

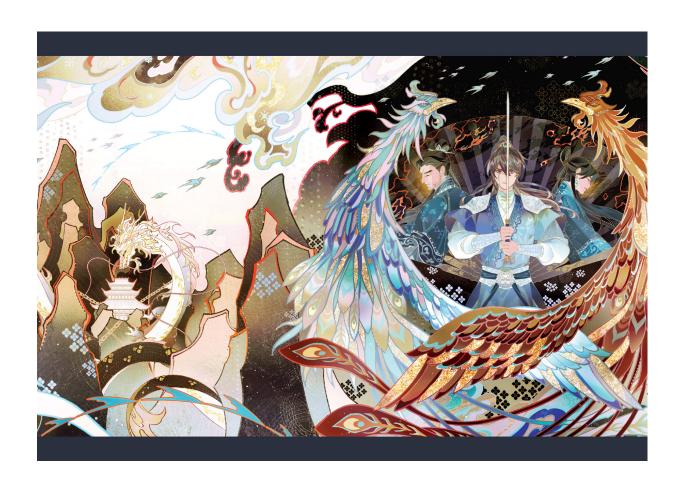
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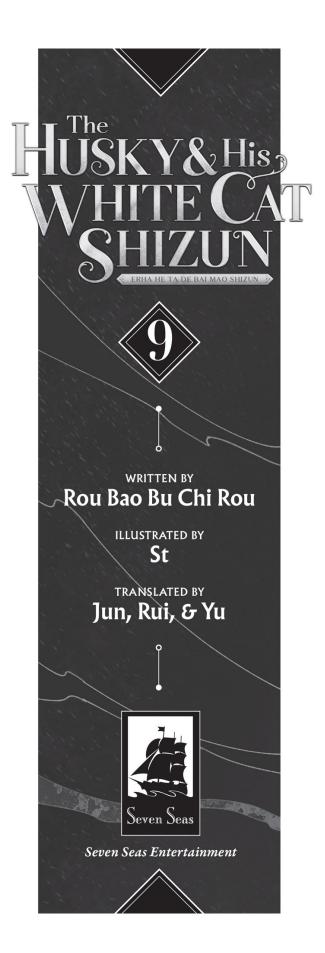
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HUSKY&Hiso WHITE CAT SHIZUN







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Chapter 270: Judgment Day

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED in the blink of an eye. At dawn on the third, Shi Mei came to the secret chamber.

Taxian-jun was already dressed, his tall, broad-shouldered figure clad in his ever-present black robes and combat armor. A gleaming silver compartment for hidden weapons was fastened at his slender waist. He wore black dragonskin gloves, beneath which were strapped several more concealed weapons.

He looked up at Shi Mei's entrance, his gaze cold. "You came."

"Get ready—we're going to Tianyin Pavilion."

"This venerable one is ready. Let's go."

Shi Mei assessed him. "What about Chu Wanning?"

"I gave him the medicine. He's asleep."

Despite nodding, Shi Mei stepped further into the room to check, Taxian-jun right on his heels. After taking Chu Wanning's pulse, Shi Mei said, "He'll recover his strength over the next few days. We should be careful."

Taxian-jun was unintimidated by Chu Wanning's strength. "What about his memories?" he asked.

Shi Mei shot him a glance. "He'll recover his memories too."

Ignoring Taxian-jun's look of displeasure, Shi Mei rose to his feet. He lit some tranquilizing incense and set it to diffuse through the room, preventing Chu Wanning from waking and disrupting his plans. Finally he stepped out of the room and cast a powerful ward on the door.

Taxian-jun furrowed his brow. "Why bother? The mountain's deserted except for Nangong Liu, and he thinks he's a child. There's no one to break him out."

"A thief in the family is hardest to guard against," came Shi Mei's impassive reply.

"Who?"

"Nobody you've met." Shi Mei sighed. "But someone I know very, very well. Enough. Let's go."

The two of them departed, leaving Chu Wanning alone in the austere stone chamber. He was unconscious again, his mind sifting through the memories of two lifetimes.

Yet that wasn't all. Even Shi Mei hadn't realized the true reason Chu Wanning's recovery was so drawn out. It wasn't because his physical health was poor: It was because the memories he was recovering weren't limited to his own. For as long as half of his earth soul had inhabited Mo Ran's body, it had mingled with Mo Ran's souls, day in and day out. When this soul fragment returned at last to Chu Wanning, it brought with it many of Mo Ran's deepest memories.

At that moment, these memories were flooding Chu Wanning's mind, filling his dreams with shattered fragments of the past.

First he dreamed of a disheveled child in a mass grave. The child was wailing over a woman's decayed corpse, his face a mess of tears and snot.

"Mom... Mom! Someone, anyone... Help, come and bury me too! Please, bury me too..."

He dreamed of the House of Drunken Jade in Xiangtan. Mo Ran, beaten black and blue, curled up in a cage meant for a dog. A golden beast-shaped burner filled with resin incense had been left in the warm room, suffusing the air with heavy fragrance. The child locked in the cage had nothing to eat or drink; he didn't even have enough space to turn around.

In the room was another boy of similar age. He leered at Mo Ran: "Look at you now—still want to play the hero? Well I say you're

nothing but a joke! Pah! You'll never be anything but a pathetic joke!"

Spittle flew at him, and the young Mo Ran closed his eyes. Chu Wanning's lashes trembled too.

Mo Ran

He dreamed of dancing flames, writhing through the building like vengeful ghosts. Shouts and cries echoed through the halls as the burning rafters collapsed one after another. Someone screamed in the billowing black smoke.

The teenaged Mo Ran sat within the towering fire, looking down with a stony expression. A bloodstained machete lay across his lap, and he was slowly peeling a bunch of grapes.

"Mom, it's over." Mo Ran appeared exceedingly calm. "But I won't get to see you again... I've killed people. My hands are covered in blood. I'll go to hell when I die, Mom. I won't see you ever again."

Mo Ran... Mo Ran...

The scene before him brightened. Chu Wanning saw a woman with soft features and eyes that sloped gently upward at their outer corners.

Who was she?

Her face bore some slight resemblance to his own, Chu Wanning thought. A likeness especially clear when she looked down in earnest concentration as she mended a coarsely woven garment.

"Mama..." a child called, soft as a mosquito's buzz.

The woman looked up, then flashed a smile. "What are you doing up?"

"I had a bad dream. My tummy hurts—I'm hungry..."

The woman put down the garment and opened her arms. "Another bad dream?" She chuckled softly. "Don't be afraid, Ran-er. Mama will hold you."

Ran-er... Mo Ran...

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. His heart was seized by an ache he couldn't put into words—it hurt too much. The scene he saw seemed a bleak and spartan existence, one of interminable suffering.

Mama...

It was the first time Chu Wanning had seen Mo Ran's mother. Suddenly, he understood why little Mo Ran had instinctively grabbed at his hem outside Wubei Temple, trusting him, begging him for succor. He understood why that same youth had walked up to him before the Heaven-Piercing Tower and implored him to be his teacher.

The young man then had said with a smile, "Because he looks the nicest and gentlest."

Back then, everyone had laughed at Mo Ran behind his back, calling him blind, a shameless suck-up. But that wasn't true. It wasn't true at all...

He wasn't blind or a suck-up. But he couldn't speak the truth out loud; he couldn't make a scene or take Chu Wanning's hand and tell him, Xianjun, when you glance downward, you remind me of the person who loved me more than anyone else in this world. But she's gone, so could you please pay attention to me—could you please spare me another glance in her stead?

I miss her so much.

Mo Ran couldn't say any of this. He could only suppress the ache in his chest and blink back the tears in his eyes. He could only endure Chu Wanning's indifference and disregard. He chased after him, laughing with a feigned nonchalance that fooled everyone.

No one could know of his past; no one could share in his pain. All he could do was smile brilliantly beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower. A smile too passionate, too hungry, hiding an inexhaustible longing in its corners; a smile that would end up scalding Chu Wanning at a touch.

Mo Ran opened his eyes.

He was no longer on Sisheng Peak. Instead he found himself in a tiny cell, gray and dim. The only light came through a narrow hatch for food near the bottom of a black iron door. The ceiling over his head was engraved with a set of scales.

A prison. This was the world's most hallowed temple of justice, the foremost court of law, which stood apart from the ten great sects—Tianyin Pavilion.

He lay in his cell, throat burning, lips dry and cracked. His surroundings were so quiet he could hear the desolate whisper of the wind, and beneath it, the uneasy chatter of his subconscious. It was a long time before he managed to gather his awareness.

In truth, he'd always been a little surprised such a day had never come in the past life. But fate had been generous to him, allowing him to drift along for two lifetimes; it was only now that it finally sought him out to answer for his crimes.

"Mo Ran, time to eat."

Time's passage was murky here; he didn't know how long he'd lain awake before he heard footsteps and saw a tray of food pushed through the hatch—fried youxuan pancake and a bowl of soup. Mo Ran didn't get up. The Tianyin Pavilion attendant said nothing more; their crisp footfalls quickly faded into the distance.

How was Chu Wanning doing now? And what of Sisheng Peak? What happened to those ruined chess pieces after the battle?

Dazed and weary, he returned again and again to the same three questions. It was a long while before he accepted that no one would give him answers. He was a prisoner now.

He sat up. His chest throbbed dully, and his entire body felt weak. The spiritual energy that had surged through him for as long as he could remember had vanished entirely. Leaning against the wall, he stared off into space. So *this* was how it felt to break one's spiritual core. To be unable to summon a spiritual weapon, powerless to use any techniques. Like a surf-riding kun without its great tail, or a cloud-dwelling peng stripped of its wings.

Mo Ran curled up in a corner, his dark eyes blank and unseeing. He suddenly felt awful, but not because of his own predicament—he'd remembered Chu Wanning in the past lifetime. As fate would have it, in this lifetime he'd finally come to understand Chu Wanning's helplessness and pain in those years. He wished he could apologize to that version of Chu Wanning. But it was too late—he could never go back.

The pancake and soup in his cell went from hot to lukewarm to cold. Eventually, he ate. The entire time, he was left in isolation.

He was a child locked up in a dog cage again. Though this room was much nicer than that cage had been—here he could at least comfortably stretch his limbs. He lay in the darkness, drifting between sleep and wakefulness—though there was little difference. Within these walls, it was like he was already dead.

Muzzily Mo Ran wondered: What if he had in fact died? What if this entire lifetime was no more than a beautiful dream, a brief reverie after he lay down in the coffin beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower, in the moments before his souls scattered? Perhaps all thirty-two years of his life had flashed before his eyes, a circus of color and emotion, before everything withered to bones in a grave.

The corners of his lips quirked up, and a smile ghosted over his face. If only that were the truth. How wonderful it would be.

He was so tired. He'd been pressing forward and struggling for so long. He didn't care if it was hell or the mortal realm that lay before him. He just wanted to rest. His heart had been reduced to a shambles, turning aged and decrepit since Chu Wanning's death in the past life. He'd spent all these years trying to do good, trying to make up for it. He'd searched for the medicine that could reverse this decay, but he'd never found it.

He'd fought and begged for so very long, ceaselessly and shamelessly. But he was tired of fighting, tired of begging. Over his lifetime he'd lost his mother and his shizun, his friends and his lover, his stolen family and his false renown. Now he'd lost his spiritual core as well. But he'd been brought to Tianyin Pavilion nonetheless. Broken as he was, he couldn't escape the cultivation realm's harshest punishment.

He'd finally lost all hope. He knew he wouldn't be forgiven.

He, Mo Weiyu, was an ugly, lopsided mountain. His wounds had been blanketed in pure-white snow, but now the snow had melted, and he had nowhere left to hide. Everything—his darkness, his monstrousness—had been laid bare.

He could never be Mo-zongshi. Since the moment his hands were stained with the blood of innocents, he was doomed only ever to be Emperor Taxian-jun. He was a vicious killer, a terrifying beast. He deserved to die. The world would rejoice at his demise.

When the cell door opened at last, he didn't know how many days he'd spent inside. Two Tianyin Pavilion disciples strode into the room. Without a word, they bound him with immortal-binding ropes, then yanked him upright and dragged him through the door.

They marched him down a long, pitch-dark hallway. "How are they doing?" Mo Ran rasped with difficulty. They were the first words he'd spoken in days.

Neither of his escorts answered him.

At the end of the hallway, daylight burst in. Mo Ran flinched under that dazzling light like a dragon that had cowered too long in the dark, eyes blinded and talons rotten. He couldn't bear its brilliance. He wanted to cover his eyes, but his hands were bound. All he could do was lower his head, tears welling under his dark lashes.

His eyes and ears were muddled; he didn't know where he was. Only his sense of smell remained sharp. He could smell the wind, the crowd, the flowers and trees on the breeze.

Someone pushed him from behind. Hesitant, he stumbled forward.

Gradually, his ears adjusted to the clamor. He could hear the din of many people talking, their conversations rushing over him like a tide. The waves could wash away mud, yes, but they could also drown a man.

Mo Ran felt like he couldn't catch his breath. He was weak, so terribly weak.

"Kneel."

His handler shoved him down. He knelt. The bright sun shone down from on high, casting its light over his haggard face. He hadn't expected it to be such a beautiful day.

"So this is Mo-zongshi..."

"Never thought we'd see him interrogated at Tianyin Pavilion. Ah, you really can't judge a man based on appearances."

Mo Ran's ears buzzed. He could make out some hazy shapes in his field of view, but nothing was clear. He peered out at the scene before him through half-lidded eyes, shaded by his lashes.

It was the same interrogation platform he remembered from when he'd come with Xue Zhengyong and Xue Meng to watch a trial, many years ago. But now he was no longer a spectator, but the criminal on display.

The people beneath the platform bunched and jostled like a pond full of carp. They were commoners and wandering cultivators who'd come to Tianyin Pavilion to watch the proceedings. Mo Ran couldn't make out their faces or read their expressions. In his blurred vision, those heads whispering back and forth became an undulating field of wheat.

He looked up. High walls loomed on all sides, with viewing platforms perched atop. Visitors from all the great sects sat upon them: He spotted the green of Bitan Manor, the red of Huohuang Pavilion, the yellow of Wubei Temple...

His heart clenched. How strange that he could still feel pain.

And there, an expanse of silver and blue—the largest and calmest contingent in the stands, Sisheng Peak.

He blinked. Ignoring his stinging eyes, he focused his gaze on them with all the concentration he could muster. But still he couldn't see—he couldn't see where Xue Zhengyong was, couldn't pick out Xue Meng or the Tanlang Elder or the Xuanji Elder. Couldn't find Madam Wang. On the interrogation platform, at the end of it all, he still couldn't see the people who mattered to him most.

"Mo Ran of Sisheng Peak, illegitimate son of Nangong Yan, lord of Rufeng Sect's ninth city..." Aided by a voice-amplifying technique, Mu Yanli's crisp words floated above the din. "We must conduct a stringent investigation, delivering neither penalty nor pardon in error..."

Mo Ran couldn't parse any of it. Her sharp, clear voice was too piercing for someone who'd languished in seclusion as long as he had.

Mu Yanli spoke steadily. Scattered phrases drifted into Mo Ran's ears, things like "a murderer must pay with his life," "harboring sinister motives," and "cultivating forbidden techniques." Finally he heard her say, "It is the duty of Tianyin Pavilion to purge criminals from our society and uphold the principles of justice."

A Tianyin Pavilion disciple walked up to Mo Ran, a black silhouette against the blazing sun. "Open your mouth."

When Mo Ran didn't react, the disciple clicked his tongue. He wrenched open Mo Ran's jaw and poured a jug of bitter, salty medicine down his throat. Mo Ran choked and broke into violent coughing. It had been days since he'd eaten, and the caustic mixture burned like fire all the way down. He felt his stomach spasming, as if

he was about to vomit. The disciple grabbed him around the neck, forcing him to remain still and swallow the rest. The ice-cold medicine felt like a snake slithering into his belly, poised to rend him open from within.

Mo Ran's face was ashen. He wanted badly to throw up, but he wasn't willing to voice any weakness or plead for mercy; he didn't even allow his tears to fall. He'd lived half his days in poverty, enduring too many miseries to name, but that didn't mean he lacked self-respect.

Once he swallowed the last drop, the disciple released him. He wheezed for air. His weariness was plain; his wings drooped, but he still had all the viciousness of a lone falcon on the verge of death.

The Tianyin Pavilion disciple turned to the assembly with an explanation: "The Draught of Confession."

Mo Ran's lips were gray, but as he looked down, he couldn't help but chuckle. The Draught of Confession... Heh, of course he knew about the Draught of Confession. Only criminals tried by Tianyin Pavilion were forced to take this tonic; it never touched the lips of an innocent. Those who drank it would feel their awareness fade, after which they would confess all the wrongs they'd committed in life.

The Tianyin disciple approached Mo Ran and tapped him on the lips, casting a voice-amplifying spell so everyone could hear him. Mo Ran closed his eyes, knitting his brows. He tried to resist it—but the pain sent tremors through his body, making his chains clank dully. His face was bloodless, and his eyes slowly rolled up into their sockets. He fell prostrate onto the platform, twitching and convulsing.

He was conscious, but his mind was clear one moment, clouded the next. He fought the medicine with every fiber of his being, but it was impossible.

"I've...killed people," he choked out at last, closing his eyes in agony.