

Little Brat's 21

Chapter 21: Came For Her

Ning Li was scrolling through the comments for a while, and the number of comments just kept increasing. Even the number of shares surged rapidly.

The comments were furious and there were a lot of nasty vulgarities. Some of them were even starting to lynch her through the internet.

Since school bullying was involved and there was video 'evidence', a few related keywords quickly climbed up the search trend.

#YunzhouSecondHigh

#YunzhouSecondHighSchoolBullying

#NingLi

Ning Li stared at the hashtag with her name for a few seconds. A cold glint flashed across her eyes.

Pop.

Another message appeared.

[Sister Li, something is not right. Is someone buying out your name in the search trend?]

Something was indeed not right.

The video was released half an hour ago and the uploader only had a little more than 300,000 fans. However, when several verified accounts shared the video, the video had garnered more than 10,000 comments in a very short time.

Then, her name appeared in the search trend.

The snippet only revealed half of her face and it was shot from a lower angle a distance away. Besides those who knew her that could tell it was her, the others would not be able to.

Even if someone mentioned her name in the comments, her name should not top the search trend so quickly.

[Sister Li, who did this to you?]

Who could it be?

Second High was a big school, so it was possible that someone coincidentally caught her in the act and took the video.

However, only a handful of them could afford to spend money to put her name on the search trend.

The video was short as it only captured the moment when Ning Li was trying to scare the girl. Since it was shot from afar, the video did not capture any sound at all.

Anyone who saw the video without knowing the context would assume that it was a violent case of school bullying.

[These people know nothing! Sister Li, stop watching! I'll get someone to hack the account!]

Ning Li finally replied.

[Leave it.]

After a moment of silence, Ning Li was replied with a bunch of question marks and exclamation marks.

[Leave it?! Sister Li, are you serious? These people's comments are nasty!]

The people knew nothing of the truth. Instead, they jumped to a conclusion, judging and convicting her based on one short video.

It felt like if they were any later, they would not be able to get justice for the poor girl.

Ning Li thought it through before she added. [Just find out who took the video and leave the rest.]

After sending that message, she put her phone away and left the canteen under everyone's judgmental gaze.

...

The classroom was usually quiet during the afternoon break.

Yet today, it was unusually lively and noisy.

The students sat in groups and stared at their respective smartphones, gossiping in excitement.

When Ning Li returned to the classroom, the lively atmosphere immediately plunged into silence.

The class all knew about Ning Li beating up the girl, but most of them had never seen it with their own eyes. Moreover, since Sun Quan had intentionally shoved it under the rug, the incident was left idle and everyone eventually moved from the topic.

Unfortunately, this was not the case now.

The video online clearly showed Ning Li beating the girl. Even though it was just a video, anyone who saw it could feel her coldness and ruthlessness.

It looked like Ning Li was really going to push the girl off the rail.

It was unlike any common school fights. The slightest mistake and someone could have died from the incident.

Ning Li seemed immune to the gazes. She simply returned to her seat, pulled the chair out to sit, and tidied her uniform before she laid down on her arms for a nap.

“Is she afraid?”

Cheng Xiangxiang looked at Ning Li in reverence. Her eyes were filled with disgust and contempt.

“Lil’Ci, she’s really going to stay in your house from now on? That’s too dangerous! Who knows what she would do to you if she’s having a bad day? Why don’t you talk to Uncle Ye? Tell her to move out from your house.”

Ye Ci shook her head. “She’s my mother’s daughter as well.”

Cheng Xiangxiang widened her eyes in disbelief. “Are you not scared? Look at her, this is definitely not the first time she has engaged in such a violent act!”

Ye Ci tugged Cheng Xiangxiang’s hand and shook her head gently, indicating for her to keep it down.

“Sister Ning Li has a rough past, so don’t say that about her.”

Everyone around her heard what she said, and they looked at each other in silence.

Ning Li's background was not news anymore.

They understood that a kid who grew up in such harsh conditions would be different. If she were not fierce enough, she would not be where she was now, unharmed.

Cheng Xiangxiang grunted. "You defend her and treat her so well, but I don't think she'll appreciate your effort."

A slight pause later, she covered her mouth and chuckled. "Anyhow, this incident is getting bigger on the internet. Even if Uncle Ye doesn't do anything, the school would certainly do something. Second High would never tolerate a stain in their reputation."

...

Yunding Fenghua, Lu Huaiyu's luxurious mansion.

Cheng Xiyue was sitting in his car when he glanced at his watch.

It had been half an hour, yet the young master had not shown up.

He rubbed the center of his brows and accepted defeat. He got out of the car and walked into the mansion.

Yunding Fenghua was a three-story mansion with a minimalistic design concept, so it was rather plain at first glance.

Cheng Xiyue headed straight to the master bedroom on the third floor.

Under normal circumstances, he would never visit the mansion at this hour, considering Lu Huaiyu's condition. However, he had made an appointment with Dr. Gu yesterday and it was almost time, yet Lu Huaiyu was still a no-show.

He could only force himself up there.

Right before he could knock on the door, he realized the door was not closed.

“Second Master Lu?”

He walked after he opened the door and looked around. Only then did he see a vague figure sitting at the study room’s balcony that was connected to the bedroom.

He walked over.

Lu Huaiyu was leaning on the rattan chair with his legs extended comfortably. He had a book in his hand.

He must have just woken up because his black hair was still messy.

The sunset painted the sky with a rosy-red color and outlined his silhouette as though he had a layer of glow around him.

His brows were sharp, his nose was tall, and his lower jaw was prominent. His cold and noble presence made him admirable yet distant enough to keep others away.

When he noticed Cheng Xiyue’s presence, Lu Huaiyu shut the book and looked around.

Cheng Xiyue had a vague feeling that Lu Huaiyu had slipped something between the pages when he shut it. However, because he did not get a clear look at it, he assumed that it was just a bookmark and was not overly concerned.

He tapped his watch and said, “Second Master Lu, we’re going to be late. Can you please do me a favor and meet the doctor for once?”

Lu Huaiyu was in a decent mood, so after some thought, he stood up.

He put the book back on the top of the rack.

“Half an hour.”

Cheng Xiyue sighed a breath of relief and followed him downstairs.

The two of them got into the car and the car sped out of Yunding Fenghua.

Lu Huaiyu took his phone out to reply to some messages.

After sending some texts, he did not keep it away. Instead, he played with it, spinning it around as if he was waiting for something.

A while later, when he realized that it was a Tuesday, he rubbed his brows and wanted to keep his phone away.

A news notification suddenly popped up.

[Round up for the school bullying incident at Yunzhou Second High! Exposing the fake rich darling in the bully!]

Lu Huaiyu stared at his phone for a second before tapping on the notification.

After a quick look, his presence turned cold.

“Turn around. We’re going to Second High.”

Chapter 22: Monitor

Cheng Xiyue suddenly stepped on the brake and turned his head around in shock. “Why are we going there?”

His gaze fell onto Lu Huaiyu and his phone.

What could have happened to make Second Master Lu this angry?

He too took his phone out and opened Weibo.

On the search trend, a few hashtags were trending and one of them caught his attention — Ning Li.

Shocked, he quickly tapped on the hashtag to find out what had happened.

On Weibo’s trending page, several threads garnered the highest attention.

Other than the video about Ning Li pushing someone over the rail, there was another long thread about Ning Li’s background too. The discussion at the bottom was as heated as it could get and even pictures were attached.

The thread described Ning Li as a loner who was never taught proper manners. All she knew was to get herself in trouble and cause trouble for others.

At the end of it, there were also pictures posted by anonymous users that exposed her past.

[OP, I used to study in the same school as her. She was already well-known when she was in Lincheng because she always got herself into a fight and has countless demerits. I heard that she got students hospitalized on several occasions too. Daughter of a wealthy family? More like the daughter of a convict who’s serving sentence in prison. She might have used her mother’s connections to get into Yunzhou Second High, but her personality would never change. It’s not at all surprising that she would get into a fight again.]

[She just got transferred to our school a few days ago and she already made a reputation for herself. As if beating someone was not bad enough, she even argued with a teacher in class and got kicked out. She acted like it was nothing. Since everyone is talking about here, I might as well reveal it and let everyone know what kind of person she is.]

[137xxxxxxx, her phone number. No need to thank me.]

When Cheng Xiyue scrolled down to the last picture, his eye twitched and he instinctively looked at Lu Huaiyu.

Lu Huaiyu was leaning back on the seat and seemed like he was making a call.

“Sorry, the number you have dialed is not available. Please...”

Lu Huaiyu hung up the phone.

Cheng Xiyue scrolled through the other trending topics.

Most of the comments scolded and criticized her, but among all that was one tiny comment that tried to fight for her.

[LittleLittleLittleFeather: She might be a problematic person but you shouldn't just reveal her phone number to the public. This is cyberbullying.]

The particular comment received very few likes but had a ton of replies. It was also pinned as the top comment.

[T.Ogen: A wild St. Mary appeared! Shocked.jpg]

[DongDong-DongDong: Something must be wrong with your brain. Not only did you not sympathize with the girl who almost got pushed over the rail, but you even care about the bully? She should have expected this when she decided to resolve things with violence.]

[hgjiag: Since you're so righteous, why don't you let her choke you for a change? This is not just random bullying yet Yunzhou Second High did not react to it at all. Are they trying to protect the bully?]

A tremendous amount of malicious replies flooded that particular comment.

Every word was as sharp as a blade. She was only a 17-year-old girl.

Cheng Xiyue sighed. 'No wonder Lu Huaiyu reacted so strongly...'

"I'll tell Dr. Gu to reschedule for tomorrow."

Lu Huaiyu was obviously not in the mood for his doctor's meeting. It would be useless even if Cheng Xiyue decided to take him there.

He must first take care of Ning Li's case.

Dr. Gu stood up but he was not angry. Instead, he told Cheng Xiyue to look out for Lu Huaiyu without asking what happened or why.

Cheng Xiyue sighed a breath of relief before he turned the car around.

Lu Huaiyu then dialed another number on his phone.

...

It had been a few hours since the incident got out but the incident showed no signs of it calming down. In fact, it got worse.

The internet was abuzz, yet the person in the center of all this, Ning Li, reacted like she was not involved. She still went to her classes and studied as she usually would.

The last class in the afternoon was self-learning.

Ning Li had a stack of mock test papers for a Physics competition in front of her. Zhou Fei had drafted the mock test paper for the participating class himself, and he told Ning Li to practice for a bit.

The Physics competition would cover a wide range of topics, and the level of it was much harder than the normal high-school senior-level Physics

Li Ning dropped her head down and looked at the questions.

She might have memories of her past life but answering the mock-up test papers without preparation felt a little strange and unfamiliar for her.

Only after answering a few questions did she slowly get the hang of it and her mind could think better.

She gradually calmed down.

Ren Qian was playing with his phone when he had a glance at Ning Li. He looked rather hesitant.

He got closer to Pei Song and whispered, "Someone is trying to stop our new classmate at the school entrance tonight."

Since Ning Li had been flushed out by the almighty keyboard warriors, everything about her was exposed on the internet. This made it easy for someone to locate her if they would like to confront her or sorts.

Pei Song turned a deaf ear.

Ren Qian then said, "Sigh, I heard Mr. Zhou wanted her in the competition class, so she's joining the night class with you guys. I know what's going on but she helped you before right? Shouldn't you repay the favor?"

Pei Song stopped writing.

...

Zhou Fei was sitting in front of Sun Quan in the office.

"You were there that day. You knew better than anyone what happened. As long as the school provides an explanation, the problem will solve itself. Isn't that a win-win situation?"

Zhou Fei tapped on his phone.

"Look at what people are saying about Ning Li."

Sun Quan's brows were knitted together.

"The best way to handle this is to not handle it. If the school steps up on her behalf, it'll only exacerbate things, which will do no good to anyone."

Zhou Fei grunted. "You are afraid that it might harm the school's reputation, right?"

Sun Quan shrugged. "Things won't last on the internet. Just turn a blind eye and the netizens will soon forget about this."

Getting Second High involved in this incident was probably not a good idea.

Zhou Fei knew the conversation was getting nowhere and it frustrated him a lot.

“I’ll call Uncle Shi then.”

Uncle Shi, or Shi Song, was the principal of Second High.

However, his call could not get through, which shocked him.

‘He’s on a call? Who could it be? This is definitely not helping the matter!’

...

After the self-learning class and dinner, Ning Li grabbed her bag for the next class.

It was almost time, so she took her phone out.

The moment she turned on her phone, countless scolding and missed calls from unregistered numbers flooded her phone.

She ignored every one of them and found a message with a familiar name.

[Sister Li, I found out who shot the video. The name is Ting Xi, a senior in your school. Did you offend this guy before?]

Ting Xi.

Of course Ning Li knew the name.

The guy was one of Ye Ci’s fanatic pursuers.

However, the guy came from an average family, so he would never have the money to push the incident to the trending page.

[Got it.]

She replied with a voice message.

[Send this out anonymously at 9:00 p.m. tonight.]

Before she could send her message, she received a new one.

[SISTER LI! LOOK! Someone released a video on Weibo!]

Curious, Ning Li tapped on Weibo.

[@Yit_Z: Plot twist! The bullied is actually the bully!]

The video that followed played automatically.

The video was the actual surveillance camera footage from the corridor, and it showed several boys and girls mocking someone.

“Look! She’s the one. I heard her father was a murderer!”

The girl in front of the group stopped in her steps and turned around.

The boys and girls continued to mock and say horrible things to her.

The footage showed what happened the other day. From the moment the group mocked and sneered at Ning Li to Ning Li pushing the girl to the rail. The video ended with the boys and girls apologizing to Ning Li.

Regarding who was in the right or wrong, every detail was shown clearly.

The person on the other end of the phone, who had also finished watching the video, was stunned.

[Sister Li, did you place cameras in the corridor and recorded what they said?]

Chapter 23: Again

Ning Li was not the one who released the video.

Only a handful of personnel could get their hands on the security footage in Second High.

Though if she wanted to, getting her hands on this security footage was not a problem.

However, she knew Second High management well enough to know that they would never make a stand on the matter. They would just wait it out and let the problem solve itself.

Yet now, someone had released the footage online.

It would cause a ripple of effects.

[CoolPurpleSweetPotato: OMG! So this is the truth? Does it mean that we wrongly accused her?!]

[HuahuaRO: Honestly, scolding and criticizing someone like that would make even a saint furious. Leave people's parents alone, isn't that common sense? If you can't control your mouth, don't blame others for beating you up.]

[LilAnTriedHerBestToday: What kind of nonsense are you talking about? Just because someone called you names, so you pushed them off the rail? It's a fact that her father is in prison. There are a ton of ways to teach people a lesson. If she decides to go with the most dangerous, it's definitely going to be a problem.]

[Monica: You above me, the olden days are gone. Being punished for your family or relative's crimes is not something we do now. If someone called me that and insulted my family, I'll chop her head off. Smile.jpg]

[YMGOrder: Frankly, the girl had it hard. The video released earlier was obviously edited with malicious intent. If you take sides too early, you might end up getting a slap on your face. I hereby apologize to her for what I said earlier. Sorry, Ning Li.]

Below that particular comment was many more comments that apologized to Ning Li.

Other than a few who were still bickering, the common viewers had already sided with Ning Li.

The plot twist happened so quickly that it felt like a tornado.

Ning Li pondered.

Who helped her?

She grabbed her bag and headed to the night class for the Physics competition.

"Ning Li?"

Ren Qian came up to her from behind with a flattering smile.

“Mathematics class and Physics class are next to each other, and I have a question that I want to ask you. Why don’t I walk you there and you can explain it to me on the way?”

Ren Qian’s action silenced the class, and many of his classmates looked at him strangely.

A guy from the competitive Mathematics class asking a girl from the competitive Physics class for help? It was probably the strangest thing that they had ever heard.

Ren Qian was a well-known Mathematics genius in Second High. The top scorer in the Mathematics exam always belonged to either him or Pei Song.

When he said he wanted to ask Ning Li for some advice in Mathematics before, everyone thought he was joking. Who would expect him to do it for real?

Ning Li nodded. She did not mind the request.

“Sure.”

Ren Qian turned around and said, “Brother Pei, let’s go.”

...

There were quite some students who joined the competitive Mathematics class, so it was common for a few of them to attend class in a group.

The three of them left together.

The class finally reverted to the lively atmosphere a while after they left.

Ye Ci stared at the three of their receding silhouettes with a frown on her face.

Pei Song was a cold person, and even though Ren Qian was always smiling, he was arrogant.

He did that because he wanted to help Ning li.

Since Pei Song did not say anything else too...

Buzz.

Her phone vibrated.

[Lil Ci, have you seen that video on the internet?]

Ye Ci knew that the video mentioned was the school's security footage.

The other party continued before she could reply.

[That video has and someone has already started to investigate this matter. This someone is also powerful, so I've deleted your email. You should be careful on your side. Don't leave any trails behind. It's nothing but trouble if someone traces it back to you.]

Ye Ci bit her lips.

[Thank you, cousin. I understand.]

A slight pause later, she could not help but ask a question.

[Cousin, who's investigating this matter?]

Ning Li came from a poor background. By right, she should not have connections to people who had access to the surveillance footage.

However, judging from her cousin's tone, Ye Ci sensed reverence.

It was something she had not seen before.

[Don't ask. Remember, you have nothing to do with this.]

Ye Ci was smart enough to leave the topic.

She deleted the chat history and some other things on her phone before she finally sighed a breath of relief.

...

Principal's office.

A young man in a black suit was sitting on the couch, looking comfortable and laid back, but the blue blood presence was distinct.

A man in his fifties sat opposite him, sighing.

"Are you happy now?"

Lu Huaiyu shifted his eyes away from his phone and looked at the man. His lips were curled into a grin.

"Thank you, Uncle Shi."

Shi Song shook his head and asked curiously, "What is with you and this Ning Li? Why are you protecting her?"

He had never heard Lu Huaiyu mentioned the girl before.

However, because of her, Lu Huaiyu gave him a call and even personally paid him a visit.

The second young master of the Lu Family was known for his laid-back and proud personality.

He had never seen Lu Huaiyu care about someone to this extent.

When he got the call from Lu Huaiyu, he immediately brought up the surveillance footage and even called his men to do a background check on Ning Li.

A senior transfer student from Lingcheng, the stepdaughter of Ye Family.

If the Ye Family asked Lu Huaiyu for help...

However, that was unlikely because the Ye Family was not that influential.

Moreover, he saw the footage himself and Ning Li's mother's attitude was more than enough to explain the situation.

Lu Huaiyu raised his brows but did not answer the question.

"Second Master Lu."

The door opened and Cheng Xiyue came in, waving his phone at Lu Huaiyu.

"Okay."

Lu Huaiyu nodded.

Shi Song swept his gaze back and forth at the both of them. "What now? Isn't this over?"

He had a feeling that Lu Huaiyu did not plan to stop here.

Cheng Xiyue said succinctly, "Uncle Shi. The video was taken by a student named Ting Xi in Second High but the one who leaked it..."

Cheng Xiyue smiled profoundly. "Was Ye Family's precious daughter."

Shi Song was shocked. "Ye Ci? Are you saying..."

"Her cousin, Ye Yiming, had some connections with the media."

By now, it was clear.

Shi Song went silent for a while.

"She has nothing against Ning Li, why would she do it? Is it possible that you've got it..."

The last word, 'wrong', failed to escape his mouth.

Given Cheng Xiyue's methods, he would never get it wrong.

However, they were the students of his school. If he exposed them...

"Huaiyu, what are you going to do about this?"

Lu Huaiyu chuckled.

“It depends on her.”

By ‘her’, he meant Ning Li.

Shi Song found himself in a difficult position to argue.

“Should I bring her over?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

Lu Huaiyu looked at his watch.

“The night self-learning class has started. Let her finish her class.”

It would be better to not disturb a senior-year student’s study.

Cheng Xiyue clicked his tongue.

It had always been others who would wait after him, never the other way around.

It seemed like the girl was his bane.

...

9:00 p.m., class was over.

Ning Li kept the papers that she got from Zhou Fei and walked out of the classroom.

Right after she walked out, someone called her from behind.

“Ning Li.”

She turned around and saw Pei Song walking to her with her water bottle.

“You forgot this.”

Before she could take the water bottle, the phone in her pocket suddenly buzzed.

She took it out and saw Lu Huaiyu’s name.

She hesitated for a while before she answered the phone.

“Second Master Lu?”

“Why didn’t you answer my calls earlier?”

She heard two voices — one from the phone and one from downstairs.

Surprised, she looked down and saw a young man looking back at her.

He was holding the phone with one hand and pocketed the other.

It was dark, and the streetlamp cast a long shadow behind him.

She blinked and said, “I’ll hang up...”

Lu Huaiyu's gaze was abysmal as though he could be one with the night.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"I thought I told you to call this number if anything happens."

Chapter 24: Second Brother

Night self-learning class was over, and with the students coming out from their classrooms, the corridors were buzzing with noise.

Him standing there was already a scene in itself, and his blue blood presence with a hint of laid-back attitude made him stand out from the lively crowd.

It was as if he had walked out from a painting. The strokes of his contour were clean, yet every detail on him was rich and pronounced.

Many students saw him and could not take their eyes away.

Some girls even stopped and got together, whispering to each other shyly.

"Who's that? He's so handsome. Is he a new teacher in our school?"

"He's too young! And a new teacher at this hour? He's probably here to pick someone up, but if he's really a new teacher, then it would be awesome!"

"I thought outsiders are not allowed in our school without valid reasons."

“Who cares! You should be grateful that such a handsome young man has graced your eyes! Maybe God knows that we’re studying hard and decided to reward us for one! I’d be willing to do another hundred mock-up tests!”

Lu Huaiyu had always been handsome and when he lifted his head slightly, his lower jaw looked even shaper and prominent.

The streetlamp’s warm light shed a layer of warm light on his face, granting a hint of softness to his cold and sharp looks.

Ning Li stared at him as the uniquely deep and pleasant voice that carried a tinge of laziness entered her ears.

Then, a thought appeared in her head.

‘He knows about what happened on the internet? And he’s here at this hour...’

She thought of the surveillance footage that was released online, and her heart beat faster.

“I’m coming down.”

With that, she hung up the phone as she turned around to Pei Song for the water bottle.

“Thank you.”

...

Ning Li headed down and walked to Lu Huaiyu. She instantly felt an overwhelming amount of eyes on her.

She had gotten used to it but it was a little too much for her to handle today.

She sighed as she looked at the young man some distance away.

He really stood out.

“What brings you here?”

Ning Li stood in front of him. She was only as tall as his chest, so she had to lift her head slightly to talk to him.

Lu Huaiyu then noticed her phone and frowned.

“Give me your phone.”

Ning Li was somewhat confused.

However, Lu Huaiyu was already reaching out for her phone.

She paused for a second but handed her phone to him eventually.

The phone was not locked, so Lu Huaiyu was able to access it directly.

She had more than 99 missed calls, all from unlisted numbers. Unread messages filled the mailbox and all of them were extremely unpleasant.

He squinted his eyes to cover the harsh coldness from inside.

He thought he had dealt with the matter as quickly as possible, but the damage done could not be erased that easily.

His long and slender fingers tapped on the phone for a while before he took a new sim card out from his pocket and inserted it into the phone. Only then did he give it back to Ning Li.

“Since your number’s been exposed, it’s better for you to change to a new one.”

Ning Li was planning to do so too but she did not expect Lu Huaiyu to be a step ahead of her.

She took her phone back, and it seemed that her phone had caught his unique cedar fragrance.

“The surveillance footage... is that you?”

It was a question but Ning Li sounded firm.

Lu Huaiyu looked away.

“Yunzhou Second High is Cheng Xiyue’s alma mater.”

He meant that Cheng Xiyue was the one who solved the matter.

He did not answer her question directly, and instead, he shifted all the credits to Cheng Xiyue. However, Ning Li knew that he must be involved.

It had been many years since Cheng Xiyue graduated, why would he pay attention to such a trivial matter?

On top of that, other than Lu Huaiyu, she could not think of anyone who would want to get the surveillance footage.

Ning Li gripped onto her phone tightly. Suddenly, she felt that the whole situation was a little troublesome.

She was already in his debt and now with this matter, she owed him even more.

“Hey, Ning Li?”

Ren Qian’s voice came from behind.

Ning Li turned around.

Lu Huaiyu also shifted his attention behind her.

The two of them seemed to have created a barrier around them with their unique aura. The other students stopped and watched but none of them dared to get close to them.

Ren Qian came out late, but he originally planned to send Ning Li out of the school with Pei Song.

Even though things had taken a U-turn on the internet, no one could guarantee that Ning Li was safe. There might still be people out there who wanted to cause trouble.

As fellow classmates, they believed they should offer a helping hand.

However, he came out to see Ning Li talking to a young man alone.

Ren Qian had been looking at Pei Song’s handsome face for almost every day now, so his sense of beauty was boosted to a new high. He barely took anyone seriously.

However, when he saw Lu Huaiyu, he was shocked by the man’s looks.

He greeted Ning Li, but when his gaze landed on Lu Huaiyu, he hesitated.

“This is...”

If he remembered correctly, Ning Li had no friends in Lincheng. Moreover, the man emanated a unique aura. With the blue blood presence, they all pointed to the fact that he was not just anyone.

He thought Ning Li had just arrived in Yunzhou a while ago, yet how did she come across someone like him?

Ning Li felt a little embarrassed.

There was nothing to hide about Lu Huaiyu’s identity.

Though if she was the one who explained it, it would sound strange.

After all, she technically had nothing to do with Lu Huaiyu.

“This is Lu...”

“Lu Huaiyu.”

Lu Huaiyu introduced himself before Ning Li could finish.

He stepped up and walked past Ning Li.

“You guys are Lili’s classmate?”

Ren Qian felt an invisible sense of imposing pressure from the man as he got closer.

It felt different from youngsters who tried to act mature or experienced. For him, it was not made up as it felt natural. It made one revered and admired his unique presence.

Even though the man looked young, at most in his early twenties, the aura on him was unlike nothing else.

Compared to Ren Qian, Pei Song reacted fairly calmly.

He nodded with the plain look on his face.

“Yes, we are.”

Lu Huaiyu smiled.

‘I’m Lili’s brother. She’s still new here, so please take care of her.’

Ning Li looked at him and her eyes twitched.

‘Brother?’

Slightly surprised, the two opposite him looked at Lu Huaiyu and then back at Ning Li.

Ning Li’s surname was Ning and Lu Huaiyu’s surname was Lu, so how could they be siblings?

Besides, if he was Ning Li’s cousin, Ning Li would not have to go through the mill before this.

However, Ning Li did not say anything as if she had acknowledged it tacitly. With that, Ren Qian and Pei Song did not press on the question.

Ren Qian cleared his throat and chuckled. “Oh, it’s Ning Li’s brother. Ah, it’s nothing, we didn’t really do anything. Ning Li was the one who helped us.”

Lu Huaiyu lowered his head to look at Ning Li, who was behind him, with a curious gaze.

It had only been two days since her transfer and her classmates were already defending her?

It seemed like the girl was quite... well received.

Ning Li felt his strange gaze on her. 'What's with that look?'

However, Lu Huaiyu quickly moved his attention away.

"It's getting late. We should send Ning Li home."

Ren Qian nodded wisely and parted ways with Ning Li.

Lu Huaiyu turned around and took Ning Li's bag off her shoulders.

"Let's go, Lili."

...

Cheng Xiyue waited outside the school in his car.

When Ning Li saw it, she understood everything.

She was two steps behind Lu Huaiyu.

"Second Master Lu, you really don't have to..."

"Call me brother."

Lu Huaiyu corrected her with his lazy tone without even turning around.

Ning Li realized the rumors about him were real. He had the temper of a young master and was a difficult person to be with.

She paused for a bit, but she eventually went with it.

“Second Brother.”

The girl’s voice was soft but when it was heard, it felt light and encouraging.

Lu Huaiyu stopped in his steps.

Not noticing that moment, Ning Li accidentally bumped into his back.

Chapter 25: I Didn’t Say I Would Let Them Go

Soreness immediately shot up her nose. Li Ning muffled a grunt as she covered her nose and took a step back. A layer of tears had welled up in her eyes.

‘Ouch!’

‘What’s wrong with this guy? Why did he stop all of a sudden! He could have given me a heads up!’

Lu Huaiyu turned around and saw her seductive eyes.

Her crystal clear eyes had a layer of gloss on them and coupled with a hint of pink at the edge, it gave her an alluring look.

He raised a brow at her.

“You should keep an eye out even if you are walking behind me.”

Ning Li glared at him.

The man’s ability to turn facts upside down was unrivaled.

“How would I know you’d stop all of a sudden? It’s not my fault!”

Lu Huaiyu looked at her. Her skin was as fair as porcelain, her features were clearly pronounced and unrivaled, and at the moment, she had a rare angry look on her face.

He chuckled.

“Okay, it’s my fault.”

His tone was as lazy and casual as ever but it had an extra connive to it.

A car honk sounded.

Cheng Xiyue was speechless as he watched the two from his car.

After dealing with Ning Li’s matter, Cheng Xiyue received a call from his secretary and he suddenly had to go back to his office to settle something.

Before he left, he told Lu Huaiyu to wait for him and he would come back after the night self-learning class was over to pick them up.

They were only a few steps away from the car, could they not have got into the car and continued the chat?

Lu Huaiyu walked to Cheng Xiyue's car.

Ning Li rubbed her nose and followed.

Lu Huaiyu opened the rear door and waited for Ning Li to get in before he got in himself.

"Little Ning Li, I've called your driver and told him that I'll be sending you home today."

He heard someone was coming for her after school, so he decided to send her home himself for her safety sake.

Ning Li hugged her bag and nodded.

"Thank you."

Cheng Xiyue was slightly stunned when he looked into the rear mirror.

"Huh? Little Ning Li, why are you crying?"

As far as he knew, the girl had always been a strong and independent lady.

Was it because of the incident on the internet?

Truth be told, it was not surprising for a 17-year-old to feel bad after what happened.

"Little Ning Li... You don't need to care about those comments. They are just using this chance to justify their actions. Those who truly care about you will know your kindness."

Ning Li's heart skipped a beat.

Cheng Xiyue might look like an indecorous person but he actually had a great view of things.

He was right.

If she was carried away by the comments of others and tried to flatter the whole world, she would gradually lose herself and ultimately fall into the pit of suffering.

She did not understand that in her past life, where she hoped to make everyone happy. Even if she had to suffer and endure the torture, she still did not take it easy on herself.

This time, this life, she would never give others the chance to hurt her again.

"Thank you, Master Cheng, but I'm not actually crying."

Ning Li cleared the air.

"Not crying? Then why are your..."

"It's my fault."

Leaning on the seat, Lu Huaiyu said softly with a ridiculing gaze.

Cheng Xiyue's eyes turned fearful.

Since when did Lu Huaiyu, this master, add the words 'my fault' in his dictionary?

Cheng Xiyue glanced over the rear mirror again and saw the two of them sitting apart from each other.

Ning Li's eyes and nose were red on her porcelain-like face that exuded a hint of stubbornness.

Lu Huaiyu was as lazy as ever. He simply rubbed his brows, looking slightly helpless and connive.

Cheng Xiyue's face twitched.

'Great.'

Not only did Lu Huaiyu admit his mistake, but he was even appeasing her.

He wanted to call Dr. Gu right away and ask him what kind of syndromes Lu Huaiyu was having.

Ning Li was not angry at all, not at something this trivial.

The incident happened in the afternoon and the surveillance footage was released in the evening. Everything that followed after was dealt with swiftly and cleanly.

It was not difficult for Ning Li to imagine how much Lu Huaiyu and Cheng Xiyue did to settle everything this quickly.

She was not an ungrateful person.

"Sorry for troubling you guys for what happened today."

Cheng Xiyue smiled and reminded her about the matter.

"It's nothing. But Little Ning Li, try to stay low. Otherwise, you might not even know what happened when you are stabbed in the back."

Ning Li reacted fairly calmly. "You're referring to Ye Ci?"

Lu Huaiyu looked at her.

It seemed like she had known since the beginning.

Cheng Xiyue skipped to the point as well since she already knew.

"It's good that you understand. If you need any evidence, I can get them."

Ning Li actually had the evidence herself.

From the moment she moved into the Ye Family, she had been waiting for Ye Ci to make a move.

Even though Ye Ci went through several people to hide from the incident, as long as she was involved, there would be traces of her.

Ning Li shook her head. "Thank you, Master Cheng, but I don't think I need them for now."

Cheng Xiyue felt surprised.

Ye Ci had almost ruined her reputation and she planned to let it go just like that?

"Little Ning Li, let me tell you something. Sometimes, you shouldn't be too soft with—"

Ye Ci was a few months younger than Ning Li, yet she had the heart to resolve things with such despicable means. Who knew what she would do when she got older.

Ning Li suddenly smiled.

Her rich and succulent lips curled into a grin and her eyes were glistening.

“Yeah, I understand.”

Lu Huaiyu crossed his legs and propped one of his hands on the seat and the other on his knee.

His slender and fair fingers tapped his knee as he smiled.

The girl was quite capable herself.

...

After sending Ning Li home, Lu Huaiyu and Cheng Xiyue left without going in.

Lu Huaiyu answered a phone call on the way back.

“Second master, the painting that you asked for earlier, they are selling it but the price is raised to a million.”

Lu Huaiyu nodded with a grunt.

“Send it to Yunding Fenghua later.”

“Yes sir.”

Cheng Xiyue looked at him after he hung up the phone and ridiculed, “This is the fourth one now. Second Master Lu, you’ve spent almost eight million on this person’s painting so far. If you really like it, why don’t you send someone to deliver a message and you can get it directly?”

Lu Huaiyu barely reacted to the question.

“If the painter doesn’t want to show, there’s no point for me to force a meeting.”

Cheng Xiyue shrugged. He had a feeling that the painter had some issues.

Half a year ago, Lu Huaiyu saw a painting in an exhibition and he asked for a meeting with the owner but was rejected.

After that, Lu Huaiyu simply let it slip but he did not stop searching for that person’s painting.

Although talented painters were everywhere, only a handful was truly known.

If it were someone else, they would rush to meet him the moment they got Lu Huaiyu’s approval.

Unfortunately, this particular person did not want to reveal any detail about himself. Not even the curator had seen the painter before because the painting was sent through the mail.

Lu Huaiyu said, “Oh, and the accounts that spread the rumors, list them out and sue all of them.”

Cheng Xiyue was shocked. “All of them?”

Lu Huaiyu thought of the insults and criticism that he saw on her phone and his eyes turned cold.

“All of them.”

“But I thought Little Ning Li decided to let it go...”

Lu Huaiyu shut his eyes. “But I didn’t say I would let them go.”

Chapter 26: The Painting Ruined

Ning Li headed to her room the moment she returned home.

When she walked past the painting room, she noticed that the door was half shut.

Su Yuan’s warm and loving voice came from within.

“Lil Ci, are you tired? You have been drawing for a long time now. Take a rest, have some fruits.”

Ye Ci replied with a sweet voice, “Thank you, mom.”

Ning Li paused and looked at the door.

Inside the room, Ye Ci sat in front of the easel and smiled at her mother when asked.

“I’m almost done. Can you place the fruits there? I’ll eat them later.”

Su Yuan placed the fruits aside and walked to her daughter. She carefully sized up the painting and her well-maintained looks showed a kind and proud smile.

“Look how good our Lil Ci is drawing.”

Unlike the impatience and disgust she showed to Ning Li, Su Yuan was always the kind and caring mother in front of Ye Ci.

The praise from her was genuine.

Like how every mother viewed their children as the best genius in the world, Ye Ci was her pride and glory.

10 years of blood and sweat raised Ye Ci into the decent lady that she was, and Su Yuan felt proud.

Ye Ci subtly glanced at the door before she said with a smile, "Mom, it's getting late. You don't have to stay up for me. Go take a rest."

Su Yuan tapped on her daughter's forehead and chuckled. "Silly girl, I should always be by your side."

Ye Ci blinked. "When I was younger, I was always by your side but I was immature then. Now, I care about you."

"All you know is to sweet talk and make me happy."

The interaction between the mother and daughter in the room was sweet and warm.

However, even though it was a door apart, the atmosphere outside the room was cold and bleak.

Ning Li shifted her attention away, barely reacting to the scene.

She simply turned a deaf ear and walked to her room.

Ye Ci looked at the door and said, "Mom, I think Ning Li is back."

The smile on Su Yuan's face faded.

When she turned around, she did see a slender figure move across the corridor.

She frowned and decided to go after Ning Li.

“Ning Li.”

Ning Li turned around and saw a frustrated Su Yuan.

The incident on the internet had gotten out of hand fast and it spread like wildfire. Through that video, all of Yunzhou’s upper-class circle had now seen Ning Li’s character with their own eyes.

Although the surveillance footage that appeared later proved that the students provoked her first, Ning Li was the one who resolved the matter with violence.

Even Su Yuan was scared of Ning Li’s ruthlessness and violent methods, let alone others.

Now, she had to bear with the collateral consequences, enduring all the sneers and mocks from others.

If it was not for Ye Ci, she would lose all her pride and glory.

“I know you’ve lived freely in Lincheng all these years, but you are in Yunzhou now. Please tone down that hot temper of yours. And this Saturday is Master Cheng’s dinner, so you can skip your night self-learning class for a few days and I’ll get you a teacher to teach you some manners.”

Su Yuan did not want Ning Li on such a proper occasion.

Only the most influential and powerful people of Yunzhou were invited to Master Cheng’s birthday dinner.

Ning Li knew nothing about manners and if she attended the event, the number of people she would embarrass was unimaginable.

However, when Cheng Xiyue dropped by to deliver the invitation, he made it clear that Ning Li must be there. On top of that, he had been sending Ning Li home for a few days now, so it seemed like they were close.

Su Yuan was forced to compromise. The best she could do was try to prepare as much as possible despite the timing and hope that Ning Li would behave herself on that day.

"I don't have the time for that. But if you insist, you can give Mr. Zhou a call and tell him I'm not going," Ning Li said succinctly.

Su Yuan was baffled.

Mr. Zhou? Zhou Fei?

"Mom, Ning Li has joined the competitive Physics class. That's why she had to attend night class for it."

Ye Ci said as she walked out from the painting room.

She looked rather jealous.

Only then did Su Yuan understand the rejection, but she frowned.

"There are so many students in the class and there are only so many prizes for you to take. Sparing a few days for the occasion won't affect your studies."

She did not believe Ning Li could win first place and compared to that, she was more concerned about Ning Li's behavior at Master Cheng's birthday dinner. She really hoped Ning Li would behave herself and not cause trouble.

A hint of frustration and impatience clouded Ning Li's furrowed brows.

Ye Ci tugged Su Yuan's sleeve and said, "Mom, Ning Li is tired. Why don't we continue this tomorrow?"

Su Yuan was fine until Ye Ci reminded her about the frustrating incident that happened earlier.

Tired? Ning Li?

Su Yuan was the one who should be tired!

Ning Li looked at Su Yuan.

The woman's eyes were dark and coupled with her blank look, her stare felt extra cold and bleak.

"I'm innocent, so why am I tired? Those who took the video and released it should be the tired one, am I right?"

Ye Ci's heart skipped a beat.

For a moment there, she thought that Ning Li had figured something out!

However, Ning Li's face was as calm as water.

Ye Ci felt nervous but Ning Li had already left for her room.

Seeing that Ning Li was as stubborn as ever, Su Yuan left angrily too.

Ye Ci spent some time calming her mother down before she returned to the painting room. She locked the door and checked her phone again for any possible traces of her. She sighed a breath of relief after she made sure she had cleaned everything.

...

Ning Li returned to her room and washed up. When she came out of the bathroom, she noticed a transfer notification on her phone.

[Sister Li, the buyer really likes your painting! I told him that we are raising the price but he agreed! Damn, I should have asked for a higher price.!]]

Ning Li dried her hair with the towel using one hand while she checked the phone. She grinned when she saw the numbers.

[Don't push it.]]

[Oh right, Sister Li! Huatsing Cup final is this Friday! The organizer sent us a VIP invitation, do you want to go?]]

[No.]]

[I knew it, but I got you one anyway. It's just a normal invitation, I'll send it to you later. Master, if you have the time, please grace us with your presence.]]

[Okay. We'll see.]]

Ning Li thought about it.

[Oh and I changed my phone number. I'll contact you with the new number later.]]

Ning Li then backed up her contacts and data before taking the old sim card out from her phone. She cut it into half and put in the new sim card she got from Lu Huaiyu.

Only then did she remember that Lu Huaiyu had meddled with her phone before. Her hands froze for a while before she checked her phone thoroughly.

What she found silenced her.

Lu Huaiyu had set his phone number as the quick dial on her phone.

“Call this number if you have any problem.”

It was as if his words were ringing in her ears.

She shook her head and discarded the thoughts out of her mind. She then went on Weibo and realized the accounts that had insulted and criticized her earlier in the day were all wiped, and everything about her was cleaned up.

It seemed like this marked the end of the little scandal.

...

Two days passed peacefully.

Friday.

Ye Ci took a day off from school to participate in the Huatsing Cup finals in the city's art center.

Su Yuan, of course, followed her beloved daughter to the competition.

Ning Li rejected Ye Ci again and went to school alone.

The moment she arrived at the entrance, she got a call.

She answered it and heard an anxious voice.

“Sister Li! HELP! Mayday! The painting that I’m going to use for the competition is ruined!”

Chapter 27: New Life

Ning Li called her class teacher, Geng Haifan, to take the day off.

Geng Haifan was the language teacher of the senior year’s first class. He was also the language team leader for all of the seniors. He went to the inner state for a symposium a few days ago and only came back yesterday.

He understood Ning Li’s situation better than others because he had a 13-year-old daughter. So, he sympathized with Ning Li and tried to take care of her.

“Oh, right. Ye Ci said she was going to the Huatsing Cup finals at the city art center today. Are you taking the day off to attend the event?” Geng Haifan asked.

Ning Li paused. “Yes.”

“Okay then.”

Only then did Geng Haifan sigh a breath of relief.

Considering how much Ning Li had been through recently, it was a good idea for her to take a break. Besides, it might be an opportunity for her to repair her relationship with her mother and Ye Ci.

Geng Haifan had seen Ning Li’s perfect score test paper, hence he was not worried about her even if she skipped a few classes.

The mentality was the most important aspect for a senior-year student.

“Thank you, Mr. Geng.”

Ning Li hung up the phone and hailed a taxi at the school entrance.

...

Yunzhou’s city art center.

Right after Ning Li got out of the taxi, she saw Wei Songze waiting for her by the roadside, looking anxious and nervous.

When he noticed Ning Li, Wei Songze came over right away.

“Sister Li!”

Ning Li cut to the chase and asked, “Where’s the painting?”

“It’s inside. Follow me.”

Wei Songze brought Ning Li inside.

There were twenty participants who made it into the finals and every one of them was given a room to themselves.

The two of them went into the room labeled ‘Wei Songze’.

Meanwhile, Ye Ci and Su Yuan were heading upstairs too.

There was also a middle-aged man in his forties behind them. He was the vice-president of the exhibition, VP Zhan Qing.

“Besides me and the other teachers in charge of the exhibition, Mr. Yu will also be there.”

Mr. Yu Pingchuan was the president of the exhibition.

Yu Pingchuan was the master of oil painting and a famous artist who had held countless exhibitions across the country. He was also one of the committee members of the National Exhibition Committee.

He loved traveling for inspiration, so he was barely in Yunzhou. He came back to Yunzhou this time for the Huatsing Cup finals.

“Lil Ci, if your painting catches Mr. Yu’s attention, your future will be promising.”

Ye Ci was nervous. “Thank you, Mr. Zhan, I’ll try my best.”

Zhan Qing smiled. “Mrs. Ye, you’ve raised your daughter into a talented person.”

The praise lifted Su Yuan’s mood.

“You’re so generous. It’s all thanks to your teachings. Besides, Ye Ci has put in a lot of hard work and I barely have to supervise her.”

After some chit-chats, Zhan Qing went upstairs.

Ye Ci and her mother returned to the room.

Then, Ye Ci stopped all of a sudden.

Su Yuan looked towards where her daughter was looking and asked curiously, “Lil Ci, what’s wrong?”

Ye Ci was a little hesitant. “I thought I saw Sister Ning Li.”

Su Yuan frowned. “You’ve invited her twice and she rejected all of them. Why would she be here? Besides, she doesn’t even have an invitation.”

Huatsing Cup was a high-class competition, where visitors were not allowed in without an invitation.

She believed she was mistaken after hearing what her mother said.

“I guess I’m seeing things.”

She then glanced at the sign with the name ‘Wei Songze’ on it and sighed.

“Let’s go, mom.”

...

“The competition starts at 10:00 a.m. I went to the toilet for a while and when I came back, the painting was ruined, someone threw paint on it,” Wei Songze said, looking irritated.

Ning Li sized up the painting.

The oil painting was about an old street block at dawn. A layer of warm sunlight shed over the buildings and the few pedestrians on the street, bringing out the liveliness from within.

It was a beautiful painting until it was ruined by a splat of blue and black paint.

"I was careless. I didn't lock the door when I left." Wei Songze looked at Ning Li with a pitiful gaze.

"What am I going to do, Sister Li?"

Ning Li grabbed the palette from aside. "No one could have foreseen this. It's not like anyone can come into your room and ruin your painting."

Wei Songze found it difficult to believe either.

"Yeah! I know right? There are surveillance cameras all over the place, we'll know who sabotaged my painting if we can get the footage. If the culprit is this bold, does it mean that the surveillance cameras are broken?"

Ning Li reacted calmly. "Even if it's functioning, it will be broken when we get to it."

Wei Songze turned around and wanted to walk out.

"I'll talk to the organizer about this!"

"Talking to the organizer won't help. Why not wait for the competition to end?"

Ning Li started to mix the colors on the palette.

"We'll know who did it then."

Wei Songze scratched his head and came back to her.

"But Sister Li, there are less than 2 hours left to the competition. Even if we apply to present the painting last, we won't make it..."

Ning Li sighed.

She had not taken up a brush ever since the accident that ended her past life.

She lifted the brush and said, "We'll make it."

...

10:00 a.m.

The hall on the third floor.

The participants' paintings were being displayed on stage one after another.

Every painting must be judged by seven judges. The scores from all the judges would be then compiled and the average score would be the final scores.

Su Yuan and everyone else was sitting below the stage, waiting for the results.

The judges were discussing and whispering in front of one of the displayed paintings.

"This one is good. The structure of space and the use of color are great. She's not even 20 years old and he can already paint to this standard, what a rare talent."

"I think this painting is better than the others."

"Huh? Zhan Qing? If I remember correctly, you praised this Ye Ci before, right?"

Zhan Qing smiled.

“I did. She’s gifted at painting. I’ve only given her a little tip and she was able to improve a lot.”

Then, he looked at Yu Pingchuan.

“Mr. Yu, what do you think?”

Yu Pingchuan was a 53-year-old cultured man with a refined temperament.

He looked at the painting but did not agree with Zhan Qing.

“It’s definitely a good painting but the painter’s triteness is distinct and it lacks liveliness.”

One of the judges said with a chuckle. “Mr. Yu, your standards are too high. This painting can be considered as the best in this year’s Huatsing Cup.”

“Eh? Why are there only 19 paintings?” asked the other judge.

Zhan Qing explained, “One of the participants had a little technical problem at the last minute. It’s being fixed as we speak. It should be up soon.”

Below the stage, Su Yuan was chatting with the family members of the other participants.

“Mrs. Ye, it seems like your girl, Ye Ci is going to get first place.”

Su Yuan smiled gently and politely.

“The competition is still ongoing, so it’s still up in the air.”

“Up in the air? I see the judges praising her painting endlessly!”

“If she got first place, it would mean an express ticket to Xijing University. Mrs. Ye, I envy you for having such a marvelous daughter.”

The frustration that Ning Li caused in the past few days immediately disappeared as Su Yuan bathed in the endless praise.

At that moment, the door opened and Wei Songze came in with his painting.

Truth be told, no one held hope for Wei Songze’s painting anymore.

A good painting required extensive preparation and thoughts about how to create the structure. He told the judges that he wanted to do a last-minute modification but how much could he do?

However, when his painting was displayed in front of the judges, everyone was stunned into silence.

It was a painting about a city at dawn.

It was when the sky was the darkest before dawn and the urban jungle was at its most quiet state.

The painting was dark, the only warm color was the light at the horizon, vaguely casting its warmth over the city.

As though a restriction was torn apart by a crack, creating a tiny entrance for the endless life energy.

It felt like the dark urban jungle was going through reincarnation.

Yu Pingchuan stared at the painting in silence for a long while before he looked at Wei Songze.

“Who modified the painting for you?”

Chapter 28: First Place? Congratulations

Wei Songze grinned. “Mr. Yu sure does have sharp eyes. I asked my friend to modify the painting for me.”

Huatsing Cup allowed its participants to modify the painting but only to a certain extent, so the score would still be counted towards Wei Songze’s results.

However, even though it was just a few strokes, it changed the painting’s meaning completely.

Yu Pingchuan had to admit that the person who modified the painting had excellent mastery over shadow, light, and color. Otherwise, it would be impossible to modify a painting to this extent within such a short time.

Compared to Wei Songze’s painting, Ye Ci’s painting felt empty and stiff.

It was no longer a simple win and lose as both paintings were not on the same level.

One of the judges suddenly said with surprise, “Huh? Mr. Yu, this person’s technique and style somehow feel similar to yours.”

For a moment, his words captured the attention of the other judges.

The few of them got closer and sized up the painting better. A while later, they realized what the other judge said was true.

The details of the painting were rather similar to Yu Pingchuan’s style.

However, the person who modified the painting went for a wilder, more freestyle technique.

“It seems like your little friend is rather unusual.” Zhan Qing then glanced over Yu Pingchuan and asked, “Mr. Yu, is Wang Yan back?”

Yu Pingchuan’s standards were very high, hence he only had one disciple, Wang Yan, but Wang Yan should not be in Yunzhou at the moment.

Yu Pingchuan shook his head. “No.”

The judges looked at each other in confusion.

Yu Pingchuan was reluctant to reveal any more details about his disciple. He switched the topic back to the competition and said, “Let’s rate the painting.”

Once the rating for the last painting was determined, the first place of Huatsing Cup would also follow.

The first judge revealed the score.

The audience was shocked when they saw it because it was the highest score yet in the competition — a perfect score!

Even Ye Ci’s painting only scored one perfect score out of the seven judges.

Ye Ci clenched her fists nervously as a bad feeling rose from her heart.

That particular judge was known for his harsh criticism and even Ye Ci did not get a perfect score from him.

If that judge was convinced, then it would mean...

The second judge also revealed the score.

The audience was silenced once again because it was also a perfect score.

By the look of it, the painting had already beaten Ye Ci.

As long as the other judges continued to give out a high score, then the first place would...

The smile on Su Yuan's face froze and she unconsciously sat up straight.

The other judges also revealed their scores one after another.

The entire hall plunged into silence.

Out of seven judges, five of them gave a perfect score.

Even though Yu Pingchuan and Zhan Qing did not follow the perfect score spree, the score they gave was quite high as well.

This painting did not need its score averaged to know that it was more than enough to secure first place.

Huatsing Cup was a competition with high standards and the judges themselves had high standards towards painting, hence it was rare for any of them to give a perfect score.

Five out of seven perfect scores were unprecedented!

One of the judges exclaimed, "The technique used on this painting is superb but the meaning is something else. It's astonishing."

There were a lot of art students or painters out there who painted well, but not every piece of their work could be considered a masterpiece.

Even though it was painted on canvas, the painting was able to grace its audience with the rich and overflowing emotions of the scene.

It felt like someone had been dwelling in darkness for a long time and finally gotten the strength to break free from the constraints and reach out for the light.

The painting was done in a darker color tone yet that stroke of lighter color made it feel much brighter. The contrast of color, the strokes that looked casual but meticulous, every detail about the painting was done perfectly.

It deserved to be first place.

...

Ning Li left the art center through the side door and headed back to school.

On the way back, she received a message from Wei Songze.

[SISTER LI! MISSION COMPLETE! The prize money is in the bag! Thank you, sis, for saving my ass!]

Ning Li grinned.

[I didn't know you're capable of getting first place.]

Wei Songze was quite talented as well. He was able to understand Ning Li's teachings and absorb knowledge quickly.

If his painting was not sabotaged, Ning Li would not have had to go through the mill for him.

[I have you to thank, Sister Li! But you were right. I told the judges that my painting was sabotaged and when they checked the surveillance camera, the cameras were all down.]

Only participants were allowed on that particular floor and it could be anyone.

Finding out the truth would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

[Let's just put this aside for now. Since you've gotten first place, go back and study for your cultural exam. You should start preparing for your recommendation exam.]

[Don't worry, sis! I won't let you down! Oh right, before I forget, Mr. Yu from the organizers asked me for your phone number and I... I gave it to him. You don't mind, right?]

Ning Li instantly felt a headache when she saw the message.

At the same time, she received another message.

[Stop fooling around.]

...

Ye Ci was still a little distraught after she walked out of the art center.

She thought she would get first place but who knew...

Su Yuan did not look good either.

The news of Ye Ci joining the Huatsing Cup had been spreading for a while now and everyone strongly believed she would win the prize. Yet now, it seemed like she would end up as people's mealtime joke.

The two of them stepped into the car.

Zhou Hua noticed the unusual tension in the air when they stepped in. He hesitated for a while before asking, “Ma’am, are we going back home or are we driving Ms. Ye to school?”

Ye Ci still had class in the afternoon and night. They had originally planned to send her back to school after the competition but now...

Su Yuan paused for a while.

“Just go ho—”

“Mom, I want to go back to school.” Ye Ci stopped her.

Su Yuan looked at her worriedly.

“I’m worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” Ye Ci forced a smile on her face. “This is a competition, there’s always win and lose. It’s how things work, isn’t it?”

She sounded like she had accepted the result.

Su Yuan failed to dissuade her, so she simply nodded.

Ye Ci looked outside the window with her fists clenched so tightly that the joints on her fingers turned pale.

The news would soon get to Second High and if she did not go to school today, she would look like she could not accept defeat.

...

Second High.

Ning Li got out of the taxi at the school entrance but she was still on her phone.

“...I didn’t mean to avoid you. I just got my number changed yesterday and it slipped my mind. I forgot to tell you.”

Yu Pingchuan had called Ning Li many times and none of it got through, which annoyed him.

“You didn’t even tell me you got transferred to Yunzhou! How can you forget about something that important?”

Helpless, Ning Li rubbed the bridge of her nose

“I thought you were traveling, looking for inspiration. I didn’t tell you because I don’t want to trouble you.”

Even a cultured man like Yu Pingchuan had a temper, and he unconsciously raised his voice at Ning Li.

“What do you mean trouble?”

Ning Li was speechless.

Coincidentally, a staff member came in at that time and when he saw Yu Pingchuan shouting at the phone, it scared him.

'Who is he shouting at?'

Yu Pingchuan told the staff to put the things down and sent him away.

He continued, "I've noticed that you haven't picked up a brush for some time. Are you really that busy?"

Ning Li was shocked.

Yu Pingchuan would never get angry at her. His voice slowly calmed down.

"Fine. Come have dinner with me if you have time."

Ning Li said yes.

Then, Yu Pingchuan hung up the phone when someone knocked at his door.

It was the staff from earlier.

"Mr. Yu, Mrs. Ye left her contact number for you and said if you have the time, she wants to visit you with Ye Ci. Maybe you can give her some advice or something, do you—"

Yu Pingchuan did not even look at the staff.

"I'm busy."

Though after he thought about it, he added, "Oh and if she insists on coming, tell her her daughter is not gifted enough. She should be careful if she insists on taking this path."

...

The first class of the afternoon finally ended and Ye Ci returned to her class.

Everyone looked at her at the same time.

Lin Zhouyang went up to her excitedly.

“Ye Ci? The competition is over? You got first place right?”

It was not for Ye Ci to force herself to calm down but when asked, she froze.

Ning Li lifted her head up and leaned backward. A grin appeared on her face.

“First place?”

“Well, congratulations.”

Chapter 29: Girl, Don't You Know What Pain Is?

Ye Ci felt a sting in her heart.

However, she puckered her lips and forced a faint smile.

“No, I didn't get first place. I got second.”

The lively classroom immediately fell silent.

Shocked, Lin Zhouyang stuttered as he scratched his head awkwardly.

“Ah? Uhm...”

Ye Ci was known for her paintings ever since she was young. In the past few years, she held the title of a gifted painter and others envied her for that.

Everyone thought she would get first place without a doubt.

Lin Zhouyang looked at her and said carefully.

“Uh... Second place is great! Right? I mean, if you tell others you got second place in the Huatsing Cup, people would still be jealous of you.”

It was not great at all.

The first place had a trophy, certificate, and prize money. However, the most important one would be the guaranteed admission to Xijing University.

Second place was nothing compared to that.

She missed it. All her efforts had gone down the drain.

Ye Ci felt terrible but she could never show her emotions in front of everyone.

She returned to her seat, put her bag down, and nodded.

“It’s a competition. There’s only one first place. I lost and I accept it whole-heartedly.”

Lin Zhouyang gave her a big thumbs up.

“That’s right! Ye Ci, you are really such a big-hearted person!”

This was as expected of the woman of his dreams!

“Though, I’m curious. Who got first place? Who could’ve beaten you?”

Everyone had the same question in their heads.

Cheng Xiangxiang had just come back with a cup of milk tea when she heard what Lin Zhouyang said. She grunted.

“It’s that guy from Seven High. I don’t even remember what his name is, Wei something, something. He always skipped class and his grades are intolerable. He asked someone to modify his painting at the last moment, that’s why he got first! Otherwise, he would never!”

Seven High was two blocks away from Second High but both schools were very different.

Aside from the poor enrollment rate, which was the lowest throughout the city, the school had poor discipline and reputation.

A school like that could never educate someone that skilled, yet he beat Ye Ci.

Lin Zhouyang was perplexed.

“Who’s that guy who helped modify the painting? It was only a few strokes and he won first place? Who’s that capable?”

Cheng Xiangxiang gave Ye Ci the cup of milk tea. She moved the chair out from the table with her leg and sat down.

“God knows.”

She was not there at the competition, but she had heard all of it from Ye Ci. Little did she know that, even if Wei Songze used his painting for the competition, he would still get first place and beat Ye Ci.

Ye Ci would never reveal the details.

Ning Li looked at the time and grabbed two mock-up test papers. She was about to leave.

Ye Ci suddenly thought of something and turned to Ning Li.

“Sister Ning Li.”

Ning Li froze before she turned her head around. “Yes?”

Ye Ci asked hesitantly, “Oh it’s nothing. I’m just curious. Were you at the city art center earlier today?”

The figure that she saw at the city art center highly resembled Ning Li. It was uncanny.

Ning Li reacted with a calm look. “What’s wrong?”

“I heard you didn’t come to class this morning and I saw someone there who looked like you...”

Ning Li looked at her with a raised brow.

Ye Ci really ‘cared’ about her. Even if she was not in school, she was still trying to find a way to monitor Ning Li.

“I thought you said outsiders are not allowed entry without an invitation.”

Ye Ci was silenced.

Ning Li could never get the invitation to Huatsing Cup, hence she could not get in.

Ring!

The bell rang. It was time for class.

Ning Li left the classroom from the backdoor the moment the bell rang.

At the same time, Tan Kailan came in from the front door.

When she saw Ning Li leaving from the back door, her already strict look turned colder.

She had never seen such a wild student.

Even if she scored perfectly on her Combined Science, she was arrogant and proud. She would never achieve anything in the future.

Sun Quan had held a short meeting with the teachers before this. He said Ning Li was a special student, and as long as she did not break the rules or caused any serious trouble, the teachers were told to turn a blind eye and let her be.

However, Tan Kailan thought otherwise. They were still within the school premises and if she was left untamed, she would definitely cause problems sooner or later.

Ren Qian turned around and giggled softly.

“Our new classmate is a wild one. I wonder who could be the bane of her?”

Pei Song was reading, but suddenly, the young man who picked Ning Li up a few days ago during the night self-learning class appeared in his head.

Ning Li seemed a little different when she was with that young man.

Even though she looked as dull and cold as ever, she looked a little warmer and softer when she was with that man.

Especially when they were close together, Ning Li seemed to share a tacit understanding with that young man. She looked more relaxed and obedient, and her eyes were glistening like the stars in the sky.

Pei Song shut his book and discarded that thought.

...

Ning Li went to the Physics group's office.

Whenever Zhou Fei had class, she could sit at his table and do revisions.

She was alone in the office.

She took out a mock-up test paper and started it.

Around 40 minutes later, she switched to the second one.

Competitive Physics class had started their training a long time ago, hence Ning Li did not have any advantage for joining the class halfway.

Zhou Fei sent her all the study materials. This meant that the revision she had to do every day was a few times more than her peers.

Fortunately to her, it was not a burden.

She checked the answers after she was done before she kept papers away.

There was a lot of stuff on Zhou Fei's table, such as figures, coffee beans, and some trinkets of sorts. None of them were education-related.

Zhou Fei loved to give a lively lecture and he never liked following the normal course, so he barely had any educational materials.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the office door.

Ning Li turned around and was surprised.

"Master Cheng?"

It was Cheng Xiyue.

Beside him was a man in a formal suit in his early thirties, looking like an elite.

Cheng Xiyue came in with the man.

"I went to your class for you and told me you're here."

Ning Li felt it was a little strange.

"You're here for me?"

“Yeah, it’s just a little something.”

Cheng Xiyue handed her a document file with a mischievous grin.

“Have a look at the things inside. If you have any problems or found any problems with it, you can talk to Mr. Liang here. He’s our lawyer.”

Ning Li actually knew the man.

He was Liang Ze, the legal representative for Cheng Corporation.

However, why did Cheng Xiyue bring him here?

Ning Li took out the papers inside the document.

For a moment, she was shocked to see the things inside.

It was a drafted prosecution letter.

The ones who were being prosecuted were the owners of the accounts who had spread malicious rumors about her online the other day.

“What’s this...”

“Take a look. If it’s okay, we can bring the case to court,” Cheng Xiyue said frivolously.

“We have solid evidence, and every single one of them will be sued and prosecuted.”

Ning Li did not expect him to resolve the matter with such extreme methods.

No wonder every comment and rumor about her was deleted later that day.

“Little Ning Li, you don’t have to worry. You don’t need to show yourself. As long as the paperwork is okay, you don’t need to worry about the rest.”

She gave it some thought before she asked, “Is this... Second Master Lu’s idea?”

Cheng Xiyue smiled. “It’s also my idea.”

The girl was bullied and isolated.

She hesitated for a while and said, “Can I give him a call first?”

Cheng Xiyue nodded.

Ning Li stood up and walked aside for the call.

Cheng Xiyue suddenly thought of something and said, “Oh, uh, he should be busy right now. Why don’t you wait for...”

Beep.

The call got through, and Cheng Xiyue was speechless.

He had never gotten through to Lu Huaiyu at this hour!

“Lili?” Lu Huaiyu answered with a deep and slightly rough voice.

“Second Master Lu—”

“What did you say?”

“...Second Brother.” Ning Li’s lips were trembling.

Only then was Lu Huaiyu satisfied. “Why are you calling me instead of being in class?”

Ning Li said, “It’s about prosecuting those account owners... The incident is over and everyone now knows the truth. Doing this will only trouble you, why don’t—”

Lu Huaiyu laughed. His next words may sound like his usual lazy tone, but they were loud and clear.

“Girl, don’t you know what pain is by now?”

Chapter 30: You Won’t Regret Calling Me Second Brother

Ning Li blinked awkwardly.

In her past life, her reputation went down the drain. The insults and criticism she received were a hundred times harsher than what she received from this incident.

The endless sneers and criticism had numbed her ears and mind.

Compared to what she experienced before, the insults from this incident were nothing.

However, for whatever reason, she felt a stinging pain in the deepest part of her heart when Lu Huaiyu asked her.

Lu Huaiyu continued calmly and patiently. "If you feel pain, just let it out. If someone bullied you, come talk to me. We will fight back together. Can you do that?"

Ning Li would never.

Ever since Ning Haizou was convicted, she had become a plague to everyone.

People put dead rats in her bag and tossed her books down the drain.

They criticized her behind her back, calling her disgusting names.

Everyone knew she had lost her parents, so even if she was bullied, no one would stand up for her.

Ning Li chose to endure the insults at first until someone cut her jersey to shreds while she was away for gym class.

Her grandmother made the jersey for her.

She found the boy who did it that very day. Even though she cried her eyes red, she beat the boy up until his face was covered in blood.

The incident got big.

She could clearly remember her grandmother's scrawny figure bowing non-stop at the boy's parents in the office.

After they got back, her grandmother asked her if it hurt.

She hugged the shredded jersey tightly and shook her head strongly.

“No! No! It did not hurt! Lili is fine!”

From that day onwards, she never told anyone about her pain.

She knew it would be useless because it would only make her grandmother sad.

Ever since that incident, she never told her grandmother about school anymore.

However, she did not expect Lu Huaiyu would say something similar.

A slight silence later, she said, “But it’s troublesome...”

Lu Huaiyu realized that even though the girl was in her teenage years, she had a lot of concerns.

He chuckled. “You won’t regret calling me second brother.”

...

Cheng Xiyue watched the slender figure talking through the phone from the side and then looked at his watch.

‘Great. Her one call is longer than 10 of my calls...’

Ning Li finally hung up the phone and walked over.

Cheng Xiyue sat up straight.

“How’s it, Little Ning Li? What’s your verdict?”

Ning Li passed the documents to him and said, "Sue them."

...

Yunding Fenghua.

Lu Huaiyu went back to the living room from the balcony.

Opposite the couch sat a man in his thirties.

The man had a black blazer on with a white T-shirt. He was handsome and had a gentle temperament.

He smiled when Lu Huaiyu came back.

"It seems like Master Lu's worries are unnecessary."

Lu Huaiyu seemed stable.

If the man had not looked through Lu Huaiyu's records, he would strongly believe there was nothing wrong with Lu Huaiyu.

Lu Huaiyu sat opposite the man and crossed his legs.

"If you say so, that's great, Dr. Gu."

The man was none other than Dr. Gu Tinglan, the doctor that Old Master Lu had hired from the states to check on Lu Huaiyu.

Gu Tinglan was not even 30 years old this year and he was already a world-renowned therapist.

Lu Huaiyu did not want to meet him at first but he got sandwiched by Old Master Lu and Cheng Xiyue. Eventually, he was forced to the meeting.

Though after the first meeting, he had a rather decent first impression of Gu Tinglan.

The man was capable and most importantly, he knew his place.

Lu Huaiyu had seen a few therapists before him but they all had the same problem — they tend to pry on their patient's deepest secrets and perform all kinds of analysis and study.

Be it an occupational habit or pure curiosity, Lu Huaiyu felt offended and invaded. He disliked all the meetings.

On the other hand, Gu Tinglan was a gentleman with great manners. His presence was able to grace anyone by his side with comfort.

He was a capable man.

Gu Tinglan poured himself a cup of tea.

"I've never heard about it before but which lucky junior won your favor and care? I would like to meet the junior if I have the chance."

He had vaguely overheard Lu Huaiyu's call.

The lucky junior should still be in school. Besides, Lu Huaiyu spoke in a rare gentle and patient voice.

Gu Tinglan had already heard of Lu Huaiyu's reputation before he came back to the country.

He was a proud man even in the capital. It had always been others trying to win his favor or service him and not the other way around, let alone seeing him this kind and gentle to someone.

If Gu Tinglan was correct, the person on the other end of the call must be the key to Lu Huaiyu's improvement in his condition lately.

Lu Huaiyu knew Gu Tinglan was trying to find out more about his condition by asking but he somehow felt invaded.

"She's busy studying."

Lu Huaiyu rejected Gu Tinglan's request politely.

A hint of surprise appeared in Gu Tinglan's eyes but it quickly faded.

It felt like... Lu Huaiyu was hiding a treasure and did not want others to peek at it.

Since Lu Huaiyu did not want to talk about it, Gu Tinglan did not linger on the topic.

"Well then, let's leave that aside."

Although Gu Tinglan had grown up in the states, he knew about the education system in the country.

"I heard the students in this country usually face a tremendous amount of academic pressure. If so, maintaining a healthy mentality is the most important thing to them."

Lu Huaiyu agreed with his statement.

He nodded and asked, "Dr. Gu, I heard you are going to stay in the country for a while this time. Am I right?"

Gu Tinglan nodded. "Yeah, I have matters to deal with."

"If so, I better not hold up your time, Dr. Gu."

Gu Tinglan smiled.

"I came back this time to visit Lincheng because it's quite near to Yunzhou, so it's not much of a delay."

Lu Huaiyu was slightly stunned. He looked at Gu Tinglan.

"Lincheng?"

...

Night at the Ye Family.

Dinner was a feast tonight, and the dishes on the table were all Ye Ci's favorite.

However, dinner felt colder and tenser than usual.

Su Yuan had originally thought that they could celebrate Ye Ci winning the Huatsing Cup, so she had asked Aunt Zhao to prepare a feast beforehand.

Who would have thought...

Getting only second place might seem as good to others but to Ye Ci, who grew up under her mother's protection, it was quite an impact.

Besides, the outsiders had assumed that Ye Ci would get the first place too, so the praises and flatteries were endless before the competition.

Now, she had to explain to people that Ye Ci got second place, not first place. It was embarrassing.

Dinner felt like torture.

In the end, Ye Ming was the one who broke the ice.

“Second place is good enough. As for the guaranteed enrollment to Xijing University...”

Su Yuan swiftly added, “Actually, with your grades, you can still make it through the exam, can’t you? You’d just have to work harder this year.”

Ye Ci’s hand that was holding the chopsticks froze for a moment. When she looked at her mother, the unusual look on her face was gone.

“It’s not that tough.”

Su Yuan sighed. When she thought of the rejection she got from the exhibition organizers, it suffocated her.

She could never let Ye Ci know what the organizers said about her.

Ye Ming nodded happily after hearing Ye Ci’s assurance.

“Master Cheng’s birthday dinner is tomorrow. Are you guys prepared?”

As if Ye Ci had thought of something, she looked at Ning Li.

“Oh right, Sister Ning Li. We’re going to the Chengs’ place tomorrow in formal dresses, I thought you might need one. Since you are still new around here, I don’t think you’ll have a dress for the occasion. Why don’t you take one of mine instead?”