. She knew, he also understood that even though the implications of every word she was saying still frightened her, she sincerely meant them nevertheless.

"You know what surprised me, that night when we came back from seeing your brother at the hospital?" She laughed self-deprecatingly and shook her head. "That I didn't question anything you said to me that night. Even as you were telling me about how you had a whole plan, and all the while you sounded like you expected me to be upset that you had thought so much about our future in such details, I knew. I knew then, that that future you had dreamed of for us, I would have liked it too."

Xiao Yan stopped speaking again, because the intensity of Yong Qi's gaze, directed at her, was making her feel breathless. The enormous point that neither of them managed to voice yet hung in the air. At the same time, she was trying not to focus on the way they were sitting so that their knees were almost touching, but not quite. She wasn't sure if it would help if she initiated some sort of contact, or if it would only make it more difficult for Yong Qi to say what he needed to say, now that she was waiting for a reply from him.

She had just made up her mind to allow the pretence of distance between them when Yong Qi reached out and smoothed back her hair, tucking it behind her ear. His fingers lingered over her cheek, and he looked at her like he was savouring the sight. The gentle touch, amid all the unspoken feelings between them, made her shiver. She seemed suddenly to be locked into silence, watching him, almost as if waiting for a cue to react to.

When he finally let his hand fall away again, he said, "You are right, sometimes it does take something that enormous to make us say the things that is most true to our hearts. But sometimes, it might mean that we say more than either of us might be ready for at that moment. I meant everything I said too, Xiao Yan, including the fact that I can wait, until you are ready."

The candour in his voice that made Xiao Yan suddenly feel like her heart was beating too hard and too fast. It took her several false starts before she could respond.

"You say that, and I am sure you mean it, but I also think that you still would like to know where I see us in five years," she said softly.

Yong Qi smiled at her quippy turn of phrase, but his answer was earnest. "Yes."

Xiao Yan nodded and tried to ignore how her heart seemed to be pressing, red hot, against her ribs, almost choking her. "Where do you see us in five years?" she almost whispered.

The intensity of his gaze was almost too much, but she found she couldn't look away.

"I think I have already told you what the future looks like for me."

It was almost as if she knew that would be his answer, because she nodded along with it. He wasn't being evasive to play with her. He was still trying to give her a way out, but she found that she didn't
want one at all. She took a deep breath, half to calm herself from the overwhelming emotions threatening to undo her, half in fortification against more that must be coming. "Tell me more."

Yong Qi continued to look at her with that same blaze in his eyes, before he reached out swiftly and pulled her towards him, so that their knees were pressed together.

"I want you to marry me," he said. "Will you?"

Somehow, despite the fact that she was the one who prompted him, the actual words took her by surprise. She hadn't expected him to be so straightforward, even if subconsciously, she knew, if they couldn't be straight with each other now, when could they? Yet her eyes still widened, and the immediate reaction flew to her lips before she could help herself, "Did you just - ? I didn't expect – "

She clamped her lips shut before she could continue to ramble in her fuzzy-minded state. She almost snuck at look at Yong Qi in trepidation. But he did not look upset that she had responded with shock, rather than acceptance. If anything, he looked half as surprised as she did that he said the words out loud. Nevertheless, the determined expression that then appeared on his face told her that just because he didn't plan to say it, or perhaps to say it the way he did, didn't mean that he would take it back, either. To her surprise, this reassured her.

"Are you upset?" he asked, as she mulled over these thoughts and didn't say anything else.

"No!" she exclaimed hastily. "Of course not."

She reached out almost wildly for his hands, desperate to reassure him. He smiled at the contact and the franticness of her gesture and readily linked their fingers together.

"Are you scared?" he asked this time. "If you are, you don't have to answer right now…"

She couldn't help a shaky laugh. "I am scared. A little." A lot. "Nevertheless…"

"Nevertheless?"

She let out a slow breath, which succeeded in calming her slightly. Then, her hands still in his, she gave him a smile that was mostly teasing, "Nevertheless…I will answer. Are you sure about what you are asking me?"

"Xiao Yan," he said, sounding like was savouring the taste of her name, "I have been sure for a very long time. You know that. This is what I want. I think, in some ways, this has always been what I wanted, from the very beginning of us."

Xiao Yan really felt like her heart could burst out of her chest now. "Yong Qi…"

"Marry me," he whispered fervently, before she could properly grasp a hold of her emotions to say anything else. Bringing one of her hands up to his lips, he pressed a kiss against her knuckles. Then, he repeated, "Marry me. Maybe not tomorrow. But some day. When you're ready. Just promise me, you'll marry me. Promise me, before some other thing happens to scare us."

She almost laughed at the last. But in the end, she could only smile and threw her arms around his neck. For a moment, all she could do was to bury her face in his neck, savouring the warmth of the contact. When she finally calmed herself sufficiently to pull slightly away to be able to look at him, he rested his forehead down against hers. Her hands entwined at the nape of his neck.

"I will promise you that I'll marry you," she finally found herself whispering as she looked up at him and realised she was so focused on him that her entire world seemed to be made up of him.
The shine of happiness in his eyes as soon as she said these words almost took her breath away. She could only meet that exhilaration with a wide, jubilant smile of her own.

"I'd even marry you tomorrow," she added, to which they both laughed. Shaking her head, she amended, "Well, maybe not tomorrow for everybody's sake, including my own. But yes, one day. Soon."

Yong Qi brought his hands up to cup and caress her face. "You are sure?"

She nodded gently. "I've been thinking about it a lot, since that night," she confessed. "I realised, even then, how much I love you, how much I have always loved you. I could run away from all the things about your position that scares me for all I want, but I would never be happy without you."

No verbal response seemed to be adequate for that declaration but Xiao Yan was anything but disappointed when he pulled her onto his lap for a feverish kiss. It was the kind of kiss meant to take her breath away, the kind that when they finally broke apart, both of them were smiling and laughing and giddy and unable to focus on anything but each other, or indeed do much else than pull together until their lips met again.

"I never intended to do it like this, you know," Yong Qi said a little while later. Xiao Yan lay with her head on his lap as he ran his fingers through her hair. "I always thought, it would be something that I'd plan, that would be, you know, a real gesture, rather than just as this kind of reaction to everything else that is happening around us."

"I don't know…I think we're a bit past the grand gesture stage." She smiled up at him impishly. "It's overrated anyway and I always feel like there are a thousand things that could go wrong. You are sure, aren't you, gesture or no gesture?"

He took one of her hands in his and raised it up to his lips, kissing her palm. "I have never been surer about anything."

Xiao Yan found herself smiling happily at his passionate tone. "I think the only reason it's taken us this long to get here is because we keep second guessing ourselves. Maybe the only way we could get here is to be spontaneous like this. To know that we love each other, and allow ourselves to accept that to be enough. I think we've established that Everything Else will always be there and we will always overthink them if given the chance."

"You don't mind though?" he asked.

She laughed. "That you didn't…I don't know, rent out a restaurant, deck it in 9999 roses and put a ring in my dessert or something? No, not really."

"Okay, let's just get this straight," Yong Qi said, laughing as well. "Even if I were going for the grand gesture, I would never propose to you in a public place. Neither of us need that kind of attention."

"Thank goodness."

"Also, grand gesture or not, there's not going to be a ring."

"I remember. It's not a done thing with your family."

"Though, if you think about it, in the end, the wedding gifts will probably be worth a few diamond rings," he said, and if it wasn't for the twinkle in his eyes, she could have thought he was serious.
"Yong Qi," Xiao Yan said, laughing, "I'm not actually marrying you for your money, right? If I wanted to do that, we'd have done this years ago."

"Yeah I know. But you know, just in case anyone asks you about it…"

Xiao Yan scoffed. "I'm pretty sure we'll be trying to keep this a secret for a while yet, and not having a ring will only help with that."

"That's true."

"Do you mind?" she asked, a little anxiously. "Keeping it to ourselves for a bit? It's not that I think there is any chance either of us might change our mind or anything, but once we announce it to the world, everything will be so different. We've just been back together for such a short time. I just want to have some time to enjoy being together, first. It isn't like we are getting married next month, right?"

"You don't have to explain so much to me, Xiao Yan. Of course I get it," he said. "In any case, we should probably wait until my brother completely recovers before we say anything to anyone anyway. But eventually, we should tell our families."

"I don't mind tell our families and close friends like Liu Qing, Liu Hong and Er Kang, Er Tai," Xiao Yan said. "It's just the announcing it to the world that I wish we didn't have to do."

"We will have to that eventually. But if it makes you feel any better, it's not something done in a day. There will be a lot of preparations before that kind of public announcement could be made, and lots of people telling us how to make it."

"So we don't have to think about it right now?"

"Precisely." There was a pause. Then, he gave her a cheeky grin. "We could make out instead."

Xiao Yan laughed before pulling him down to do just that.

In the end, there was a rather logical explanation for the seemingly miraculous return of Zi Wei's sight. The tests run by her doctors eventually showed that the internal swelling caused by Zi Wei's accident had subsided, relieving her optic nerves, which led her to regain her ability to see. That it happened while Zi Wei was too focused on Er Kang to notice as it happened was a total coincidence.

"Or you know, alternatively you could just tell people that both you and Er Kang were healed through the power of love," Xiao Yan said to Zi Wei. They were sitting together in Xiao Yan's apartment after dinner. Er Kang was still in hospital, but his condition had improved enough that both he and Xiao Yan managed to convince Zi Wei he would be fine without her for one evening. "It'd sound much less dry and a lot more romantic."

"And since when are you so eager for something to be romantic?" Zi Wei asked.

Xiao Yan only shrugged. Zi Wei watched as a mysterious smile bloomed and brightened her whole face.

"You know, Xiao Yan, you look really beautiful."

Xiao Yan laughed. "Okay, I know you're saying that just because you've just regained your sight and everything looks nice to you right now – "
"No, it's not – well, it's partly that. But I really do mean you look really pretty today. There's something…more joyful about you that does it, I think."

Xiao Yan caught Zi Wei's searching eyes and blushed. Burying her face in her hands, she only let out a rather pitchy noise of embarrassment. That made Zi Wei lean forward in anticipation.

"What's happened between you and Yong Qi?"

Xiao Yan parted her fingers and peeked at Zi Wei through the gap. "Something happened."

"What?" Zi Wei probed impatiently. "Tell me."

Xiao Yan moved her hands from her face and looked at Zi Wei, flushed. "We might have come to an understanding."

"What kind of understanding?"

"Of…where we're going, what we're heading towards."

Zi Wei raised an eyebrow, even more impatient for a more explicit answer.

"I mean, it's not like it's official or anything yet, and for now that's probably a good thing. But the point is, we're on the same page for once," Xiao Yan said, still infuriatingly vague.

"And what page would that be?" Zi Wei pressed. "I mean, I know what page Yong Qi's on…"

"Yeah," Xiao Yan admitted, smiling sheepishly.

Zi Wei could only stare at her for a second, before crying out happily, "Really?"

Xiao Yan didn't answer but with rocking from side to side, but the grin on her face was enough confirmation. She laughed as Zi Wei grabbed her into a delighted hug.

"Oh Xiao Yan, this is so great and wonderful! It's amazing! I'm so happy!" Zi Wei exclaimed.

Xiao Yan ducked her head, happy and embarrassed at the same time.

"Don't say anything to anyone yet, all right?" Xiao Yan said. "Er Kang and Yong An are still in hospital…I know they're recovering but we don't want to say anything before…"

"I won't say anything if you really don't want," Zi Wei said with a grin, "but I am really happy for you, Xiao Yan."

"Me too," Xiao Yan said with a laugh.

"So what happened? What brought this on?"

"Nothing really…or maybe, everything. I mean, between your accident and then Er Kang and Yong An's, everything just suddenly seemed to be put under a different light. It made me realise how much I wouldn't be able to bear to be without Yong Qi."

"It is strange, isn't it, how some things could just change the way you see the whole world?" Zi Wei said contemplatively. "For me, it's been that, both literally and figuratively. Before, I never thought that I am in the habit of taking the things I have for granted, but it took turning blind for me to – I'm really resisting the urge to use the words 'see' here – to realise, I guess, how much I did take things for granted. It's not just being able to see. It's also Er Kang. Everyone else that I love. You."
"You were never going to lose any of us, Zi Wei."

"I know. But not being able to see anyone I love made it felt so much more like a part of me was losing you all, even if you would never want me to feel like that. Or maybe it's just that that whole...scenario made me realise how...fragile life could be, how easily it could be taken away against our will, one way or another. I don't know. I'm not making sense, but what happened does just make me feel so much more grateful for everything that I have."

"I don't think it's something that could be put into words, Zi Wei," Xiao Yan said. "But I do know what you mean. Sometimes our world view change and it's disorientating, but if there's anything I've realised lately, it's that the most disorientating shifts are probably the most necessary. I don't think Yong Qi and I would just keep going around in that same circle of doubt forever if there wasn't that shift to break us out of it, to see the thing that the one thing that has always been constant and never managed to change throughout all of this, is the fact that neither of us will ever find this kind of love with anyone else. I've always known it, but I needed to convince myself it wasn't just some wild, unrealistic dream that I was indulging in."

"For what it's worth, I don't think it was time wasted that you took this long to convince yourself. Sometimes we only see things when we see things." Zi Wei smiled and shook her head the moment the words were out of her mouth, causing a wide smile began appearing on Xiao Yan's face. "You don't need to point out the irony in me saying that."

"I won't," Xiao Yan said, but her grin and the twinkle in her eyes made both of them dissolve into giggles nonetheless.

November

It took longer than either Xiao Yan or Yong Qi anticipated to tell anyone other than Zi Wei about their wish to get married. Somehow, Xiao Yan had the feeling that everyone in his family knew, regardless, that such an announcement was coming, and when it finally came out, no one was particularly surprised.

Still, working out the logistics was tricky, considering the emperor suddenly found himself dealing with the fact that not one, not two, but three of his children were preparing to get married.

On a relative scale, Zi Wei's wedding was simple enough to deal with, because the preparation was already well underway. A prince's wedding, however, would be quite different from, and a lot more complicated to plan than that of the emperor's daughter who held no official title. The Crown Prince's wedding would be even more complicated still.

"Zi Wei's wedding is already set, so her wedding will take place as planned," Yong Qi told Xiao Yan. "But ours will have to wait until after Laoda's."

Xiao Yan was hardly surprised; with all the rules and protocols that were always involved in official events concerning the imperial family, for something as momentous and large scale as weddings, there would of course be some sort of order of precedence, and of course Yong An would come first.

"That would actually work out for us, wouldn't it?" she asked. "We said we didn't want to rush into it."

"We can't rush into it now even if we wanted to, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said with a smile. "My parents are already saying that we'll have to budget at least six months after Zi Wei's wedding to plan Laoda's wedding. It'll be at least another six months, if not a year, before ours could take place."
"So…we're looking at, a year, a year and a half?"

"Yes. Is that too long?"

"I don't know," Xiao Yan said, chuckling. "I mean, I haven't actually given us a deadline or anything. Even if I could, it's as you said, we can't rush it even if we wanted to, can we? But does it really take that long to plan a wedding?"

"If anything, Mama and Jiejie are concerned that considering the scale, six months after Zi Wei's wedding might actually be too soon for Laoda's."

"But Zi Wei's getting married in February, and that's accounting for all the time Er Kang needed in the beginning to settle his job and then later, pushing the date back what with everything that's happened. They could have managed to get married within three months of when they first decided if they wanted to."

"Zi Wei's wedding is different, though. It's entirely privately funded. My family paid for the engagement fare because it took place at Yuan Ming Gong, but the Fu family are insisting on paying for the entire wedding. Considering it's small and private, they can afford to do that. Yong An's wedding and even ours will completely different affairs though. Between Household and Parliament, there will be, I'm sure, many, many, many debates over how much money could be spared. Another reason why there will need to be at least a year between Yong An and us."

"Public money is paying for our weddings?"

"Oh god, no," Yong Qi said, laughing. "The country will be in uproar if we used taxpayer money to pay for our weddings nowadays. No, my parents will pay for the weddings themselves from our private funds. Public funds would only pay for the security costs, and only because there are logistics reasons for that. But as I said, even with that alone, there will be endless discussion about how much could be spent."

"Is there any way we could just go register and then not do anything else?" Xiao Yan asked, mostly joking.

Yong Qi chuckled. "I sometimes wish we could do that too."

"Only sometimes?"

"I do want our wedding to be something memorable, Xiao Yan, and to celebrate it with friends and people we love," he said gently, stroking her hair.

She couldn't help smiling at his touch, but then she sighed. "But it won't just be friends and people we love, is it? It's going to be friends, people we love and thousands of other people your family have to invite for political and diplomatic reasons."

"Thousands? Not that many, I'm sure. The four-figure guest list will be reserved for my brother's wedding."

"But, many, nonetheless."

"Well, yes. Does that bother you?"

"I'm not sure if bother is the right word," Xiao Yan said, chewing on her bottom lip. "I mean, I'm not under any delusion that you have a choice in this. I know it comes with the territory, so I won't wish it could be different."
"For what it's worth, Ah Ma has already told both Laoda and me that when it comes to starting on the guest list, we should start with people we actually want to invite, before adding on the ones we have to invite. So we won't have to sacrifice anyone we might really want to be there to make room for, say, the Emperor of Japan."

"Are we inviting the Emperor of Japan?" Xiao Yan asked, only half teasing.

"Yes," Yong Qi answered with a straight face, which made her laugh despite her mounting nerves. He added, "The good thing is in terms of the diplomatic invites, we can just take my brother's guest list and pare down from there. Actually, there will be a lot of things about our wedding that could probably be discussed and prepared simultaneously with Laoda's. Anyway, the timing isn't all just for the wedding preparations itself. Meng Yue will have a lot of things she has to learn before the wedding and there needs to be time for that. Which brings me to the next bit: so will you."

"So will I…what?"

"You will also have to learn these things. You used to call them princess lessons for Zi Wei?"

Xiao Yan couldn't help but let out a low humming noise of dread at the back of her throat. "I knew I shouldn't have had so much fun making fun of Zi Wei back then and being glad I wasn't her. This is probably just karma for that."

Yong Qi chuckled and put an arm around her in comfort. She buried her face in his shoulder. "Might be nicer for you though, since at least you'll have a classmate in Meng Yue," he said.

Xiao Yan raised her head and stared at him in disbelief. "Meng Yue and I don't have anything in common, other than the fact that we're going to be marrying into your family. I don't think I could anticipate anything nice about sharing this experience with her."

"Less…dull, then."

"Even you already say it's going to be dull," Xiao Yan groaned.

Yong Qi laughed. "Honestly Xiao Yan, of course it's going to be dull. Have you seen ceremonies my family takes part in? It all depends on solemnity and precision and knowing exactly what will happen when. That doesn't come with spontaneity or anything that might be construed as interesting."

"What exactly will I have to learn?"

"You'll probably have to talk to Mama and Imperial Household about it," Yong Qi admitted. "But probably something along the line of how to walk and talk and eat."

"I know how to do all that," she scoffed.

He smiled at her. "Not our way."

"Urgh." With that groan, she dropped her head back down on his shoulder. He patted her head indulgently, still smiling at her melodramatics. "You know, I think you'll come to regret telling me that it's okay for me to complain to you about the adjustments I have to make now that we're back together."

He knew she was mostly joking, but he couldn't help answering her seriously. "No I won't, Xiao Yan." His tone made her look up at him questioningly. He took her hands. "I meant it. You can talk to me about the difficulties you have with all these changes and adjustments and new things coming
into your life. That's the point of having all this time to prepare, Xiao Yan. In fact, you have to tell me. Don't keep it to yourself just because you're afraid it's mindless complaints. Keeping it to yourself will only make you feel more frustrated, and in the end, it'll be too much to bear. You're not meant to bear this alone. You'd just end up resenting it, and I don't want that for either of us."

Xiao Yan nodded. Yong Qi was not yet assured.

"Promise me," he urged. "Promise me you'll talk about these things, to me or to Zi Wei or really, anyone. Just don't try to deal with it yourself; you don't have to."

She smiled at him, unable to help feeling enormously moved by his concern for her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him towards her for a soft kiss.

"I know I'm being a little flippant right now, but I also do realise that this is important, not just to you, but to your family and to this country. I understand why it's important. I promise I'll take it seriously and I'll talk and ask for advice when I need it. So don't worry, okay?"

"Okay," Yong Qi said. Then, cupping her face softly in the palms of his hands, he brushed a small kiss on the tip of her nose. "You'll get through this wonderfully, Xiao Yan, as long as you remember that you are never alone."

"I will."

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**December**

Xiao Yan crashed into her apartment late that evening, to find Xiao Jian and Qing Er there waiting for her.

"Your family is so weird," she said unceremoniously to Qing Er as she dropped down on the couch.

"You have just realised this now?" Qing Er asked, looking at her, amused, as she reached for her brother's cup of something-or-other – Coke, it turned out – that was lying on the table and drank, ignoring his protest.

Xiao Yan grinned at both of them. "No, but it needed to be said."

"Why?"

"You will not believe how I just spent the afternoon."

"How?" her brother asked.

"I just spent the last two hours being taught how to **lean down to speak to a child without showing my cleavage**," Xiao Yan said, incredulity dripping from every word, which made Qing Er and her brother both laugh. "I mean, why?"

"So that you can lean down to speak to children without traumatising them by showing them your cleavage," Qing Er said, still laughing.

"Yeah, but isn't that like, common sense? I mean, I know marrying Yong Qi means I will have to learn a lot of things, but I didn't realise **this** would be one of them, and that this country is actually paying someone to teach it to me. From public funds. I thought I'd be learning things like…I don't know, the entirety of your family tree with every branch that ever existed or something."
"Honestly, Xiao Yan, no one really cares about what Qian Long's fifth son's son was called, so if you thought that would be what you'd be learning, you're wrong. There really is no mystic ritual to being us," Qing Er said. "Most of the time, it is really practical – if silly when you say it out loud – stuff like this."

"How would you…learn something like that, though?" Xiao Jian asked. "Or do I not want to know?"

Xiao Yan shrugged. "There's a lot of leaning down and getting up again and leaning down. It's almost a squat work out."

Qing Er laughed. "There's more than that."

"Yeah, there was a lot about how different cuts of shirts and blouses look when you lean down or forward and how to choose clothes that fits and something else about how high to button your shirt, I can't remember," Xiao Yan said, yawning. "I mean, I told Yong Qi I'd take this seriously, but it's hard when this is the stuff I'm spending my time on. I don't think it even helps that Meng Yue is taking it all completely unironically seriously. I can't even do that, so what hope do I even have of remembering all the stuff they're telling me?"

"If it makes you feel better," Qing Er said, "this kind of information is really hard, and frankly quite useless, to just cram inside your head for the sake of knowing. At the beginning, believe me, you will have people to pick out your outfits for you, so you don't need to worry about anyone letting you leave the house looking indecent. And eventually you will pick up what is appropriate and what is not. Don't look at this like it's an exam and you have to remember single thing they're telling you now. You're learning a whole new way of life, and sometimes the only way to learn is to actually live it. No matter how much you prepare, you are bound to slip up more than once. If people are generous enough, they'll forgive you and realise that you've had to adapt to a life that is very different from what you're used to. Then there will always be people to criticise no matter what you do, and you shouldn't pay attention to that."

"I wasn't really looking for that speech, but now that you've said all that, it actually does help," Xiao Yan said with a grateful smile at Qing Er. "I mean, Yong Qi has said similar things already, and Zi Wei, and a lot of other people, actually, but sometimes it takes hearing them on days like this, when I feel like I'd never get the point of what I've been doing all day, for these words to sink in and actually help. So thank you."

Qing Er smiled and reached out to pat Xiao Yan's knee. "You'll be all right, Xiao Yan. We have faith in you."

"Which is more than I could say for myself sometimes."

"It can be daunting, but I think the important thing is to realise no one expects you to be perfect from day one. As long as you have respect for the position you're going to hold, everything else will follow and fall in place."

Xiao Yan nodded and sighed. "I do hope you're right."
As she idly scrolled through article after article covering the preparations of Zi Wei's wedding on her phone, Jin Suo felt a surreal sense of disconnect. There was just so much speculation, everything from what Zi Wei would wear to who was invited, details of all which so far had been kept private. Of course, it didn't exactly take an inside person to be able to guess what Zi Wei would wear. As much as this was being sold to the world as a private wedding, Zi Wei was still the emperor's daughter and he, at least, preferred that her wedding follow the structure of that of a princess. That meant, of course, that just as the case was at her engagement party, Zi Wei would be wearing traditional dress. There certainly would be no white taffeta or lace mermaid cut, as more than one online news outlet speculated.

There was so little in the speculation that came close to what would actually be seen and would happen at the wedding that Jin Suo felt as if she were reading about strangers, despite the fact that there were photos of the happy couple smiling out at her from every page.

Well, in the photos, Zi Wei was smiling. It would take a skilled photographer indeed to catch Er Kang smiling in public. He was still too used to being the one blended in the background with an impassive expression, so of course he would not be grinning for photographers now, even when he was appearing as Zi Wei's husband-to-be. Jin Suo wondered if there was anyone online who speculated that perhaps he was not happy about the marriage, considering how solemn he looked to the world, despite how long they had been together. She had no intention of going looking for those discussions, of course, but the wonder hovered vaguely at the back of her mind.

And yet, those around the couple, including Jin Suo, knew that in private, Er Kang smiled often enough, and most of the time, the smiles were directed at Zi Wei. It was especially truer now that they had gone through a period where Zi Wei had been unable to see such expressions of happiness from him.

Jin Suo tucked her phone back into the pocket of her coat, deciding to focus her attention and pass the time thinking about what would actually happen at the wedding. From her purse, she pulled out the piece of paper which contained the notes and details of the challenges Er Kang would have to go through before he would be allowed to pick up his bride. Though Zi Wei's sisters and cousins would join them in blocking Zi Wei's door, the princesses had let Xiao Yan and Jin Suo have free reign on deciding the games, and the two of them had spent many nights Skyping, brainstorming ideas and laughing themselves silly. Rereading it now, Jin Suo couldn't help smiling in anticipation either.

It was still dark outside when Zi Wei woke up on the biggest day of her life, feeling a dizzying combination of excitement, nervousness and elation. She reached idly for her phone on the bedside table to check the time, squinting at the sudden bright light in the dark room.

It was only five o'clock.

And she couldn't go back to sleep.

Giggling quietly to herself, Zi Wei tried not to toss and turn in her impatience; it would only wake Jin Suo who was still asleep beside her. After alternating between staring the canopy of her bed in the
semi-darkness, and running her fingers against its cool, carved wooden frame for about half an hour, Zi Wei finally decided to push the covers aside and get out of bed. She might as well get up, since it was obvious she wasn’t going to be able to go back to sleep.

A hot shower shook the fogs of the winter morning out of her head, and she returned to the still dark bedroom, her hair blown dry and dressed in a comfortable T-shirt and leggings. There wasn’t much choice, as most of her things had been packed and delivered to Er Kang’s house – soon to be their house – the day before. Another small suitcase stood in the corner of the room, packed with the things she would need throughout the day after Er Kang picked her up from Xian Fu Gong. Zi Wei resisted the urge to pick up the packing list that was taped on the front of the suitcase and open it to check for what would be the fourth time that she had everything she needed. Xiao Yan and Jin Suo had already complained the evening before that she was being paranoid when they went through the list three times.

"What on earth could you possibly forget that wouldn't be available from someone somewhere?" Xiao Yan had asked as she sprawled out on Zi Wei’s bed. "Relax. It's the night before your wedding, you're not supposed to worry about packing, for heaven's sake!"

Zi Wei smiled and shook her head as she remembered how nervous she had felt the night before. Right now, she felt more excited than nervous, even if really, when it came down to it, the two feelings were awfully familiar. They were both the same twisting feeling in her stomach.

She poured herself a glass of water from the bedside table in order to try and calm herself. Then, picking up her phone, and not wishing to wake Jin Suo just yet, she pulled her blanket off the bed and retreated to the other end of the room, curling up on the cushioned Kang under the blanket. She was in the middle of scrolling through the text conversation with Er Kang, when the phone buzzed in her hand and a new text appeared.

Are you awake?

Zi Wei smiled.

Yes.

I can't sleep anymore.

Me neither.

She was hardly keeping track of how long she remained like that, exchanging texts with Er Kang, but the next thing she knew, Jin Suo's voice made her jump.

"Isn't there some rule somewhere that say you can't talk to the groom on the day of the wedding before he picks up you or something?"

"We're not talking," Zi Wei said, smiling after she had recovered from being startled.

"But that is Er Kang you are texting."

Zi Wei smiled widened, but she only looked down at the phone again. Jin Suo laughed.

"What time is it?" Zi Wei asked.

"Nearly seven. When did you get up?"

"Around five."
"Too nervous or too excited?" Jin Suo asked, grinning knowingly.

Zi Wei looked up at her with a sheepish smile. "Both."

Her friend laughed.

"I'm going to wash up. Tell Er Kang that you're off to breakfast and he should go get ready too."

"You want tea or coffee when you come out?" Zi Wei called towards Jin Suo's retreating form.

"Yes, coffee."

Zi Wei did send a goodbye text to Er Kang, only half-aware of the dreamy smile on her face as she typed out the text. Afterwards, she began heading towards the kitchen. There, she found Yong Qi already setting out breakfast.

"Mama sent La Mei over with this," he explained when she asked where the food had come from. "She wasn't sure whether you'd be awake yet so she called me instead."

Zi Wei laughed. "Sorry."

Her brother grinned. "It is your day."

She smiled softly at that. Yong Qi leaned over to kiss the side of her head.

"Ready?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, exhaled and smiled. "In a sense. It all sort of feels surreal right now, to be honest. I'm trying not to think of all the ways things could go wrong."

"Everything will be fine, Zi Wei," Yong Qi said. "Just relax and enjoy it. You and Er Kang have been through enough to deserve that."

"I'll end up saying the same thing to you later, you know."

They shared a smile over that. In that moment, Zi Wei realised she was happier than ever that Yong Qi and Xiao Yan's relationship had redeveloped to the point that they, too, were looking forward to a day like this in the future. She wondered how nervous and uncomfortable they would both be on a day like this, faced with questions and speculations, both voiced and unvoiced, from all the guests, most of whom would only mean well, if the question of marriage was still unsettled between them.

Zi Wei looked around. "Xiao Yan still asleep?"

"It's seven in the morning," Yong Qi said. "Of course."

"I can do this while you go wake her up," she said, laughing, and taking the bunch of chopsticks in his hands from him. "As much as I would love to let her sleep in, this isn't the day."

"She's awake," a grumpy voice still thick with sleep mumbled behind them, as Xiao Yan shuffled into the room. She went to Yong Qi and dropped her head against his shoulder, and judging from the way he hastily grabbed her and stumbled a little in the process, she had dropped her whole weight against him too. "Why are you so chipper?" she asked, voice muffled by Yong Qi.

"It's my wedding day," Zi Wei replied cheerfully. Then, she reached for a china cup of coffee and handed to Xiao Yan. "Here."
"Thanks," Xiao Yan said against a jaw-cracking yawn, straightening off of Yong Qi to accept the cup. "W-wh-where's Jin Suo?"

"She'll be out in a minute."

The next hour or so was entirely comfortable and happy, as she, Jin Suo, Xiao Yan and Yong Qi breakfasted together amid laughter and cheerful conversation.

Zi Wei lost track of time after that, as her anticipation mounted and so did her nervousness. Around eight o'clock, the empress, He Jing and He Ke arrived with the empress's personal stylist, Dong Xue, to whisk the three girls away to start on their hair and makeup.

"I thought the pick-up isn't going to be until like two o'clock," Xiao Yan said. "Why are we starting to get ready now?"

"Because it's going to take that long," He Jing answered.

Xiao Yan stared at her warily, clearly unsure whether she was kidding. "You're not actually serious, right?"

"There's lunch with the rest of the family at Yong Shou Gong at eleven, remember?" He Jing asked. "It's not that much time until then to get all of us ready."

"There's…after lunch?"

He Jing laughed. "It'll be a miracle if we manage to get Zi Wei ready in the time left after lunch."

Xiao Yan blinked, looking even more disconcerted, and exchanged a sceptical look with Jin Suo, who only shrugged and made a signal that implied, 'Just go with it.'

It turned out, He Jing was right. The hours flew by and there was just enough time for all of them to dress, get their makeup done and for the empress and princesses to have their hair put up in the dovetail updo, before it was time to leave for lunch at Yong Shou Gong.

While everyone else's makeup would last them through the day, Zi Wei's current light make up would be redone into a more bridal style after lunch. She would also then change into her wedding outfit, which was to be far more elaborate than the lemon-yellow dress with sweetheart neckline and flared skirt she was wearing to lunch with her family. She had deliberately chosen because of its clean, classic cut. Her hair, too, was kept simple, and was only woven into a soft French-braid bun with a single yellow frangipani flower tucked into the locks by her temple.

"You should just get married in this," Xiao Yan said.

"I'm sure there's some rule somewhere that says I have to be in red, though," Zi Wei said, laughing, before reaching out and pulling both Xiao Yan and a Jin Suo who looked rather teary into a tight hug.

After lunch, the empress and two princesses stayed at Yong Shou Gong to change to their traditional celebratory dress, while Dong Xue, Jin Suo and Xiao Yan accompanied Zi Wei back to Xian Fu Gong, where Zi Wei would be transformed to a bride, ready for the groom's party to pick her up and deliver her to her married home.

"It really is beautiful, but you'd think that they'd have modernised the outfit a bit and get rid of the under layers," Xiao Yan said, looking at Zi Wei's clothes, which of course consisted of more than one layer. "I mean, it's all right in winter, but it looks frightfully hot in summer. I can't imagine what
it's like to wear."

"The inner layers help create dimension to the sleeves, which are wide flat sleeves instead of horse-shoe sleeves like the even more formal ceremonial dress, so it needs to have a look of depth to it," Dong Xue explained as she helped Zi Wei button the outer gown. She added, laughing, "Even if it doesn't, I wouldn't hope for any modernisation in official court dress, though. You can have modified, modernised designs based on traditional dress like the qipao as casual wear and I've seen modernised hanfu with shortened sleeves and knee-length skirts. But for ceremonies and events like this, it will always be the full traditional designs."

"In that case, I'm glad I don't have to wear it," Xiao Yan said from where she sat on the edge of Zi Wei's bed, smoothing the skirt of her dress.

Considering Zi Wei's sisters would also be in qizhuang, and therefore would not match Xiao Yan and Jin Suo anyway, the two of them had forgo the idea of dressing alike as bridesmaids usually did. Jin Suo looked dainty in a sleeveless cream-coloured soft silk and chiffon dress with red-flower embroidery scattered all over the bodice and A-line skirt which fell to her knees, complete with a wide red silk sash at the waist. By contrast, Xiao Yan's cap-sleeved dress was a dark navy blue overlay with white lace. They, of course, had both been dressed since the morning and were not required to going through the numerous changes of wardrobe that Zi Wei was.

Zi Wei was now naturally in red, though in a different style. She didn't mind the multiple layers of the outfit as Xiao Yan expected her to. Even if she was inclined to, she didn't think she could, considering how much she loved the deep ruby red colour of the symmetrical gown. Its lapel and the sleeves were trimmed in a blue so deep it was almost black. A round of peonies and smaller crape myrtles were embroidered on the chest of the gown and on the trimmings of the sleeves, while patterns of clouds and waves adorned the bottom hem and the stiff collar.

"You don't have to wear this yet," Zi Wei reminded Xiao Yan, grinning. "You will have to, you know, when you marry Yong Qi."

"And it won't just be on your wedding day, Miss Xiao Yan," Dong Xue said with a smile. "There will be certain special ceremonies where you will be required to be in full ceremonial dress, once you become a part of the imperial family."

Xiao Yan sighed dramatically. "I know."

Jin Suo giggled. "Are you ready for all of it?"

"Nope," Xiao Yan answered, but she was grinning cheerfully. "But I have some time to get ready, thank goodness."

Somewhere in the middle of Dong Xue clipping extensions into Zi Wei's hair, preparing to put it up, He Ke arrived.

"Mama thinks I don't have enough to do, but at the same time she won't trust me with check on any of the arrangements either, so she has sent me here to see if I could help any of you," she declared, sitting gingerly down on a chair in order to avoid mussing up her own clothes.

"I'm not sure there is anything you could do here, either, Princess," Dong Xue said, looking both amused and apologetic.

"How are all the arrangements outside?" Zi Wei asked.

"Oh, you know, everyone's being a perfectionist, as they always are during things like this. It's sort
of setting me on edge a little, so it's probably a good thing I'm in here."

"Shouldn't you be used to it?" Jin Suo asked.

"Strangely enough, no, mostly because if it's state banquets or whatever, I wouldn't get to be involved anyway."
 He Ke jumped up from her seat and approached Xiao Yan. "Saosao, you really aren't just going to wear your hair down like that, are you?"

"I can't decide what to do with it," Xiao Yan admitted. "And there wasn't time earlier to do anything."

"Can I do something with it?"

She considered the princess for a moment, before shrugging. "Why not," she said. "I probably trust you to do something nice with it more than I trust myself, anyway."

He Ke grinned and began rummaging through Dong Xue's supplies. As she worked Xiao Yan's shoulder-length hair into soft curls and pulled half of it up with a side twist, Dong Xue had also finished Zi Wei's makeup and pinning her hair, and was now setting the tianzi (鈿子) into place. The black velvet frame of the headdress was decorated with delicate, gold-gilt ornaments in the shape of flowers and butterflies, dotted with dashes of blue ones, mimicking the colour of kingfisher-feather.

"There's no mistaking it, you are a bride," Jin Suo said, grinning as Zi Wei stood up. "You look amazing."

Zi Wei flushed with shyness and pleasure at the compliment, and reached out to squeeze her hand, as Xiao Yan, He Ke and Dong Xue voiced their agreement. Just that moment, the empress and He Jing came in to make sure that they were all ready, as it was nearing the time for the groom's party to arrive.

By ten to two, everyone and everything was in place. Zi Wei was dressed and ready and ensconced in her bedroom at Xian Fu Gong with the emperor and empress. An iPad on Facetime with Qing Er's phone outside her room would give her the front row seat to watch Er Kang trying to get past Jin Suo and Xiao Yan blocking the door.

Promptly at two o'clock, a process of cars of the groom's party arrived at the gate of Xian Fu Gong, and Yong Yan opened the door that contained Er Kang. His groomsmen, consisting of Er Tai and some of Er Kang's close friends and work colleagues, came out from the cars behind. A flurry of exchanges of wedding gifts and red envelopes followed in the courtyard of the palace, where the bride's family and guests were gathered. Er Kang prepared to make his way into Xian Fu Gong to claim his bride, but naturally found the door obstructed by Xiao Yan, Jin Suo and Zi Wei's sisters and cousins.

"I don't remember this being a part of your wedding," Er Kang said mildly to He Jing amid laughter and cheerful chatter.

"And you were in the procession picking up the bride then?" Xiao Yan crowed.

"I was providing security," Er Kang said, attempting to look straight-faced, but the corner of his lips twitched nonetheless.

"Well, this is a different wedding!" Jin Suo said. "You didn't think it would be that easy to take Zi Wei, did you?"

"Show me what you've got then," Er Kang said, grinning at the bridesmaids.
"I think that's our line," He Ke said gleefully. "But nonetheless. Saosao, go!"

"So, here's the first challenge," Xiao Yan announced. "Back in the days, men who get to marry the emperor's daughters were supposed to be well versed in both literature and martial arts. I think we're pretty set on your military prowess, but how are you with literature?"

"You have five minutes to sing Zi Wei praises, but the condition is that you must do it only in idioms and four-character expressions, and you can't pause for more than ten seconds between phrases, or repeat any expression," Jin Suo said.

"If I do, then what?" Er Kang asked.

Xiao Yan grinned. "Then you have to give one of us a red envelope."

"How about I give all of you a red envelope now, and I don't have to think of any idiom?"

Everyone in the courtyard laughed and the din of chatter rose as everyone egged Er Kang on to complete the challenge.

"As if we would allow that!" Jin Suo cried. "Come on, a great privileged gentleman like yourself can't even produce some beautiful words in praise of your wife? Admittedly, five minutes is a long time, I give you, but depending on how you do, we might let you off earlier."

"Okay, fine." Er Kang cleared his throat as He Ke's finger poised over her phone. "When I met Zi Wei, it was like I've known her long before, and love at first sight."

"I actually can attest to that," Xiao Yan called out, laughing. "That's actually true."

"I'm head over heels in love with her. They say, in a lover's eyes, Xi Shi appears, but from the bottom of my heart, ancient times may have Xi Shi sinks fish, Wang Zhaojun entices birds into falling, Diaochan eclipses the moon, Yang Guifei shames flowers, but Zi Wei surpasses them all."

"That four beauties one is so cheating!" He Ke cried. "We should just count that as one."

"Count it as however many you want," Er Kang said, smiling smugly. "You just said five minutes, you didn't say there was a numerical target I had to hit."

"Okay, okay, continue, stop stalling or we'll add it to the time," Xiao Yan said.

"I love her until the sea dries up and stones turn soft, around her I am unable to restrain one's emotions, when we are apart, each day is like a year, one day is like three autumns. We are a match made in heaven, I've long known that we are to be two birds with joint wings, two trees with joint branches, I love her too much to let go of her hand. From now on, we will be together until the end of time, and though I know good things do not come without toil, but in this it is unfathomable to me that we would give up halfway on this marriage..."

He continued as the wedding guests and the girls called out encouragements and praises. Xiao Yan and Jin Suo leaned over He Ke's arm to watch the time.

"Oh wow, Er Kang, I'm so used to you being serious and only opening up your feelings to Zi Wei, but now I know it's one thing if you don't say anything, but once you do, it only takes one word to surprise everyone," Xiao Yan cried, impressed, after Er Kang went well over the time required and they just let him go on speaking. "That was actually closer to ten minutes."

"You said five!"
"Why stop you when you were on a roll?" He Ke asked. "You'll do, Jiefu!"

"For that one word 'Jiefu' from you, can I just remind you that I am here to pick up my bride, and *everything has been prepared, and all that is needed is an eastern wind.* Can you all give me my eastern wind?"

"Eastern wind is for you to find, Fu Xiansheng," He Jing said with a serene smile. "I think there are few more challenges before you can be let through."

"And now you call me Fu Xiansheng."

"Once you successfully pickup Zi Wei, then I'll call you Meifu."

A game of charade and "Two Truths, One Lie" later, Xiao Yan pulled out from her purse at black blindfold.

"Okay, now I'm alarmed," Er Kang said, giving Xiao Yan an amused wary look.

"Don't worry, eastern wind is nearly here," Xiao Yan said. "But to catch it, here's your final test."

"So Zi Wei spent a considerable time last year being temporarily blind," Jin Suo continued. "And if her sight hadn't returned, she would have been spending the rest of her life in the dark. You've already proven your devotion to her when you made it clear to her that you would still marry her no matter what. But this challenge isn't a test of your love. It's to give you an idea of what she went through and would have gone through if her sight didn't return."

"Put this on," Xiao Yan said, handing him the blindfold. "Then, we will open the doors and all of us girls will go in to the bedroom where Zi Wei is. You have to make your way blindfolded to the bedroom. Everyone else can call out direction to you, but they can't physically guide you to the room. Once there, all of us will be in there and none of us will say anything. You have to take our hands and only by touching our hands, you need to find Zi Wei among all the girls in there."

"I have to find her just by feeling the hands?"

"What else do you want to feel up?" He Ke asked with a saucy grin, to everyone's deafening laughter and whistles. It was some time before everyone calmed down. "With what everyone is wearing, it'll be too easy to find her if you touch anywhere else but the hand. We'll roll up sleeves to make sure you're only looking for her by the feel of her hand."

"Remember, the objective is to find your bride," Jin Suo said, smiling. "Once you find her and are sure it's her, you can tell us to remove your blindfold, and you are correct, then you can take her hand, to use an expression."

"If you're wrong, however…" He Ke started.

"I won't get it wrong," Er Kang interrupted.

"Such confidence!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Let's hope it pays off!"

The blind journey from the door to Zi Wei's room of course was long an arduous, and sometimes not always helped by the contradicting instructions and directions being cried out by all those around Er Kang.

"Go a bit to the right! The right! I said, right!"
"I am going right!"

"Not enough!"

"Stop! Stop! You're about to walk into a vase that's like three-hundred years old."

Er Kang did eventually reach the bedroom, where the real challenge began. The person closest to the door was Xiao Yan, so naturally hers was the first hand that Er Kang managed to reach upon entering the room.

"This is…"

"Brother, be careful, get that one wrong and someone will be very upset at you!" Er Tai said.

"Hey!" He Ke called. "No cheating!"

"I'm just saying he'll be in trouble if he gets this wrong, I didn't say what wrong was."

"This isn't Zi Wei," Er Kang said definitively before He Ke could protest further. "This is Xiao Yan."

"You're in trouble when you get it right too, I guess," Er Tai said, glancing at Yong Qi and laughing.

"Yes, I really would like to know how you know what my girlfriend's hand feels like," Yong Qi said with mock indignation.

"It's not about how it feels, it's in the shape," Er Kang said, dropping Xiao Yan's hand unceremoniously as she burst into a peal of laughter.

The search continued, with several near misses and going back and forth between a few potential choices. Finally, Er Kang said, stroking the back of the hand that he was holding tightly, "This is it. This is her. This is Zi Wei."

"Are you sure?" Jin Suo asked. "We'll give you a few more seconds to think it over. You can still change your mind."

"No, this is her," Er Kang repeated determinedly.

"Final choice?" Xiao Yan pressed.

"Yes."

"If you are sure, then let's go for the moment of truth," Jin Suo said. Then, she signalled for the person whose hand Er Kang was holding to remove his blindfold. She did this promptly, smiling deliriously at Er Kang, while everyone around them cheered and clapped.

For Er Kang, it really did feel like looking directly at the sun. He wondered if it was this dazzling for Zi Wei too, having light return after all the days in the darkness. He had been unable to see for but a handful of minutes, but the effect of her standing before him, so beautiful, so radiant, was knee-weakening. It seemed insane that they were not married yet, and in fact their wedding ceremony had yet to even start. And yet this was the magical moment. They were standing here, hand in hand, light glinting off the gilt and the pearls in her hair, and this was the moment when their life together, married, would begin. Er Kang knew he was supposed to say something, to do something, but suddenly, stunned speechless wasn't just an expression anymore, and he could only gaze at her, forgetting for a moment that they were surrounded by their friends and family.
A few steps away, Yong Qi asked Xiao Yan, "Was that deliberate?"

"Was what deliberate?"

"Instead of the bride being covered and him taking the veil off her, this is more or less the opposite."

"Honestly, no," Xiao Yan replied. "This was my idea and originally, I only thought about the fact
that he wouldn't be able to see. But now that you mention it, the implied reversal is pretty genius."

They looked at each other, and both of them found themselves laughing.

"Let's just say that's what we intended all along," Xiao Yan whispered conspiratorially. Yong Qi
only responded by reaching for her hand and squeezing it warmly.

Xiao Yan wondered why there were so few stories about weddings being robbed, considering the
fact that they were dripping in gold and money. The red envelopes handed out by the groom's party
aside, gifts from the guests invariably involve gold or precious stones. She was sure this wasn't just
limited to weddings in these elite circles. After all, it was pretty much given in any wedding that the
groom's mother would gift the bride with at least one piece of gold jewellery.

There was, of course, no chance of any kind of robbery at a wedding involving the emperor's family,
where there seemed to be as many security persons as guests. But it was one of those idle thoughts
that Xiao Yan found popping up in her head as she sat in the passenger seat of Yong Qi's car as they
followed the car that was taking Zi Wei and Er Kang from the palace to his house, after the bride
and groom had offered incense to her Ai Xin Jue Luo ancestors at Feng Xian Dian.

The apartment where Zi Wei's accident had happened had been sold a couple of months before. Its
unfortunate association with crime was off-set by its prime location and the illustriousness of its
former owner, so Er Kang managed to sell it without much of a loss. The plan had always been that
he and Zi Wei would start their married life in an actual house with enough room to raise a family,
but he had also originally intended to keep the apartment and rent it out. After what happened, the
idea lost its attraction, and it was only too easy to come to the conclusion to sell it.

Zi Wei and Er Kang were to live in a house out in Beijing's suburbs, near Yuan Ming Gong, and
near Er Kang's new job at the Imperial Security Academy. The house was designed with the
traditional siheyuan architecture in mind, though with alterations to include modern conveniences.

Its location, however, made for a considerable drive from the palace in the city, which explained how
Xiao Yan found herself having such bizarre thoughts.

Er Kang's parents were there waiting when the bridal party arrived. There, the rest of the ceremonies
took place. Zi Wei and Er Kang ate sweet date soup, offered tea to his parents, and Zi Wei received
gifts from her mother-in-law.

At every stage of the wedding ceremony so far, there had been sufficient pauses and time allocated
for photos to be taken. Now, the main ceremonies over, and all the photos of the bride and groom
and their families in traditional dress that could be taken had been taken, there was a gap in the
program for everyone to change into modern clothes before making their way to the hotel where the
reception would take place.

Xiao Yan, Jin Suo and Dong Xue helped Zi Wei change out of her multilayer qizhuang, and into her
reception dress, a V-neck navy blue silk organza number with pink floral patterns and a long skirt
that fell to the floor. Her hair was freed from the dovetail updo, and the extensions taken out. For the
reception, Zi Wei's hair would be loose and adorned only with a thin flower crown that matched the
florals on her dress.

"I am so glad I picked up flats for the reception," Zi Wei said as she eased her feet out of the tall flowerpot shoes. "I didn't have to be on my feet that much so far and these shoes are already killing me."

"Imagine what it'd be like if you had to wear them standing and walking around greeting guests at the reception as well," Xiao Yan said, nodding understandingly.

They all arrived at the reception early, and had time to breathe before the guests started arriving. The empress, He Jing and He Ke, who according to tradition did not accompany Zi Wei to her new home, had arrived earlier and made sure all the arrangements were in place.

Once the guests started arriving, it felt like all Xiao Yan could remember was the steady stream of people and showing them to tables, all taking place amid the near constant flashes of photographers.

"Go sit down," Zi Wei said at one point, taking Xiao Yan by the arm, having herself caught a moment between smiling at guests and the cameras. "Both you and Jin Suo."

"It's fine, we can help, everyone's busy anyway – "

"And the point of having a big family is that there is already a lot of people to help. Come on, you're guests – "

"Oh, are we guests now?" Xiao Yan asked.

At her mock offended tone, Zi Wei only laughed and shook her head, before letting the issue go. The guests were all seated eventually, and Xiao Yan found herself at a table at the front of the room with Liu Qing, Liu Hong, Xiao Jian, Qing Er, Yong Qi, Jin Suo, Sai Ya and Er Tai, near where the wedding cake towered. All nine tiers of the cake were frosted with a champagne-coloured frosting and thin hand-piped gold swirls. Red fondant ribbons adorned the base of each tier and white, hand-crafted sugar orchids and crape myrtles cascaded from the top of the cake down to the base. A gold sugar double happiness character was attached to the side of the tier second from the top.

Xiao Yan's hand found Yong Qi's under the table as they watched Er Kang and Zi Wei walk hand in hand down the aisle that had been formed in between the groups of tables on either side of the room. As they stood together, hand in hand, heads together, at the top of the room, Xiao Yan didn't think she had ever seen Zi Wei ever looking more radiantly happy, and Er Kang definitely had a hard time keeping a smile from his face. The wedding wine was poured and the couple, arms entwined, drank, to the rousing claps and cheers of the guests in the room.

Then came the speeches. The emperor, as the father of the bride, of course, was to speak, and it would be one of the rare times when the speech would all be in his own words.

The hum of chatter and laughter that was left over from witnessing the bride and groom exchanging their wedding wine fell down to a hush as the emperor reached for the microphone. He, too, wore a happy smile as he began to speak.

"I have made many speeches in my life. Many of you here probably have had to sit through many of my speeches, and what percentage of them are at all interesting to listen to, I cannot say."

There was a pause as appreciative laughter rippled through the room.

"But I am also more used to making speeches to more people than I can count, whom I cannot see,"
he continued, once the laughter had died down. "Today, in this speech, I would like to ask for everyone's indulgence to address Zi Wei and Er Kang only."

He turned to face the couple and held out his hand to his daughter. Zi Wei, already with tears in her eyes, her other hand still grasped firmly by Er Kang, reached out to allow her father to take her hand.

"It is usual that a father at his daughter's wedding, reminisces the day he met his daughter, which usually is the day she was born. Zi Wei, our first meeting was many years overdue, and what overwhelmed me in that moment was all the days of your life that I had missed. But over the last few years, you have constantly reminded me that we should both count all the moments and days that we now have to be together instead."

For a moment, it seemed as if emotions were already getting the better of both Zi Wei and her father, as he paused in his speech, closing his eyes briefly to gather himself. Zi Wei smiled and momentarily let go of Er Kang's had to delicately brush tears away from the corners of her eyes.

"It occurred to me, even then, that one day, I would be giving you away at your wedding," the emperor continued, "and it would be, regardless of when we met, the most important day of your life that we share. Back then, I could only hope that I would be worthy of that."

Xiao Yan could see Zi Wei whisper, "Ah Ma, you are" to him.

The emperor took a visible breath, then smiled softly at her.

"And here we are. Here you are, hand in hand with the man who will walk the rest of this journey with you, and Zi Wei, I cannot be prouder."

Xiao Yan could hear Jin Suo sniffle back tears beside her. She turned, and together they shared an emotional smile of happiness for Zi Wei.

In the front of the room, the emperor was placing Zi Wei's hand into Er Kang's, so that now both their hands were clasped together.

"Er Kang. What shall I say? What can I say when you have such a fixture of our family for such a long time, long before you met Zi Wei? You have spent the whole of your adult life thus far, avowed in the protection of various members of our family. But whether it was with He Jing, or Yong Qi, or Yong An, your role as their protector was always meant to be temporary. Today, you let go of that role, and none of us could regret it, because you do so to take on one that you would hold for the rest of your life, that of Zi Wei's protector, and her partner in life. I, for one, am only happy to place her hand in yours as your bride. I will watch you join her on this journey with no misgivings or worries, because I see the love for her in your eyes, and I've seen all the happiness and joy and comfort you've brought her ever since you knew her."

For a moment, Xiao Yan wondered if Er Kang would start crying too, but he only just managed to keep his emotions in check as he murmured words of thanks to his new father-in-law.

"Zi Wei, Er Kang, it is your day of great happiness, and with this speech, I've been told I should give you some words of wisdom to prepare you for your life together." The emperor paused and smiled, shaking his head a little. "I am sure, if this speech went through the usual production line that most of my speeches go through, there will attempts plenty. How much they truly measure up to the description of wisdom, you would then be the judge. But this speech, I'm afraid, is written by me, and as such, I cannot claim my words to be wisdom, though it would not stop other people from claiming it on my behalf. I have always been the undeserving recipient of such generosity. What I can offer you, are reminders. Remember the love you hold for each other, and live everyday of your
life with that love as your guide. There will always be challenges as well as joys, laughter as well as tears, but they are all for you to share from this day onward. Also from today, you are never alone; you just have to remember that you are each other's home to return to."

"And in closing this speech, I can only say that I hope, years from today, when the two of you have aged and approaching the last chapter of your life, you will look at each other, and not see the old and the grey, but you'll see yourselves as you are today, both confident in the knowledge that if you could start again, you'd still choose the life you are starting together today."

Everyone clapped as Zi Wei reached out to hug her father, and for a long time did not let go.

Er Kang's speech that came after was in a different style.

"So, earlier when I arrived at Xian Fu Gong to pick up Zi Wei – my wife – "

Everyone in the room cheered while Zi Wei smiled shyly and Er Kang looked momentarily stumped, as if he had only just realised this fact.

Zi Wei leaned in to place a gentle kiss on his cheek, which was sufficient to shake him out of his stupor, and he grinned, resuming his speech.

"As I was saying, earlier, when I went to pick up my bride, naturally, I found my path blocked by her sisters. One of the challenges they set to me then was that I must my love for Zi Wei. Their condition was that I must do so using as many idioms as possible. I think I might have delivered most of the essence of this speech then. So if anyone who was present there find this speech repetitive, I would say blame the bridesmaids."

The guests laughed, while Xiao Yan gave a loud exclamation of protest. Er Kang only grinned at her.

Turning to Zi Wei, his expression was more solemn, and it suddenly felt like for Er Kang, the only person that existed in the room was her.

"Zi Wei," he said, taking her hand, "no doubt there had been more than a few obstacles in our road leading up to this day, but right now, today, we are finally here. Today marks not an ending, but still a beginning of a different chapter of our life, and I solemnly swear to you now, that I will do everything in my power to make sure that, regardless of whatever challenges lay ahead of us, our life together from this day forward, will still always be full of happiness, and happiness, and happiness."

At the urging of the guests, they exchanged a brief kiss. Watching the scene, Xiao Yan couldn't help but feeling like there was an enormous weight on her chest, suddenly choking her, and she turned to bury her face in the crook of Yong Qi's neck. He placed his arm around her shoulders, squeezing tightly and kissing the top of her head. When she could finally look up, Xiao Yan could only smile through the tears she tried hopelessly to hold back, and joined everyone else in raising her glass and drinking to Er Kang and Zi Wei's happiness.

The banquet continued after the speeches, as Er Kang and Zi Wei made their way through the tables to receive toasts from the guests. When they reached Xiao Yan, she and Jin Suo reached out to pull Zi Wei into a long, tight group hug that left none of them dry-eyed.

Later, when the guests had all departed and all those who remained were just family and very close friends, and she stood next to Yong Qi watching Er Kang and Zi Wei saying goodbye to everyone else before getting into a car that would take them home, Xiao Yan understood now why it was called being on cloud nine. Watching Zi Wei with her arm around Jin Suo, Xiao Yan wondered if
she was this happy on Zi Wei's behalf, how would it feel, when it would be her turn to be the bride? This train of thoughts made her turn to look at Yong Qi. Suddenly, she found herself even more overwhelmed than she had been the whole day, which itself was already a roller coaster of emotions. For the first time, she found herself thinking that having to wait another year for her own wedding really was too long.

Yong Qi turned and caught her gaze. Smiling widely, he reached out to take her hand in his. She allowed her fingers to slide in between his and leaned against him, shutting her eyes for a moment to savour the closeness.

He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb and whispered softly, "Can't wait for ours?"

Raising her head enough to give him a sheepish smile, she answered, low enough so that only he could hear, "Something like that."

Yong Qi laughed softly, eyes glinting in happiness at her, before raising their entwined hands to his lips to kiss the back of her hand, basking in the feeling of elation at her admission.
At Zi Wei's wedding, Xiao Yan might have thought it was too long a wait until her own wedding, but time managed to slip through her fingers when she wasn't looking. It usually did. So December came and Xiao Yan found herself at another wedding - Yong An's wedding – that was to be a much better representation of what she could expect to happen at her own wedding than Zi Wei's wedding could be.

Before she could get to her wedding, however, it had to be planned first.

And Xiao Yan had never thought before about how much work was involved in the process.

"So, I promised my parents I would check. We are calling you Xiao Yan on the wedding press release and invitation, right?"

The wind of that Friday seemed to cut like glass, and neither Xiao Yan nor Yong Qi had wanted to venture out for dinner. They agreed about this sometime around three in the afternoon over a series of text messages, and Xiao Yan picked up food for the two of them on her way to Xian Fu Gong from work. Now, sat on either side of a low table with the kang warming them, they were both focused on their individual laptops. Before Yong Qi posed his question, the only thing that punctuated the comfortable silence between them had been the rhythmic clicks of keyboards.

Xiao Yan looked up at him, baffled. "Yes, of course."

"Well, they wanted to make sure you really wouldn't just prefer Fang Ci," he explained.

"Would the rest of the world know who Fang Ci is?" she asked through giggles. "Imagine if the press release managed to imply you're marrying someone completely different from me."

"That would certainly give them plenty to write about," Yong Qi said, laughter twinkling in his eyes. "But still, Ah Ma wanted me to check."

"Yes, Xiao Yan is fine." There was a pause as she chewed on her bottom lip, lost in thoughts. Giving Yong Qi an anxious look, she added, "Though...since obviously, my brother and adopted parents will be involved in the actual wedding, that whole thing about me discovering my real family and birth name will have to be...I don't know, announced in some way, right?"

"If only to stop people from wondering who they are once they are seen at the wedding, yes," Yong Qi said. He thought quietly for a moment, before placing his laptop on the table and pushing it slightly away. "Household sent an email earlier – you haven't seen it?"

"I've seen the email but I haven't read it," Xiao Yan said, eyes on her own laptop as she began logging into her inbox to find the email in question. "What is it?"

"The task list of wedding preparation and who does what and when and things like that," Yong Qi said. "Anyway, my point is, one of things on the list is that we need to meet the Imperial Household Press Office within the next week or so to discuss the press release, which is basically the wedding announcement. We can discuss this situation about your family with them then to get their advice."
"A press release so early?" Xiao Yan asked, looking up from the task list attached to the email, which was a scary-looking twenty-page thing, and even then, from the look of it, was only supposed to be taken as bullet points. "The wedding’s literally, like, seven months away."

"Yes, but the moment they start to make any kind of preparation that involves outside suppliers, our chances of keeping the planning process a secret is essentially zero. We might as well get the announcement out of the way, so we can actually get on with the planning."

Of course, that made sense, and Xiao Yan found herself nodding in agreement.

"It looks like Guan Shu Er is going to handle this press release – "

"Not your Communications Secretary?" Xiao Yan interrupted with a slightly surprised look.

"No, because I'm not making my own wedding announcement. My parents are doing that so it's being handled by their Communications Secretary," Yong Qi explained. "I think that we should email her first to brief her about the situation with your family so that she can actually think about the approach before we meet her. Let's not make her job more difficult than it already is by making her think on her feet."

Xiao Yan nodded. "Seems like a good idea. You or me?"

"You, certainly."

"You just want to pass off the work."

She shot him a long, only half-serious, sidelong glare as she said this. However, Yong Qi was amused.

"Only you'd know how much you want to tell her – and consequently, everyone else," he pointed out.

This drew a long sigh from Xiao Yan, because of course, this was true. Yong Qi's smile widened.

"You don't have to do it now," he said, as he made his way over to sit next to her.

Putting his arm around her, he also pressed a kiss against the side of her neck. She struggled half-heartedly, but as she didn't really want to escape him, it was only too easy for him to win and pull her onto his lap.

"We have wedding plans to talk about," she said against his lips, but was not so against what he was trying to start that she would push him away too determinedly.

He pulled away long enough to grin at her. "And as you said, the wedding is in seven months. We've plenty of time."

"Not according to the empress."

"Hmmm?"

"She asked me today if we've given any thoughts to the guest list."

"Oh right." To her admitted disappointment, he pulled away from her now and reached for his computer. After a few taps, he turned the screen around so that she could see it. "We will have complete final say on family and friends, so we can talk about that later, but Household will be giving a list of suggested dignitaries. I asked Laoda to send me the list from his wedding."
Xiao Yan leaned over to Yong Qi's computer and scrolled through the list. Then, slowly she looked up and stared at him.

"Where it says President of the United States…" she said in a carefully controlled voice.

Yong Qi seemed to be striving to keep his expression blank, an effort only marred by the pursing of his lips.

"No," Xiao Yan almost yelled, physically recoiling from the computer. "We are not inviting a mouldy prune to our wedding!"

"He will officially be the president by then, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said, sighing. "It would be undiplomatic to not invite him."

Xiao Yan snorted in disgusted. "What on earth makes you think he cares about diplomacy? Besides, he clashes with the colour scheme."

"Xiao Yan – "

"It doesn't matter!" She threw up her hands in agitation. Her voice turned to desperation. "I don't want to ever meet him, because he will say something that will make me punch him in the face. It's our wedding, Yong Qi! I don't want to invite him to our wedding! And honestly, my brother's going to be there. Even if I could promise you I'll behave, I can't say the same of Xiao Jian."

"I don't want to invite him either," Yong Qi admitted.

"Thank Heaven you're saying that!"

He was quiet in thoughts for a long moment, then sighed again. "I will talk to Ah Ma and Household to see if we could get away with removing him from the guest list, at least for your comfort. After everything they have said to me about how we should feel free to ensure the guest list is what we want, they should allow us this. But even if we don't invite him, chances are, we might still have to meet him at some other point, Xiao Yan."

"I don't know, maybe he gets impeached first. Or assassinated. I'm not really fussed about which."

Yong Qi closed his eyes and shook his head, but he couldn't stop the corner of his lips from twitching, either.

Xiao Yan gave him an exasperated look. "What?"

Wisely, Yong Qi decided to let it go. "What about the other names?" he asked, gesturing to the computer.

She shrugged. "If it's normal practice, then I don't think I mind."

"So you just minded the pumpkin in a wig."

Xiao Yan gave a derisive laugh. "Yes."

"All right," Yong Qi said, after a beat of thought. "The list is always meant to be cut down, anyway. This was for Laoda's wedding. Ours can be trimmed down."

"Just…make sure it's actually trimmed where it needs trimming."

Yong Qi nodded and gave her a smile, reaching over to squeeze her hand. It managed to make her
feel marginally better.

She yawned. "Well, that was an exhausting subject of conversation, for all that it took about three minutes. Can we do the rest of this later?"

Yong Qi closed the lid of his laptop. "I think we've better."

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PRESS RELEASE: Prince Rong is to marry Miss Xia Xiao Yan

The Emperor is delighted to announce the upcoming marriage of Prince Rong to Miss Xia Xiao Yan.

The wedding will take place on 17 July 2017 (24th day of the 6th month of year Ding You) at Xian Fu Gong, with a wedding banquet to follow at Tai He Dian. Further details about the wedding day will be announced in due course.

Miss Xia Xiao Yan was born Fang Ci, to Dr Fang Zhi Hang (PhD) and Dr Du Xue Yin (MD), both originally of Hangzhou, Zhejiang. Dr Fang Zhi Hang was a professor of Classical Chinese at Yong Le University, a university his daughter would later choose to attend, unknowing of its connection to her father. Dr Du Xue Yin was trained at Beijing University of Medicine, and later worked at Xuan Wu Hospital, a hospital affiliated with the university.

Dr Fang Zhi Hang and Dr Du Xue Yin married in 1980. In 1987, a son, Fang Yan, was born to the couple, followed by a daughter, Fang Ci, on 12 March 1990.

In the summer of 1991, the Fang family were involved in a car crash, during which Dr Fang Zhi Hang and Dr Du Xue Yin regretfully lost their lives. Their children were taken to an orphanage, where they were subsequently separated. Miss Fang Ci was eventually transferred to Bai Yun Orphanage, Beijing. Lacking identification at the time of transfer, the staff at the Bai Yun Orphanage renamed and reregistered her as Xia Xiao Yan, which is the name she continues to use until this day.

Master Fang Yan was located by Mr Jiang Su and his wife, Mrs Wan Mu Hong, close friends of his biological parents, who legally adopted him. After some years of being unsuccessful in finding his sister, the Jiang family emigrated to the USA, where they have since resided as naturalised citizens.

Miss Xia Xiao Yan and Mr Fang Yan met while they were both in the employment of Lumos Beijing, a regional office of the UK-based child protection international non-governmental charity organisation. The acquaintance led them to discover that they may be related. DNA analysis later confirmed the relationship.

After learning about the family of her birth, Miss Xia Xiao Yan had since accompanied her brother Mr Fang Yan to the USA several times to meet Mr and Mrs Jiang.

Miss Xia Xiao Yan wishes to share this story of her birth and her current family to the public as part of the announcement of her engagement to Prince Rong. She has also indicated that she will keep her current legal name, instead of reverting back to her birth name of Fang Ci.

"I recognise that Fang Ci is the name my birth parents gave me, however Xia Xiao Yan has also been a part of me for too long now for me to convincingly change my identity," she says. "My brother and his adopted parents are telling me all that they can about my birth parents, and I believe I can still honour and respect their memory through learning about them and remembering the love they have undoubtedly held for myself, my brother and each other."

She has informed Prince Rong and the rest of the Imperial Family of these circumstances. Prince Rong has met Mr Fang Yan, first when he visited Lumos Beijing in official capacities and, later,
several times in more familial situations, after Miss Xia Xiao Yan shared her family story with him. He, as well as the Emperor and Empress have also met Mr and Mrs Jiang, who, along with Mr Fang Yan, will represent the bride's family at the wedding.

Following the wedding, the couple will reside at Xian Fu Gong.

"Why is it so…dry?" Xiao Yan asked, looking up from the printed copy of the press release at Guan Shu Er, who was sitting across a table from her in the sitting room at Xian Fu Gong.

"It's a press release. They are meant to present only the facts, so they are very unemotional, so to speak," the Emperor's Communications Secretary said. "Even more so than news articles, which has some room for emotional bias. There is none in a press release."

"That's what you'd prefer, surely?" Yong Qi, who sat beside Xiao Yan, asked.

"Yes, of course, I'm not saying it's bad or poorly written," Xiao Yan said, looking primarily at Guan Shu Er. "You've covered all the facts we want to announce very well. The…tone just took me by surprise a little, that's all."

"All press releases read like stale rice, Xiao Yan," Yong Qi said, smiling. "If you want flavour, I can name several newspapers which will happily oblige and rewrite this with plenty of juicy embellishments within the day of the press release coming out."

"No thanks," she muttered.

"They will write them anyway," Guan Shu Er said, clearly trying to hold back her amusement and failing. "I am sure we'll even see a biopic of you in a few years' time."

"Oh Heaven," Xiao Yan groaned. "That's the last thing I need."

"Well, I doubt anyone would ask," Yong Qi said. "The movie will end up either being fluffy fairy tale or some angsty tear jerker, neither very true to life. Actually, I feel like we should be placing bets on whether you or Zi Wei will get a biopic first."

Despite of herself, Xiao Yan laughed. "I'm inclined to put my money on Zi Wei."

"Before you do that," Guan Shu Er cut in with a smile, "do I have both your approval on the text? The Emperor has approved, but ultimately both of you need to be comfortable with it."

"Yes, it's fine, Ms Guan, thank you," Yong Qi said. "Xiao Yan?"

"I'm fine, too. Thank you."

"Very well, then it's set to be published on the Palace website next Tuesday. At the same time as it going live, it'll be sent out to all our Imperial Correspondence contacts at major newspapers."

"I'm sure the Press Office phones will be ringing off the hook after that," Yong Qi said. "You'll be very busy."

"We are prepared for it, Sir," Guan Shu Er said.

"As always. Thank you again."

Guan Shu Er nodded in acknowledgement, and after shaking hands with both Yong Qi and Xiao Yan, she gathered up her papers and briefcase, and quickly departed.
When Xiao Yan knocked on Grace's door the next morning, it was admittedly with no little trepidation. She wasn't sure why she was so nervous. Perhaps it was because this would be the first time she was telling anyone else other than family and very close friend about her upcoming marriage. There was probably no going back from this. She wouldn't be able to change her mind without some sense of embarrassment or loss of face after the news spread beyond those closest to her (and his family's staff). Not that she wanted to change her mind anyway.

"I need to talk to you about some news," she said as she sat down on the chair opposite her boss.

"You're getting married?"

Xiao Yan blinked owlishly for a second, as Grace watched her with a calm smile.

"Seriously, Xiao Yan, it would be the least surprising thing you say to me all year."

There was another beat, then Xiao Yan shrugged. "You said it, I didn't."

"But I'm right? You are?"

"Yes. The actual wedding still quite far off, but there's a press release going out soon, and I should tell you before the news break."

"Well, firstly congratulations!" Grace said, smiling.

Xiao Yan gave her a slightly sheepish smile back. "Thanks."

"When is it? The wedding?"

"July," Xiao Yan answered. "So you have plenty of notice about my resignation, though I guess don't start recruiting until the press release goes out."

"Of course," Grace said, laughing. "We won't start recruiting until closer to your leaving anyway. When would that be?"

"Yes. I've been told to aim for early June, about six weeks before the wedding, though it can be pretty flexible depending on how you get on with replacing me."

"I'm sure there's plenty of time to manage the date you want."

Xiao Yan looked around, a sudden wave of wistfulness swept over her. "I will miss this place, though. I learnt a lot here."

Grace smiled. "It's the job that does that, especially when it's your first."

"Yes, but thank you for the opportunity. The time I spent here really was invaluable, and from the way things are looking, we'll likely still work together in the future."

"Oh?"

"Well, the Empress Foundation is looking at starting a project working on equal access to education for girls in disadvantaged provinces, and it will require partnering with other donors and NGOs. The project would be operating as a separate entity and the idea – after months of discussion – is that Zi Wei and I would co-chair slash co-direct it – we haven't worked out the jargons yet. I'm sure we will be approaching Lumos for partnering opportunity in some capacity or other at some point…though technically I'm not supposed to tell you any of this just yet."
"My lips are sealed, then," Grace said. "You are excited about this."

"Well, yes, I am," Xiao Yan said, shrugging, "mostly because it means that at least my life after marrying Yong Qi won't just purely be smiling daintily and small talks and waving and cutting ribbons, none of which I'm actually very good at."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, Xiao Yan."

"I hope so," she said, feeling suddenly rather breathless. "Well, that's the plan, anyway."

"Well, congratulations to you on both these good news, Xiao Yan, and I really do wish you all the best."

"Thank you." Xiao Yan flashed a sudden grin. "And don't worry, you'll be invited to the wedding, as will everyone in the office."

"I wasn't about to fish on that score," Grace said, laughing and shaking her head. "But congratulations, again, Xiao Yan."

Yong Qi had made her a schedule, so to speak.

The press release was being published on the Palace's website and sent by email to the press promptly at 9AM that Tuesday morning. Expect every microblogging platform to explode within the hour complete with hashtags and certainly by noon, news articles covering the contents of the press release, discussing the new information about her family as well as speculating on the kind details of the wedding that neither bride nor groom had made any kind of decision on, would start appearing on various online newspapers.

Grace was to be out of the office for a meeting that morning, which meant that when the news break, all of Xiao Yan's colleagues would be on a long leash to gossip about it. This meant, basically, that she had just over an hour of peace at work that morning before she should just throw all hopes of accomplishing anything out of the window.

This was good news, she reminded herself, and she really did want to share. That was something that Yong Qi kept telling her, too. And yet, she was acutely aware that the enormous twists her stomach was making now wasn't about how the news would break – she knew how; she had read it, approved it – but how it would be received.

She really didn't know why she suddenly cared about how strangers thought about her life and the things that went on in it.

The first sign of the news breaking in her office came when someone crashed into the partition around Xiao Yan's desk, making her jump nearly out of her skin.

"Oh my god, is it true? It's true, isn't it?" Chan Yu babbled, not really giving Xiao Yan a chance to get a word in. "When did this happen? Why didn't you tell us?"

"I'm guessing the press release is out," Xiao Yan said mildly, looking up at the clock on the wall. 9:15AM. Guan Shu Er would be nothing but punctual; Xiao Yan's surprise was only at how fast the news reached her colleagues.

Ming Yue swivelled her chair around before either Xiao Yan or Chan Yu could say anything else. "What are you talking about, Chan Yu?"
Beside her, Cai Xia also looked up curiously.

"Aren't you guys on any kind of social media?" Chan Yu demanded. "Everyone's sharing the link."

"Of course we're on social media," Cai Xia said, "except we're busy...you know, working."

"Link to what?" Ming Yue said at the same time.

"The news has only been out for fifteen minutes, Chan Yu," Xiao Yan said, when her colleague in question ignored both Ming Yue and Cai Xia and only turned to her expectantly.

"So it's true?" she demanded again.

"Of course it's true!" Xiao Yan said, laughing. "It's an official Palace press release!"

"Oh. Em. Gee," Chan Yu gasped, actually spelling out the letters in English. "Really? Why didn't you tell us BEFORE?"

"Because I literally wasn't allowed to...?"

"Whaaaa – ?" Ming Yue asked, looking from Xiao Yan to Chan Yu, still confused as to the subject of their conversation.

"Our boss is getting married," Cai Xia said in a singsong voice, looking up from her computer, apparently having located the announcement. "The Palace has just put out a press release."

Her announcement drew attention of everyone else in the room, and Xiao Yan soon found herself stuck at her desk while all her colleagues crowded around it with effusive exclamations of congratulations and excited chatter among themselves. All Xiao Yan could do was sit with her elbows propped on the table and her face cupped in her hands, looking up at them in amusement.

"Thank you, you guys," she said once everyone has managed to offer their congratulations.

"But that means you're leaving us," Ming Yue said. "That's so sad."

"I'm not leaving for another six months!" Xiao Yan exclaimed, laughing. "At least."

"Are we invited to the wedding?" someone else asked.

"Yes!"

"I don't know if it's going be worth it to attend this wedding. We might end up in deficit," Chan Yu teased. "I mean, how much do you put in a red envelope for an imperial wedding? Like, normally you're supposed to put in your share of the meal, but much do banquets at the Palace go for per head?"

"No red envelope!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "Honestly."

"What?"

"We're not accepting red envelopes from guests at the banquet," Xiao Yan explained. "Only from family and very close, intimate friends who will be at the ceremony, which will be private." There was a beat. "Well, more or less private. Restricted, anyway."

"Seriously?" Ming Zhu asked. "Normal people come up with a profit after their wedding."
Xiao Yan laughed. "Normal people don't invite all the world's remaining monarchies to their wedding reception." She dropped her head on the table. Her next words came out muffled. "I don't recommend it, by the way. It's very stressful."

"And you won't make any money off it, either. Wow, that sounds like a horrible deal," Chan Yu said.

Xiao Yan's shoulders shook with laughter and by the time she raised her head, she had tears in her eyes.

"Yeah, well, we can't be seen to be making money at our wedding," she said through the remnants of her giggles. "Apparently. So, no red envelopes."

"So you're saying that you'll be having probably the year's most expensive wedding and you're paying for all of it yourself?" Cai Xia asked. "That really does suck."

"You guys do remember who I'm marrying, right?" Xiao Yan asked, squinting up at her colleagues. "We'll live. And if you really are that desperate to give me money, there will be a fund set up that people can donate to and all of it goes to charities…Come back to me on that later though, we haven't decided anything about it yet."

This announcement only led to her being immediately more peppered by questions, which eventually led to curious wonders of how long she had actually been engaged and how the whole engagement came about. Surprisingly, Xiao Yan found that she did not much mind sharing these details; if anything the attention and the ability to share gave her a new sense of mounting excitement. Then again, if she were to be completely honest with herself, Xiao Yan had to admit that there was a small part of her (okay, a pretty big part) that wanted to have the validation that came with knowing that people around here were truly happy for her and Yong Qi. After all, they were announcing their wedding! If she was going to get married in full view of a billion people, she would be glad for any knowledge that there were people who really did rejoice in the prospect of the wedding as much as the two of them and their families did.

2017

March

Zi Wei woke up to chill on her nose and could not go back to sleep.

For a moment, she only laid there languidly, her eyes still closed, listening to the familiar sound of Er Kang's even breathing.

When she did finally decide that it was time to open her eyes, she found herself confused for a second. Instead of the familiar ivory-coloured ceiling of their bedroom, she found herself staring at the yellow silk canopy and frames of a traditional lacquered wooden bed. Her confusion was brief, as she realised that instead of being in her and Er Kang's house, she was back in her old bedroom at Xian Fu Gong.

That was when she remembered. They had all gathered at Xian Fu Gong the night before, Saturday night, to celebrate Xiao Yan's birthday, which was actually today, Sunday, but none of them really wanted to risk a hangover on Monday morning. It had proved to be a good decision, as by the time they had called it a night, it was one o'clock in the morning. Er Tai and Sai Ya, Liu Qing and Liu Hong were close enough to return home, but there seemed little sense in Zi Wei and Er Kang attempting the distance to their house at that hour. They could have asked for someone to drive them,
of course, but that would have required getting out of doors in the chilly March night. Zi Wei and Xiao Yan were intending to spend the day together anyway, so there was no point of Zi Wei going home only to return in the morning when Xian Fu Gong had more than enough room for them to stay over.

Feeling restless, Zi Wei got out of bed and dressed, making her way into the kitchen, not expecting anyone to be there this early in the morning. However, she was surprised when she arrived to find someone already there before her, sitting at the small kitchen table, mulling over already lukewarm tea and picking at a slice of the leftover birthday cake. It was even more surprising when that person turned out to be Xiao Yan.

"What miracle got you up this early?" Zi Wei asked, looking for a mug to make herself some tea.

Xiao Yan only gave her a decidedly half-hearted smile and shrugged. "I couldn't sleep."

Zi Wei poured hot water over her tea and then took to mug over to sit down next to Xiao Yan.

"You okay?" she asked searchingly.

Xiao Yan shrugged again, which was not a promising reaction. Before Zi Wei could think of what to say, Xiao Yan nudged the box that contained the leftover cake towards her.

"You might as well finish this with me," she said, "there's not enough for Yong Qi and Er Kang anyway."

Zi Wei continued to look at Xiao Yan with some trepidation for a moment, before going to get a plate and spoon. She knew that Xiao Yan, if left with the final slice of cake in the box, probably would just have eaten it out of the box.

Back at the table, Zi Wei eased the slice of cake from the box to the plate. For a couple of minutes, they sat side by side, each picking at their cake, not really eating, both with different thoughts occupying them.

Then, Xiao Yan sighed.

"What's wrong?" Zi Wei asked, deciding to try again.

This time, Xiao Yan looked at her, a thoughtful expression on her face that indicated that the answer was much more complicated than Zi Wei expected it to be.

"What is it like?" Xiao Yan finally asked, after another prolonged silence. There was even a longer pause before she would elaborate, giving any sense to her question. "Being married."

Zi Wei's first instinctive reaction was panic and she was unable to prevent the anxious frown descending on her face. Thankfully, she managed to hold back from asking out loud the myriad of questions that was threatening to escape from her, even if she couldn't help but ask them in her head.

What has happened? Are you having second thoughts about the wedding? What will happen if you call it off now?

Xiao Yan looked oblivious to the storm of increasingly alarming questions that were appearing in Zi Wei's head. She forced herself to think more rationally, and give her friend some credit.

No, Xiao Yan and Yong Qi were perfectly comfortable the night before, and they had even discussed the wedding at one point. They had both been relaxed and happy and laughing. If there
was a problem, they wouldn't have been able to hide it. They were both horrible at it, especially when it came to their feelings for each other. Whatever was causing Xiao Yan to ask this question must have appeared sometime during the night.

"Did you and Yong Qi have an argument?" Zi Wei couldn't help but ask, though at the same time, she couldn't imagine what they could have argued about, considering they all only retired when all of them were quite tipsy, and surely that wouldn't give them much time before falling into bed for any kind of argument.

"No," Xiao Yan said, "we didn't argue at all. Actually, I don't quite remember the last time we had any kind of serious argument that wasn't just…you know, playful disagreement. Everything is…everything is fine. More than fine. It's perfect."

"But…" Zi Wei prompted, when she didn't continue.

"But…I don't know."

Zi Wei was quiet for a moment, savouring the cake frosting at the tip of her spoon. She tried to remember what it was like, being where Xiao Yan was at the moment, and thought about Xiao Yan's actual words.

"Everything's perfect," she repeated, then looked closely at her friend. "You're happy and comfortable together, as you are now. And you're wondering if you should even try to do anything to change that. If it's not broken, don't fix it?"

Xiao Yan nodded, stabbing her cake with her spoon. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "I mean, I know we can't just live together and call it a day, because there's still enough social stigmas associated with the idea to raise eyebrows. But if we're being honest, we're almost living together anyway. The only thing that moving in together would actually change is that I won't have to remember to actually go to my apartment every once in a while."

Zi Wei couldn't help it. She let out a laugh, which thankfully Xiao Yan joined in, though with less humour and more exasperation.

"What I mean is, why are we going through with all of this fussing and planning a huge wedding? It's all full of decisions that ultimately is supposed to be about pleasing ourselves but since there are too many choices of…I don't know, cake flavour and flowers and dress colours that half the time I don't even know what I want, and yet I'm deciding all this anyway while being scrutinised by the whole world and putting up with all the expenses which I'm well aware I won't have to pay but still it's bloody expensive. And the end result is just…a more intense version of what we're already doing now. I mean, the difference between getting married and living together, as far as I'm concerned, is…basically a piece of paper."

"It's a very important piece of paper, as far as the world is concerned," Zi Wei pointed out.

"Sod the world," Xiao Yan muttered. "People I don't even know have no right to judge what I do with my life."

"If only that's how it works."

Xiao Yan blew out an exasperated breath and took an aggressive sip of tea.

"It is different though," Zi Wei said. "I mean, put aside the title and everything that comes with that, because the trade-off is that you lose some of your freedom. But just two people being married is different than two people just being together."
"How?"

"For one thing, you're together all the time. I know it feels like that now, but right now, you still have the option of your own space as a backup. And as a backup, you don't want to have to fall to it, but the idea that it's there if you need it is a comfort and it works on your subconscious. I don't know, I feel like it's easier to avoid arguing about things that annoy you about each other if you know you can still step away. Ultimately you might not step away and you put up with it, but you have the way out as a comfort at the back of your mind. Once you've switched your brain to the fact that you're in this together and there's no exit – which is of course not true, but you know, relatively speaking – then you let things get to you a lot more."

"What kind of things?"

"I don't know. Silly things. Er Kang has a very specific system of how to arrange his clothes in the closet, and apparently, I'm still doing it wrong. According to him I'm still hanging his suits facing the wrong way, whatever that means. I don't even know how it matters. On the other hand, he seems to think the rice cooker is a magical pot that you can cook everything in, and I know it says on the instruction manual that you can make soup and porridge with it, but I want to draw the line of actually using it like a pressure cooker for a whole chicken, which for one thing, doesn't work…"

Xiao Yan burst out laughing, spraying the table with crumbs of cake.

"These are the problems, Xiao Yan! I'm serious!" Zi Wei said, though she was smiling also.

"I know you are," Xiao Yan said, brushing the cake crumbs from the table. "But marriage is a commitment for life. Wouldn't that mean you would have more tolerance and be able to not let such small things get between you?"

"In some way, yes, but on the other hand, they are things that are there in your life so constantly," Zi Wei said. "I mean, I guess the trick is recognising that these are small things, and the moment you're letting these disagreements blow to aggressive fights and you're hurting each other, then maybe the real reason you're fighting is another underlying reason."

Xiao Yan mulled over these words, lips clamped around the spoon in her mouth.

"It's not all the silly things," Zi Wei added. "I mean, you get used to the small things in time. We talk about different things now that we're married. We talk about money more than we did before, about how much we have and what to do with it."

"Money is not a new topic for me and Yong Qi, at all."

"It will be, though," Zi Wei contradicted. "The way you talk about it will be different, because it won't just his money anymore, it'll be yours, together."

Xiao Yan still looked disbelieving.

"Your perspective will change, Xiao Yan, trust me, even if you can't imagine it right now. And there are other big things, not just money. It's things like Er Kang's career change and the Equal Education Access project you and I are starting, how much our time that will eat up; how both are going to affect our lives; how we're going to adjust to that; or when we might want to have children and the preparations we might need for that; if it's not right away, then what we want to work towards in the meantime. And don't tell me you and Yong Qi don't have much choice in these matters. You do, you just also have limitations, and everyone has some kind of limitation. You just learn to work with yours, together."
Xiao Yan nodded thoughtfully and started nibbling at her cake again.

"And Xiao Yan, I think the big questions are in some way the easier ones to discuss and answer," Zi Wei added. "Those are the things that are going to have big impact but it'll be over time. The little things that affect your everyday life can seem like a much bigger deal, because they're there constantly."

"And the wedding…"

"Oh Xiao Yan, you had fun at our wedding! We all did and that's how it's supposed to be! I know yours and Yong Qi's will be a little different, but it's still going to ultimately be family and friends and fun. I know, right now, with all the preparations and organisation and everyone asking you left and right whether you prefer white or off-white table cloth, that's all very stressful, but that doesn't have to mean that you have to see it as a sign that you're doing something wrong."

"This is really silly, right?" Xiao Yan asked, putting her head down on her hand. "I mean, I just woke up this morning and it's like everything just smacked me in the face, and I just…"

She trailed off, shrugging hopelessly.

Zi Wei reached out and took her hand. "It's okay to feel overwhelmed, Xiao Yan, but I'd be surprised if you didn't find yourself overwhelmed at some point. You've organised events for work before. You know what it's like."

"It's not the same."

"It is similar. You go through all the stress and arguments and decisions, and in the end after everything goes off smoothly, you feel good about it all, don't you?"

Xiao Yan nodded. Zi Wei gave her an encouraging smile.

"And this is your wedding. It'll be worth it in the end. I promise."

After losing herself in thoughts for a few seconds, Xiao Yan finally looked up at Zi Wei and smiled back. Then she reached around to pull Zi Wei into a hug. "Thank you. I guess sometimes all I do need is just some cake and wise, calming words."

Zi Wei laughed and gave her a comforting pat on the back. "Anytime."
"Well?" Xiao Yan asked, looking with slight trepidation at Yong Qi who was standing in front of her.

He gave her an once-over with that soft look in his eyes that managed to make her feel both deliriously pleased and faint-inducing nervousness. Or perhaps the faint feeling was just a result of anticipating the interview they were about to participate in.

"You'll do," Yong Qi said, smiling at her, then leaned over to kiss her cheek gently. "Really, Xiao Yan, you look amazing. And you'll be fine."

"I hope so," she answered.

Despite his words, she was unable to resisting giving a self-conscious smooth over the burgundy chiffon top she was wearing over white skirt in matching floral patterns. Yong Qi's tie was also of the same colour.

"Ready?" Yong Qi asked, pulling his jacket on.

"Not really."

"It will be all right, Xiao Yan. You've met He Na before."

Xiao Yan exhaled nervously. "Just because I've met the interviewer before doesn't mean that I can't be nervous about this interview."

"Well, it'll be good practice for you," he said with an encouraging smile. "And they promised, this won't be more than an hour."

"Just promise me you'll shut me up if I say something stupid."

Yong Qi laughed. "I'm sure it won't come to that – "

"Just – in case – "

"All right, fine, I promise."

She gave him a sheepish smile, then tried to gather herself as Yong Qi held out his hand. With a final deep breath, she took it, feeling emboldened when he squeezed her hand tightly. His touch, as it usually did, relaxed her, and she was able to give him a genuine smile as they made their way out of Xian Fu Gong and headed towards the Imperial Garden.

In the Garden, a bench was set up under a pair of cypress trees that Xiao Yan had been told were over three-hundred years old. Over those centuries, the trees' branches grew entwined together, so that now, if it weren't for the fact that there were two roots, it could be seen as one tree. Then again,
that was the point of the symbolism, and likely something similar to this was where the idiom came from.

When Yong Qi and Xiao Yan arrived, there were wires running underfoot as cameras have already been set up for their interview.

"Wang Ye, Miss Xiao Yan," their interview, He Na, called as soon as she spotted them. "Hello."

As the three of them exchanged pleasantries and Xiao Yan found herself relaxing slightly, the crew hovered around, checking the last of the set up for the interview, then fitting Xiao Yan and Yong Qi with their microphones.

"Thank you for agreeing to do this interview," He Na said. "I know that you both value your privacy, so it is an honour and a privilege that you are allowing me to lift the curtains a little."

"It's our pleasure," Yong Qi said.

"It is," Xiao Yan agreed. "And this is a happy event coming up for us, and I think if there's ever anything that I might want to share with the world, it's this."

"Well said, Miss Xiao Yan, well said," He Na said, smiling.

"Please, just Xiao Yan."

"All right." The set up for the interview seemed to have completed, and at that moment, their interviewer gestured to the bench. "Please, if you would take a seat, we can begin."

Xiao Yan and Yong Qi sat close together under the boughs of the cypress trees, while He Na settled down on a chair set just diagonally from them, so that they would look at her during the interview, rather directly into the camera.

"Before we begin," He Na said, "I just want to remind you again that this isn't a live interview, so if there is any question you don't want to answer, or anything that comes up in the conversation that you would like to edit out, please feel free to let us know."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Yong Qi said with a friendly smile. "We have seen these questions beforehand, after all. And if we could please just stick to names, it'll be fine."

"I am all for that as well. Shall we begin?"

Yong Qi and Xiao Yan both nodded.

"Well, needless to say, I have many questions, but not a lot of time. How about we start from the beginning? We know that you met at university, but neither of you have really ever talked about how you met, specifically. Would you mind telling us now how you met?"

"Well, I think the first thing I should mention in telling this story is that it can be difficult to concentrate in a university library when you are me," Yong Qi said, grinning.

"He's generally a disturbance to public order," Xiao Yan joked, "to libraries, especially."

He Na laughed.

"Yes, well, basically I managed to find this secluded spot in the library, where I'd come to study. And then after about two weeks...Xiao Yan discovered it too."
"It's not my fault that the spot you picked really was the best place to work," Xiao Yan said, smiling. Turning to He Na, she added, "Basically we first saw each other when we decided to study at two tables near each other this corner of the library. We didn't speak to each other or anything."

"You didn't come over to introduce yourself?" He Na asked.

"No!" Xiao Yan exclaimed. "I mean, it was a library, it wasn't exactly a socialising place. We just sort of…studied near each other for a few weeks."

"You could have come up with some excuse, like ask to borrow a pen or something," Yong Qi said with a teasing twinkle in his eyes.

"And wouldn't you have seen right through that?" Xiao Yan asked.

Yong Qi thought for a second then nodded. "Probably. It probably would have changed things. Now that I think about it, maybe where we are right now did depend on neither of us actually speaking to the other in the library."

"No?" He Na asked. "Then how did you become acquainted?"

"It was raining really hard one evening, and I was driving home, when I saw Xiao Yan walking back to her dormitory from class in the rain," Yong Qi said. "I recognised her from the library, I suppose, so I stopped and offered her a ride back to her dormitory."

Xiao Yan looked down at her lap and smiled slightly to herself at the embellishment of the facts. Both Yong Qi and she had agreed that it was just much easier to give the simplest version of events.

"We talked in the car," he continued. "And after knowing each other, we started to become more friendly whenever we run into each other in the library. We started hanging out and everything just went on from there. It's quite hard now to pinpoint a moment when things become more than just friendship; it's been quite a while now. But I think that's how it should be in relationships that started out that way. It certainly worked for us."

He Na looked down at the note cards in her hands for a second. "It certainly has been a long time since you first met. By the time you marry, I believe it would have been seven years since you first met."

"Yes, just short of under a couple of months," Xiao Yan said.

"So it's been a long time. When during those years did marriage become a possibility for you? When did you start speaking of the possibility?" He Na asked.

"I think…in some strange ways, the idea of marriage has always been there from the very beginning," Yong Qi said. "I can't speak for Xiao Yan here, but for me, at least, it was a consideration from very early on, even if I might not always be actually conscious of it. I certainly know that there were expectations, or maybe just speculations – not from family, but generally from the public – from very early on after our relationship became public that we marry. But I also knew this was never something we could rush into, not simply for the sake of expectation of the public, or even of our families if they ever expressed such expectations. The important thing was, of course, whether Xiao Yan could grasp what she would be marrying into and could accept that. It's undeniably been a long road, but I would have happily taken it even slower, if that was what we needed to be completely sure."

"Yes, certainly. And I just want to add that I really do appreciate, so much, how patient Yong Qi – as well as his family – has always been with me," Xiao Yan said, looking over at Yong Qi and
reaching out, squeezing his hand. "In terms of...of chemistry, I think, that we both knew each other were special from early on. But this has always been bigger than us – and honestly, I'm still learning how much bigger it really is – and for that, we needed to really needed the time to contemplate it and make sure we were absolutely certain that we can do this together."

"And was that need to be sure the reason you were not together for a period of time?" He Na asked. "Do you regret that time?"

Xiao Yan took a moment to ponder over her answer before speaking. She felt surprisingly calm by the question, but then perhaps the fact that Yong Qi's hand was still grasping hers and his thumb was stroking the pulse point at her wrist helped.

"I don't think...I can't say I regret it," she finally answered slowly. "I think when you're together all the time, and dealing with so much uncertainty in your life – as we were at the time, when both of us were at different crossroads in our lives – you can lose sight of the woods for the trees. For me, at least, our time apart allowed me to learn a lot about myself, and about what I want from life in general. It's not something I regret, because I don't think it was inherently bad, that we were apart for a time. What is important is that we are back together now."

"I agree, I agree completely," Yong Qi said. "Also, I would think that these stumbling blocks aren't exclusive to our relationship, that every other relationship go through the same sort of ups and downs. Sometimes you can hang on and get through it together. But sometimes there are challenges that you have to solve yourself, to understand what you yourself are capable of, before coming together again. For us, our period apart taught us what we can accomplish on our own, so that we can have a better idea of how we could do all the things we want to do together."

"Speaking of together, I suppose I should get to the question that many wishes to know. When did the engagement happen and how?"

"I think the information that will interest you most, He Na, is that it happened a long time before we announced it to the world," Xiao Yan said, smiling. "Yong Qi proposed back in...in late 2015, actually."

"But your engagement was only announced late last year." He Na pointed out.

"Yes, it was over a year later that we announced it," Yong Qi said. "Our families knew before...very soon after we decided between the two of us. I don't think we ever thought we'd keep it within the family for so long, but the reason for that were...numerous. There were so many things happening around the time we first become engaged. I mean, Zi Wei was getting married, then my older brother was getting married. Neither of us wanted to steal their thunder, so to speak."

"But if we're speaking realistically, we have talked about marriage for a long time, as we said," Xiao Yan added. "The actual engagement came at a time when we both felt it was the right time, I suppose, but it wasn't...the question, when it came, wasn't a massive shock. It obviously can't be, not when this isn't a decision that either of us ever could make lightly."

"I think it must have been for the best for you both too, to have all that time to enjoy being engaged in private, to really think about your upcoming marriage without all the speculation from outside," He Na said.

"Yes, in many ways, you are right," Yong Qi said.

"And no matter how long the wait, here you both are at last," He Na said, gesturing to the trees behind them, having reached the overarching symbolism of the whole interview. Because of course a
semi-scripted interview had to have symbolism. "Of course, you both know that over the years, these two trees behind you have become a symbol of lasting love. Yong Qi, many couples in your family, including your parents and your siblings and their spouses, have had their official engagement or wedding photos taken and or spoken to the media under these trees. How do the two of you feel, right now, sitting under the trees that symbolise eternal love yourselves?"

"Certain it's a lot to live up to but also these trees represent the many good examples we hope to emulate," he answered. "Both of us also hope, of course, that being here now will allow us to receive the blessing of the happy marriages that came before us."

"Yong Qi, do you ever think about how your mother would have thought about this wedding, and Xiao Yan, do you ever imagine what it would have been like to meet her?" He Na asked.

Yong Qi turned to Xiao Yan first. "Xiao Yan?"

"Well, I would love to have had the opportunity to meet and to know Yong Qi's mother –"

"So would I," Yong Qi said, smiling, which was met with chuckles from his companions.

"As I said before," Xiao Yan continued, "Yong Qi's family have been entirely welcoming from the very beginning, and I only wish I could have had the chance to have the same kind of relationship with his mother. I've spent a lot of time since being engaged learning what it means to become a part of Yong Qi's family. Everything I've learnt so far has taught me how much Yong Qi's mother has accomplished for the country during few years she had as Crown Princess, and I think that's astonishing. I can only hope that I will be able to follow her example and that of the Empress, and do my bit as well."

"Joking aside," Yong Qi said, smiling softly at Xiao Yan and linking their fingers together, "it really is in moments when I'm at the cusp of these huge changes in my life that I find myself wishing I could have known my mother, to at least be able to have some idea of how she would react or feel about the decisions I'm making. Right now, though, as we're moving towards our future, I only like to hope that my mother would be proud of how far Xiao Yan and I have come. I also hope that she'd want us to look towards building our own future. The Empress, my sister-in-law and Xiao Yan are all very different and I don't think there has ever been any expectation from my father, or really anyone else in the family, that they would have to do all the same things as my mother and in the same way. It's about taking what each person have into the duties and role and making it their own destiny in their own way. And I think Xiao Yan will do a wonderful job of that. Though that's not to say that my mother and her legacy won't have a place in Xiao Yan's life or our life together." He turned and paused for a second to look at Xiao Yan thoughtfully. "I think we can hint a little, about what you have planned with the Empress Foundation, don't you think?"

"Yes, I think I can talk about it briefly."

"I mean, we can always check and ask you to edit it out if it isn't time to say anything yet," Yong Qi said.

"I am curious about what this great secret is," He Na said.

"This is the first time any of us has actually talked about this publicly," Yong Qi added, "so you're getting this exclusive."

He Na merely smiled and looked expectant.

"To be honest, I have always thought about what my role would be, marrying Yong Qi," Xiao Yan
said. "I've always known that I wouldn't be happy without something to occupy me. And I know there will be engagements and appearances, but I also know that I want something to do beyond all that. After discussing with Yong Qi's family – and honestly, everyone has been incredibly supportive and encouraging – we have come to an arrangement that I'm really excited for."

The next few minutes of the interview were spent talking about the new project that Xiao Yan and Zi Wei were working on. Eventually, of course, the conversation had to turn back to the happy couple.

"Your wedding announcement did also accompany a very interesting story about your family, Xiao Yan," He Na said. "Yong Qi, have you met everyone now?"

"Yes," Yong Qi replied, "I have met Xiao Yan's brother and her adoptive parents."

"And how was that meeting?"

"Well, you know, as with any meeting with future in-laws, for me, it was a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. But the first meeting went well, very well, and everyone was supportive – "

"That's after they've gotten over the shock," Xiao Yan said dryly.

"They were shocked that you were marrying a prince, Xiao Yan?" He Na asked.

"Well, no, because we weren't engaged when they first found out about who Yong Qi was, in my life. The shock was more the idea of him, and the fact that I didn't exactly volunteer the information. But at the time my family found out about us, we weren't together, so I hadn't thought about mentioning him to them yet. But, you know, these days, it's not easy to keep a relationship like ours – on-going or not – a secret." She paused and grinned. "But I think they were still a little in shock from the development of our engagement though, when they met Yong Qi."

"Nevertheless, I was really happy to find that Xiao Yan's family really wished us well. My first meeting with Mr and Mrs Jiang was not my first meeting with Fang Yan, Xiao Yan's brother, but it was my first meeting with him after we got engaged. He did try to threaten me a little bit."

They all laughed at this obviously not serious description.

"But you know, I have sisters," Yong Qi continued, smiling, "I know what it's like. But no, it was obviously mostly just in jest."

"You've won him over, really," Xiao Yan reassured him. "Though if you confront him about it, he'd probably deny it. But he can see what I see in you." The three of them laughed again. "But in seriousness, we've been very lucky, I think, that both our families have realised that we need their support and have been very generous in giving it."

"So we shouldn't expect any conflict between the two of you with your respective in-laws?"

"No, not at all," Yong Qi said. "I am really looking forward to knowing Xiao Yan's family better, and I really can't be happier for her that she's found them. And my family has always adored Xiao Yan, so I think we will all get along very well."

"Xiao Yan, marriage is, of course, a big endeavour in anyone's life, but this is an even bigger thing you're getting into. How are you feeling about that?"

"Very nervous, of course," Xiao Yan said, laughing shakily. "But honestly, I am very excited as well. I've had a long time to think about all of this, and I don't think a little nervousness is a bad thing at this point. I've always been very aware of how massive a step this would be, and I actually think it
would be concerning if I didn't find it nerve-wracking. I've seen Zi Wei enter this life and I've seen her navigate through it, and I've supported her through it, so in some way I'm even more hyper-aware of the challenges. But at the same time, I also know that Zi Wei will be there for me as I was for her, and Yong Qi's family as well."

He Na looked significantly at her hand, still enclosed in Yong Qi's. Xiao Yan had a feeling this would be the moment the camera zoomed in on their hands as well.

"And your prince is there too, of course," He Na remarked.

Xiao Yan turned to look at Yong Qi. She was sure there was a stupid, goofy smile on her face now, and the camera was catching it all but she couldn't bring herself to feel self-conscious about it. "Yes, of course. And he's always been there."

Yong Qi smiled back at her. The pause that followed probably lasted only a second, but to Xiao Yan, it seemed to stretch into infinity. It was with some difficulty that the two of them finally turned their attention back to He Na, as politeness dictated.

"Well, this is an obvious question, and you must know it's coming because everyone would like to know. What are your plans for a family, for children?"

"Well, I can't say it's anything we've planned yet," Yong Qi said. "At this point, we'd like to just enjoy the getting married part first."

"That's his way of saying, we don't want to talk about it publicly and it's none of your business," Xiao Yan added helpfully, which made He Na laugh.

"I'm sure once we're married, there will be plenty of opportunities for that question to come up again, and we can perhaps address it then," Yong Qi said, more diplomatically.

She thankfully got the message and did not press the issue further. Admittedly, they had discussed this question at length in preparation for the recording. He Na knew she wasn't going to get an answer, and both Yong Qi and Xiao Yan knew she would ask anyway, because what was an interview about a marriage without a question about children?

"We're coming to the end of our time," He Na said, "and I'd like to end with this question: What is the one thing you like most about each other?"

"Xiao Yan is constantly show me new ways to look at the world, from beyond the privileges that I was born with. Sometimes I think about the song, A Whole New World, from Aladdin, and Xiao Yan really is the Aladdin to my Jasmine…"

Xiao Yan burst out laughing at that. "Am I supposed to feel flattered or offended by that comparison?"

"Flattered, just feel flattered," Yong Qi said, smiling mischievously at her, which made her shake her head in exasperation.

"Xiao Yan?" He Na prompted. "What's your answer?"

In that moment, Xiao Yan couldn't help but look deeply into Yong Qi's eyes; despite his joking answer, he was looking at her with a gentle smile that suggested that there was an entirely different layer of sincerity to his words. Perhaps the cynical part of her was frozen amid all the excitement and emotions surrounding their impending marriage, but in that moment, the only thing Xiao Yan could think of was that, maybe, there was no greater declaration of love than to be compared to a Disney
princess and her beau, even if in the analogy, he was the princess.

As for her own answer, she found herself being more candid than she was even planning to be. "I guess...Yong Qi makes me feel safe. Growing up with the childhood that I had, safe wasn't a feeling I knew very well...or sometimes, at all. And I've always taken care of myself, and I know I can do that, and I will, but at the same time, with Yong Qi, I know he'll be there to watch over me, and that gives a kind of freedom I never felt until I met him."

Xiao Yan was surprised that both she and Yong Qi managed to keep control of their emotions following that speech, and later, when she had watched the edited interview, she was relieved that He Na – or whoever was in charge of the editing – decided to cut from them immediately after her last word, to the He Na's closing remarks, which actually followed several minutes later.

The truth was, Xiao Yan had not intended to say this much. If anything, she had intended to do a lot of theatre for this interview. But there was something about that moment, and she spoke the words before she could think better of them. And yet, she didn't regret saying them in this context at all. If anything, she realised that theatre really wasn't required when all the things she wanted to say and share was also the truth.

"You meant what you said?" Yong Qi whispered to her later as the photographer for their interview photoshoot adjusted his camera.

Xiao Yan didn't need any more elaboration to know what he was talking about. "Yes, of course."

Yong Qi gave her that same intense, gentle smile from earlier, and leaned in the whisper, "I love you too," before placing a soft kiss on her nose.

Unbeknownst to them, the photographer had captured the unstaged, unscripted moment, and the photo of the nose-kiss ended up being the main photo of the whole interview.

17 July 2017

The wedding day arrived and Xiao Yan did not think she had ever been so overwhelmed with such weight of numerous feelings. Somehow – and she admittedly did not retain much in details except the general feelings of nervousness so powerful that it made the tips of her fingers tingle and the surreal sense of happiness – she got ready for the big day. Zi Wei, being the groom's sister after all, was not there, but her family and friends were, including Liu Qing and Liu Hong, and her previous dorm-mates. Then there were, of course, also the numerous staff sent from the palace to help her get ready. The details, though, were blurred out by her mounting anticipation, and Xiao Yan only remembered spending half the morning trying to hold her head still while having her hair brushed, twisted and pinned, and looking whichever way the make-up person told her to look, all the while trying to wrinkle away the itch on her nose which she could not scratch.

Despite of her nerves, the morning flew by, and Xiao Yan was watching on the screen of an iPad as Yong Qi attempted to pass all the challenges set up at her door by her friends. This included making Yong Qi take the stairs of Xiao Yan and Xiao Jian's adopted parents' houses one step at a time, and with each step giving a reason for being in love with Xiao Yan...in a different language. Even know it was a game, and swearing to herself that she would not cry on her wedding, Xiao Yan nevertheless found herself tearing up when Yong Qi, knowing that she was watching, saved the most heartfelt words for the languages Xiao Yan understood. Next, he was challenged to pick out cut-out photos of different parts of Xiao Yan's face from a sample collection, which he attempted valiantly until it clicked that none of the choices he was given actually were photos of Xiao Yan.
herself.

There were other tests before Xiao Yan's friends were satisfied enough to let Yong Qi into the room where Xiao Yan was waiting.

The moment arrived. Inside the room, Xiao Yan sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the door, feeling like her heart was full to bursting as she waited for it to open. And open it did, and in walked Yong Qi, beaming at her, and Xiao Yan could not look away, nor did she want to. In that moment, as he approached her, it was as if all the years they had known each other was flashing in front of her, and all the emotions and feelings she ever felt in those years flooded over her, leaving her short of breath. It had certainly been a journey for them to get to where they were now, and Xiao Yan could not think anything else that was more perfect than the fact that they were now here together, so happy like this.

"Hey," Yong Qi said as he knelt down before her.

"Hey," Xiao Yan replied, her smile matching his in brightness.

Just like that, Xiao Yan found her nervousness settled as Yong Qi reached out and took her hands tightly in his, bringing the both up to his lips to kiss. She smiled as she savoured the warmth of his lips on her knuckles as he whispered, "You look so beautiful."

The moment was broken only when everyone else started to urge Yong Qi to get on with looking for her shoes, which were hidden in the room. He managed this with surprising speed, and gently helped her put them on. The journey from the room to the wedding carriage waiting outside amid the cheering and congratulations of their family and friends as well as the flash of cameras, was not as nerve-wracking as she feared when Yong Qi was grasping her hand firmly and leading her through it all.

As unnerved Xiao Yan was about the prospect of traveling to the palace where the wedding ceremony would take place in an open carriage, which basically meant she was on parade for the people lined on either side of the streets, she was also glad that traditions had evolved enough so that Yong Qi was also in the carriage next to her. She was smiling, not for the people who came out in droves to see them drive past, but for the comfort and reassurance that Yong Qi was giving her as he would occasionally squeeze her hand, reminding her that they were in this together, from now on and for always.

Once they arrived at Xian Fu Gong, the rest of the wedding ceremony played out as Xiao Yan had witnessed in real life once before, at Yong An's wedding. In fact, it was over sooner than Xiao Yan expected, and before she knew it, she was again walking hand-in-hand with Yong Qi into the banquet hall of Tai He Dian, to the applause of the guest and the pounding her heart in her chest.

Xiao Yan really was regretting the fact that she didn't eat much at lunch due to nerves. Someone really should have told her that between changes of clothes, wedding speeches and going around the greet eight hundred guests, she wouldn't have much time to eat at her own wedding banquet.

As they made their way to the next table, Xiao Yan slid her hand more deeply along Yong Qi's and tightened her grip on the crook of his arm. Somehow, the room seemed even bigger now that it was filled with guests than she ever remembered from their previous inspections of the banquet set up and rehearsals. Guests were sitting around large round tables, each with a centrepiece of peonies on top of a small golden platform which meant that the flowers were raise slightly off the table. On that same platform at each table were also two already filled porcelain wine cups for the bride and groom to drink when they arrived at each table to receive the guests' congratulations. Of course, anyone
who was involved in the planning of the wedding knew that these cups actually contained water, which thankfully looked like Chinese rice wine. The water was both a necessity and blessing, because there was no way either of them would manage to stay sober if they actually received toasts from all the guests with wine.

Unfortunately, water could also only quench thirst, not hunger.

"You all right?" Yong Qi whispered, while somehow still maintaining a smile at the guests around them.

"Hmmm. Just...kind of hungry," she admitted sheepishly, turning her head into his shoulder to hide her face.

He squeezed her hand that was placed on his arm with his other free hand. "It's nearly over, don't worry."

She turned back and gave him a brighter smile. She didn't want him to think she wasn't enjoying herself, which, for the record, she was. It had just been a long and emotional day, and she was reaching a point where she needed to take a breath. And maybe stop smiling for a second. Not because she wasn't happy. No, because her face hurt. She'd spent the last few hours constantly smiling, after all, and generally at people she'd never met before. She felt like the smile was frozen onto her face now, which was probably a good thing because she didn't have to think about it. But still, her face hurt.

The last table they arrived at, thankfully, was full of their friends. Heartfelt congratulations were all around as Xiao Yan and Yong Qi arrived the table consisting of Liu Qing, Liu Hong, Jin Suo, Xiao Jian, Qing Er, Han Xiang, Meng Dan, Er Kang, Zi Wei, Er Tai and Sai Ya.

As Yong Qi reached for the two cups from the centrepiece, Liu Qing grabbed them from him and poured the water into a spare bowl on the table. "No, no, I know for a fact that the only time these cups contained wine was when you drank with your families up on the front table, and it's been all water after that," he said. "But none of that here."

Xiao Yan could only laugh as she watched her brother taking the cups from Liu Qing and reaching for the pot of wine. "That's right. We are not toasting you at this table with water," Xiao Jian said. "It's your last table anyway."

"And we saved the best for last, didn't we?" Xiao Yan said, grinning, as they all clinked their cups and drank.

"What are you two doing at this table anyway?" Yong Qi asked, looking at Zi Wei and Er Kang.

Xiao Yan also looked at Xiao Jian and Qing Er, then nodded to the head of the room. "Yeah, aren't you supposed to be up there with the families?"

"The speeches are over, we decided to join everyone here instead," Zi Wei said, smiling and standing up to pull Xiao Yan in a tight hug.

"It just seems more fun over here while you two were going around greeting the guests," Xiao Jian added. "But you're done, right? Sit down, sit down."

Xiao Yan really didn't need asking twice, and soon found a chair to join them at the round table. Yong Qi laughed and decided to do the same.

Zi Wei pushed a couple dishes of food towards them. "Eat."
"Oh thank you!" Xiao Yan nearly cheered, putting her arm around Zi Wei and squeezing tightly.

"I thought you'd be famished by the time you got here, so I told the staff the serve your food in individual portions and brought it down here," Zi Wei said, laughing at Xiao Yan's effusive appreciation.

Er Tai clapped Yong Qi on the back. "So how does it feel now that you are married and tied down?"

"It feels great," Yong Qi replied, grinning. "When are you getting on with it?"

"Whenever it feels like the time," Er Tai replied, shrugging. Then, looking at Sai Ya, he said, "We're all right for now, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are," Sai Ya said.

"Are you sure?" Yong Qi asked, smiling at her. "Because we can totally put him on the spot for you."

She laughed and leaned her head against Er Tai's shoulder. "No, we're good. But thanks."

"I also can't believe that you, of all people, would betray me by asking this clichést of clichéd questions on your wedding," Er Tai grumbled, looking at Yong Qi with a mock expression of hurt.

He only laughed good-naturedly. "Have you been asked this question so far today?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, someone has to ask it," Yong Qi shrugged.

Er Tai sighed melodramatically. "Well, I don't appreciate it."

"I'm sure our parents do, though," Er Kang said, which made everyone around the table laugh.

"Hey, what is this? This is so not fair. You might as well ask the same question of anyone else at this table except my brother," Er Tai said.

Yong Qi smirked. "Yeah but you're much easier to tease."

Between bites of chicken, Xiao Yan chimed in with a grin. "Besides you started it."

"Just eat, Bride and Groom, before you have to get up to see the guests off," Er Tai said, though he was laughing too.

There were, of course, a lot of guests to see off, and it wasn't surprising that it was near midnight before the banquet ended entirely, and Xiao Yan and Yong Qi finally made it back to Xian Fu Gong.

Their wedding ceremony had taken place at Xian Fu Gong, and she had been brought into the wedding earlier, but that was in the company of everyone else involved in the ceremony. Now was truly the first time that she and Yong Qi had been alone all day, and it was here, in the wedding chamber.

Xiao Yan stood in the middle of the room and looked around the room, lit not with bright electric lights, but with the many tall pairs of dragon and phoenix candles placed around the room. The flickering of the candle light added an almost palpable new heartbeat to the room, and Xiao Yan's
heart seemed to beating to its rhythm, so distinctly that she could feel it, as she stood here, taking in the way the red engulfed the room, enveloping the two of them in its fold.

Yong Qi, who had only dropped her hand a moment earlier to close the door, now stepped around to stand in on front of her. His arms immediately circled her waist and pulled her in close to him, so that they were hip to hip.

He leaned in and rested her forehead against her. For a moment, they stood there, savouring the closeness, neither speaking, listening to the sounds of gentle breaths and flickering candles.

Then, Xiao Yan reached up and cupped his face in her hands, smiling widely. "So, we're married," she whispered.

The smile he gave her in return was bright enough to rival the dozen candles in the room. "Yes, we are."

She giggled and wound her arms around his neck. "No way out now."

"Do you want a way out?" he asked through his smile.

Xiao Yan breathed in deeply, momentarily overwhelmed by both the strength of the emotions in her and the sight of Yong Qi so happy before her. "Absolutely not," she said, before leaning in and kissing him soundly.

It was several moments later when they finally parted. Yong Qi ran a thumb against her bottom lip. "I would have expected your lipstick to be completely smudged now."

She laughed, and shook her head. "It's supposed to be kiss-proof, which I guess we've just confirmed. But that means it won't come off with anything other than make-up remover." Sighing softly, she pulled reluctantly away. "Just let me go take the make-up off first, okay? My eyes are beginning to sting, to be honest."

He let go of her just as unwillingly, but not before pressing a kiss to her cheek and the side of her neck. "Okay."

"So are you really not going to tell me where we're going for our honeymoon?" Xiao Yan asked, sometime later as she leaned back against Yong Qi's arm, which were circled around her shoulders.

He ran the tip of his fingers along the length of her arms, which still managed to give her shivers. "I gave you a hint," he said in a definite teasing tone.

"Yeah. 'Pack swimwear.'" Xiao Yan rolled her eyes at his unhelpfulness. "What kind of hint is that?"

He only shrugged, then turned to scatter kisses along her bare shoulder.

She pulled away impatiently. "Are you sure you won't tell me?"

He raised his head, looking utterly serious. "Yes, I'm sure."

Xiao Yan narrowed her eyes for a moment, before breaking into a mischievous smile and climbed onto his lap, winding her arms around his neck. Then, leaning in so that their lips were just a hair's width apart, she whispered, "What if I try to seduce it out of you?"

She could see and hear Yong Qi's breath hitch slightly. Nevertheless, he pulled her even closer, and
smiled at her. "Try me," he said, and the next thing Xiao Yan knew, she herself was completely overcome by the feeling of his kiss, and she could no longer think of anything else but him.

Santorini, Greece

The villa that they were renting for their honeymoon offered a perfect view of Santorini sunset over the Aegean Sea. Best of all, it was private. Xiao Yan had never appreciated the ability to spend money more than she did at that moment. Sunset, she found in the two days they had been here, was practically a religion on Santorini. Even now, looking down at the steps below their villa, she could see the masses of tourists who had flocked to the public spaces at the tip of the island, as they did every day at dusk, to catch the magic moment. Up here, she and Yong Qi were in the world of their own, free to indulge in each other's company while watching nature paint the most beautiful work of art mortals could hope to see.

It was early enough now that the sea still glittered like sapphire, a heart-breaking blue, stretching out into the far horizon.

A clinking sound behind her alerted her to Yong Qi's arrival. She turned, she saw him place two glasses of wine down on a wooden table that was painted bright yellow, before walking over and wrapping his arms around her from behind. Xiao Yan could only sigh contentedly as he reached for her hands and laced their fingers together, and they stood there, waiting for the sunset.

They did not have to wait long. Barely fifteen minutes later, the sun begun to descend, an orange circle of light that seemed to be pulled down by some magical hand, lower and lower, flooding the sea first with purple and gold. The cascade of colours reflected off the pristine white chalk buildings all around, and in that moment, it felt as if a warm blanket has fluttered down on the whole world, engulfing them in the most beautiful mixture of red and orange and yellow and purple and blue.

"Can you believe that there was a time when we hadn't met yet, when we didn't know each other, didn't love each other, and didn't think there could be a moment like this?" Yong Qi asked, his breath tickling against her ear.

She smiled out at the sunset. "No." There was a pause. Then she added, "But I am glad that it happened. Everything between us. Just as it did."

Yong Qi sighed deeply, a happy sigh that seemed to vibrate against them both. Xiao Yan's only reaction was to squeeze his hand tightly.

"Xiao Yan."

"Hmmm?"

"I am so happy."

Xiao Yan's heart seemed to skip a beat at the way his voice shook, his emotions tethering on being too much to bear. She pulled his arms tighter around herself and inhaled deeply. In that moment, all her senses seemed to be overloaded as she tried to drink in the moment. The sight of the breathtaking sunset before her. The smell of the Aegean wind. The taste of its salt on the tip of her tongue. The gentle sounds of the waves crashing against the cliffs down below. Most real of all, and most satisfying, was the feel of Yong Qi's arms wrapped so tightly around her.

She leaned back against him, savouring the soft kisses he was pressing against her neck and her hair. "Me too," she whispered finally, and meaning it with all her heart.
Chapter End Notes

There is a story behind the wedding date. 18 July 1997 is the day HZGG first started shooting, so 18 July 2017 will be its 20th anniversary. I wanted Xiao Yan and Yong Qi’s wedding to take place on this date (well, originally, I had another date in mind, but that's another story), but apparently 18 July 2017 is a really bad day for wedding (of course I looked this up, guys, what did you expect…), but 17 July is a good day, so that's why that's the wedding date.

It's sort of surreal that this fic is finally over, seven years after I first started with the idea. At the beginning, it was supposed to be just a simple and fun break from the period setting as demonstrated by the completely silly original title. Then it just grew and grew from there. I'm really going to miss this story, but honestly considering how long I've been at this, I think I have to say goodbye to it now.

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