

FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU



CASE FILE

# COMPENDIUM

*Bing An Ben*

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**COMPENDIUM**  
*Bing An Ben*

1



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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

CASE FILE COMPENDIUM: BING AN BEN VOL. 1

Published originally under the title of 《病案本》 (Bing An Ben)  
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Cover Illustration: Boki  
Interior Illustrations: DanKe

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar  
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold  
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ISBN: 978-1-68579-772-0  
Printed in Canada  
First Printing: February 2024  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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## Chapter 1: Opening Shot

**C**LICK. The darkness illuminated. The TV screen flickered, and an image began to appear.

The faculty dorm was located in the building crammed into the furthest corner of this centuries-old university campus. Placed out of the way, it was where the school mostly sent their young and sprightly teachers. The exterior was gorgeous—all red brick and white steps, with delicate ivy vines encircling the old Western-style building. No passersby would be able to resist taking a lingering gaze, but only those lucky enough to become a teacher and enter it would realize that, under its beautiful facade, this building had undergone many rounds of repairs. The interior walls were mottled and layered, like an aged face caked with countless layers of makeup. The dorm was so old that it didn't even have digital televisions; the ones here were cable TVs that could only be described as antiques.

“The Yangtze Plain is experiencing several torrential rainstorms in succession...”

A young man walked past the corridor as the sound of the TV program filtered through the cracked glass window of the receptionist's office. Usually, the old lady on shift would stop him and shout, “Hey, little student, dontcha know? This is a faculty residence for teachers. You're a student, you can't keep coming here.”

But today, the receptionist didn't scold him. Perhaps it was because she was staring off into space, or that her eyesight was failing in her later years, but she didn't notice him pass by in the dark night.

He walked directly up to the third floor and knocked on a familiar iron door.

It opened with a creak; the woman inside poked her head out. "It's you?"

"Xie-laoshi," the young man said softly.

It was quite late, and he was an unexpected guest. But the woman was his teacher, as well as the person closest to him in the entire school. After a moment of surprise, she welcomed him inside.

She brewed a cup of tea and added some sliced ginger. It was raining outside, and she could feel that the youth was soaked and cold; hot ginger tea could drive out the chill.

Xie-laoshi placed the steaming cup down on the tea table before her student, who was standing uncomfortably in front of the sofa. "When did you get back?"

"Just today."

"Please sit down," Xie-laoshi said.

Only then did he sit, his hands curled over his knees. He was stiff and reserved, and didn't touch the tea.

"Why didn't you let me know that you were coming back? Are there even buses this late?"

"...Mm."

“How did things go with your family?”

The youth was quiet for a while, then lowered his head to pick at the rip in his jeans. “My mom still wants me to drop out...”

Xie-laoshi fell silent.

He was already a university student; if he chose to drop out, the school didn't have much say in the matter. Even so, she had spoken with his mother and promised to lower the tuition fees due to their financial difficulty in hopes that his mother would allow her son to finish his studies at the university he had worked so hard to get into.

But his mother had shrilly refused.

“What studies?! Studying Chinese? Who doesn't know how to speak Chinese? You're all just pulling a scam!”

Xie-laoshi had patiently and gently tried to explain, “Your son is very bright. Look, he's already in his second year. Wouldn't it be a huge waste to give up halfway? Plus, once he graduates, it'll be easier for him to find a job. He told me he wants to be a teacher. With his grades, he'd have no trouble getting employed as one. This is your son's dream, and teaching is a stable job...”

“He could never become a teacher! It's not like you haven't seen his face!”

The mother's words were like a dull blade cleaving right down the middle of an invisible current.

Xie-laoshi was furious, but she didn't know how to respond.

“I want him to come back to work right now! Our family is broke! He needs to stop wasting time! With that...that face... What can he do even if he studies! What school would want this kind of teacher?!”

So what was his face like?

She peered at her student, his face dimly illuminated by the weak incandescent lamp in her room.

Xie-laoshi had already grown used to his features, but everyone who saw him for the first time would gasp. Due to some unknown disease, half of his face—from forehead to neck—was covered in purple blotches, as if concealing rotting flesh.

It was a horrifying sight, undisguised in its abnormality.

“Freak!”

“Stay away from him, it might be contagious.”

“Hey! Half-and-half!”

Having grown up with this face of his, mockery and ridicule followed him like a shadow.

Because he had a disease, and moreover because he didn't have the sense to cover up his ailment, his ugliness, he was shunned wherever he went. No matter how hard he studied, no matter how gently he interacted with others, he was like an evil dragon flying through a clear sky: conspicuous and frightening. He could never receive any equal treatment.

People like Xie-laoshi, who could see that the unblemished half of his face was very lovable and gentle, were a rarity.

He would always gently and numbly bear everyone's mockery. Sometimes, he too would laugh along, as if he had actually done something wrong.

But what exactly had he done wrong?

Xie-laoshi noticed it all. When studying, he'd always be the most focused; he'd dutifully do his part and silently take on the most work in group projects. When people bullied him, he would just endure it without getting angered or saying much.

"It's fine, Laoshi, I'm already very happy that you'd chat with me. Back in my village, everyone would cross the street as soon as they saw me coming. There's never been anyone like you, who would listen to me so attentively. The other students are very nice too. At least no one's thrown bricks at me."

His words were calm, but his head was forever bowed, his shoulders hunched. Years of humiliation had caused his spine to bend, deforming from the pressure.

Later, she said to him, "If you'd like, you can always come to me for private tutoring after the evening self-study session. If there's anything you don't understand or you need my help with, just let me know."

He smiled in deep embarrassment, the blush of shame appearing on the unblemished half of his face.

In the two years she'd known him, she'd grown used to opening her dorm door after he had knocked to see him standing there with his stooped posture. He would be carrying the papers, prose, and even poetry that he wrote, having come to ask her for pointers.

These days, many people liked to curse, but very few liked to write poetry.

But he persisted, even as other students mocked him, calling him an ugly freak who wrote ugly things: *So rancid, even more rancid than your rotten grape face.*

He would smile a little and just keep writing.

Now, he didn't even have the right to do that anymore.

As these thoughts filled Xie-laoshi's mind, she felt a pang of sorrow and gazed with pity at the boy in front of her.

"Laoshi, this time, I came to say goodbye," he said. "I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"You're going back home?"

"...Mm, more or less."

He paused. "Laoshi, if my disease weren't on my face, if it were somewhere people couldn't see, people would be a little nicer to me. How nice would that be."

The rims of Xie-laoshi's eyes reddened. She'd already done everything she could, but she wasn't his kin; she didn't have the final say, nor could she

save him. His family situation was worsening by the day, and his mother regretted letting her child leave home to study, especially since she had a healthy second son who was still in junior high school. If they called the sick child back home, they could let the healthy one take his place.

Xie-laoshi didn't blame his mother; having to weigh the pros and cons of the family situation, she was being quite fair.

"The...the essay that you left with me, the one you wanted me to look over, I'm not done editing it yet—" Xie-laoshi hastily changed the subject, feeling that soon she wouldn't be able to hold back her tears anymore.

"But I read through the first parts very carefully. Why don't you start the academic withdrawal process a little later? Wait until I've edited the entire thing..."

"No." He shook his head with a smile. "I must go when morning comes."

She felt so remorseful; why had she always thought that there was still time?

Why hadn't she stayed up all night to edit his essay?

And why had she gone out to shop and chat and attend those long and meaningless meetings?

Her student's dreams were about to shatter, and his heart about to give out. As his teacher, she couldn't even offer up a bouquet of flowers to bid his dream farewell.

"I'm sorry..."



“It’s fine,” he said. “But I wrote one last poem. Can I give it to you?”

She readily nodded.

He took a piece of paper out of his backpack and handed it to her. The paper was thin, almost weightless.

She read every word. It was an adoring love poem, searingly passionate yet tentative and careful. She’d read the works of many masters who spoke of romance, from the “when will the moonlight in our bed dry the tears on our faces”<sup>1</sup> of the past, to the “my eyes are more beautiful because they have you in them”<sup>2</sup> of the present. Yet at this moment, it seemed like none of them could compare to this sheet of paper that her student had presented to her.

He didn’t put anything out in the open, as if doing so would spoil the meter of the poem.

This young man was a poet. He knew that if the love between two people from different social statuses lost its poetry, all that would be left was embarrassment.

“It’s a memento for you.”

Tenderness was written all over his face—both on the grotesque and ordinary halves.

“I’m sorry, Laoshi. I can’t afford to buy you any gifts.”

“There’s nothing better than this.” She turned around, suppressing her sobs. “You...you should eat something. I’ll find you some snacks to go with

the tea.”

In a bid to keep her emotions in check, Xie-laoshi rummaged through her cabinets. She picked up a tin of butter cookies and placed it on the table.

He thanked her politely. Under Xie-laoshi’s gaze, he finally touched the teacup tentatively, only to pull back instantly. Softly, he said, “It’s so hot.”

Xie-laoshi touched the cup. “Huh? It’s lukewarm.”

Nonetheless, she added some cold water to the cup. Her student chewed on his favorite cookies and slowly began to drink. By the time he finished the cookies and the tea, the night was still young.

“Laoshi, can I stay here for a little while longer to read?” he asked.

“Of course.”

He smiled again, slightly sheepish. “I’m inconveniencing you so much, even when I’m about to leave.”

“It’s fine, you can stay for as long as you’d like... Right, give me your address—I’ll send you a copy of all the good books I see. Given how clever you are, even if you only study on your own, you won’t do too poorly.” Xie-laoshi could only offer some words of comfort. “If you need any help with anything, you can contact me on WeChat.”<sup>3</sup>

He looked at her. “Thank you.” He paused. “If only everyone were like you, then perhaps...”

He lowered his head and didn't continue.

Her dorm had no shortage of books. With his undisguised disease, his grotesque appearance made him the center of attention every time he went to the library. Thus, she invited him to the faculty dorm and lent him her own books to read.

In that same spirit, he spent the whole night reading inside the faculty dorm, as if he wanted to bring all the words back to his hometown using this night.

He rarely acted so selfishly. In the past, he would never stay too late, worried that he'd disrupt his teacher's routine. But today was an exception.

Xie-laoshi didn't blame him for this final willful streak. She stayed up with him, but into the latter half of the night, she grew tired. Without realizing it, she drifted off to sleep at her desk.

In her hazy unconsciousness, she heard her student suddenly say, "Xie-laoshi."

She blearily made a noise of assent.

"There's one more thing. I want to apologize to you. Those thefts in our class that you got criticized for... When those students kept losing their belongings and couldn't find them no matter what... Actually, I was the one who took their things."

Shocked, she stirred from her slumber, but her body was too tired, too heavy to get up.

“But I didn’t keep any of those things. I didn’t take any of their money,” he said sorrowfully. “When they mocked me, I really hated them... I threw all their bags into a pile of straw and burned it all. They suspected me, but you chose to vouch for me without question. But in truth, I was the culprit. I didn’t have the courage to admit it. Only in one person’s eyes have I ever been a normal person, or even a good person—that’s you. Laoshi, I’m very vain, aren’t I?” He paused. “I wouldn’t know what to do if you were disappointed in me. You’re the only person who has ever acknowledged me.”

His voice trailed off.

But his gaze was clear, almost transparent, as if a weight had been taken off his shoulders.

“This is the one thing I regret the most... Xie-laoshi, I’m truly sorry. My disease seems to have metastasized from my face to my heart. If there is a next life, I really want to be a normal person... I don’t want to be so sick that I don’t even have the right to be loved. Xie-laoshi...”

Wind rushed in through the window, making the papers on the table flutter, like soul-summoning flags.

Then silence returned.

The tea on the table cooled.

When Xie-laoshi woke up the next morning, she found that she’d slept the night away at her desk. Her room was neat and tidy. Her student was always polite, but this time, he hadn’t said goodbye to his teacher before packing up his things and leaving.

Unable to suppress a twinge of melancholy, she rose sleepily and went to the living room. When she looked down at the tea table, her eyes flew open, as if a basin of ice water had just been poured over her head.

The tea she'd made for the youth had frozen over, but how? The room was clearly 27 or so degrees Celsius!

Her dark eyes wide, she looked around the room only to be plunged into even deeper shock. Last night, she'd clearly seen her student eat the butter cookies, yet not a single one was missing from the tin. The tea which had frozen into ice was untouched, and finally...

That veiled love poem, the contents of which she still sheltered in her heart, the paper farewell he'd gifted her...

It had disappeared.

Or, perhaps it was more accurate to say that the paper had never existed in the first place.

She was almost shaking. Suddenly, her phone alerted with a *ding*, causing her to jump in fright. She grabbed it immediately, only to find that it was a spam message. She let out a breath of relief, but then, as if struck by a thought, as if waking from a dream, she quickly dialed the student's number.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Her heart pounded with every beat of the mechanical tone.

"Hello?"

The call had gone through.

On the other end of the line was the familiar voice of a middle-aged woman. It sounded coarse, but right now, it was also nasal with tears. Xie-laoshi exchanged a few words with the young man's mother.

Her heart sank into a pitch-black hole, careening downward.

After a pause, she heard a flurry of accusations—"It was you people! You again!! I haven't had time to come for you, yet you actually called us first!"

Xie-laoshi couldn't remember what she had said at the beginning anymore; her mind had blanked out. All she could hear was the miserable shouting at the other end, like a bludgeoning wake-up call. "He's dead! Dead!"

Blood froze in her veins.

*Dead?*

"It's all your fault!! He got into an argument with me and ran out. There was a torrential storm outside, and the police said a section of an electric cable was exposed..."

Xie-laoshi's ears were ringing.

Amid the intense castigation and mournful sobbing, she could barely make out a few words, ghostly and ghoulish, like an otherworldly farewell.

The woman on the other end of the line gave an ear-splitting shriek.

“Why bother calling? Why bother?! Yesterday was his seventh day!!”<sup>4</sup>

## Chapter 2: I Was Still a Student Back Then

**“Y**ESTERDAY WAS HIS seventh day!!”

The tapping of the keyboard stopped. He Yu stood up from the desk in the faculty dorm room. The apartment wasn't even sixty square meters. Next door, in the living room, a tedious variety show about poetry was playing on an old-fashioned TV. The program was accompanied by the static humming of the faulty signal.

The sofa was still that sofa in the story. The snacks for the tea, the tin of biscuits—they were all still there. But the time on the clock read 8:09, and the streetlights were on outside. It was the middle of summer, and the air was very humid. Moths circled beneath the lights, mosquitoes buzzed low to the ground, and rain had yet to fall.

He Yu left the little study in the faculty dorm. When he opened the door, light spilled in at an angle through the filthy windowpanes, making the entire space seem rather surreal, more so than the story he had just finished writing.

A young woman lay on the sofa. The air conditioning was set to a very low temperature, and she was sleeping under a coral fleece blanket. Before her were several crumpled tissues that had been used to wipe away tears and snot.

“Wake up,” said He Yu.

“Ngh...”



“Get up.”

“Not so loud... I barely even fell asleep...” The young woman groaned wearily, smacking her lips. “Gonna nap for a bit longer...”

He Yu was about to say something else, but the variety show on the TV started introducing an old movie.

“There’s a *Brokeback Mountain* in every person’s heart...”

He gave up trying to wake her up and took the remote to change the channel.

He Yu really disliked homosexuality.

“Welcome, everybody, to our medical wellness program today...”

He changed the channel again. He Yu also disliked doctors and hospitals.

“Once, Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly fluttering about...”<sup>5</sup>

This time, he left the program on. Given his tastes, he could accept this as background noise.

He Yu put down the remote and glanced over at the snoring woman still lying on her back. He turned and walked into the kitchen. He opened the greasy refrigerator, and the light from the appliance illuminated his face.

After he surveyed the refrigerator's contents several times, he took out two eggs and a chunk of ham, as well as a bowl of yesterday's leftovers. Then, he raised his voice to ask the woman sleeping in the living room, "Xie Xue, do you have green onions here? I can't find any."

The woman didn't move.

"I'll make you Yangzhou fried rice."

There was no response from the living room. He Yu glanced back again to see that the young woman had gotten off the sofa and was leaning against the kitchen doorway.

"...Then you'll need two eggs, plus a big piece of luncheon meat," the woman said, then hesitated. "Do you know how?"

He Yu rolled up his sleeves and looked back at her with a suave smile. "Sit outside and wait. It'll be ready soon."

The woman named Xie Xue tottered away to wander around the other rooms. Seeing that the computer in the study was switched on, she sat down to skim over the opened Word document. "He Yu! Did you use me as your muse?"

The range hood was too loud. "What?" He Yu asked.

"I said! Did you! Use me! As your muse?!" Xie Xue brought his laptop out. "For the Xie-laoshi in this ghost story!"

"Oh." He fell silent for a while before cracking an egg with a smile. "Yep. You're exactly the person I imagined. Art imitates reality, Xie-laoshi."

“But you wrote that you were secretly in love with me?”

“...Art is not the same as reality, Xie-laoshi.”

But that last part was a lie.

He really was secretly in love with her.

He Yu and Xie Xue had known each other for more than ten years. Xie Xue was five years older than him. This was her first year as a lecturer teaching screenwriting and directing in the School of Fine Arts at Huzhou University. He Yu was one of the students in her class.

When Xie Xue first saw the roster for the incoming screenwriting and directing majors, she had sent a shocked message to He Yu. “Fuck, what a coincidence! One of the boys in the two classes I’m teaching has the same exact name as you!”

At the time, He Yu had been on a plane. He was sitting in a window seat and looking out at the flickering lamplight of the airport tarmac with his cheek propped up on one hand. His phone dinged, and a familiar profile picture popped up. He looked at the message from the girl he had been in love with for ten years and was just about to reply when the request for all passengers to switch their devices to airplane mode sounded over the intercom.

He Yu tilted his head and thought for a minute. He didn’t reply to her message before turning off his phone.

How could there be so many coincidences in this world?

Idiot.

He had fought for this opportunity himself, of course. It was completely unlike the story He Yu had written.

As for He Yu himself, not only was he not penniless, he wasn't ugly either. He was blessed with a very handsome face, and as the son of a pharmaceutical tycoon, he had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and attended high school overseas. But less than thirty minutes after finding out that Xie Xue had become a lecturer at Huzhou University upon graduating, He Yu applied for the institution's School of Fine Arts.

Several months later, the semester began.

However, the newly appointed Xie-laoshi was too young; she didn't understand how treacherous workplaces could get.

Jiang Liping, the morality advisor<sup>6</sup> in charge of the screen-writing/directing classes one, two, and three, was an infamous eccentric. Supposedly, she had no relevant education or training and had gotten this fluff position in the school simply by sleeping with the board of directors. Jiang-laoshi was ostentatiously beautiful and didn't feel a bit of shame about using sex to get what she wanted. She spent every day blatantly flirting with the board members in broad daylight and was overtly hostile toward any female student or teacher with decent looks.

When Xie Xue rushed into the classroom for her first lecture with her laptop in her arms, she saw Jiang Liping there in a floor-length red dress, hogging her lectern to discuss important items with the new students.

"I'm sorry, Jiang-laoshi, the first class is starting..." Xie Xue tried to remind her.

But the other woman merely waved her hand. “Just wait a minute, the morning study period was too short. I still have two items to go over.”

Who knew if she was picking on her on purpose, but Jiang Liping stretched out the last two points for fifteen, almost sixteen, minutes before she finally finished. “All right, that’s all I had to cover. I won’t disrupt your class anymore.” She then turned to Xie Xue. “Uhh...I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name earlier. Anyway, stay focused, don’t be nervous.”

Professor Jiang strutted away, her towering scarlet heels clicking against the ground. Her vintage Hong Kong-style dress fluttered in proud crimson waves in her wake, leaving the dejected Xie Xue to shuffle up to the lectern, laptop still in her arms.

She was so fucking screwed.

Maybe things would have been all right if Jiang Liping hadn’t said anything. But now that she had, Xie Xue had to gulp nervously.

Most students in prestigious schools were exceptionally talented and not easily won over. They didn’t trust younger teachers as much as they did older ones in the first place. Now, Jiang Liping’s parting words were nothing short of a vicious kick to Xie Xue’s knees.

This group of prodigies immediately understood that, oh, their instructor was still a teacher-in-training—one whose name their advisor didn’t even know.

What an outrage! No matter how much fiery motivation burned in Xie Xue’s heart, it couldn’t fend off the disparaging comments that this class was spitting at her. It only took ten minutes for the new faculty member Xie-

laoshi to devolve from a confident woman to a stuttering mess. She began to feel dizzy and faint.

So caught up was she in her emotions that she didn't even notice the tall young man who was leaning back in his seat in the last row of the classroom, watching her while spinning his pen idly.

“Hello, everyone. I'm your screenwriting and directing teacher. My name is Xie Xue. Um...”

The students weren't buying it. “Laoshi, how old are you?”

“Jiejie, why don't you order milk tea with us too?”

“Ooh, Laoshi, you look even younger than me...”

The situation was spinning out of control. Xie Xue had no choice but to feign sternness like a paper tiger. “Silence! I'm not messing around with you. Don't waste your precious youth during your university years. You must study hard and gain knowledge. I'll have you know, I'm a very strict and uncompromising person, and the percentage of students I fail is far higher than my colleagues. So all of you need to be on your toes; don't you dare brush off my words.”

He Yu couldn't contain his mirth. He looked down as the corner of his mouth curved carelessly upward.

She was just a fucking dumbass.

The students in the classroom fell silent, staring at her as if she were an animal in a zoo. One student even sighed and picked up his backpack to leave.

“Hey! You there! You—”

“Laoshi, I won’t fail no matter how much you threaten me. I have a date with my girlfriend, so I’ll be leaving now.”

“Fascinating. So Huzhou University actually hires teachers-in-training who threaten to fail us if we don’t attend class? We got into this university after enormous effort—we’re not here to become lab rats for the teachers to experiment with, are we? How come you’re the one teaching us while Professor Shen teaches next door? I’m going to write a letter of complaint to the dean later. Excuse me for not staying.”

Xie Xue was in a terrible predicament.

Although she forced herself to calmly ask for the students’ names and took points off on her tablet, this sequence of events had dealt her such a heavy blow that she wasn’t able to recover for a long while. Her carefully prepared lesson had become a half-forgotten mess. She blathered pointlessly for an age before finally reaching what she had previously thought would be a very interesting interactive activity. However, not a single person was willing to come onstage and participate.

Just as she was on the verge of tears, thinking of running away in defeat, a male voice suddenly came from the last row of the classroom.

“Laoshi, I’ll do it.”

Xie Xue was so miserable that she didn’t even realize how familiar that pleasant voice was. She immediately sought out the source of the sound, looking for her savior through eyes filled with grateful tears.

When she saw the boy she hadn't seen in three years, Xie Xue was so surprised that she gaped at him without regard for her image. "H-He Yu?!"

The boy sat at his desk. His eyes were bright and clear, the corners of his mouth were upturned, and his lips were strikingly thin. He looked a little haughty, a little mischievous—much like the moment when a young Lau Kin Ming in *Infernal Affairs II* raised his head and gazed toward a drunk Mary, with some of the smugness of a young man who had discovered his prey and sated his desire.

He arched a brow. "Long time no see, Xie-laoshi."

Long story short, that's what happened.

After returning to the dorm, Xie Xue couldn't hold back anymore and began to sob in an almost cathartic manner. He Yu had a crush on her, but he wasn't particularly tactful and didn't know how to comfort her properly. He actually said, "Go ahead and cry it out, then. I'll go write in your study for a while. Once you feel better, I'll come out and have dinner with you."

"He Yu, do you know how to cheer people up at all?!"

"Do I have to finish the homework you assigned or not?"

"...Just go."

But when He Yu came out after finishing the story, Xie Xue had already cried herself to sleep.

She didn't wake when he called for her, but he wasn't in a rush.



Xie Xue's favorite activity was eating, with sleeping a close second. As long as you made her something yummy, she'd definitely crawl out of bed right away. Even as a university instructor, this trait wouldn't change.

Fifteen minutes later, she was staring down at the food He Yu held before her.

"...What's this?"

Looking down at the pathetically mushy "fried lumps of rice with egg and ham" in his hands, He Yu felt a little embarrassed. He told his teacher extremely loftily, "Can't you tell? It's Yangzhou fried rice."

"You call *this* Yangzhou fried rice?"

"...Fine, don't eat it then. I can order delivery." The student picked up his phone with a deadpan expression and looked up the highest-rated restaurant. He was filling in the delivery address when the doorbell rang.

He Yu raised his almond eyes. "Who is it? A colleague here to see you?"

"Probably not, I haven't gotten to know them yet." Xie Xue put down her chopsticks and looked up at the clock. "Who would come at this hour..."

As she spoke, she shuffled over to the doorway in her slippers.

A few seconds later, Xie Xue's excited voice came from the doorway. "Ge! Why are you here? You're not working overtime today?"

The sound of the word "Ge" crashed down like thunder. He Yu's original scoundrel aura and his careless lazy mood were instantly shattered.

Countless dark memories flashed through his mind like a knee-jerk reaction.

Springing to his feet, he grabbed that appallingly disgraceful fried rice from the table and strode quickly toward the trash can in the kitchen.

But it was too late. Xie Xue had pulled her big brother into the room.

“Ge, I haven’t even told you yet. He Yu’s back from overseas, and he’s one of my students. He’s sitting inside right now. You two haven’t seen each other in a long time either, right? Hey, He Yu!” Xie Xue’s call stopped him midstride. “Where are you going with that plate?”

He Yu froze stock-still in silence.

Never mind.

Since he’d come back, he’d inevitably have to face him again.

He Yu stood with his back to them, wiping his genuine emotions from his face before slowly turning around, looking gentle and refined, elegant and poised.

Facing the elder brother of the Xie family who was a full thirteen years older than him, he actually seemed to match the man in his presence. He gazed toward the head of the Xie family, at the man who somewhat resembled Xie Xue. Then, he reached up to pinch his own nape, his eyes lingering momentarily on the man’s features. “Long time no see, Doctor Xie. You look...”

He Yu paused, assessing him.

This man hadn't changed a bit. His features were indifferent and grim, while the planes of his face were sharp and hard, outlining a strong, combative face. His eyes were pretty—a pair of peach-blossoms similar to Xie Xue's. Though they would appear alluring on anyone else, his eyes were a testament to what it meant to have your features align with your personality. On this extraordinary man, they could freeze even thousands of leagues of peach-blossom pools into dark ice. Despite the similarities to Xie Xue's lovely eyes, his pupils were ice-cold. With his rigidly poised physique, he exuded an aura of absolute detachment.

Very tyrannical, very dictatorial. He resembled the big boss of an autocratic feudal clan—all he needed was an atmospheric black fur coat to contrast against his pale face and two of those silver cloak clasp chains worn by military warlords to complete the look.

In the end, He Yu smiled warmly, but there was no mirth in his eyes.

“You look the same as before. You haven't aged a bit.”

## **Chapter 3: I Disliked Him from the Start**

**T**HIS WAS XIE XUE'S older brother, Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng had once treated He Yu's illness as his family's personal physician.

He Yu looked like a normal person on the outside. The impression he gave others was always gentle and kindhearted, and he excelled in conduct, learning, and career. However, the He family had a closely kept secret: this enviable golden child had suffered from a rare mental disorder since birth.

It was an orphan disease, with only four recorded cases having - occurred throughout history. The circumstances of each patient were similar: They had congenital deficiencies in the endocrine and nervous systems. When disrupted, their personality would drastically change. Usually, they were numb to pain, but when their condition flared up, they would lose touch with reality, become bloodthirsty, and gain intense destructive tendencies toward themselves or others, resulting in a standard antisocial personality. Physical symptoms included a high fever and confusion, with each flare-up being more severe than the last.

In clinical practice, this disorder was nicknamed "psychological Ebola." It gradually caused the patient's mind to collapse, consequently paralyzing and numbing their body. In the end, they would suffer the deaths of first their mind, then their body. Like a metastasizing cancer, the symptoms would worsen step by step, breaking down a fully functioning member of society into one who'd have difficulties with the most basic of social tasks until eventually becoming a complete lunatic.

In this manner, Patients 1–3 had all been tormented to death before succumbing to that final stage.

He Yu was Patient 4.

His parents brought him to many famous doctors, both local and international, but it was no use. The doctors all believed that the only way to delay the progress of the disorder was to hire a medical caretaker to stay by He Yu's side and carry out long-term supervisory care in order to lower the frequency of flare-ups.

Ultimately, with various considerations in mind, the He family found Xie Qingcheng, who was only twenty-one at the time.

That year, He Yu was eight years old.

But now, He Yu was already nineteen, and Xie Qingcheng was thirty-two.

Xie Qingcheng looked even more unflappable than before; one could even call him indifferent and cold. He was not easily affected by anything, so He Yu's sudden return had not shaken him. He only spent a few seconds looking over the young man he hadn't seen in more than three years from head to toe, ignoring He Yu's polite greetings.

With his age and social standing, he had neither the interest nor the need to play along with a boy who wasn't even twenty years old. He only asked, "Why are you here?"

"I..."

"It's already so late. This is the female faculty dorm."

He Yu smiled. Though he wanted to curse, “Why the fuck are *you* here then?!” he nevertheless responded politely, “I hadn’t seen Xie-laoshi in a very long time. We were talking for so long I forgot the time. Sincerest apologies, Doctor Xie.”

“You don’t need to call me Doctor Xie anymore. I’m no longer a doctor.”

“My bad. Old habits,” He Yu responded lightly.

“...Aiya.” Seeing the atmosphere between them grow tense from the sidelines, Xie Xue rushed to mediate. “Um, Dage, don’t look so stern and serious... He Yu, sit down, don’t be nervous. We haven’t seen each other in so long.”

As she spoke, she distanced herself from He Yu, acting quite courteously. She was always like this: When she was alone with He Yu, she was very casual and behaved as though they were quite close. However, as soon as anyone else was present, especially when it was Xie Qingcheng, she would maintain a polite boundary between herself and He Yu.

He Yu figured that Xie Qingcheng had used fear from a very young age to inspire this behavior. This older brother who acted so much like a family head from a feudal society was the epitome of straight man cancer<sup>7</sup> and egregious chauvinism.

Such a man would be ever-vigilant about threats to the safety of their female dependents. When Xie Xue was young, Xie Qingcheng didn’t even let her wear dresses with hems above the knee. One time, her school organized a talent show for families and classmates, in which Xie Xue had breakdanced. As Xie Qingcheng watched from beneath the stage, his

expression had gone black. When the young Xie Xue stepped off the stage, he interrogated her about why she would participate in such an improper dance performance with a grim look on his face, then forcefully draped his suit jacket over her shoulders.

Though it was only eight or nine at night, Xie Qingcheng probably thought it was extremely improper for a single man and an unmarried woman—like He Yu and his sister—to be alone together at such a late hour.

Just as expected, as soon as Xie Qingcheng walked into the room, he pulled up a chair and sat down. The head of the household crossed his long legs, loosened his cuff links, and looked impassively at He Yu.

“Tell me, how exactly did you just happen to get accepted to Xie Xue’s university, and into her exact field of study at that?”

His forceful attitude from his occupation had seeped into his personal life. At that moment, He Yu felt like he was a patient at the hospital stuck with a moody doctor who asked, “Tell me where it hurts,” in a flat, indifferent tone.

When He Yu thought of it like this, he found it sort of funny.

Xie Qingcheng saw that He Yu didn’t respond for a while, and the corners of his mouth seemed to carry a slight smile. Xie Qingcheng’s gaze iced over. “You can’t explain?”

He Yu was wrong. He wasn’t a doctor examining a patient—Xie Qingcheng’s tone sounded exactly like a policeman interrogating a criminal.

He Yu sighed and replied, “It’s not like that.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“I couldn’t get used to being abroad, and I like screenwriting and directing. You’re asking me why it’s such a coincidence, but how can I explain it?” He Yu smiled as he spoke, patience dripping from every word. “It’s not like I’m a fortune teller.”

“You like screenwriting and directing?”

“Yes.”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t press further, because his eyes were drawn to the “fried lumps of rice with egg and ham” that He Yu was holding.

Xie Qingcheng furrowed his brow. “...What is that?”

He Yu wanted to throw the plate at Xie Qingcheng’s face—a face that looked as if others owed him a fortune—then follow up with “What’s it to you?”

But because Xie Xue was present, he smiled at her brother politely and replied, “Yangzhou fried rice.”

Xie Qingcheng looked at it closely for a few more seconds. With a cold expression on his fatherly face, he said, “Take off the apron. I’ll make another one.”

He Yu stared at him, dumbfounded.

“How did you survive abroad for all these years?”

“...By ordering delivery.”



Xie Qingcheng's gaze sharpened, a hint of condemnation flashing in his eyes.

Under his penetrating glare, He Yu was transported back to the first time they met. On the villa's freshly mowed lawn, Xie Qingcheng had looked down at the eight-year-old He Yu with a gaze so sharp it could practically dissect his heart.

That day was He Yu's birthday. A crowd of children were playing at the He family's enormous villa. They had tired themselves out and were chatting on the white pebbles of the lakeshore about their ambitions.

“When I grow up, I wanna be a celebrity!”

“I'm gonna be a scientist.”

“I'm gonna be an astronaut!”

There was a chubby kid who didn't know what he wanted to be, but he didn't want to show it either. As he looked around, he happened to catch sight of the housekeeper ushering a young doctor through the front yard.

The grass was lush and vibrant, and the sky was a clear and pristine blue. The young doctor was carrying a bouquet of flowers for his boss. The splendidly blooming summer hydrangeas were wrapped in pale silver tissue paper, arranged with silvery willow catkins and bright double roses. As a unique touch, the bouquet was covered in a layer of decorative tulle.

Xie Qingcheng held the flowers in one hand and casually stuck his other hand in his pocket. He was wearing a clean, close-fitting white lab coat with two ballpoint pens clipped to his breast pocket. Since he wasn't working at the moment, the front of the coat was unbuttoned, revealing a lead-gray

shirt beneath, as well as a pair of long, shapely legs clad in loosely tailored pants.

The chubby kid gaped at him. After a while, he pointed at Xie Qingcheng with his short, stubby, sausage-like fingers and declared, “I’m gonna be... I’m gonna be a doctor!”

There was a sudden gust of wind, and since the florist really hadn’t paid enough fucking attention when they wrapped the flowers, the wind managed to blow away the tulle covering Xie Qingcheng’s bouquet. The white fabric immediately floated into the sky over the lawn, only to fall when the wind died back down again.

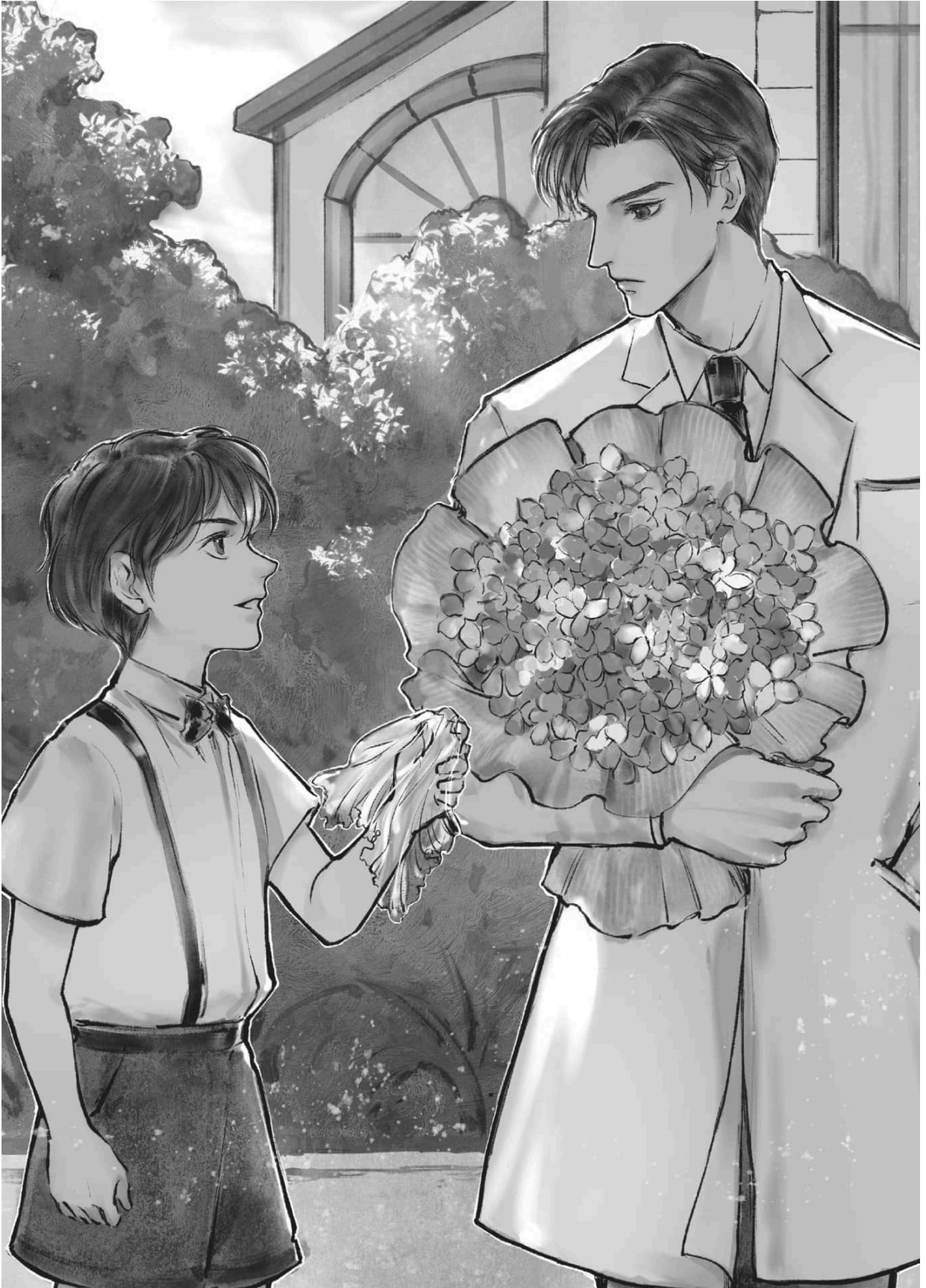
All the children craned their necks to look at that piece of white tulle. It finally fell precisely in front of He Yu, the only one who wasn’t interested at all.

Although He Yu didn’t like the doctors, pharmaceutical representatives, and researchers who often appeared in his home, he was habitually courteous. Therefore, he lowered his head, picked up that square of soft tulle, and brought it over.

“Doctor, you dropped this.”

He looked up at those indifferent eyes.

It was the height of summer, but inexplicably, they still made He Yu, who was learning Tang dynasty poetry at the time, think of a particular phrase: “Snowfall whispers onto the neighboring bamboo grove.”<sup>8</sup>



Xie Qingcheng looked down and took the tulle. The movement made his lab coat flutter lightly in the breeze, like the cast-off feathers of a crane that had transformed into a demonic spirit. “Thank you.”

At that moment, He Yu suddenly caught a whiff of a faint medicinal smell coming from his cuffs.

Research had shown that the feelings between people were largely dictated by the scents on each other’s bodies. That was to say, if someone gave off a scent that you liked, then it would be easier for you to fall in love at first sight. On the other hand, if their smell made you annoyed or afraid, then you probably wouldn’t have a very promising future together.

He Yu didn’t like Xie Qingcheng’s scent.

It was ice-cold and unyielding—like the countless bitter pills he’d swallowed ever since he was a child, like the alcohol and iodine solution they would wipe on his arm before injections; like pale, white, ice-cold hospital rooms, devoid of human company and suffused with the odor of disinfectant.

He was almost instinctively terrified of this kind of smell. Subconsciously, he frowned.

But the housekeeper grabbed his shoulder and smiled as he introduced him to that doctor big brother who made him feel unwell all over. “Doctor Xie, this is our boss’s young master.”

Just when he was about to look away, Xie Qingcheng paused and fixed his dark eyes on He Yu. “...So, it’s you.”

The look in his eyes irrationally reminded He Yu of a surgical knife. It was abnormally incisive, giving He Yu the strange feeling that he was going

to cut open his heart and put it under a microscope.

“Nice to meet you,” the young doctor said. “I’ll probably be the one treating your illness in the future.”

He Yu was afraid of doctors. He deeply disliked even gentle female doctors, to say nothing of this terrifying apparition emanating stern iciness from head to toe. The eight-year-old boy immediately felt unwell. He forced a smile, then turned around and left.

His mother, Lü Zhishu, happened to see this scene from the balcony. When she finished work that night, she called her son into the study. There was a cup of hot cocoa at just the right temperature on the tea table covered in emerald-green velvet. She pushed the cocoa over to He Yu.

“That Doctor Xie, you met him today?”

“I did.” He Yu’s family upbringing was strict. He was always very prim and proper to his mother, and a distance was maintained between them.

Lü Zhishu was considerably disappointed in this abnormal son. At that point in time, she had already birthed a second child. Although the younger boy wasn’t as clever as the elder, he was at the very least cute, sweet, and healthy, so she focused all her attention on him. When she talked to He Yu, she had nearly no patience. “His name is Xie Qingcheng. He’ll be your personal physician from now on, and he’ll come to our house every week to examine you. You must cooperate with him, and if you ever feel unwell, you can call him over at any time.”

“Mm.”

The composure of the eight-year-old boy in front of her always made Lü Zhishu feel a little scared, a feeling she tried to dispel with a sigh and a bit of teasing. “He Yu, we’ve signed a slave contract with Doctor Xie. If he can’t cure your condition, he’ll end up as a long-term laborer for us. He’ll never get paid or be able to take any days off. He won’t even be able to find a wife and get married. Do you know what this means?”

“Not really.”

“It means, if you don’t cooperate, you’ll lower the efficacy of his treatment, keep him from regaining his freedom, and leave him unable to eventually find a wife. Then, you’ll have to take responsibility for him and support him for life.”

Even though he was mature for his age, He Yu was still only eight—young and gullible—and was thus horrified. He looked up at once. “Can I cancel his contract?”

“No.” On her flights the past few days, Lü Zhishu had obsessively watched Republican-era dramas about torturous love and family infighting. With a fleeting thought, she added something even more cutting. “Also, he might want you to take responsibility by becoming his wife. Look at how pretty you are—you’d make a decent foster bride.”<sup>9</sup>

Back then, He Yu had no interest whatsoever in love, nor did he have any desire to learn more, so he didn’t even know marriage was restricted to heterosexual couples in this region. At Lü Zhishu’s words, his psychological trauma deepened; there was even a period when Xie Qingcheng’s silhouette would appear in his nightmares.

“No, I don’t like you... I don’t want to marry you...!”

These nightmares weren't dispelled until six months later, when He Jiwei heard the story and roundly cursed out his own wife. "What the hell did you tell our son?"

Then he cursed out He Yu. "How'd you fall for this kind of joke? Where has your usual intelligence gone? You're a man, Xie Qingcheng is also a man—what do you mean you need to marry him and be responsible for him? Do you have rocks for brains?"

He Yu felt very dispirited.

Over the course of the past half a year, at the thought of how he'd end up as that ice-cold doctor's foster bride if he didn't cooperate and let Doctor Xie cure him of his psychological condition, all he could do was constantly pretend to be stupid and foolish in front of the doctor. He hoped to leave a very negative impression on this man, so that even if matters got to that point in the future, Doctor Xie would definitely never develop any untoward interest in himself.

However, he didn't expect that after playing the fool in front of Xie Qingcheng for six months straight, his dad would tell him, "Your mom was teasing you."

If not for He Yu's strong self-restraint, he might have already blurted out a "Fuck you!" Unfortunately, he was monitored too closely. Forget about curse words—at age eight, even the word "bastard" had yet to enter his childhood vocabulary.

But, in any case, through those six months of diligent effort, persevering hard to embarrass himself before Xie Qingcheng, He Yu had more or less managed an extraordinary feat: no matter how hard he strove, in the following six or seven years...

No, it was longer than that. Even after he parted ways with Xie Qingcheng at age fourteen, even today, to Xie Qingcheng, He Yu was still a massive, three-dimensional, living and breathing dumbfuck with a capital D.

And in this moment, the hideous bowl of fried rice in his hands was the strongest evidence of the fact that, in Xie Qingcheng's eyes, after four whole years, he was still the ultimate dumbfuck who couldn't even make fried rice properly.

He put down the offending dish and handed the apron to the head of the Xie family, the elder brother who was dressed immaculately in a pressed suit and leather shoes. He Yu appeared calm and collected, but he was a little dejected. *That was a miscalculation*, he thought to himself. He shouldn't have personally done the cooking to begin with. Wasn't this just giving Xie Qingcheng free entertainment?



## **Chapter 4:** **When We Met Again, I Needed to Look Down at Him**

**T**HE SIZZLING SOUND of frying rice filled the narrow kitchen. He Yu and Xie Xue sat at the somewhat greasy little dining table. Xie Xue was in a better mood, a relaxed smile on her face as she waited for her elder brother to finish cooking. He Yu also smiled perfunctorily, but on the inside, he was rolling his eyes.

The kitchen door covered in posters slid open. The familiar aroma of cooked rice wafted out first. Then Xie Qingcheng walked out and took off his apron. As usual, he was wearing a shirt tucked into tailored dress pants. Despite his cold personality, he was still a good elder brother. Because his parents had died young, he had become the head of the household by default, looking after his younger sibling since childhood. As a result, his culinary skills were quite excellent.

Seeing her brother with his rolled-up sleeves bring a tray over and put it down on the simple little table, Xie Xue cried out in surprise and quickly jumped up to help him arrange the food and set the table.

“It smells amazing. Ge, you’re the best, you’re the best! I love you so, so, so much! Let’s eat! I’m starving!”

Xie Qingcheng’s expression was solemn. “Girls shouldn’t blather on like this. It’s inappropriate. Go and wash your hands first.”

Then he turned to He Yu and said, “You too.”

It had been ages since He Yu had eaten this kind of fried rice.

The rice Xie Qingcheng made was fluffy and golden, each and every grain distinct—when He Yu was little, he would stand by the stove and watch Xie Qingcheng make his little sister’s favorite dish. He knew good fried rice needed to be made from leftover rice that was neither too moist nor too dry. Before the rice went into the pan, Xie Qingcheng would first mix it with beaten eggs in a large bowl until every grain of rice was evenly coated in golden yellow.

Once the oil in the pan was hot, he would swiftly add in two more fresh eggs, scramble them, and immediately scoop them up. Then he would add lard and pour the egg-coated rice into the frying pan and stir-fry on high heat.

But this wasn’t exactly authentic Yangzhou fried rice. To suit Xie Xue’s tastes, Xie Qingcheng modified the recipe and never added peas, but this didn’t make it any less delicious.

All three plates of golden, piping-hot fried rice glistened under the lights, with small pieces of diced ham, tender shrimp, and delicate green onions sprinkled throughout. They looked and smelled extremely appetizing.

As He Yu ate, he schemed in secret.

He hardly tasted the food as it passed through his mouth. Xie Xue talked and laughed at the table, but because Xie Qingcheng was present, she directed most of her cheerful chatter toward her brother. The two siblings conversed comfortably, but because He Yu hadn’t interacted with the two of them in so long, he struggled to get a word in edgewise, becoming a nonexistent backdrop.