

## And I'll Return from the West, with Victory at my Back

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20640884) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20640884>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">全职高手 - 蝴蝶蓝   Quánzhí Gāoshǒu - Húdié Lán</a> , <a href="#">全职高手   The King's Avatar (Cartoon)</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Ye Xiu &amp; Ye Qiu</a> , <a href="#">Yè Xiū &amp; Sū Mùqiū</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Yè Xiū</a> , <a href="#">Tián Sēn</a> , <a href="#">Jiǎ Shì míng</a> , <a href="#">Sū Mùqiū</a> , <a href="#">Sū Mùchéng</a> , <a href="#">Yè Qiū</a> , <a href="#">Team Royal Style</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Written before the prequel movie was released</a> , <a href="#">QZGS Big Bang 2019</a> , <a href="#">Temporary Main Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Really not as angsty as the summary suggests</a> , <a href="#">All my knives are soft and quiet</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">QZGS Big Bang 2019</a> , <a href="#">Time Travel and World Travel</a> , <a href="#">The King's Avatar</a> , <a href="#">Precious Rare and Unique</a> , <a href="#">Shady Kings Avatar Faves</a> , <a href="#">Completed Favorites</a> , <a href="#">WOO Insomnia Time</a> , <a href="#">escapism (to forget that the world is a burning hellscape)</a> , <a href="#">uzen: i like this a Normal amount</a> , <a href="#">Treasure_Box</a> , <a href="#">Fics that quench my thirst and breathe life into my soul</a> , <a href="#">Hanya Fic yang Aku Sukai</a> , <a href="#">masterpieces i'll never tire of rereading</a> , <a href="#">Favorite Fics That I Hoard</a> , <a href="#">Alternative Universes of Fandoms I enjoy</a> , <a href="#">the king's avatar gems</a>
Stats:	Published: 2019-09-14 Words: 37,829 Chapters: 1/1

# And I'll Return from the West, with Victory at my Back

by [madmaenad](#)

## Summary

Ye Xiu dies at thirty-four, choking on the cancer in his blackened lungs, and wakes up to find himself a decade younger in a world where Su Muqiu leads the Alliance's gods and he died before ever touching Glory. Now a homeless, penniless stranger, Ye Xiu works toward reaching the pro stage again. But an unproven twenty-four year old rookie is a risk only Royal Style, an ex-powerhouse team watching themselves slip into obscurity, is desperate enough to take. While protecting his secrets, Ye Xiu chases victory beside his new teammates, and finds a place in the lives of those who once knew him.

## Notes

Sincere thanks to my beta tread [softly](#), who has provided invaluable creative input and dedicated assistance over the last four months, and to my artist Choco General. Also, a shoutout to the BB organizers and their work putting this event together!

If you need a RS team cheat sheet, check the end notes where I've listed the names and accounts.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

On the morning of his thirty-fourth birthday, Ye Xiu passes out on his bedroom floor and never wakes up again.

He can't say he was unprepared. Fifteen years of City B air pollution followed by nineteen years of chain smoking had a fairly predictable result. By the time the doctors discovered his condition, it had progressed so far that nothing could be done.

There were worse ways to die. Ye Xiu had time to accept the idea and fulfill his responsibilities as best he could.

Though he could have done without the coughing. It upset Ye Xiu's hands whenever he tried to play Glory. Eventually, trying just wasn't worth the attempt. But that was fine. Ye Xiu spent all his time managing the family business anyway, and the rookies would cry if he kept winning championships. Under the talented new generation, Glory would continue advancing.

Getting Ye Qiu to accept the truth was far more difficult. He kept making such a fuss about something no one could change. Ye Xiu had left for nearly fifteen years, and Ye Qiu had managed just fine without him. What did his younger brother still need Ye Xiu for at their age? He'd been absent in his brother's life for so long anyway.

He has regrets, of course. Doesn't everyone? But Ye Xiu has already fulfilled his most important promises. Su Muqiu's legacy is ensured, and Su Mucheng is a capable, grown adult. He's returned to Ye Qiu as promised, and his family has Ye Qiu as a suitable heir. He doesn't worry about the future; they'll do fine without him.

So Ye Xiu faces his end with a certain measure of peace.

When it finally happens, there are no symbolic doors, or comforting conversations with departed ancestors. When Ye Xiu tries to speak of it later, he can only shake his head in silence. The experience is too alien. Words like 'dark' or 'cold' or 'long' are useless. Human language can offer no reference points to the disembodied.

In that place where time has no meaning, Ye Xiu balances on the knife-edge between being and not-being. Perhaps it only lasts a millisecond. Perhaps it's millennia.

And then, he falls. And falls, and falls, and falls, but that isn't right either because he's nowhere and there's no *him* anymore and then-

He's drowning under a deluge of *wet cold bright sensing feeling touching breathing lungs expand lungs collapse choking coughing can't breathe can't breathe*

Something grabs him by the collar and drags him. Still reeling from sensory overload, Ye Xiu flails, temporarily overwhelmed as he tries to remember how to control his limbs.

There's a loud noise before another set of hands yanks him up. Ye Xiu gasps involuntarily and finds his airways clear. Water, he realizes, awareness returning now that he can breathe. He was in the water and someone is pulling him out.

When he's deposited on something hard, Ye Xiu goes limp, dizzy from the sheer sensory input of having a body again, too much pressing in on all sides. There's noise above him, but he can't resolve the sounds into meaning, and eventually they go away.

He lays there and watches the shadows grow shorter, then long again while the overwhelming physicality of having a body recedes into something manageable again.

He can *breathe*, he realizes. No wheezing, no chest pains, no coughing, no shortness of breath. Ye Xiu never realized the luxury of such a simple thing, each smooth inhale and exhale without pain.

Cheek resting against the ground, Ye Xiu takes stock of his circumstances. He's alive. He died and now he's alive again.

It might be shock, or pragmatism, but Ye Xiu is neither panicked nor distressed. He knows, in the same hazy, instinctive way he understands this is neither a dream nor a hallucination, that he cannot return to the place he came from. Some gates only open one way. He can only accept and move forward, the same way he accepted the inevitability of his own death.

"Hey you, are you okay?"

The words make sense this time. Ye Xiu tries to lift his head and succeeds only in making himself flop about like a fish.

"Um, are you drunk?"

Ye Xiu doesn't drink unless there's a championship involved. When he attempts to say this, all that comes out is garbled mess. Shaping words is too delicate for his poor motor control, but the vibration of his voice filtered through the bones of his skull produces an interesting sensation.

"Beihai Park isn't an appropriate place to drink! Please be considerate of others next time!"

The voice goes away after lecturing some more. Unfortunately for that nameless comrade, Ye Xiu ignores everything except his new information.

Beihai Park. Ye Xiu supposes an imperial garden is an appropriately symbolic place to return to life, not that he particularly cares. What's more important is that he's still in City B. That makes things simpler.

Ye Xiu is patient and stubborn. Shortly before the park closes, he wobbles his way out of the nearest gate and catches a bus. In his pockets are his Resident Identity Card and roughly forty yuan in soggy notes.

Ye Xiu's interest lies only in Glory, but he's watched Su Mucheng's dramas enough to know roughly how his situation works. Just because this world appears similar to the one he died in doesn't guarantee they're identical. More information is needed.

Something familiar catches Ye Xiu's gaze, and he turns his head. From a glossy, colorful advertisement, Vaccaria's image urges him to watch the Season 6 playoffs and support



defending champions Tiny Herb.

The sudden release of tension is almost physical. A world where Glory exists. Ye Xiu breathes deeply, reveling once more in the feeling of clean lungs. Even if everything else in this second life is strange, he'll be able to play again.

Season 6...Blue Rain will win their first championship in the upcoming finals. Ye Xiu himself will be twenty-four and part of Excellent Era, still able to move freely since no one knows his face.

Twenty-four. A whole four years left before his retirement. Ye Xiu marvels at the unlooked-for gift of time.

Then his belly gurgles, and Ye Xiu remembers this body hasn't eaten all day. Having any appetite at all is a novelty - it was why he'd lost so much weight near the end. To celebrate his second life, Ye Xiu treats himself to McDonald's with his dwindling funds and then asks directions to the nearest internet cafe.

Stepping inside and seeing so many screens lit up by Glory brings another rush of relief. Glory seems just as popular as before - perhaps even more so. Ye Xiu idly studies the Glory posters on the walls as he waits in line to reserve a computer.

Desert Dust, with Han Wenqing beside him. Swoksaar and Yu Wenzhou, Troubling Ran and Huang Shaotian. Vaccaria and Wang Jiexi along with Peaceful Hermit and Tian Sen from the City B home teams. Dancing Rain and -

"Mister? Mister! You're next in line!"

Ye Xiu blinks and looks back at the girl at the front desk. "Sorry," he says, none of the storm in his heart reflected on his face. He hands over his money and ID and is given a station number. Once the girl's attention goes to the next customer, Ye Xiu takes a deep breath - he may never get used to that feeling - and looks back at the poster.

He can't say the face next to Dancing Rain is one he's seen before. Su Muqiu hadn't lived into his twenties, after all, but Ye Xiu recognizes the look in those eyes, the shape of the jaw, the slope of his brows. That's Su Muqiu, alive and risen to become the God-level player Ye Xiu always knew he would be.

The warm anticipation accompanies him as Ye Xiu logs on and immediately dives into the Glory forums. How many championships has Excellent Era won with Su Muqiu as Ye Xiu's partner? How much further has Glory advanced with the two of them side by side? Ye Xiu can't wait to find out.

But as the minutes pass, Ye Xiu knows something isn't right. Excellent Era has three championships, and Su Muqiu is hailed as the peak of Glory. But there is no Ye Qiu, or One Autumn Leaf. No Battle God. Not one mention anywhere, not even when Ye Xiu searches the oldest posts. He tries the name 'Ye Xiu' just to make certain, but finds nothing.

Perhaps this world's Ye Xiu remained with his family and never joined the pro scene. The notion sits uneasily, but carries a sense of rightness. A perfect world doesn't exist. If so, Ye Xiu will need to return to his family's side immediately.

He immediately expands his search beyond Glory. Coming home at such a late hour will invite questions, and he'll need to provide his parents convincing answers. For that, knowledge of what his other self has achieved is necessary.

Ye Xiu pauses as a new thought occurs to him. Had this world's Ye Xiu tried to drown himself? Was that why Ye Xiu had been drawn here after death?

But the next few minutes prove unhelpful. The Ye family is prominent and well-known in City B. Ye Xiu easily finds his parents and his brother, alive and entirely as he remembers them. As for himself...no mentions, no records, no sign.

It's as if Ye Xiu doesn't exist.

The uneasiness in his heart increases.

Loud cursing intrudes on Ye Xiu's thoughts. Glancing to his left, he finds the obvious cause: the appearance of Glory's arena defeat screen. The Qi Master playing beside him runs out of curses and groans instead. "There goes my win streak!"

"Attempting the Heavenly Domain Challenge?" Ye Xiu inquires.

"Yeah, I'm stuck on the Arena part."

Perfect, Ye Xiu needs money for computer time. His lips twitch upward in a confident smile. "Pay me for each win, and I'll complete the Arena challenge."

"How much?"

Ye Xiu quotes a price. It seems that rates have increased since he worked with Su Muqiu, because the Qi Master nods eagerly and immediately switches seats.

Tabling the question of his other self's whereabouts, Ye Xiu plays Glory for the rest of the night, delighting in his younger body's high hand speed and the way his fingers don't ache even after hours of play. His exhaustion hardly weighs on him. When you're immersed in something you love, how can there be fatigue?

After word of Ye Xiu's services gets around the cafe, he amasses enough funds to buy at least two days' worth of computer time and a few meals. Ye Xiu finally sleeps at his computer for a few hours in the early morning, when the strain of rebirth crashes down too heavily to withstand any longer.

When he wakes up, he straightens his clothes as best he can and catches a bus toward a familiar upper-class residential area. The Resident ID card Ye Xiu found in his pocket - one that matches his age in this world - shows the same address the Ye family used in his own world. His cheap, wrinkled polo shirt, sweater and dark pants stand out in a place like this, so Ye Xiu doesn't go directly home.

Instead, Ye Xiu dons a surgical mask as a disguise and heads to a small park where he remembers the oldest neighborhood staff gathered to gossip. The elderly always favor the young who pay respects to them; Ye Xiu soon has the old nannies and servants freely chattering about their employers.

It takes him half an hour or so, but he manages to steer the conversation in the Ye family's direction. The Ye family is very respectable, and there isn't much dirt in their history. But all the elders shake their heads over the same thing.

Poor Madam Ye! Blessed with twin boys, only to lose one so young!

They tell Ye Xiu more when he shows interest. The young Ye heir was sick the whole summer after he turned fifteen, before passing late in the year. It was a true tragedy for the Ye family and especially hard on the poor boy's brother.

Ye Xiu leaves before someone recognizes him.

He does not go to the house. He is not the Ye family's brother, nor their son. To pretend otherwise would be cruel. They have faced enough grief already.

For the first time since his rebirth, Ye Xiu experiences the urge to smoke. At the mere thought, a visceral recoil ripples through his entire body. The sense memory of coughing while a vise tightened around his chest and red spattered his hands assaults him. He startles the passenger sitting next to him so badly they get up and move to another seat on the bus.

Ye Xiu gets off at the next stop and buys a packet of vaguely cigarette shaped biscuits, tearing into the package immediately and holding one in his mouth until it disintegrates, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

So. Ye Xiu is dead - was dead? - in this world, while Su Muqiu lived. An equal exchange of lives, and this time Su Muqiu was able to achieve his dreams with his own hands. Ye Xiu bears no ill will toward his friend. He isn't so self-important to think his existence is irreplaceable. On the contrary - he wondered many times what this sort of situation would look like, if Su Muqiu had lived and he had died.

Ducking back into the convenience store, Ye Xiu gets directions to the nearest internet cafe. Hands tucked in his pockets, he works his way through the bag of biscuit sticks as he walks.

Ye Xiu can't join the Pro League. They'll expect him to do advertising, and the Ye family is well-known in City B. His identical name and appearance as their late son would invite questions Ye Xiu cannot answer. And part of him - the part that made him hide his face for years despite being the best in his field - doesn't want to subject the Ye family to seeing a stranger with the same name and face as their dead son.

Perhaps if he could use a stage name and do the photos, or avoid the photos and use his real name, it could be dismissed as coincidence...But no, Ye Xiu doesn't have sufficient clout to get those concessions from a pro team. He isn't the Battle God here.

Even if he agreed to do advertising, Ye Xiu's age severely limits his opportunities. Most pro players debut in their late teens, or early twenties at the latest. Tang Rou had been considered old at twenty-two, and Ye Xiu is two years older than that. His short competitive lifespan will discourage pro teams from even considering him, no matter how skilled he is. Ye Xiu will find a place only with the desperate and needy.

That leaves the Challenger League as his only viable option. He could sign a one-year contract, leave the team if they become champions, then repeat the process. Ye Xiu nods, satisfied by the new plan. It may not be the true stage he wants, but he's been given so much extra time already. At least this life he'll never need to leave Glory. It's already more than he expected.

Brand new and unscarred, the Glory account card in Ye Xiu's hand isn't the familiar silver of the two First Server accounts that had accompanied him for over a decade. Ye Xiu turns the empty card over in his hands after he buys it from the front desk.

Lord Grim is lost to him. Recreating the Myriad Manifestations Umbrella alone is beyond his capabilities, and this world's Ye Xiu died before ever even meeting Su Muqiu. The two of them are nothing more than strangers here.

When the character creator asks for a name, Ye Xiu types 'One Autumn Leaf', then stares at the blinking cursor for long minutes.

In Ye Xiu's first life, Su Mucheng had named his Battle Mage. She'd meant to be poetic, but she'd made a mistake and gotten one of the characters wrong, turning the name into 'One Autumn Leaf' instead. Truthfully, the mistake had always bothered him, but it had also become a fond memory of their past together.

Decisively, Ye Xiu erases one of the characters he typed, replacing it and clicking the 'Continue' button almost too fast to see.

'Herald of Autumn' appears in the Seventh Server, and Ye Xiu settles in to play.

---

For the first two weeks, Ye Xiu exists in perpetual survival mode. He games all day for money, sleeps for a few hours at whatever internet cafe he's using that day, and gets by on the absolute cheapest food he can find. His twenty-four year old body protests, but his performance doesn't suffer too much. Being young again really is wonderful.

The grueling work schedule needed to keep himself afloat is almost a blessing. Ye Xiu prefers to sleep as little as possible. He always dreams of being sick again, and of dying, but the worst ones are the silent, melancholy dreams of the people he's left behind. Ye Xiu knows they're fine, but it was his choices that are responsible for leaving them behind. Their separation is resoundingly final; even if his family and friends are alive here, they're not the same people. Those he lost cannot be replaced.

No matter what he dreams, Ye Xiu always wakes up with a tightness in his chest, gasping for breath until he remembers he's healthy again.

If Ye Qiu or one of his pro friends found themselves in Ye Xiu's situation, the outcome might have been disastrous, but Ye Xiu settles easily into his new life. He's never been more grateful for his experience as a runaway. Su Muqiu equipped him perfectly - Ye Xiu has valuable skills he can sell, and he knows the best ways of advertising them. He watches his account balance increase, and slowly acquires a second set of clothes bargaining with local shop owners.

Finding a better place to sleep is more difficult, but this isn't the first time Ye Xiu has rented illegally. After making some delicate inquiries, he finds a landlord who'll overlook his refusal to provide documentation and rents a bed, sharing a single room with six other people. The communal shower is the real treasure. It feels incredible to be completely clean again, even if the water's warm only because it's summer.

To supplement his income, Ye Xiu wins a few local Glory tournaments and purchases his first maxed account. Finally freed from relying on loaned accounts, he begins taking on higher profit projects - assassinations, equipment farming, and power leveling. Ye Xiu likes the power leveling jobs the most because he can bring Herald of Autumn along and share the party EXP.

Once the basic necessities are acquired, Ye Xiu turns back to his long-term goals. Building his reputation in-game will automatically draw attention from Challenger League teams, with the added benefit of increasing his profit as he becomes better-known.

But it doesn't hurt to add a little extra incentive. Ye Xiu writes down everything he remembers from Wei Chen's skill point guide, which turns out to be a decent amount, around a third. After all, Ye Xiu personally completed those quests on multiple Team Happy accounts, and it's only been around six years since then.

He also reproduces the blueprints for One Autumn Leaf's entire set of Silver Equipment up to level 70, storing them on Herald of Autumn's account card. That part is effortless. Ye Xiu spent ten years with One Autumn Leaf and watched Su Muqiu design the basic plans. Even after years apart he is incomparably familiar with that character.

In his limited free time, Ye Xiu researches the pro league, watching matches and compiling analysis documents on individual players and teams. Comparing the current Alliance to the one in his memories, there's no doubt that this world's current Glory League is more commercialized. Perhaps the Chairman had been right that Ye Xiu had held back Glory's development.

But when Ye Xiu begins watching matches, the League's tactics make him shake his head. They display plenty of cunning, but lack sophistication - direct, if effective. Their Silver equipment, on the other hand, is far more refined than what Ye Xiu remembers. He suspects Su Muqiu's influence on this timeline is responsible for the focus on equipment over tactics - he'd managed to outfit Excellent Era's entire main roster with Silver weapons by Season Three.

Watching Excellent Era's matches with Su Muqiu controlling Dancing Rain is fascinating. Zhou Zekai may be the Great Gunner, but Su Muqiu is the indisputable Gunner God. Ye Xiu is amused when he realizes Su Mucheng took over Qi Breaker after Wu Xuefeng left. She's

just as much of a popular idol in this world too. Ye Xiu watches Excellent Era's press conferences just to see the two of them together, smiling and happy.

He also tracks down some recent pictures of Ye Qiu, just to confirm they aren't identical as long as Ye Xiu keeps his hair longer. Hopefully it will never become an issue, but just in case, Ye Xiu wouldn't want to trouble his brother. He searches the internet for news of Ye Qiu every now and then, just to make sure he's alright.

Ye Xiu plays Glory, accumulates his meager belongings, and finds himself content watching the people he cares about from afar.

---

"Your performance was spectacular! Have you ever considered joining a team?"

Ye Xiu doesn't even bother turning around as he collects his tournament winnings. "I'm twenty-four," he says. This isn't the first time he's been approached by a recruiter, and the simple truth of his age has made every single one of them lose interest in Ye Xiu.

"No problem, no problem. Age is just experience!"

Ye Xiu glances over his shoulder. The recruiter is a plump, slightly balding man without any obvious team affiliation, who looks half-melted from the broken AC and the late-June heat. Frankly, the level of opponents at this particular tournament doesn't allow good judgement of anyone's skill. Ye Xiu suspects this man is either incompetent or new to his job.

The recruiter presses a card into Ye Xiu's hand. "Come try out at our training camp!"

"Sure," Ye Xiu says without looking down. If they're official enough to have a training camp, it's the kind of team he'll never be accepted into, but he might get a few decent matches or a free meal out of it.

The recruiter beams, wipes the sweat off his face and hurries after his next target. Ye Xiu rides the bus back wondering if he should use his winnings to buy a third set of clothes, a maxed Knight account so he can sell his services as a tank, or do neither and put it into his emergency fund. Only after he pulls out Herald of Autumn's account card and sees the paper business card underneath flutter onto the table does he pick it up and read it.

Royal Style? How surprising.

Ye Xiu bites down on a toothpick and examines the card more closely. This world's Royal Style closely mirrors the team of his memories - a former powerhouse and championship contender reduced to mid-tier, slipping in the rankings with every season, never quite reaching the playoffs but strong enough they had nothing to fear from the truly weak teams below them.

He leans back in his chair, considering the costs of time and money involved, and ultimately decides to use the opportunity. If Ye Xiu can truthfully claim he was accepted into a pro team's training camp, it would give the Challenger League teams an additional incentive to overlook his age.

The next morning, Ye Xiu packs his entire worldly belongings in a plastic bag and travels to Club Royal Style. The training camp is entered through a back entrance; Ye Xiu joins the local students on summer break flooding in for the day's training. As the oldest person in a crowd of mostly teenagers, Ye Xiu receives many questioning looks, which he pays no attention to.

When Ye Xiu flashes the business card he was given, the receptionist waves him through a side door.

"Another one from Old Gong?" groans the supervisor in charge of testing. "Why does he keep sending us worthless trash!" He squints at Ye Xiu. "How old are you anyway?"

When Ye Xiu opens his mouth to answer, the tester waves his hand toward a bank of computers. "You know what, I don't even care. Pick a station, the test programs are already loaded. Use your own account card. If you don't have one, get out."

Ye Xiu ambles over to the nearest computer, toothpick in his mouth, and breaks the camp record score with the same ease most people eat breakfast.

The testing supervisor nearly chokes on his pen when he sees the numbers. "What did you say your name was again?" he asks, favoring Ye Xiu with a proper look this time, before calling over the training camp's head supervisor.

Head Supervisor Yan takes one look at Ye Xiu and sneers, clearly unimpressed by what he sees. "Why did you call me over? I don't care if he broke the record! Anyone can do that. Send him to the next round of testing and have him fight the trainees."

The testing supervisor shrinks back and sputters.

Uninterested in the byplay, Ye Xiu yawns and rests his cheek on his hand. He'd had to wake up early to catch the bus. "We can skip to the last round," he says. "There's no one in this training camp who can beat me anyway."

Supervisor Yan's face goes a startling shade of purple. "Have him fight all four terms if you have to," he snarls before storming out.

Ye Xiu spends the rest of his morning working his way through Royal Style's trainees. It's a tremendously pointless exercise, but the training supervisor grows increasingly excited with every trainee Ye Xiu crushes. Finally, Ye Xiu completes a match and the supervisor doesn't immediately gesture another player to take his opponent's place.

"Wonderful!" the man cries. "I'm happy to offer you a position here in the training camp!"

"I'll have to decline." Ye Xiu says immediately, not giving him any face.

"What!" The testing supervisor's jaw drops. Ye Xiu is acting completely unenthused, which seems to confuse the man. "Why not?"

"There's nothing anyone here can teach me. And for personal reasons, I'm not suitable to join the pro team."

The testing supervisor is speechless.

“Also,” Ye Xiu adds, “my living situation won’t support commuting every day.”

“You can live in the dorms for free!” the testing supervisor tries desperately.

Free lodging and computer time in exchange for playing Glory? “Thank you for having me,” Ye Xiu accepts immediately, shaking the supervisor’s hand. “Where do I put my bag?”

By the time anyone figures out he’s twenty-four, he’s already moved his things into his new dorm room and shown up for afternoon practice. Nobody involved wants to admit negligence, and Ye Xiu feigns deafness whenever it’s politely hinted he should resign. They could force him out, but he’s already defeated the camp’s top trainees, so Ye Xiu is allowed to remain.

Entering Royal Style’s training camp is a lucrative windfall for Ye Xiu. In exchange for completing daily practice Ye Xiu would have done anyway and beating a few trainees, Ye Xiu can live in a much nicer room for free and still do paid gaming in his spare time. Now that Ye Xiu can afford it, Herald of Autumn goes to a power leveler to be maxed. September is the beginning of the Challenger League, and Ye Xiu simply has too many demands on his time.

Ye Xiu’s fellow trainees are unhappy, to say the least, at seeing him promoted directly to the fourth term class and they make their jealousy evident. Since Ye Xiu could probably beat them with one eye closed, their trash talking inevitably backfires, and any attempts at humiliating him are either ignored or completely ineffective: Ye Xiu is soon left largely alone.

It helps curb their jealousy that Ye Xiu seems to have made a powerful enemy already.

“Why are you not training?” Head Supervisor Yan demands one morning near the end of June, upon finding Ye Xiu watching a match recording.

“I’ve finished the exercises for the day,” Ye Xiu replies, pulling off his headphones.

“Then you should be fighting matches with the other trainees!” the man spits.

“I’ve beaten them all once today,” Ye Xiu tells him.

From the red color flushing his cheeks, Head Supervisor Yan is teetering on the edge of an explosion.

“Would you like me to beat them again?” Ye Xiu suggests, wanting to go back to his match. He’s working his way through analyzing seven seasons’ worth of match recordings, but it’s a time consuming process, especially since he’s including notes on how the matches played out in his first life written as ‘hypothetical scenarios.’

“Get out,” Head Supervisor Yan hisses. “Don’t think I won’t include this in my reports!”



Puzzled, Ye Xiu closes the recording and leaves the practice room. Finding his afternoon unexpectedly free, he heads in search of the guild studio.

Guild Royal Heritage is run by Senior Meng, retired Vice-Captain of Royal Style and current user of the guild leader account Martial Emperor. In his original world, Ye Xiu played against him in the first two seasons of the Alliance, and his favorable impression of the vice-captain hasn't changed. Despite Royal Heritage's weakness and low status among the player base, Guild Leader Meng insists on a disciplined and smoothly run department and is a fair and strict superior.

When Ye Xiu makes his offer, Guild Leader Meng's dour gaze rakes him from head to toe, and he crisply nods once. "Very well. Class?"

"Battle Mage is my main, but I'll play anything," Ye Xiu replies, following behind the guild leader as he's handed an account card and pointed toward a station. "We'll call you once we locate a Wild BOSS," the guild leader says, returning to his work.

Ye Xiu is free to continue his match analyses until Royal Heritage receives word that Buddhist Zhen Mo has spawned. When Royal Heritage's troops arrive, one of the guild elites curses. "Shit, what a mess."

Eight guilds are already embroiled in the conflict. Any Knights holding the BOSS's aggro have already been killed off, and the battle has degenerated into a massive free-for-all between the guilds, with the uncontrolled BOSS wandering freely through the map instant-killing whole swathes of players.

"Chaos is an opportunity for us," Ye Xiu disagrees, chewing on the toothpick in his mouth as he surveys the field.

"Who asked you, trainee?"

"That's very narrow-minded! Wasn't your captain a trainee once?"

"You-"

"What kind of opportunity?" Guild Leader Meng's Martial Emperor interrupts.

Ye Xiu laughs, then outlines his plan.

<Congratulations to Guild Royal Heritage for killing Buddhist Zhen Mo>

"Not bad," Guild Leader Meng remarks. Across the studio, he's turned around, watching Ye Xiu. "Interested in staying until another BOSS spawns?"

"I've finished my training for the day," Ye Xiu replies, stretching his hands above his head in satisfaction. He's begun tutoring a few of the trainees - the ones who hadn't minded his promotion and admired his skill - but nothing compares to the chaos of a BOSS battle.

Royal Heritage is fortunate today. They're one of the first three guilds to arrive after Swordsman Kayou spawns. Ye Xiu leads a strike force to disrupt the other guilds' formations

while Martial Emperor and the others lure the BOSS deep into Sighing Ravine before killing him.

“You’re good luck, Brother Ye!”

“Duel me in the Arena, that trick with your Chasers was incredible!”

“Have you participated in a BOSS battle before?” asks Guild Leader Meng, giving him a sharp, measuring look.

“Yes, but not for any guild you’d recognize.” Ye Xiu knows Team Happy will never be born in this world. It was built on an unfulfilled dream and Ye Xiu’s reputation, neither of which exist here.

The Guild Leader nods. “How long have you been playing?”

“I started when the First Server opened,” Ye Xiu replies, stretching again and noticing how late it’s gotten.

“Go have dinner,” the Guild Leader says, turning away. “You can come back anytime.”

“Thanks.” Ye Xiu is pleased by achieving today’s goal: free access to the guild accounts so he can practice all twenty-four classes without buying more alts.

“Next time you should let me command,” Ye Xiu remarks offhandedly on his way out.

The guild members begin objecting, but Guild Leader Meng’s voice cuts through. “Very well. Come back and I’ll allow you command.”

The next day, Ye Xiu’s trainer sends him straight to the Guild studio once he’s finished giving the fourth term trainees their daily beating. Guild Leader Meng has Ye Xiu duel the guild elites one by one, ending with himself.

“The training camp isn’t teaching you anything, is it?” is the only thing the former vice-captain says after his turn experiencing Royal Heritage’s unanimous defeat.

“It’s quite pointless,” Ye Xiu agrees, bringing up the match he’s currently analyzing.

Guild Leader Meng steps closer. “Is that Excellent Era’s match from the season four finals?”

Ye Xiu makes a noise of assent. “You’ve fought against Su Muqiu before. What are your impressions?”

“Extremely adaptive and cunning. His persistence and tenacity make his rivalry with Han Wenqing very well-matched. His mechanics are top tier, and his ability with interrupts can’t be overstated.”

Ye Xiu clicks his tongue. “He gets distracted when he thinks too much.”

One of the guild members coughs awkwardly in the background. For a trainee in a mid-tier pro team's training camp to critique a god is simply not appropriate.

"How would you take advantage of that?" Guild leader Meng asks, genuine interest softening his face from its usual severe expression.

"I can think of a few scenarios..."

The first time Ye Xiu leads Royal Heritage's troops in a BOSS fight, Royal Heritage comes within a hair's breadth of killing it, only to fail at the end.

"When did I say I'd win the BOSS?" Ye Xiu says in response to the guild elites' abuse. "Success is never guaranteed when it comes to BOSSes."

When Guild Leader Meng orders Ye Xiu to take command again for the next BOSS, the guild elites object, thinking it's some form of pity.

Ye Xiu laughs at the mere idea of Vice-Captain Meng showing sympathy. You didn't become a guild leader without being ruthless, underhanded and viciously businesslike. In both Ye Xiu's first world and this one, Vice-Captain Meng wasn't nicknamed the Iron Hand without reason.

This time, Ye Xiu snags the BOSS. The effect of having a master tactician can't be overstated, and Royal Heritage's troops are well organized, albeit weak.

Under Ye Xiu's daily attention, Royal Style's BOSS harvest explodes. Royal Heritage is an extremely weak guild, but Guild Happy had once been weaker. Among the other guilds, a rumor starts that a pro player skipped vacation to help out this summer. The rumor never gets confirmed because Ye Xiu frequently switches classes, but he's amused to learn it exists because it *is* technically true.

Head Supervisor Yan is incensed to learn where Ye Xiu spends his afternoons, but he can't complain about loaning his student away when it produces such positive results for Royal Style. Barring a few especially proud or envious holdouts, by mid-July and Ye Xiu's third week in Royal Style's training camp, the fourth term trainees have all been taken under Ye Xiu's tutelage. Once they saw their fellows improving using Ye Xiu's suggestions, they clamored for the same treatment. Fighting teaching matches requires more effort, but Ye Xiu appreciates their willingness to seek improvement and has been happy to nurture their talent.

Ye Xiu is quite satisfied. His research is progressing, he's narrowed down a list of Challenger League teams who might consider him, and Herald of Autumn is steadily gaining levels with the power leveler. Everything is coming along quite nicely.

---

When his phone rings, Tian Sen is halfway through a workout, but the name on his phone screen immediately makes him pick up.

"Senior Meng?"

“Little Tian. How’s your vacation?”

“Good. Is everything okay with the guild?” Tian Sen asks. His voice carries a questioning lilt. Guild Leader Meng wouldn’t usually call unless he had a problem that required the input of the team captain.

“We’ve experienced some very good fortune recently. I have no complaints. I called to see if you could return early from vacation.”

“Sure,” Tian Sen replies instantly, wiping his forehead. “It will take me a few more days to wrap things up with my family, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you need help with, Senior?” Tian Sen asks as he leans against the wall.

For a moment, Guild Leader Meng is silent. Then he chuckles, and Tian Sen can hear the smile on his face as he says, “Little Tian, I’ve found you a partner.”

Tian Sen sucks in a breath. “A dual core?”

“I want you to assess him before I say anything to management. He’s an unconventional choice, to say the least, and Head Supervisor Yan will almost certainly oppose me with every grain of authority he has.”

Royal Style’s captain frowns. “How good is he?”

“Good enough that I need your Peaceful Hermit to have a hope of challenging him. I’ve never met anyone with such a deep understanding of Glory. Not even Su Muqiu, the Silver Inventor.”

“I’ll be there within three days,” Tian Sen replies decisively. His hand tightens around his phone.

In the early Glory Alliance, Tian Sen’s Peaceful Hermit account had been as famous as the Gunner God and the King of Fighting. With a championship at stake, Royal Style had fought Excellent Era on equal ground. These days, the God-level account Peaceful Hermit might not even make All-Stars next year, and it would take a miracle for Royal Style to enter the playoffs this season.

More than anything, Tian Sen wants his Peaceful Hermit account to not fall and be forgotten, and Royal Style’s legacy restored to the top of the Alliance. To prevent the fear deep in his heart, Tian Sen worked as hard as he could. However, the team’s performance was in a slump, and their guild was extremely weak. Hovering below tenth place season after season, they had no fear of those lower than them, but neither could they compete with those above.

A dual core. As he ends the call with Senior Meng, Tian Sen turns the possibility over in his mind and returns to the idea often over the next few days.

Though the suggestion was frequently raised in outside analyses, Royal Style had never found a suitable partner for Peaceful Hermit, and not for lack of trying. Tian Sen has always supported the idea. Royal Style's captain is wholly devoted to his team, and sharing the core position wouldn't cause him a moment of hesitation if it meant improving Royal Style.

But even as he prepares to return to the club, Tian Sen doesn't pin his hopes on this new candidate. Sooner or later, Royal Style will return to that championship stage. Tian Sen believes this without question. As long as they were still fighting and working hard, anything was possible.

Even with Senior Meng's warning, Ye Xiu is nothing like Tian Sen expects.

As they discussed, Senior Meng brings Tian Sen to the guild studio, gesturing subtly toward one particular computer station. Tian Sen glances over during the chorus of guild member greetings, but can't see over the back of the chair.

"Captain Tian has returned early to manage some matters for the team and will be assisting us today," announces Senior Meng. "Little Tian, there's a free computer over by Little Ye."

"Thank you," Tian Sen replies, taking the offered Exorcist account card. Curiosity courses powerfully through him as he approaches Ye Xiu. Senior Meng provided nothing except a name so Tian Sen could form a fresh opinion of this potential recruit.

For someone who maintains his body as well as Tian Sen, Ye Xiu looks distressingly unhealthy. He's pale, with dark bags under his eyes and unkempt hair brushing his shirt collar. His loose, cheap clothes don't hide how thin he is either. Only the curl of his long, elegant fingers over his keyboard hints at his skill. He's older than Tian Sen expected - was that why Senior Meng had called him unusual?

A flash of light brightens Ye Xiu's monitor; Tian Sen realizes Ye Xiu has unusually light eyes, brown turning amber-gold for one brief instant.

As Tian Sen sits down, Ye Xiu glances over with a listless expression on his face, before his eyes slide back to the match he's watching - last year's Challenger League.

Tian Sen feels like he's been dismissed. Irritation makes his voice a tad sharper than he'd like. "Are you Ye Xiu from the training camp?"

"I am," Ye Xiu affirms, pausing his video and taking the toothpick out of his mouth. His eyes sweep Tian Sen up and down and crinkle at the corners with amusement known only to himself. "Captain Tian Sen. You're very well informed for someone who returned only today."

Tian Sen almost blushes, but plows on anyway. "I'm the team captain. It's my job to stay informed about anything important to the team."

"Very good!" Ye Xiu praises, then slyly adds, "I must be very important."

Tian Sen chokes. He can't tell if Ye Xiu is being sincere or teasing him. Possibly both. "The training camp's strength will someday become the team's strength," he argues.

"That's true. Is your training camp being nurtured well?" Ye Xiu asks, his gaze sharpening.

Something about the framing of the question makes Tian Sen pause. *Was* there a problem with the training camp? Head Supervisor Yan is unpleasant, and he's better at bootlicking than doing his job, but surely that was all?

Palm propping up his chin, Ye Xiu observes Tian Sen with the perpetual half-smile Tian Sen will soon realize is always on his lips. He radiates an aura of perfect self-assurance - one that would be arrogance in someone less skilled or self-aware.

"A level 70 BOSS spawned!" someone shouts.

A moment later, one of the guild employees curses. "That Excellent Era bastard is back from vacation!"

The entire guild room collectively groans. "Doesn't he already have enough materials to experiment with? Leave some for us!"

"Well, Captain Tian, ready to become my workhorse?" Ye Xiu laughs, fingers already dancing over his keyboard in a practiced rhythm. "Sounds like today's battle will be interesting."

Caught up in the guild's enthusiasm, Tian Sen logs in, joining up with Royal Heritage's troops. "You're commanding?" he asks in surprise when Ye Xiu begins arranging the formation, watching their guild troops obey the Battle Mage with an easy familiarity. Just how often did Ye Xiu command them?

Martial Emperor comes up beside Tian Sen's Exorcist. "Little Ye joins us every day after completing his training."

Tian Sen's eyebrows raise, and he darts another glance at the player beside him. It was not in character for Senior Meng to trust someone else with leading the guild's troops.

"I take it that Excellent Era's Su Muqiu will be joining us today?" Ye Xiu's voice echoes from Tian Sen's headphones and beside him.

"He takes his sister on vacation for a month or so every year, then comes back to torment the guilds into giving him BOSSes," Senior Meng replies, displaying the long-suffering endurance of those resigned to their fate.

Ye Xiu laughs. "I can't let him get too overconfident. Let's see if we can't snatch a BOSS, Captain Tian!"

Tian Sen understands very quickly why Ye Xiu is allowed to lead the guild troops. A tactician! And a skilled one too - Tian Sen wants to see Ye Xiu vie against one of the Four Master Tacticians, just to see who'd win.

With those steady orders echoing in his ear, Tian Sen and Royal Heritage beat back the other challengers, until only Excellent Era is left. Against one of the Four Great Guilds, Royal Heritage is far outmatched in strength. Ye Xiu's tactics have carried them this far, but Su Muqiu's Sharpshooter is tearing through their troops, throwing Ye Xiu's careful formations into disorder.

"Don't go thinking we're finished already," Ye Xiu scolds Tian Sen. "We have the advantage!"

"What's that?" Tian Sen asks, knocking back five players in a single swing.

"There's two of us and one of him. Go hold him off until we kill the BOSS, Captain Tian!"

Tian Sen is speechless. There has to be a limit to confidence!

Even so, he charges out to seek the Gunner God. Tian Sen may be a god, but so is Su Muqiu, and Su Muqiu is older and more experienced. Tian Sen can force the elder to focus his attention on himself, but unfortunately he can't observe Ye Xiu, who is finally actively entering battle. With the support of the guild healers, their duel drags on until a system message echoes through both their headphones.

<Congratulations to Guild Royal Heritage for killing Forest Guardian Vich>

"Damn! Looks like you've been practicing. I look forward to our next battle, Little Tian!" Su Muqiu calls as Excellent Era withdraws.

Tian Sen sighs and slumps in his chair. With Clerics on both sides, a high level duel like that was never-ending.

"Not bad, Captain Tian. Want anything to drink?" As Ye Xiu stands up, tucking a new toothpick into his mouth, Tian Sen realizes two things simultaneously: he has at least ten centimeters and twenty kilos on the older player, and he still hasn't managed to observe Ye Xiu's level of individual skill.

"Actually, I'll come with you," Tian Sen replies hastily. "Let's borrow one of the practice rooms and we can duel."

"Sure, sure," Ye Xiu agrees, the knowing gleam in his eyes sharpening as Senior Meng slips out to 'deliver some paperwork.'

Ye Xiu strolls along with his hands in his pockets, pausing to allow Tian Sen to unlock the practice room door. He takes a seat like it belongs to him, which might be reassuring in the right circumstances but is vaguely irritating now. "If you're going to test me properly, you should use your main."

"Alright," Tian Sen agrees, giving up on keeping anything secret from Ye Xiu. Those light eyes give off the perpetual feeling Ye Xiu knows infinitely more than you do anyway.

Senior Meng arrives silently and takes a place at Tian Sen's shoulder. Against Ye Xiu's vastly inferior character, Peaceful Hermit grinds out a reliable win, but without his Silver equipment

it might have been a very different story. Tian Sen is sweating with effort and feels like he's never really understood the potential of the Battle Mage class until now.

Ye Xiu has no reaction to being beaten, other than raising one bony shoulder and asking, "Again?"

Tian Sen nods fervently. He forgets what he originally intended to bring Ye Xiu here for, losing track of time in their string of duels. Ye Xiu's strength - whether it's experience, tactics, or God-level mechanics, Tian Sen knows he's the one being taught here.

"That's enough," Senior Meng says, the hushed awe in his voice bringing Tian Sen out of his own daze. "We've seen everything we need."

Eyes wide, Tian stares at the defeat message. "What was that, with that last Rising Dragon Soars the Sky?!"

"The dragon turned its head," Ye Xiu replies blandly, twisting the toothpick in his mouth between those long fingers.

"It can - it can *do* that?" Tian Sen splutters.

"Yes. Not very practical though." Ye Xiu remains indifferent to Tian Sen's goggle-eyed shock.

Tian Sen is speechless. The God-level Peaceful Hermit had been beaten by a no-name spare guild account, wielding a never-before-seen Battle Mage technique its creator thinks is unimpressive.

A god, Tian Sen realizes, excitement rising in his breast. Royal Style has uncovered a new god. Tian Sen remembers the way the two of them coordinated earlier, fighting the Gunner God and stealing that BOSS, and thinks to himself that this really might work.

"Before you two get carried away, I can't join Royal Style," Ye Xiu's voice carries a faintly apologetic tinge.

"Why not?" Tian Sen demands. "What are you doing in the training camp if you're not interested?"

Ye Xiu shrugs. "The dorms are free."

Both Tian Sen and Senior Meng gape. That's it? He's just here to freeload? How can anyone be this shameless?"

Ye Xiu holds up his hands to placate them. "I told the testing supervisor before I accepted the spot that I couldn't join the team, but he didn't seem to care."

Senior Meng narrows his eyes. "You knew what we brought you here to do. Why didn't you say anything?"



“I wanted to duel Captain Tian,” Ye Xiu replies, faintly apologetic. “Watching Peaceful Hermit fight felt nostalgic.”

“You’ve been playing a long time?” Tian Sen asks, genuinely curious. No one newly come to Glory remembered Peaceful Hermit’s achievements with anything resembling nostalgia.

“I created my first account the night Glory opened its first server. I’ve given that account away to someone who’ll maintain it, but I remember it fondly.” There’s a faint wistfulness to Ye Xiu’s tone.

“What do you plan to do?” Tian Sen asks.

The confident half-smile returns to Ye Xiu’s face. “Join a Challenger League team, play Glory.”

“Why not us?” Tian Sen bursts out. What did the Challenger League offer that Royal Style couldn’t?

“A pro team wouldn’t accept my conditions for joining,” Ye Xiu returns seriously. “For family reasons, I can only do limited advertising and would need to use an assumed name. I’d prefer to use my real name and not do the advertising at all, but I don’t think any team in the current league would accept that.”

“That’s it?” Senior Meng asks, arms crossed and a calculating expression overtaking his usual sternness. “There’s nothing else?”

“Nothing else.” Ye Xiu matches him with a considering look of his own. “You’re going to pursue this? That wager might not pay off, Guild Leader Meng. Your position with the club is already in question.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” he replies. “Little Tian? You’re the captain. What do you think?”

Tian Sen considers everything carefully: the risks to Royal Style, his teammates, their boss, his own emotions and goals. He’s fought stars and tacticians, and he knows Ye Xiu is the best of the best. What could Royal Style become, if they welcomed this nameless god who walked quietly through their doors?

“Let’s do it,” Tian Sen decides, looking toward Senior Meng and receiving an accepting nod.

“Developing a dual core will take the spotlight away from you. You don’t mind that?” Ye Xiu shows a mild, amused interest.

“If I wanted fame, I’d have already left,” Tian Sen replies bluntly. He’s earned the right. Among the talented members of the Golden Generation, Tian Sen’s career was said to be the most tragic. He joined Royal Style just as its achievements began to fade, and he remained there while refusing all offers for more money and position.

Ye Xiu’s lips curve upward in a smile, as though he’d never doubted the answer. “Alright. Fulfill my terms and I’ll join your team, Captain Tian Sen.”

---

The agreement falls into place far more quickly than Ye Xiu expected.

Truthfully, he was half-expecting this proposal to fail. Ye Xiu had not been convinced that Royal Style still possessed the will to change. After so many seasons with no improvement, the club's management and players alike are slipping into a mentality of complacency and helplessness, with Tian Sen increasingly alone in his struggle.

Accepting Ye Xiu would have been impossible without Tian Sen's support. There are too many strikes against Ye Xiu: his age, the resources required to raise a brand new class, potential disruption to the team's tactics, wrangling with the Alliance for Ye Xiu to work under a stage name, his limitations regarding paid advertising.

But Tian Sen's devotion and hard work are undeniable. Royal Style's captain carries the implicit trust of his boss, manager, teammates and everyone in the club. If Tian Sen pushed for a radical change like adding a dual core, everyone knew he'd carefully considered their circumstances and was unquestionably convinced it would help Royal Style.

It's still the most contentious decision Royal Style has faced since Tian Sen was chosen as Peaceful Hermit's controller. Head Supervisor Yan and Guild Leader Meng spend the entire time at one another's throats. Under scrutiny, questions are raised regarding the accuracy of the training camp reports, which paint Ye Xiu as a moderately skilled troublemaker. Supervisor Yan ended up being demoted - apparently Ye Xiu's reports weren't the only ones he was slanting.

As additional incentive, Ye Xiu had also offered Herald of Autumn's silver equipment plans and his piecemeal skill point data. A fully tested silver equipment concept was worth a great deal on its own, not to mention the value of adding additional skill points.

After extensive analysis, the department heads and the boss all weigh in; the team is called back early to meet Ye Xiu and assess compatibility. But Ye Xiu's skill level is undeniable, and Royal Style wants every advantage they can grasp to escape their current stasis.

On the first of August, Ye Xiu signs his name to the one-year contract making him an official member of team Royal Style. He was far more careful with the terms of this contract than the one he signed with Tao Xuan. Ye Xiu knows a fair amount of contract law now, after studying it for his work as the Ye heir, and he's built in enough safeguards to define exactly what his obligations are. The one-year term is protection both for himself and Royal Style - Ye Xiu has a way out if things don't work out, and if Royal Style finds his terms too burdensome, they can renegotiate next year.

Even with the additional terms, joining a pro team entails far greater risks than entering the Challenger League. Ye Xiu possesses the proof of identity necessary to register with the Alliance, but his legal identity is officially dead. The more attention he attracts, the greater the chance someone will discover the irregularity.

Already, his real name is known among a handful of guild members, trainees and staff at Royal Style, but Ye Xiu isn't too concerned over this. As long as he keeps the club's favor they'll protect him. And he isn't technically committing a crime. Both his name and identity

card genuinely belong to him. Comparing his fingerprints against the government database or running a DNA test will confirm his identity, leaving only the ‘reasonable’ conclusion that there’s an administrative error in his records.

Avoiding such a situation would be best, and for that, Ye Xiu will rely the smokescreen of his stage name. Common sense is his strongest protection. Who would seriously believe he’s a dead man returned to life? He’ll stay out of sight as much as possible, but if he still draws the Ye family’s attention, his assumed name should give them enough reason to believe Ye Xiu is just a doppelganger, and not a living ghost.

It’s still a selfish action, just like running away was in his first life. Ye Xiu doesn’t deny that.

“Welcome to Royal Style,” Boss Liao congratulates him, shaking his hand. The boss’ smile is slightly strained; he knows the risk he’s taking.

“Thank you,” Ye Xiu replies. “Don’t worry! You’ve gotten a good deal. Buying a player like me usually isn’t so easy!”

The boss chokes.

“Time for practice,” Tian Sen announces, taking advantage of his strength and height and herding Ye Xiu toward the door.

---

When his transfer deal with Royal Style almost falls through at the very last minute, Jia Shiming doesn’t panic, but his play that week is especially vicious until the ink is drying and he knows he’s free. Royal Style may have unimpressive scores, but Jia Shiming would rather join their main roster instead of spending another year in Tyranny as nothing more than Han Wenqing’s unneeded successor.

At least with Royal Style he’d get to play.

“Senior Jia, welcome,” says a face Jia Shiming doesn’t recognize the first time he walks into Royal Style’s practice room. Sloppily dressed, the stranger’s lips are quirked like he’s enjoying a private joke. Jia Shiming’s irritation immediately spikes.

“Ye Xiu,” Jia Shiming replies, more than slightly resentful that he was almost passed over in favor of another older player. “Or should I say Ye Rui?”

Ye Xiu laughs, “I let the boss decide my stage name. When someone gives you something you should use it, no?”

Jia Shiming smiles tightly. It doesn’t matter. If Royal Style doesn’t work out, then he’ll keep searching for another opportunity.

“Using things people give you goes for opportunities too!” Ye Xiu continues. “One shouldn’t look too far ahead and miss the path under one’s feet.”

Jia Shiming startles, abruptly off balance. He can’t shake the feeling that Ye Xiu knows far, far more than he lets on; with the man’s air of arrogance, that idea is too frightening.

He keeps a careful eye on Ye Xiu after that. No one seems to know anything about him, other than a name and that he doesn't want his background known. He's eerily perceptive, somehow verging on prescient, and probably the best Glory player Jia Shiming has ever met, which means something from a player tutored by a god to be their successor.

Jia Shiming notices other things too. Ye Xiu only seems to own three sets of clothing, and his dorm room is so empty it looks uninhabited. He has some kind of oral fixation - he's always got something in his mouth - but his appetite is nonexistent. He never speaks of other friends or family, and he never leaves the club by himself. And sometimes, Ye Xiu will get an odd look on his face, one that makes him look a thousand years old and so very weary.

Jia Shiming hadn't intended to interact much with Royal Style's players outside of practice - after all, a team like this isn't his ultimate goal - but he wants to keep watch on Ye Xiu, and Tian Sen spends time with Ye Xiu refining their new dual core, and the team goes where Tian Sen goes. Somehow everyone ends up BOSS hunting in the Heavenly Domain, or messing around casually on alts.

Jia Shiming doesn't understand Tian Sen either. The captain places so much importance on Royal Style, invests so much of his time and devotion in the team - how does he not understand that Royal Style will never return the same affection? This isn't the old Alliance anymore. These days, a club is purely a business. Pro players are a means to an end. If players don't look out for themselves, the club will just discard them when they're finished.

It doesn't matter, he reminds himself. This is only temporary.

But Ye Xiu wasn't wrong when he said Jia Shiming shouldn't overlook his current opportunity. If Jia Shiming trains harder, maybe he can finally meet someone's expectations.

---

Introducing a new core is a delicate thing. If Royal Style were a top-tier team, Ye Xiu's addition could have ripped their dynamic apart. Jealousy and ambition bloom even when talent is undeniable.

Yet Royal Style is uniquely well-suited to such a dramatic transformation. The captain sets the tone for his players, and Tian Sen passes his shot caller position willingly and without resentment. Their main roster's personalities are also excessively stable and grounded. Royal Style's veterans understand what they are, and what they aren't - good, but not the best. Just like their team, their abilities exceed average yet fall short of true brilliance.

And the truth underlying Royal Style's current cooperative harmony is that anyone with real ambition never stays long. The young rookies with ego, the would-be stars seeking to impress better teams - they pass through Royal Style's ranks like thieves in the night, treating Royal Style as nothing more than a stepping stone. Anyone left either cannot reach higher and knows it, or could find better offers and doesn't want to.

Ye Xiu's refusal to accept either captaincy or vice-captaincy also soothes tempers. "I have no interest in being captain," he says, placing his hand on Tian Sen's shoulder. "Then I'd have to attend all the press conferences. I'll be relying on you, Captain Tian, Vice-Captain Shen!"

Shen Wanhe, their vice-captain and user of the Spitfire account Flash Memory, suddenly looks much less relieved. Despite being among the top five Spitfire players, he'd always been content with his position at Royal Style and his lack of fame, hoping to play out his career quietly before accepting a dignified retirement. Ye Xiu's arrival has thoroughly sunk that plan. Shen Wanhe can already feel future headaches looming.

"At least he's going to drive everyone else crazy too," Chang Jianping, who plays the Mechanic Starshot, consoles Shen Wanhe while he pats the vice-captain's shoulder with an insincere smile. As Tian Sen's close friend, he can't wait to introduce Royal Style's new dual core to the Alliance.

"Fucking finally, as long as it's not me!" grumbles Ren Junchi, their Paladin Gentle Angel, without any heat. Ye Xiu could provoke like other people breathed, but he possessed an equally keen sense of boundaries that kept his taunts from turning ugly.

"Amazing," Ye Xiu remarks, wandering past. "I thought Senior Ren didn't notice when I bullied him."

Ren Junchi sputters. "I noticed! You bastard, you can build your shitty Battle Mage's equipment by yourself!"

Flicking an openly amused glance at the Paladin, Ye Xiu laughs. "You're still going to help me equip Herald of Autumn."

"Fuck," Ren Junchi curses. Little Ren talked tough, but hid a soft center behind his manly man persona. Ye Xiu had picked up on this fact as soon as they met and frequently took advantage of it.

Seated at the fringes of the team, Jia Shiming watches quietly, neither ignoring his teammates nor engaging with them.

Tian Sen frowns. Jia Shiming is just another bright comet passing through, but he and his ambition cause no trouble. It just bothers Tian Sen to have one of his main roster - and a rookie at that - not fully integrated with the team, like missing the final piece of a puzzle.

In comparison, Ye Xiu's integration appears seamless. Ye Xiu's God-level play could have easily unbalanced Royal Style's rhythm; it happened frequently with outstanding rookies. Instead, it's the opposite. Ye Xiu takes immaculate care when cooperating with his teammates, shaping and curbing his habits so perfectly and effortlessly that Tian Sen can't believe he's never played at the pro level before. It's just one more mystery to add to the pile labeled 'Ye Xiu.'

Yet Tian Sen isn't quite satisfied. Outwardly, he has nothing to complain about. Ye Xiu's conduct is irreproachable, his skills are outstanding, and he gets along with his teammates.

But sometimes, Tian Sen catches Ye Xiu with a distant look in his eyes and wonders if Ye Xiu isn't holding himself apart just as much as Jia Shiming is.

---

First generation players are so terribly, deeply loyal to their teams, the bond rooted deep: devotion offered out of love and a desire to play that had nothing to do with fame or money. Old-fashioned and out of sync with his own generation, Tian Sen inherited that spirit himself.

Tian Sen can read the broken remnants of that same love in Ye Xiu. Ye Xiu betrays himself in the way he holds his new uniform jacket in his beautiful, gifted hands; perfect composure unruffled, but slim fingers tracing the symbol again and again, restlessly seeking a more familiar shape. Then Ye Xiu decisively slips the black and gold jacket over his shoulders and goes back to practicing with the team.

Tian Sen wonders, but does not ask Ye Xiu's story. His new partner is a very private person, and as long as it doesn't harm Royal Style, Tian Sen is content not to know. If Ye Xiu has reservations, Tian Sen can't find any sign.

The Ye Xiu of Royal Style's training camp treated the club as a convenient way station he could milk for free food and internet while he worked toward his real goals. The Ye Xiu whose name lies drying on his contract is a different beast entirely.

Tian Sen may finally have met a workaholic as dedicated as himself. Ye Xiu continues BOSS hunting to equip his character, spends hours cloistered with Wang Sen and the research department, practices relentlessly with the team, plans tactics with Tian Sen, and conferences with the PR department and management regarding his introduction. He isn't like these entitled young geniuses who expect clubs to hand things to them.

Somehow Ye Xiu remains energetic no matter the hour; his enthusiasm and honest love for Glory shine through, making an impression on whoever works with him. His dedication is repaid with trust. It is a power peculiar to Ye Xiu, one at odds with his effortless ability to provoke. Suddenly, the club isn't so indifferent to their new dual core. Watching their captain and Ye Xiu work tirelessly, a new spirit is beginning to spread through Royal Style's halls.

Like waking up after a long sleep, Royal Style is remembering its history. Boss Liao begins coming around more often, and Tian Sen discovers his teammates staring at the old pictures of Guo Mingyu's team on the club walls. Royal Style had been great once. When had they forgotten that?

"Don't expect unreasonable things, or else you'll be disappointed," Ye Xiu scolds them more than once when their hopes grow too high. "Glory isn't played alone. What we need now is everyone's steady effort."

It's been several years since Royal Style held significant ambitions. But as summer draws to a close, Royal Style cautiously finds itself united in a co-conspiracy of 'why not' and 'let's try'.

---

"Your blueprints were perfect - no wasted materials at all!" Wang Sen enthuses. "I don't think we could have built a better set of Silver equipment for your Battle Mage style if we tried."

"Of course not," Ye Xiu replies. "No one knows more about Battle Mages than I do."

In another world, Wang Sen would have become part of Team Happy's technical department. He is the first Happy member that Ye Xiu has met in this world; working so closely together on Herald of Autumn's equipment has been bittersweet.

"We've managed six pieces of Silver equipment with the materials the guild has obtained so far."

Ye Xiu nods in satisfaction. Six wasn't bad. It was higher than the league's average, although accounts in a top-tier team account would have at least eight, and the God-level account Peaceful Hermit possessed ten. This is Royal Style's way of hedging their bets. Before they invest more materials in his character, they need to see Ye Xiu is worth the expense.

Wang Sen holds out Ye Xiu's account card. "Go ahead, you can take a look."

Tian Sen and the rest of the technical department crowd around as Ye Xiu logs in, clearly anticipating his reaction.

The character page loads; Ye Xiu feels like he's been punched in the gut.

"Little Ye? Is something wrong?"

He turns his head, slipping a smile on his face without thought. "The technical department did a good job! But you should've, since I did all the difficult parts for you."

As Wang Sen half-heartedly groans, Ye Xiu looks back at Herald of Autumn, outfitted in armor of deep russet and gold with a red lacquer spear in his hand.

Even after choosing a new name and breaking with the past, had Ye Xiu still been expecting that familiar figure in black and gold?

"Did you want us to adjust anything?" one of the researchers asks while Ye Xiu hovers his cursor over each piece of equipment, confirming the stats are identical.

"No," Ye Xiu answers decisively. He returns the card to Wang Sen, bites down on a new toothpick, and leaves the technical department with his hands in his pockets.

Struggling for day-to-day survival had made it easy to ignore the differences between this world and his original one. As far as Ye Xiu can tell, the divergence begins right around the time he was born. Politicians who were never elected, stars whose careers never took off, athletes who lost instead of won - if Ye Xiu had any thoughts of gambling rather than playing Glory for money, these changes would have swiftly ended them.

The Alliance has changed, but Glory remains a perfect twin to the game he loves. Until now, Ye Xiu hadn't found a single difference in this world's Glory - not in lore, gameplay, or mechanics. Glory was a touchstone in an unknown world, and Ye Xiu did little beyond play Glory and sleep when he arrived, even in Royal Style's training camp. Then he'd signed with the team, and suddenly he had the leisure and money to notice the things he'd overlooked.

Ye Xiu discovers it's better to remain in the club dormitories unless he researches in advance. Navigating City B alone is a disorienting experience. He gives a taxi driver the wrong

directions because the street has a different name here. He spends ten minutes looking for a metro station entrance that was built four blocks down. He goes to his favorite place for zhajiang noodles, a restaurant he'd known both from childhood and after he returned to his family, and finds a clothing boutique instead.

But however unsettling, those are small things, mistakes easily explained as forgetfulness or unfamiliarity. Ye Xiu has to take more care with Alliance matters, otherwise he'll mention players whose careers developed differently, or name pros who never played at all, or reference matches where the outcome changed. He's building up his information base, but his most dangerous knowledge is the private details of people he hasn't met yet.

It's a good thing Ye Xiu has practice hiding his past, because he knows too much to relax. It isn't strangers who pose the greatest threat to his masquerade. Every close personal interaction is a test, one that forces Ye Xiu to keep constant watch on himself, sorting through what information he's been told, what he can reasonably justify knowing, and what he cannot speak of. It's exhausting, and necessary. Little differences, little mistakes are what Ye Xiu needs to avoid most, because if he makes enough of them someone might catch on.

*You are a stranger*, Ye Xiu reminds himself every time he looks into the eyes of someone who was once a friend and finds only indifference.

---

Su Muqiu would never have expected *Royal Heritage*, of all guilds, to pose a serious threat to his materials gathering. Under their new commander - who Su Muqiu has yet to fight properly, except in brief clashes before Tian Sen appears - Royal Heritage always puts up a strong fight, but the guild is simply too weak to resist one of the Four Great Guilds on a regular basis.

"Looks like this BOSS is ours," Su Muqiu gloats, deflecting a strike from Tian Sen's Exorcist with his Mechanic.

Royal Heritage is already retreating, leaving the BOSS to Excellent Dynasty. Su Muqiu hears Tian Sen sigh. "The regular season starts soon. We'll resign the field to you, Senior Su!"

Su Muqiu cackles. "Looking forward to beating you, Little Tian."

Beside him, Mucheng smiles peacefully as she rips through Royal Heritage's troops with her Qi Master, shadowed and blocked at every turn by an Elementalist with top-notch skills.

He hums appreciatively. Summer BOSS hunting has been unexpectedly helpful for information gathering. "You've got a good rookie there."

For some reason, Tian Sen chokes on a laugh. "You have no idea."

"Call him over," Su Muqiu says impulsively. "He's been poaching all my BOSSes, he should at least say hello."

Mucheng laughs, and her Qi Master and Royal Style's Elementalist break off their duel, heading toward the two captains.



With two rookies being added to their main roster this season, Royal Style's PR has been working overtime teasing a big change in their lineup. Jia Shiming's hype was expected, but their second rookie came out of nowhere. Apparently he's twenty-four - unimaginably old for a pro, people *retire* at that age - and is considered to be the more stunning prospect. Unfortunately that's all Su Muqiu knows through official sources, and all of his retired pro friends in Royal Style are keeping quiet.

From Su Muqiu's observations in game, Royal Style is completely right. Anyone who can tactically outfox his opponents while simultaneously escaping a God-level player's attempts to duel is formidable, and Royal Style's rookie does it while cycling through all twenty-four classes. Su Muqiu hasn't even determined what class the rookie mains. It's *maddening*.

"Captain Su!" calls out the rookie in question. Su Muqiu adjusts his headphones - the acoustics must be off. There was an odd undertone in the rookie's voice.

Halting next to Tian Sen, the rookie plants his Elementalist's staff. "Ready to surrender?"

Su Muqiu blinks, and then scoffs. "Your guild is retreating. Why would I surrender?"

"I'm still here," the rookie answers brazenly.

Su Muqiu checks to make sure Royal Heritage hasn't doubled back. The rookie had tricked him before like that.

No, still retreating. "You're going to beat Excellent Dynasty by yourself?"

"Captain Tian is also here," the rookie points out, like an afterthought.

Su Muqiu is speechless. That's two against a hundred! How is that better?

"Well, it was only polite to offer," the irritating newbie continues. "I hope you don't end up wishing you'd surrendered."

Who wants to surrender! Su Muqiu feels a vein popping in his temple.

< Congratulations to guild Excellent Dynasty for killing Wilderness Escort >

The rookie tsks. "You can always surrender next time," he consoles as if Su Muqiu has just let a wonderful opportunity pass by.

What the hell. Su Muqiu grinds his teeth while Mucheng giggles. "You! What's your name!"

"Ye Rui."

He grits out, "I'll see you on stage. Don't cry when I crush you."

"Likewise," Ye Rui laughs and returns to Royal Heritage's troops.

Su Muqiu squashes the un-captainlike urge to chase after that guy and beat him up, and goes to see what Excellent Dynasty's won. He and Guan Rongfei have several projects they need

materials for. Ye Rui is just a distraction.

It's only later, just on the edge of sleep, that Su Muqiu thinks Ye Rui's voice was oddly familiar.

---

Shaking their captain's hand, Su Muqiu sends Conquering Clouds and their monster rookie - Sun something? - off with their first loss of the new season.

What *was* it with this season producing talented rookies? As long as he worked hard, that Sun kid would be God-level within a year or two. If it weren't for Ye Rui, Su Muqiu guesses he'd be a shoo-in for Best Rookie.

Speaking of Ye Rui...

"How'd Royal Style do tonight?" he asks the nearest club member with their phone out.

"It's all over the net! Their ancient rookie completed a 1v3 against Seaside! Look!"

Su Muqiu squints at the phone screen. "Is that Battle Spirit?"

"Yeah!"

Battle Spirit rarely appeared in competition - the combo count requirements were just too high. Had Seaside's player stood there and taken hits like a sandbag?

Su Muqiu laughs. "Ye Rui. You're going to be a terror."

As captain, Su Muqiu is required to attend the club's traditional beginning-of-season party. When he arrives, he carefully exchanges greetings with Tao Xuan, then moves away to fulfill his quota of socializing, mingling with the sponsors and upper-level club staff who want to meet the Alliance's poster boy.

While they were once close, Su Muqiu can't call the current Tao Xuan and himself friends. Some people change after achieving success, and Tao Xuan's appetite only grows with every season. Even having both the Alliance's advertising symbol and its most popular female idol on his team might not be enough soon, which is why Su Muqiu tries to satisfy most of Tao Xuan's wishes. After a childhood spent taking care of his sister and himself, caution is ingrained in his bones. Exactly how deep Tao Xuan's greed and envy run is something Su Muqiu would rather not find out.

Nearly falling asleep in the taxi afterward, Su Muqiu finally makes it back to the club and drags himself to the dorms in hopes of a hot shower. He's nearly made it to his room when he hears the swift patter of footsteps. Mucheng's eyes are bright with unshed tears, and the unhappy line of her mouth twists her brother's heart as she throws her arms around his neck.

Su Muqiu takes his sister by the shoulders. "Mucheng, what's wrong!" Su Muqiu's mind flashes to the emergency bags he has hidden in the back of his closet. No matter how many years pass, some part of him is always ready to take Mucheng and run.

“Come see,” she pleads, and pulls him into her room. The computer is on, paused on a press conference with Royal Style’s symbol in the foreground. In the frame, Tian Sen and Shen Wanhe are frozen waiting for a question.

Su Muqiu takes this in with puzzlement. “Mucheng -”

“Just watch. I need to know if I’m imagining it,” she replies tersely, clicking play.

The sound is muted, but Su Muqiu has attended so many of these post-match press conferences he can practically write the script himself. Tian Sen finishes accepting congratulations on his team’s victory. Then the camera pans to the right.

His first sight of that amused smirk hits Su Muqiu like the shock of ice water. Impossible. But those eyes...he’s never met anyone else with eyes quite like that. And those beautiful hands - a gamer’s hands, each careless gesture making long, thin fingers ripple and flex.

“He looks like Ye Xiu,” Su Muqiu rasps, the roughness of his voice betraying his pain.

Ye Xiu. The runaway who’d waltzed confidently into an Internet cafe, beaten Su Muqiu at his own games, and turned their family of two into three. The Su siblings had known Ye Xiu for barely six months before misfortune cruelly, senselessly took him away, but somehow he’d wormed his way into their hearts so far the memories couldn’t be uprooted.

Even now, almost a decade later, his death haunts them. Su Muqiu dreams of it still - Ye Xiu shaking him awake, his thin fingers clenched bloodless white over his heart, gasping that he can’t breathe.

“Ye Xiu had a twin,” Su Muqiu reminds Mucheng even as he dismisses the idea.

The Su siblings had met Ye Qiu exactly once, when the Ye family came to collect their son’s body. Ye Qiu had shown up at their door by himself, begged his way inside, spent hours listening quietly to their memories of his brother, then thanked them and left. Though Ye Xiu’s family had taken him away for burial in city B, the Su siblings still remember their friend on Tomb-Sweeping Day in their own way.

“They’re twins but they’re nothing alike,” Mucheng says, mirroring Su Muqiu’s unspoken thoughts. “And Ye Qiu didn’t play games.”

Su Muqiu swallows, glancing at the three youths in the photograph on Mucheng’s desk, then back to the face on her computer screen. Allowing for age, the resemblance is near-perfect.

“Ye Rui...It has to be a coincidence,” he says as much to himself as Mucheng. Reaching out, he restarts the match recording from the beginning and turns on the sound.

Mucheng expertly skips to the team introductions, and there he is - Ye Rui, calm and so confident it borders on arrogant, wearing Ye Xiu’s face and stepping on the stage Ye Xiu was always meant to reign on.

Su Muqiu’s heart clenches, half-angry and half-elated. He’s always believed that Ye Xiu would have loved Glory.

Again, Mucheng jumps the recording forward precisely to the group arena start. How many times had she watched this match while he was out?

Called first in the group arena, Ye Rui lifts his head and rises, poised confidence masking coiled anticipation, stepping lightly across the stage.

Su Muqiu can't help but watch through the lens of memory, imagining Ye Xiu returning to his rightful place with the same trace of happiness in his eyes. Even if Su Muqiu didn't know Ye Rui was about to win, he'd feel secure trusting his team's performance to this player.

A Battle Mage with dark red and gold armor loads: Herald of Autumn. Would Ye Xiu have chosen a Battle Mage too? It would have suited him, Su Muqiu decides. A difficult class to master, capable of explosive power.

With his opening move, Seaside's first player dismisses his opponent completely. How could someone with Ye Rui's talent overlook such a mistake? The golden glow of Battle Spirit sends Seaside's player into defeat without landing a single attack on Herald of Autumn.

The pro circle had openly doubted Royal Style's claims of a new dual core. Age couldn't be overcome. At twenty-four, how long could their rookie last? A year, perhaps two? Added to his inexperience, no talent could improve fast enough to mature before needing to retire.

Su Muqiu would've believed that too, if he hadn't faced Ye Rui in the game. Though it was true his age limited his career, Ye Rui was a polished diamond, needing nothing except a place to shine.

Seaside's second player is more cautious, but he clearly believes that first victory was a fluke. Ye Rui dispatches him just as speedily, though his Battle Mage takes some damage.

Ye Rui clearly shows his background here. Like Han Wenqing and Su Muqiu himself, Ye Rui belongs to the old wild-taught, in-game style: efficient, pragmatic, using exactly as much effort as necessary and not a drop more.

Su Muqiu frowns. That's not quite correct - there's something else here, something odd in Ye Rui's style he can't place. The older crude style is the base, but after that...

Now Seaside's captain has come out to anchor the group arena. Boundless Sea is a far stronger character than Herald of Autumn; after watching this battle Su Muqiu would say Herald of Autumn's silver equipment is top-tier, but there isn't enough of it. Fighting toe-to-toe with an All-Star even while carrying a disadvantage, Ye Rui doesn't look the slightest bit like a rookie, making up for his handicap with skill, mechanics, and pinpoint decision making.

Boundless Sea never expected such expertise; after a bloody battle he falls just like his teammates. Is this really a rookie performance? Su Muqiu wonders more than once. He regrets again never getting a chance to fight Ye Rui in game. What would it be like if they fought properly?

Ye Rui exits to thunderous applause. Royal Style is a team with old, deep roots and their fans aren't young people flocking toward success, so masterful performances like this are cherished.

Later, by himself, Su Muqiu will pause the recording right here: Ye Rui, lifting a hand to acknowledge his victory, eyes flashing amber under the spotlights and his unguarded joy exposed for this split-second before being diligently reigned in.

Decisively, Su Muqiu reaches out and exits the video. "That's enough. Mucheng, Ye Xiu is gone. The doctors wouldn't make a mistake about that."

"I know," she says. "But this resemblance...isn't it too much? It's not just his looks or his skill. You haven't seen the press conference. The way he acts..." She laughs. "He draws aggro like a wild BOSS."

Su Muqiu shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. Ye Rui is just an opponent. We'll treat him like everyone else."

It's nothing more than a wish. Of course Su Muqiu can't treat Ye Rui like everyone else.

He watches the matches, but that could be excused as a captain's duty. It's the interviews that Su Muqiu can't justify - not that Ye Rui does many of those. He rarely appears in public at all, which could be dismissed as shyness if Su Muqiu didn't know Ye Xiu had never been shy in his life, and if Ye Rui didn't resemble Ye Xiu so closely.

His QQ beeps. Su Muqiu opens the message and finds he's been added to a new group: 'Four Master Tacticians.' Another message quickly follows.

Vaccaria: God Su, would you mind giving us your impressions of some footage?

Dancing Rain: sure what for

Immovable Rock: We need a representative of the older style's opinion.

Dancing Rain: is this is about Ye Rui

Swoksaar: Senior is correct. His style is very odd, isn't it?

Dancing Rain: yeah I noticed but I cant figure out what about it bothers me

Life Extinguisher: Look at this please [link]

Su Muqiu watches the recording. It's a thirty second clip from Royal Style's team battle last night, specifically of Ye Rui facing off against Troubling Rain. It's only when Ye Rui is facing someone of similar strength that Su Muqiu can finally see the unusual pattern.

Dancing Rain: I see what you mean. the attack paths...

Su Muqiu shuffles through his own collection of reference clips, rewatching several before typing his conclusion.

Dancing Rain: right there at 0:17. any normal player would have increased their apm to counter Troubling Rain but Ye Rui doesn't

Immovable Rock: Precisely. Higher speed would be the easiest solution here. Instead Ye Rui uses a combination of meticulous positioning and efficient attack pathing to counterattack.

Swoksaar: His style also involves prediction and foreknowledge of his opponent's habits - rather like my own.

Life Extinguisher: But unlike Wenzhou, Ye Rui's actions are a habit, not a necessity. We know he's capable of sustaining higher APM because he's been clocked in the 300s before. He could counter more directly if he wanted.

Vaccaria: We've rewatched all his previous matches. Ye Rui consistently compensates without relying on hand speed. He'll use higher hand speeds in individual matches, but it's almost as though Ye Rui is reminding himself he can. When his focus is split in the team match, he'll return to his habit of compensating through efficiency and his APM will stay low.

Swoksaar: In short, Ye Rui plays like he possesses half his actual hand speed.

Su Muqiu digests this for a moment, his hands hovering over his keyboard as he frowns.

Dancing Rain: that's pretty unnatural. you'd expect to see older players develop this style but never someone in Ye Rui's condition

As players aged and their reflexes and hand speed slowed, they would learn methods to compensate, like switching tactics or changing habits. One of the most common was training your play to become more efficient. If you couldn't move as fast, then use the shortest attack path instead, or predict your opponent's movements and react before they even started moving. For older players with more experience, this was a natural, necessary evolution to remain competitive. Younger players would also train this skill, but the effect wasn't as evident since their hand speed allowed other options.

Life Extinguisher: Yes. But even the oldest, most well-adapted players don't approach Ye Rui's level of effective compensation.

Immovable Rock: His efficiency is quite impressive. I wonder if further refinement is even possible for him.

Swoksaar: You know, Ye Rui already plays like someone ten years older. I'd speculate that as his hand speed naturally goes down from age, Ye Rui will be able to remain in the league longer than anyone else of his generation. Certainly into his late twenties, perhaps into his early thirties.

Vaccaria: But you're right, senior. It is strange. This playstyle arises from necessity, not training, and Ye Rui's condition is extraordinary for his age. If I didn't know better I wouldn't believe he's twenty-four.

Swoksaar: What's even stranger is that we've never heard of him before. This style requires years of experience and practice, yet no outstanding Battle Mage player ever appeared until now. Where was Ye Rui playing all these years to become so experienced?

Life Extinguisher: Not to mention his abilities as a shotcaller. Those alone would have earned him a place in the league if his hand speed was even halfway decent.

Dancing Rain: you must have some ideas why Ye Rui plays like this

Vaccaria: We can only speculate, but perhaps it has something to do with his late debut.

Swoksaar: Our best guess is that Ye Rui experienced a prolonged period of low hand speed, forcing him to learn how to compensate before his condition abruptly rebounded, allowing him to play at his current ability while retaining his hyper-efficient habits.

Su Muqiu swallows, mind racing. He hesitates, then types a response.

Dancing Rain: maybe he got sick

Immovable Rock: Perhaps. Or it could have been an injury. We only have theories at this point. But it would explain why he joined the Alliance at his current age and his contradictory play style.

Su Muqiu logs off in a daze.

The Su siblings hadn't seen Ye Xiu die. Perhaps if they'd been given that closure, his memory wouldn't haunt them so badly.

That night, they'd taken Ye Xiu to a hospital and waited in agony until a doctor could see him. Su Muqiu remembered counting seconds and minutes as Ye Xiu got paler and paler, Mucheng struggling not to cry beside him.

Once Ye Xiu was finally whisked away, Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng had never seen him again. Because they weren't family, they weren't allowed to stay with Ye Xiu or know his condition. After a night in the waiting room, wracked with hope and fear, a pitying nurse had simply informed the Su siblings that Ye Xiu had died.

She could have lied to us, Su Muqiu realizes. A sudden, hot tide of anger twists his face into a snarl.

Ye Xiu's high class, wealthy family wouldn't have wanted their son associated with poor orphans. If Ye Xiu had lived, but remained very sick, the Ye family could have taken Ye Xiu back to their home in city B and the Su siblings wouldn't have any way of knowing.

If they wanted their son to cut ties, the Ye family wouldn't have told Ye Xiu about their lie either. Ye Xiu would have been ill and probably forbidden contact with the outside world after running away. Since the Su siblings never tried to reach out either, Ye Xiu could only believe that his friends didn't want to contact him.

Ye Xiu was from City B. Club Royal Style is also in city B. That seems like too much of a coincidence. But his name...

Su Muqiu taps his fingers against his desk. The Alliance requires an identity card to register. Ye Xiu could've used a fake ID, but that's illegal. Su Muqiu believes Ye Xiu wouldn't take that risk as long as another opinion existed. That creates a problem for Su Muqiu's current theory.

He spins absently in his chair. Find the bug, he reminds himself. In looks, skills, and personality, Ye Rui is a perfect match for Ye Xiu. Ye Xiu would have used a real ID card. So why is he Ye Rui and not Ye Xiu?

An idea strikes him. Su Muqiu opens his QQ again and scrolls through his enormous contacts list. He's friendly with everyone, which is incredibly useful in times like this.

Find the bug, Su Muqiu reminds himself, pulling up Royal Style's main roster. Tian Sen is too loyal; he'll protect his teammates to the utmost. Chang Jianping is too perceptive and quick. Jia Shiming is too new, and Su Muqiu doesn't know him well. Ren Junchi will just bluster and insist on lying.

Su Muqiu clicks decisively on Shen Wanhe's ID. The vice-captain is Su Muqiu's best bet. He has an honest personality and a businesslike attitude toward his position, lacking Tian Sen's absolute loyalty.

Dancing Rain: hey I have a quick question for you

Su Muqiu feels sweat collecting on the back of his neck and stretches his fingers anxiously. The reply comes quickly.

Flash Memory: Sure, what is it?

Dancing Rain: is Ye Rui's real name Ye Xiu

Shen Wanhe doesn't respond for a long time. Su Muqiu's mouth splits in a grin. He already has his answer. If Su Muqiu's guess was wrong, Shen Wanhe would have simply told him so. If Shen Wanhe has to think about his answer, he's hiding something.

Flash Memory: I really can't talk about things like that

Dancing Rain: no problem, I get it. thanks!

Su Muqiu shuts QQ triumphantly. He'd been right. Real ID, fake public name. Ye Rui was Ye Xiu.

He won't tell Mucheng yet. Technically, Su Muqiu's theory is still nothing more than guesses and hope.

But Excellent Era faces Royal Style soon, which means Ye Xiu will be coming here, to City H. If Ye Rui is really Ye Xiu, Su Muqiu will find his proof on their battlefield. He can't wait.

---



The taste of victory is just as sweet as he remembers, heady and potent, lingering brightly on the tongue.

Ye Xiu should be forgiven for playing a little excessively in that first match. It had been so terribly long, years and years, past death and rebirth, and Ye Xiu hadn't realized until the moment he stepped on stage how much he'd missed that feeling. The euphoria carries him all the way through the match, past a sleepless night playing Glory until he crashes the next day.

Slipping back into competition rhythm is effortless. He is twenty-four again and his fingers still move the way he wants them. Every match, every moment is a gift, and Ye Xiu intends to glut himself until time takes its toll once more.

When Shen Wanhe confesses that Su Muqiu knows his real name, Ye Xiu simply takes it in stride. Enough people know Ye Rui is just a public name that he can't draw any conclusions about how it happened. Su Muqiu was always well-liked, with plenty of friends, and he always kept an ear to the ground.

Besides, Su Muqiu won't make trouble. He's too savvy to bring unnecessary problems to his doorstep, and he loves Glory too much to use it for competitive advantage. Ye Xiu trusts him to be kind if he can.

But just in case, Ye Xiu will feel out Su Muqiu's intentions after their upcoming match. He's anticipated this match ever since joining Royal Style, an uncharacteristic excitement rising up whenever he thinks of it. Facing Su Muqiu and Dancing Rain, united at long last - how will Su Muqiu have improved, given the chance to live?

But he can't spend much time thinking about unnecessary things. Ye Xiu has a team to guide, after all. And the current battle is where his attention should lie.

As the team reviews their away game with Void, Ye Xiu's gaze falls on Jia Shiming more than once. Among Royal Style's players, the young Striker is his current highest concern.

Ye Xiu has no complaints about his talent. Ye Xiu can see why Old Han nurtured him. Brought to his full potential, he will certainly stand among the Glory's top Strikers.

However, Jia Shiming's mentality is the problem. Putting aside his obvious reluctance to invest emotionally in the team, Jia Shiming has unreasonably high expectations for himself. When he doesn't meet those expectations, his frustration and stress make his condition deteriorate further; when his condition deteriorates he can't meet his own expectations, and the cycle grows stronger. It's one of the reasons Jia Shiming had never risen quite as high as he should have in Ye Xiu's original world.

So far, Ye Xiu has only guided him indirectly. Jia Shiming wants to continue fighting alone, and Ye Xiu's interference could have the opposite effect. The young Striker is not enthusiastic about Ye Xiu's presence. Jia Shiming will need to sort out his own mind, but until then there are other things Ye Xiu can teach him.

"Captain," he asks after the lights go back on and the team meeting breaks up. "May I train with Senior Jia this afternoon?"

Ye Xiu may be Royal Style's unquestioned commander in-game, but he's scrupulously careful not to impinge on Tian Sen and Shen Wanhe's authority otherwise. He doesn't want any conflict arising in the team, or any fan rumors about puppet captains.

"Of course," Tian Sen replies, always a reliable ally when Jia Shiming is concerned.

While the rest of the team disperses, Ye Xiu claims his usual station, chewing on a toothpick and considering his options. "Let's try something different today," he suggests as Jia Shiming is about to swipe Wandering Sage's account card.

"Like what?" he replies cautiously.

"I'd like to increase our tactical flexibility," he lies, offering Jia Shiming another Striker account card. "Try playing this build today during our matches."

Though reluctant, Jia Shiming takes the card without complaint and logs in.

Next is the tricky part. Ye Xiu brings his Phantom Demon Ghostblade to the Arena. "We'll work on the points brought up in our last match," he says, and initiates the duel.

Jia Shiming's Striker charges forward, but Ye Xiu already has his Ghost Boundaries ready. And there it is, just like their last match - that fraction of hesitation when Jia Shiming reaches the boundary edge. He rushes the barrier in the end - his Striker has no long range attacks - but Ye Xiu is already certain of his conclusion.

They play out the teaching match, and then Ye Xiu leans back in his chair, taking his toothpick out of his mouth. "Senior, do you admire Han Wenqing?"

Jia Shiming bristles, defenses drawing up. "Of course, what Striker doesn't?"

"Because copying his style really doesn't suit you," Ye Xiu tells him bluntly. "If you hold yourself to that standard you're going to fail. You're very straightforward, but your instinct is to think before charging. You were trained to mimic Han Wenqing closely, and your styles *are* very similar, but the flexible Striker build I gave you feels more comfortable, doesn't it?"

Breathing hard, Jia Shiming's lips press together into a thin line.

"If you insist on forcing your style into his mold, you'll still be a good player, but not the best you can be," Ye Xiu finishes.

Ye Xiu gets up, slipping on his coat. "Keep the account card I gave you. I won't make you do anything. If you want to keep playing like you have, that's fine. What you decide is up to you. But you've spent long enough in Han Wenqing's shadow, don't you think?"

Just as he reaches the door, Jia Shiming's voice calls from behind, "I'll keep the card. For now."

Ye Xiu smirks. As he walks down the hall, the sounds of tapping start in the practice room behind him.

---

City H, home of team Excellent Era. After spending years living here, Ye Xiu can't really call himself fond of the city, but the sight of it spread out beneath him makes his heartbeat quicken.

"You seem like you're looking forward to this match," Tian Sen observes curiously as they disembark from the plane.

"Of course," Ye Xiu agrees from behind his face mask. "Three-time champion Excellent Era is a strong opponent. It'll be interesting to meet the Gunner God on stage." The current Royal Style is still testing their new tactics and teamwork, learning how to mesh together; strong opponents like this are exactly what they need to expose their flaws.

While all of that is true, Ye Xiu's personal desire to see the Su siblings pulls incessantly, an urge magnified by closeness. To confirm with his own eyes they're both alive and well...it would put him greatly at ease, but upsetting his emotional equilibrium before a match would be foolish.

However, there is one easy errand Ye Xiu can complete. While his team settles in before pre-match practice, Ye Xiu slips away from the hotel in disguise and hails a taxi.

"I've heard there's a skilled female Glory player here," he tells the front desk employee of Happy Internet Cafe. "I'd like to test her."

Beneath his mask, Ye Xiu grins as Chen Guo stomps over, breathing fire and ready to fight.

Ye Xiu's memories with Team Happy are pure warmth, with only the faintest tinge of melancholy. Bidding goodbye to this person and those memories will let him face the future lighter and without regrets.

Ye Xiu takes pity and leaves Chen Guo some face when he beats her, taking a full minute instead of forty seconds. "Are you really the female expert?" Ye Xiu teases when Chen Guo's Chasing Haze loses once more.

Slapping the table so hard the monitor shakes, Chen Guo orders Ye Xiu to wait right there, then storms up the stairs to her room.

Ye Xiu leans back. So Tang Rou already works here, just as she did in his old world. Determining that fact was today's real goal.

If Tang Rou has found her own purpose outside of Glory, Ye Xiu will leave happily. However, if she's followed the same path, drifting as she seeks a challenge, Ye Xiu will offer her one. Talent shouldn't be wasted, and Royal Style could use her skills.

You never got tired of winning championships, after all.

---

"Remember, this is not last year's Royal Style. This is a Thunderclap with better talent and a god-level account," Su Muqiu reminds his teammates in the preparation room just as they're about to go onstage.

He turns to the main roster. "In the team battle, you need to know where Tian Sen and Ye Rui are at all times. Do not make the mistake of underestimating their teamwork. Their cooperation is still evolving, but it's improving with every match. We need to break their connection."

Liu Hao crosses his arms and scoffs. "Captain Su, Ye Rui's just a rookie - nothing compared to you! He'll be hitting rookie block about now, anyway."

Su Muqiu can only laugh in disbelief. "What block? Has anyone been able to counter Ye Rui, except by overpowering him with a stronger character? If he had better equipment he'd be an even worse threat. I doubt we've seen all his tricks."

Liu Hao falls silent, but Su Muqiu doesn't miss the quickly hidden resentment. He meets Mucheng's eyes. She offers her sweetest smile and a little wave toward the door.

Good, she'll keep an eye on him. Su Muqiu can't get rid of Liu Hao until he finds an equally skilled replacement, which has proven tricky so far. If management wasn't firmly on the Su siblings' side, Liu Hao would be more of a problem, but Su Muqiu can handle petty jealousy.

"Let's go," he says, and doesn't overlook the quick flutter of his pulse. Tonight, one way or another, Su Muqiu will have his answer

Excellent Era is the first team to line up, with Su Muqiu at their head and Mucheng right behind him as vice-captain. The same hope he feels lights her eyes. Unseen by their teammates, Su Muqiu touches her hand. She looks back at him steadily, returning the subtle touch.

Footsteps echo down the tunnel. Su Muqiu keeps his gaze facing the bright stage lights until Tian Sen stops beside him. Only then does he allow himself to search for Ye Rui.

It's difficult to make out faces - everything is half-shadow and half-light, while the crowd's shouts echo in the background. Su Muqiu gives a polite nod toward Tian Sen, who towers over the rest of his team.

"Still going to crush me until I cry, Captain Su?" comes a voice from the darkness, laughter edging the words.

His gaze snaps toward the sound. Behind Shen Wanhe, Su Muqiu can just barely make out another outline. Or are his eyes playing tricks? Royal Style's black and gold jackets fade into the shadows, confusing illusion with reality.

Like a ghost, Su Muqiu thinks, the hairs on the back of his neck raising.

"Ye Rui?" he manages through a dry mouth.

"Mmmm," the voice confirms, and steps forward into the light.

It's Ye Xiu who looks back at Su Muqiu, Ye Xiu and his unmistakable, unshakable certainty. His friend's mask is almost perfect. But Su Muqiu knows where to look, and he doesn't miss that split-second of recognition - recognition and something else, something he can't place.

And Su Muqiu grins, because somehow, impossibly, Ye Rui is Ye Xiu.

Mucheng has seen it too. One of her small, real smiles graces her face, making her even more beautiful.

“Yeah, rookie. I’m definitely going to crush you,” Su Muqiu replies, voice softer than it should be. “I really want to see what you look like when you lose.”

Ye Xiu tsks. “Aren’t you being a little hasty, Captain Su? The match hasn’t even begun yet.”

Just as Su Muqiu is about to reply, the lights go down and the tempo of the crowd slows, signaling the players should prepare.

Mucheng leans forward. “Ye Rui. I’ve hoped we could meet for a long time.”

Ye Xiu’s armor is stronger this time, not a single chink showing. “Vice-Captain Su, I’m surprised to hear you say that. How many times have I stolen Excellent Era’s BOSSes now? I forget, it’s been so many.”

Su Muqiu grits his teeth. “Maybe we could talk more after the match.” Tian Sen is giving him a puzzled look. Su Muqiu is friendly, but not usually this eager.

“Maybe,” Ye Xiu replies noncommittally, before Royal Style is called up on stage.

Wearing a fox’s grin, Su Muqiu breathes deeply, rising into the steady focus that always produces his best performances. He’s had to wait almost ten years for this match, and he intends to win.

---

“How does it feel to be the creator of a new Battle Mage technique?” the reporter asks him breathlessly.

Ye Xiu can feel Royal Style’s PR department collectively holding its breath.

“All skill is the result of hard work and talent,” he parrots, just as he’s been taught.

Shen Wanhe visibly relaxes beside him.

Ye Xiu sighs. Such little faith.

“People are calling your move Dragon Raises its Head. Can you give us any details?”

“No.” Did they expect him to explain it right here?

“Ye Rui! Do you have a grudge against God Su?”

Ye Xiu nearly laughs, but he’s half-blinded by camera flashes. “No. This was just the first situation I encountered that I needed it. No one was able to dodge my Rising Dragon Soars the Sky before.”

Given so much juicy bait, the reporters clamor for more material, but the Alliance monitor calls their press conference to a close. Ye Xiu follows his teammates back to the preparation room, rolling a toothpick between his fingers.

3-7, Royal Style's loss. Not an unexpected result. After taking the group arena, they'd come within striking distance of a win, but lost the team battle in the end. If Herald of Autumn was a stronger character, there was a good chance that outcome would be reversed, but Ye Xiu won't look down on his opponents and say it would be that simple.

In six seasons, Su Muqiu's Excellent Era has never missed the second round playoffs. Unlike the Excellent Era Ye Xiu had once led, riddled with internal rot, this world's Excellent Era stands strong and whole.

Ye Xiu tries not to let the thought hurt him.

"Wait, don't leave yet!"

Watching the Su siblings dash in Royal Style's direction, the corners of Ye Xiu's mouth turn upward. Nothing can eclipse the sheer relief of seeing Su Muqiu alive, fighting side by side with Su Mucheng. Ye Xiu hopes they enjoyed their battle as much as he did.

"Captain Su!" Ye Xiu calls, affecting a scandalized tone. "I know you're disappointed, but wanting to PK in real life is too much."

Su Muqiu scoffs. "Who's disappointed? Didn't I win?"

"Didn't you promise you'd crush me until I cried?" Ye Xiu reminds him helpfully, then lifts his hands and gestures toward Su Muqiu with a flourish. "But only one of us got ambushed and had to be rescued by his teammates!"

As Su Muqiu reddens, Ye Xiu shakes his head. "Tsk ts. Rushing over like this now! Isn't this bullying, Captain Su? Gods bullying rookies, what kind of example are you setting? Wouldn't the Chairman shake his head at you? Aren't you ashamed?"

Su Muqiu looks like he wants to flip a table, while Su Mucheng's shoulders shake in silent laughter.

"Tian Sen, I'm borrowing him," Su Muqiu announces, stabbing his finger at Ye Xiu.

In the face of Su Muqiu's anger, Tian Sen frowns, glancing at Ye Xiu for confirmation. Tian Sen's devotion to his team extends into steadfast, relentless protection of its players. If needed, Ye Xiu is certain Tian Sen will cover for him, or use his physique to intimidate Su Muqiu into backing off. Fortunately, that's entirely unnecessary.

"Have you seen him?" Ye Xiu answers the unspoken question. "Do you think Captain Su does anything except game? If he tried to punch me he'd just hurt himself."

Su Muqiu looks crushed. "I'd never hurt you," he promises, eyes pleading for Ye Xiu believe him.

At that moment, Ye Xiu knows that he's miscalculated: Su Muqiu had known this world's Ye Xiu.

His mind clicks rapidly into gear. The evidence before had been ambiguous, but Su Muqiu would only carry this wound with good cause. For that condition to be met, this world's Ye Xiu most likely ran away, met the Su siblings, and then encountered whatever misfortune left that look on Su Muqiu's face. But there's no guarantee. They could have met differently; Ye Xiu can't assume anything. Whatever happened, the Ye family must have covered the truth up and lied to save face, inventing the excuse about a long illness. Had their son really died of illness, or had Ye Xiu been the one encountering an accident this time?

Ye Xiu freezes. What if this world's Ye Xiu was still alive? His only evidence is rumor, and the Su siblings don't seem surprised he's alive. If the Ye family lied once, why not again?

Ye Xiu's current masquerade could be more dangerous than he knew. If discovered, his backup plan was to claim there's been an 'administrative accident' and 'Ye Xiu' must have been accidentally declared dead, but if there's a second living Ye twin already occupying that identity, Ye Xiu is nothing more than an unregistered criminal committing identity fraud.

"Sorry, God Su. We don't mean to offend," Shen Wanhe apologizes. "Ye Rui is just very..."

Everyone looks at Ye Xiu, who's plastered his blandest, most listless expression on his face while his mind spins.

"Aggravating," Chang Jianping summarizes.

Ye Xiu keeps his voice light. "If Captain Su wants to talk to me, I can spare some time now."

"Please don't keep him too long," Tian Sen says, still looking concerned by the idea of leaving Ye Xiu alone with the pair. "We have an early flight tomorrow."

Su Mucheng beams, disarming Ye Xiu's teammates with the force of her smile. "Don't worry, we'll return him before you leave."

In Excellent Era's stadium, there's a small maintenance area with rooftop access. Once upon a time, Ye Xiu hid up here to smoke. Now the height leaves him dizzy, and the association makes him nauseous.

He leans against the railing to hide his lightheadedness, deploying studied neutrality to face Su Mucheng and Su Muqiu's hope.

"Ye Xiu," Su Mucheng murmurs over the sound of the city. "How did this happen?"

That's exactly what he wants to know. "Whatever you believe," Ye Xiu says, determined not to abuse their hopes, "I've never met either of you before." He treats everyone he meets in this world as a new person, not a copy of his memories. He won't change that now because he cares about them.

The Su siblings exchange a glance. "We know there must be conditions, for you to be allowed to play. Like the name," Su Muqiu says.

What can Ye Xiu say to convince them? Nothing. His story is something out of a poorly written web novel, and Ye Xiu has no proof except his own memories.

He tries anyway. "I'm telling you, I'm not who you think I am. Whoever you're looking for, you haven't found them."

"We understand," Su Mucheng says. "We can follow whatever rules you need to set. We're just really happy you're okay, Ye Xiu."

His stomach turns, guilt joining the vague nausea inspired by the smell of smoke. "You should let me go. Being associated with me may not turn out well for you." Without knowing what happened to this world's Ye Xiu, he doesn't even know how narrow a ledge he walks. Ye Xiu was fine risking himself to play Glory when he had no significant ties, but endangering Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng is unacceptable.

Both of them only look more determined. The Su siblings share many traits, and one of them is that once they allow someone in their circle, they're unshakably loyal.

Ye Xiu sighs. "If you're certain, we can talk on QQ. But I don't want you to misunderstand. This is not me confirming anything. I'm not the Ye Xiu you're hoping to see."

"That's fine!" Su Muqiu laughs, pleased to have worn Ye Xiu down. Su Mucheng wears a similar sly smile as she throws her arms around him.

Ye Xiu stiffens, then goes limp. People don't usually touch him. It's the first time anyone's been so close since his rebirth.

"I'm so glad you're alright," Su Muqiu says, joining the hug.

Despite his misgivings, Ye Xiu relaxes into their warmth. This world really is the best.

---

Tang Rou has taken to the training camp like a fish to water. Her training supervisor has nothing but praise for a student with Tang Rou's ferocity and will, and it doesn't hurt that Ye Xiu has taken a personal interest either. She and her Blademaster, Soft Mist, are in good hands.

On his way back from the training camp, Ye Xiu runs into Tian Sen and a few of his teammates. If he'd been paying more attention, he would have sensibly turned tail and booked it in the opposite direction as soon as he saw them. Tian Sen, who has muscles on top of his muscles, and Ren Junchi, the captain's usual exercise companion, are both in running gear. Somehow they've dragged along Chang Jianping, whose smile wouldn't be out of place on a man about to face execution.

Tian Sen brightens when he sees Ye Xiu. "Old Ye, how about joining us?"

"I'd rather die," Ye Xiu returns blandly.

Tian Sen sighs, already used to disappointment. "Exercise is good for you. It improves circulation and builds muscle."



“Captain, if you get any bigger you’re not going to fit in the player booth,” Ye Xiu tells him seriously.

Ren Junchi snorts. “You should just give up, Captain. He’s a lost cause. When was the last time you even saw the sun, you ghost?”

Ye Xiu waves his hand. “I’m very happy as a shut-in. I don’t even need to leave the club except for matches.”

“Did you at least eat lunch today?” Tian Sen asks hopefully,

“I’ll eat later. I have business with Guild Leader Meng,” Ye Xiu replies.

“There are nutrition bars in the practice room,” Tian Sen reminds Ye Xiu as he walks away.

Ye Xiu’s eaten them. They’re chock full of vitamins and taste similar to cardboard. Ye Xiu detours to the practice room on his way to the guild department anyway, unwrapping one from Tian Sen’s stash and biting down, overlooking the bland flavor. He’s worked himself back up to regular eating habits since his current, healthy body actually has an appetite, but he’s too well-practiced at muting his body’s signals, and occasionally Ye Xiu will become so involved in his current project he’ll forget. His teammates have learned to check in with him. Ye Xiu both appreciates the gesture and wishes it weren’t necessary. But habits are hard to break, and Ye Xiu was sick for far longer than he’s lived in this new body.

Royal Style’s success has been good for Tian Sen. He’s more relaxed when he feels he isn’t the only one working towards the team’s improvement, and his playing has become more fluid and experimental. Ye Xiu is pleased to have a partner who values his team so highly. They won’t be taking the Best Partners award away from the Su siblings any time soon, but their cooperation isn’t decades long either.

“Little Ye, what can I help you with?” Guild Leader Meng says when Ye Xiu enters his domain. These days, the guild leader can often be seen conferring with upper management, so it’s a mark of his regard that he’s taking the time to handle Ye Xiu’s request himself.

Ye Xiu grins around the toothpick in his mouth. “Were you able to acquire the information I asked for?”

Guild Leader Meng digs out a folder, satisfaction lightening his usual stern face. “Of course. I’ve even managed to find the training camp information you wanted.”

Flipping through the pages, Ye Xiu laughs. “Things have been going well for you, I see.”

The guild leader’s lips turn upward. “A sudden reversal of fortune has to be grasped properly. Keep winning, and I might even be able to push some real changes though this summer.”

While the guild leader goes back to his work, Ye Xiu sits down at an empty station and sorts through the papers more slowly.

Blue Brook’s Warlock, Windward Formation. Tyrannical Ambition’s Cleric, Little Cold Hands. The scrap picking Ninja Deception, no affiliation. Tiny Herb’s trainee Qiao Yifan,

Assassin.

Ye Xiu has never wanted to recreate Team Happy through Royal Style. Royal Style has its own character and strengths, and Ye Xiu would never twist them just to copy Happy. But there's no reason Ye Xiu can't seek out some of his old teammates. Happy won't exist, but its players can still have successful careers. Recruiting Happy's talent would certainly benefit Royal Style, and supporting a few extra students is no hardship.

Without Happy's unique circumstances, most of Happy's former roster won't have a hope of entering the pro scene. Wei Chen's age is too difficult a handicap for a team to accept. An Wenyi and Luo Ji have obvious weaknesses as well as lives outside the pro scene. Ye Xiu is searching for them anyway. Even if their paths never cross this time, he can check they're alright.

Su Mucheng and Fang Rui don't even need to be mentioned - like Ye Xiu, they already have teams.

For those with a decent chance of being accepted, Ye Xiu would like to offer his ex-teammates the opportunity to reenter the pro scene. Tang Rou was the easiest, since she was exactly where he expected and had no ties. His other potential recruits are more difficult.

Steamed Bun is baffling as always. Ye Xiu has no idea where that guy worked before coming to Happy, and expecting him to make the same decisions twice is too unlikely with that erratic personality. Unless he's lucky enough to stumble on Steamed Bun again, Ye Xiu won't be able to find him.

Qiao Yifan's situation is more delicate. As part of Tiny Herb's training camp, he isn't bound by contract and would need to be persuaded to willingly leave. Unfortunately, Ye Xiu lacks his former reputation, and between City B's two teams Tiny Herb is the better prospect for a young, talented player. Ye Xiu would also have to convince Royal Style that Qiao Yifan's talent was worth poaching, despite him being a complete unknown. No matter which side Ye Xiu approaches from, he currently doesn't have enough influence.

And then there's Mo Fan, who's accessible in-game, unaffiliated with a team, and resolutely unwilling to join one. Unfortunately for Happy's former Ninja, now that Royal Style's performance is steadier and Ye Xiu's fulfilled his limited advertising duties, Ye Xiu has time for a personal project.

"Senior Meng," he calls out, selecting a Ninja from a stack of the guild's open accounts. "There's someone I'd like the guild to keep an eye on."

"To kill?" the guild leader asks, crossing his arms.

"No," Ye Xiu laughs, remembering how many times they'd killed Deception just to wear him down. "Actually," he replies, tapping the Ninja account card with a forefinger, "I'm thinking of taking a student."

Herald of Autumn: What am I distracting you from?

Dancing Rain: just had a meeting with upper management

These meetings are becoming more and more frequent. Su Muqiu finds them pointless, because he already knows what Tao Xuan and the rest are going to tell him: Samsara is doing too well this season, you must outdo them.

‘Great Gunner’ Zhou Zekai is better-looking, younger, and has a more eye-catching playstyle than Su Muqiu. Fans are starting to say that the Gunner God title should belong to him, even if Zhou Zekai has only mastered a single gunner subclass. Samsara is doing well this year, and if they really wins a championship, that would be Tao Xuan’s disaster scenario.

Su Muqiu doesn’t care about titles or popularity. Zhou Zekai is a good junior, and Su Muqiu likes him. Of course Su Muqiu wants to bring Excellent Era another championship or three, but Tao Xuan and the rest seem to have forgotten that it isn’t that easy.

Herald of Autumn: Haha, I’m running a dungeon right now.

Dancing Rain: you are the worst. why am I talking to you right now

But Su Muqiu’s mood is already lighter, just from this. He loves knowing Ye Xiu is just a message away and spams his friend constantly. Ye Xiu is much better about answering than Su Muqiu remembers - but their past is a topic Ye Xiu refuses to talk about, always insisting that he’s not that Ye Xiu. Su Muqiu doesn’t push. If Ye Xiu needs to set boundaries, Su Muqiu will honor them. His friend has returned, and that’s enough.

Herald of Autumn: Aren’t you the one who messaged me?

Dancing Rain: fine. how are you doing?

Herald of Autumn: I’m hiding from the club manager in a practice room. He wants me to apply for the rookie challenge at All-Stars.

Dancing Rain: why not youd kick ass

Herald of Autumn: Too much attention. I’d rather relax.

Dancing Rain: do you know how close you are to being voted into all stars this year. if your team was more popular youd already be in. youre super famous already

Herald of Autumn: It’s not that simple. Both sides need to save face in front of the fans. I’d have to deliberately lose against almost everyone, and that’s pretty insulting to my opponent. Plus everyone knows my skill level so I can’t be too obvious.

Su Muqiu’s fingers are already moving before he’s even finished reading Ye Xiu’s response.

Dancing Rain: then challenge me

Dancing Rain: I don't care if you sandbag. if I'm in on it, we're both so good almost no one could tell the difference between a real fight and a fake one

Herald of Autumn: No need to go to the trouble. I can just say no.

Dancing Rain: if you avoid applying this year the pressure will be even bigger next year, and there is no way you won't get voted in the top 24 next time. save yourself trouble with your club and do it now while you can more easily excuse a loss

Dancing Rain: besides, aren't both of us getting old? how many more chances are we going to get to play like this?

Herald of Autumn: Well. If you're so determined, how can I say no?

Su Muqiu grins, about to reply when another message pops up.

Herald of Autumn: Captain Su must be really desperate to beat me since he keeps failing. No problem, I can allow it this once!

Dancing Rain: [rage emoji]

Even if it's not a real duel, Su Muqiu counts down the days to All-Stars with more real excitement than he'd felt when the Alliance first began holding the event. Mucheng supports their plan whole-heartedly and arranges a meetup between the three of them on the first day.

Seeing Ye Xiu at All-Stars, his form hilariously dwarfed by Tian Sen's height and bulk, plants a kernel of jealousy in Su Muqiu. *He* was meant to be Ye Xiu's partner. Herald of Autumn should have conquered under Excellent Era's flag.

Su Muqiu suspects that remaining in City B is another one of the Ye family's conditions, otherwise Ye Xiu would have sought him out. Ye Qiu better not cross his path again, because Su Muqiu won't be kind.

Blue Rain's organizers were wise enough to leave Ye Xiu's challenge for last, whetting the audience's appetite with increasingly tasty matchups. When Ye Xiu's stage name is called, the noise exceeds even Yu Feng's reception.

Ye Xiu - or rather, Ye Rui - has a reputation as a mysterious individual. Where had he come from? Why hadn't he appeared before now? How could he display peak God-level skill as a rookie? To all of those questions, Ye Xiu would give no reply - or at least, not one that made any sense. So the fans held an intense curiosity and fascination toward this new-old god, a flower destined to fade just as it blooms.

On stage, Ye Xiu is unmoved by the attention. His "I challenge Senior Su" is as casual as ordering a meal. When the host asks why, Ye Xiu only answers, "I want to meet the Gunner God properly," a smirk pulling at his lips. "I've played against Senior Su's Launcher, but I'd like to see what his Sharpshooter is like."

The crowd screams. What a good choice! Su Muqiu's full class proficiency is unique, not to mention they always love seeing Glory's icon, the three-time champion and public face of the

league.

As he climbs the stage, Su Muqiu can't wipe the grin off his face. If Ye Xiu can't stand at his side, fighting him isn't bad either.

The host is visibly disappointed that there isn't more tension between them. Ye Xiu is so calm he's almost indifferent, while Su Muqiu is his usual affable, pleasant self. Sharpshooter and Battle Mage load into Ye Xiu's map choice: a plain, flat arena.

### 3. 2. 1. Fight!

Just as they agreed, both characters charge straight forward. Su Muqiu opens fire as soon as he's in range. Ye Xiu answers with the sharpest Z-shake he's ever seen, and then his Battle Mage is in range too, answering with a Dragon Breaks the Ranks. *Found you*, Su Muqiu thinks, and throws himself into the battle.

The audience is treated to a spectacular duel. If anyone still doubted Ye Rui's abilities were God level, after this fight they'd never dare. The bright lights and effects of skill activations flash in rapid succession as the two characters weave around each other, giving and taking damage.

But the atmosphere of this fight isn't tense or angry. The two trash talk each other like old comrades, and their movements exude a sense of freedom and exuberance. There's no sense of stakes between them, only a mutual thirst for victory - two gods taking joy in exercising the peak of their skill.

Everyone can only regretfully watch those two health bars fall to the last drop. Had time really gone by so fast? Couldn't they watch a little longer?

But they aren't the only ones thinking those things.

Su Muqiu raises his revolvers, aiming for one final attack, and Ye Xiu's Battle Mage mirrors him, spear gathering blue magic waves. Up until now, their fight has been mostly genuine. This time Ye Xiu's attack angle is just slightly off, deliberately leaving a near-invisible opening; Su Muqiu is supposed to Slide Kick here before delivering the finishing blow.

Smiling, Su Muqiu picks the ending he really wants and pulls the trigger instead.

---

"Who told you to change the plan without thinking things through? Stick to the equipment editor, you fanatic," Ye Xiu tells Su Muqiu once the three of them have found a private room in a restaurant.

Both the Su siblings wear bright, sunny smiles; Ye Xiu knows very well that neither of them can be trusted when they smile like that.

Beatific grin not changing a hair, Su Muqiu shakes his head. "This way is better. A draw means neither of us loses."

Ye Xiu sighs. Both of them know Su Muqiu is risking the most here. As the senior, anything except an effortless win is a mark against him. Ye Xiu and Su Muqiu may not care about reputation, but there are others - like Tao Xuan - who will. Ye Xiu losing would have made everything simple. Really, what was wrong with their original plan?

Well, things in the past can't be changed. Ye Xiu twists his toothpick between his fingers as he chews on it. "If you're going to do things like this, then you need to know more about me."

Su Mucheng's eyes widen; Su Muqiu straightens.

Ye Xiu's eyes flick upward, looking at each of them in turn. "Because I'm not your Ye Xiu."

---

It's raining the day Ye Qiu passes a storefront and finds his brother looking back at him, the same way it rained the day his father called to say Ye Xiu was dead.

Perhaps it's the chill, or the sound of icy rain striking his umbrella, but Ye Qiu freezes, staring at the poster even as the person behind him curses and pushes past.

Wearing a black and gold uniform, Not-Ye Xiu offers a mocking smile, his body language so perfectly assured it sets your teeth on edge just looking at him. There's some kind of fantasy character standing in the background, but Ye Qiu can only focus on the way Not-Ye Xiu's beautiful hands are half-unfurled in a beckoning gesture toward his audience.

The likeness is perfect. Ye Qiu would swear he's looking at Ye Xiu right now, if he hadn't seen his brother's cold, empty body with his own eyes, or touched those clever hands lying limp and slack in death.

Without thinking, Ye Qiu realizes his cellphone is in his hands, taking a picture of the poster. Another pedestrian knocks into his side, pushing him into the crowd and out of sight; Ye Qiu hurries away, his cold breath curling around his face.

That should have been where things ended.

But Ye Qiu finds himself pulling out that picture again, marveling once more at the model's identical features. If he didn't know better, Ye Qiu would swear he's a triplet, rather than a twin. Even sharing the same face, Ye Qiu doesn't see himself reflected for a single instant in that glossy ad. Ye Qiu never *could* imitate his brother, even though they looked identical.

His lips pressing together, Ye Qiu brushes off the old bitterness like a withered flower petal from his shoulder. His brother has been gone for almost a decade. Time and death simplify many things.

In childhood, Ye Qiu had loved Ye Xiu more than he loved his own parents. Ye Xiu was his best, first, strongest ally in satisfying their distant parents and their towering expectations. But Ye Qiu's childish, brotherly love for Ye Xiu was always mingled with resentment.

Ye Xiu was smarter, better, more clever at everything, breezing through their lessons with an ease their parents praised. Ye Qiu was the inferior mirror, the spare son nobody needed, always falling short in comparison. How many times had their parents urged Ye Qiu ‘be more like your brother?’

And then Ye Xiu was gone forever, and there was no one left to be compared to.

Just like that, their lifelong connection snapped, and Ye Qiu become one-half of a pair that wasn’t a pair any longer.

Ye Qiu is older now and understands many things. He knows his brother’s achievements weren’t as easy as he made them seem, and it wasn’t Ye Xiu’s fault their parents set him up as Ye Qiu’s unreachable ideal. Over time, envy and jealousy have faded, leaving only the sour taste of grief.

When Ye Qiu looks at his brother’s perfect imitation now, he feels comforted. Ye Xiu is dead, but out there is someone who looks just like him, alive and leaving his mark on the world. If he had lived, Ye Qiu knows Ye Xiu would have done something worth commemorating too.

Ye Qiu sets the photo of Not-Ye Xiu as his phone background. It’s like a talisman; every time he unlocks his phone, Ye Qiu gains a little mouthful of comfort. Ye Qiu would have been content with this little bit of happiness and never asked more.

But one day in early February, a young business partner looks over Ye Qiu’s shoulder at lunch and remarks with the surprised pleasure of discovering a rare shared interest, “You’re a Royal Style fan?” Then he blinks, taking a second look. “Wow, you really look like God Ye!”

Not-Ye Xiu’s name is Ye Rui, and he plays games for a living.

Ye Qiu is furious. Looking like his brother is one thing, but how dare this imposter have the same last name? And playing games like his brother did too! Ye Qiu hadn’t even known Ye Xiu loved them until his brother was dead.

Any measure of comfort is gone - Ye Qiu’s treasured picture of Ye Rui only mocks him. Why is this fake alive when his brother is dead? Ye Xiu would have outplayed this fraud a thousand times over!

Ye Qiu is obsessed. With every photograph, every article, every interview, Ye Qiu hates Ye Rui a little more. This fraud’s stolen Ye Xiu’s voice, his mannerisms, his habits - from his height to the way he sits, Ye Qiu can’t find one single way Ye Rui is unlike Ye Xiu.

Ye Qiu cannot forgive Ye Rui’s crime. It’s too eerie and too unfair. The imposter’s mere existence is infuriating. Ye Qiu sets a search filter on his phone news app for that name, furiously hate-reading every scrap of information. He buys a subscription to ESports Weekly. He even follows Ye Rui’s club run Weibo, despite knowing Ye Rui hasn’t written a single post.

But it isn’t enough. Ye Qiu is starving for information, and Ye Rui is a walking media blackout. He hunts down Ye Rui’s teammates on the web, finding their personal accounts,

and is rewarded every so often with a new scrap of knowledge.

Still not enough. Ye Qiu starts watching Ye Rui's matches - just the parts where the fraud plays. But Ye Qiu never played games, and he doesn't have the faintest clue what's going on. So he has to look up guides online, pausing and reading explanations as the match progresses, watching the online stream again and again.

Eventually, he ends up watching the whole match, start to finish. At first it's just to teach himself about the game, but Ye Qiu is coming to know Ye Rui's teammates well, and Glory isn't completely boring. There's exciting parts and actually some tactics to it - the hateful Ye Rui is especially good at those - not as good as Ye Xiu would have been, of course. Never.

The logical next step is buying himself a season ticket to Ye Rui's home games. This way, Ye Qiu can keep an eye on that fake in person. Luckily, Royal Style - that's the name of the fake's team - is based in City B. Daring to appear in Ye Xiu's home city is yet another strike against Ye Rui.

Deciding what to wear is unexpectedly stressful. Ye Qiu changes his clothes three times before he's satisfied, settling on a polo shirt and designer jeans. He refuses to dress up just to watch adults play video games, but if he's recognized as the Ye heir Ye Qiu also doesn't want to dress too casually. Ye Qiu has put too much effort into building his image as a well-mannered, proper young man to throw it aside now.

Ye Qiu has the driver drop him off a few blocks from the stadium and walks the rest of the way - which is stupid, because what does he have to hide? His parents may be overprotective, but they didn't care where Ye Qiu was going once they knew he was just attending a sports match. Ye Qiu draws up the hood of his jacket when he catches someone looking strangely at him. Ye Rui has a lot to answer for, that bastard.

His seat is excellent. Ye Qiu shelled out enough money to make certain of that. Who even spent so much to watch people play video games? Idiots, that's who. Ye Qiu stewes in silence until the lights go down, not that you could tell from his pleasant, polite expression, honed to perfection from many, many business meetings.

He's brought his earbuds so he can listen to the broadcast commentary, but Ye Qiu pulls them out now, wanting to experience the atmosphere. He taps his fingers against the armrest through the entire introduction, wishing they'd stop talking and introduce the teams already - though Ye Qiu only knows the imposter's team, so he has no idea who this visiting team is, nor does he care.

There's the captain of Ye Rui's team, Tian Sen. And the vice-captain, Shen Wanhe.

Ye Qiu's fists clench, hidden in the darkness. Because next, is always...

Ye Rui. Ambling across the stage like a lazy tiger, he's a steady well of certainty and support, untroubled by the crowd.

Ye Qiu's throat closes up. Ye Xiu. That's Ye Xiu standing there, right now.



That irrational thought stays with Ye Qiu through the rest of the match. Ye Qiu spends every second peering at the player seating, trying to catch a glimpse of not-Ye Xiu. Recordings don't quite convey the atmosphere of a living person, and the resemblance is so strong it hurts. This feeling of safety, of having an immovable force at your back - only Ye Xiu had ever given Ye Qiu this feeling.

When not-Ye Xiu walks off the stage, Ye Qiu finds himself reaching out after him.

Ye Qiu remains in his seat until the stadium workers come to clean. Ye Rui and Ye Xiu. Similarity in either looks or personality could be excused, but not both. Ye Rui is a perfect, identical copy of his dead brother. Something suspicious is going on here.

Ye Qiu has been ignoring the coincidences for too long. Even if he sounds crazy, even if no one else believes him, Ye Qiu *knows* Ye Rui has something to do with his brother. Ye Qiu doesn't know what's going on, but he *will* find out.

---

"Senior, was there something you needed?" Ye Xiu sighs, leaning over his chair arm and sending Jia Shiming a meaningful look.

Jia Shiming doesn't react outwardly, but recoils upon realizing that his tutor's noticed his inattention.

Ye Xiu cocks his head sideways, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement as if he's reading Jia Shiming's thoughts.

Jia Shiming believes, with almost complete certainty, that Ye Xiu can read his intentions down to the tiniest detail. No one in Royal Style is surprised anymore when Ye Xiu's predictions turn out to be both prescient and completely true. Eight months into their cooperation, Jia Shiming is even starting to find this ability comforting, rather than terrifying and invasive.

This reaction should probably concern him. But Jia Shiming has practice to complete - his play lately feels like he's moving past a bottleneck - and figuring out Ye Xiu requires maximum effort for zero gain.

He still observes Ye Xiu as a matter of habit. It feels exactly like watching a cat playing with a bird, knowing that *you* might be chosen as the cat's next plaything, but as long as you were the cat's ally he would never eat you.

"It's nothing," Jia Shiming replies, turning his head back to his monitor.

The two of them are alone in a private practice room where Ye Xiu can tutor Jia Shiming in what's become an unofficial scheduled practice session. Translated, that means Ye Xiu completes his own research while occasionally offering tips or playing a few rounds.

Jia Shiming initiates another practice program, but his gaze creeps slowly back to Ye Xiu, idly playing a disposable alt.

“Senior, if you ask your question you might stop dying as often.”

Right then, Jia Shiming’s Striker jumps up and dies, ending the training program. Gritting his teeth - the fact Ye Xiu was always right didn’t make it less annoying - Jia Shiming surrenders, as all Ye Xiu’s opponents eventually do, and turns toward Ye Xiu.

Ye Xiu has his hand propping up his chin, body draped arrogantly loose over his chair.

The sight makes Jia Shiming irritated enough to actually open his mouth and say, “Why doesn’t God Su message you anymore?”

Ye Xiu’s eyes shutter, carefully tucking away his emotions. Lightly, he replies, “A case of mistaken identity. He thought we’d known one another before, but it was just a resemblance.”

Bizarrely, Jia Shiming is flooded with guilt. Rather than apologize, he latches onto his other emotion - anger. “That’s not a good reason for ignoring you.”

“He isn’t ignoring me. We still exchange messages in private,” Ye Xiu explains evenly.

“Besides, his reaction is very reasonable. Relationships shouldn’t be built on illusion, and he’s giving us a chance to become real friends. The closeness between people isn’t based on appearance, but shared experience. As God Su and I experience things together, we’ll naturally grow closer. That’s much healthier, don’t you think?”

*You look lost in a room full of people when you think no one’s watching,* Jia Shiming thinks.

Sensing Jia Shiming isn’t convinced, Ye Xiu goes on the attack, waving his hands. “Do you think gossip is going to satisfy the captain when he asks about your progress? Aren’t we aiming to enter the playoffs? It’s March, we only have seven matches left! Go on, go on!”

Jia Shiming bends his head and goes back to his practice. It isn’t his place to interfere between two gods.

---

The team battle against Misty Rain had been unusually intense. Adding the increasingly victorious Royal Style as a playoff contender has heightened the end-of-season stakes; more competitors means more disappointed teams. While the top-tier teams have all locked in their places, the margin for losing one of the precious remaining playoff spots is razor-thin, and there’s only six matches remaining.

If Ye Xiu feels flushed after their victory, warmth rising high in his cheeks and neck, he thinks nothing of it. It’s just the residual heat left from fueling quick thoughts and quicker fingers in their hour long, grueling fight.

Ye Xiu dumps responsibility for the press conference on Chang Jianping and returns to his hotel room as soon as they’re dropped off, heat still curling down the back of his neck. He’s tired, but he spends the night tossing and turning in his hotel bed, the pit of his stomach unsettled.

Dropping off to sleep around two AM, Ye Xiu jolts awake at four, the sickly green numbers blinking back at him. Cold sweat sticks his shirt to his back; he swallows painfully past the swollen tissues of his throat, a cough tumbling out of his mouth. His nose is clogged with fluid; he opens his mouth, lifting his head as if to ease the rattling wheeze of his breath. All he can do is take small sips of air through the wet vice choking his airway.

*Hecan't breathe hecan't breathe can't breathe hecan't breathe hecan't breathe*

Ye Xiu lunges for the trashbin and vomits until his stomach muscles cramp and he's gagging on the dregs of bile and stomach acid, light-headed from lack of air. Once the black spots clear from his vision, he tries cleaning his mouth with a bottle of water, then promptly throws the liquid up so violently his arms give out under him and he collapses beside the bin.

The layer of cold sweat is beginning to dry, making him shiver; his head aches and he coughs again; the phlegm lingers, clinging to the edges of his throat until he can only feel the constant sensation of being choked.

The iron-rich taste of blood in his mouth is just his imagination, Ye Xiu tells himself.

He turns on the light to check for red, just to be sure.

---

"Has anyone seen Ye Xiu this morning?" Tian Sen asks, frowning when his teammates return a unanimous no.

"He's going to miss breakfast," Shen Wanhe says. "We're flying out at noon."

Ren Junchi scoffs. "Old Ye doesn't need breakfast, he has a laptop with a card reader and internet."

The team laughs. Even among a bunch of Glory addicts, Ye Xiu's love of Glory stood out.

Chang Jianping pushes away his coffee. "I'm finished. I'll go knock on his door."

"I'll go with you," Tian Sen says.

Chang Jianping bangs on Ye Xiu's door with great enthusiasm, but no one answers. Tian Sen's brow wrinkles and he frowns, pulling out his phone and sending a message to the team manager.

The door opens just as Tian Sen's phone vibrates with a response. He looks up and winces. Blinking at them with bleary eyes, Ye Xiu is dressed, but his hair is a mess and his clothes look like they've been slept in. Ye Xiu is always pale, but his face is nearly colorless and his eyes are bloodshot.

"You act like you've never seen a sick person before," Ye Xiu croaks, turning his head to cough. The sound of his voice makes Tian Sen wince: all wet, raw tones.

"Are you okay?" Chang Jianping asks, repenting his previous glee.

Even ill, Ye Xiu somehow finds the strength to give him an obnoxious look. “I’m sick.”

“Do you need anything?” Tian Sen cuts in.

“No. I messaged the team manager at four-thirty and he woke up the staff until they found someone who brought medicine.” Ye Xiu chokes on the last word. Covering his mouth, he coughs himself breathless, the painful sound coming from deep in his chest; then he pales even further and dashes back into his hotel room. The sound of someone repeatedly throwing up comes from inside.

Finally, Ye Xiu comes back to the door, looking even more wretched.

“Are you going to be able to play in next week’s match against Excellent Era?” Tian Sen asks. He’s worried about Ye Xiu, but he is Royal Style’s captain foremost, and he needs to know immediately if their plans need reworking. Excellent Era is a powerful opponent, and they would only have six days to form a new strategy without Ye Xiu.

Ye Xiu shrugs. “I’ll make it. It’s just a cold.” Another one of those painful coughing fits hits, then Ye Xiu retches and makes a shooing motion before slamming the door.

Tian Sen and Chang Jianping look at each other, then walk back to their rooms to finish packing while texting their teammates the news.

When he drags himself down to the hotel lobby later, looking like he’s about to keel over, Ye Xiu endures plenty of light ribbing while they wait for the bus. It was almost April, who got a cold at this time of year? - but Tian Sen holds too much respect for his partner to let it go beyond a few jokes, no matter how irritating Ye Xiu is normally.

“How do you feel?” Shen Wanhe asks, peering with worry at Ye Xiu’s pasty complexion.

“Like I’m dying,” Ye Xiu returns in his raspy voice, entirely straight-faced as he dumps his bag on the ground.

The team laughs, reassured that their ace is feeling good enough to joke. Royal Style is right on the edge of making it into the playoffs, and losing their shot caller for an entire match might be the difference between success and having their season end in six more games.

Ren Junchi crosses his arms and snorts. “Serves you right for being shameless. It’s karma, Old Ye!”

Ye Xiu abruptly laughs, the skin around his eyes tightening; the noise turning into a hacking cough. “I forgot - it’s Qingming Festival tomorrow,” he says while he’s doubled over catching his breath. “Must be bad luck.”

The main roster exchange glances, always curious when it came to the rare scraps Ye Xiu gave about his background. Was there someone Ye Xiu was going to visit?

Then Ye Xiu dashes for the nearest trashbin and everyone forgets in the ensuing hail of laughter.

The situation becomes much less funny when they board the plane and Ye Xiu, exiled to the back of the plane, spends the entire flight locked in the tiny lavatory. He's glassy-eyed and unresponsive on the way back to the club, too exhausted to keep throwing up on an empty stomach. He only rouses himself long enough to laughingly brush off the staff's suggestion he go to a hospital - Royal Style employs a team doctor, of course, but he's flown home for the Qingming Festival tomorrow and won't return until Tuesday. Once Ye Xiu's finished riling the staff up enough they forget their goodwill, he disappears into his room.

Lunch goes by. Then dinner.

No one sees Ye Xiu.

If Tian Sen and the others couldn't hear him coughing through the walls, they'd probably have broken down his door by now. Relying on the power of numbers, the main roster convenes an impromptu meeting in Tian Sen's room, then descends en masse to crowd around his door to stage an intervention at Tian Sen's insistence.

"Did you all miss me that much?" Ye Xiu says when he cracks open his door to stick his head out. His voice barely rises above a whisper; the wheeze of his breath is audible; the bags under his eyes have grown darker and more sunken.

"This is just for proof of life," Chang Jianping demurs, waving his hand.

"You didn't come out at all today, you fucker!" Ren Junchi accuses, pointing his finger at their Battle Mage.

Abruptly, Ye Xiu sways and grabs the wall for support.

"I'm a little—lightheaded," he murmurs as Jia Shiming reaches out to steady him by the shoulder.

Tian Sen isn't the only one frowning. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I have energy bars," he says.

"Did you eat any of them?" Tian Sen asks, too familiar with Ye Xiu to fall for that trick.

"I tried. I keep throwing up."

Shen Wanhe, who has a doctor as a father, speaks up and asks, "Do you have enough water?"

Ye Xiu shakes his head. "I have enough. I just can't keep anything down."

"When was the last time you could?"

Ye Xiu pauses to think. "Around sixteen hours."

The main roster see their own alarm reflected in one another's faces - even Jia Shiming seems concerned.

“Old Ye...you probably need to go to a hospital. You’re dehydrated.”

“I’m not going to a hospital,” Ye Xiu says implacably, shaking off Jia Shiming’s hand and straightening. “I’ll take whatever medicine you want, and I’ll rest. But I won’t see a doctor or go to a hospital.”

“Old Ye, you really should consider -”

“I’ve never missed a match in my professional career, and I won’t now,” Ye Xiu interjects, as if that’s what they’re all worried about.

“That’s not why -”

“Why not go?” asks Jia Shiming.

Ye Xiu makes a vague gesture. “Inconvenient. I’d rather not.”

Faced with a complete refusal, the main roster can only shove extra drinks and food into Ye Xiu’s arms and retreat back to Tian Sen’s room in silence.

“What does he mean ‘inconvenient’!” Ren Junchi explodes when the door closes.

“We’ve known all along God Ye is hiding from something,” Jia Shiming answers.

Silence spreads over the room. Royal Style’s main roster had never openly discussed Ye Xiu’s background - just a few fleeting comments between one or two of them. They can make some good guesses. Ye Xiu stayed at the club over New Years. He owned practically nothing. He never mentioned anyone outside the pro circle, especially not family. He insisted on limited advertising and almost never left the club.

But to the team, Ye Xiu wasn’t mysterious. He would answer any question, except where and what he was doing before he supported himself through playing Glory, floating from one internet cafe to the other. They were all confident they held a true understanding of Ye Xiu’s character. He was shameless, and reliable, and strangely trustworthy when it came to keeping his word, and he’d earned his arrogant confidence, the kind that came from absolute self-knowledge.

It felt wrong to say he was hiding. Ye Xiu never hid from his problems; if he couldn’t straightforwardly overwhelm, he tactically retreated, then lay in wait to spring an ambush. Whatever reason he had for keeping things to himself, it wouldn’t be trivial.

“It doesn’t matter,” Tian Sen says slowly, drawing all eyes to himself.

“Captain?” asks Shen Wanhe.

Tian Sen straightens, the words flowing easier the more certain he becomes. “Whatever kept Ye Xiu from going pro before, he didn’t give up. He started all the way in the First Server and kept playing until today.”

This was the spirit of Glory's first generation of players. No matter what situations they faced, they would never give up.

"That's true," Chang Jianping says. "He would have been fifteen when Glory came out, I believe. We all know what level of dedication is required to reach Ye Xiu's skill and understanding of Glory."

"So he just played Glory for nine years and did nothing else? That bastard is crazy," laughs Ren Junchi, as if all of them weren't as crazy.

"Does anything before then really matter?" says Shen Wanhe.

No. Hadn't it been the same for all of them? Esports wasn't always a respected career. They'd all made hard choices and faced opposition to be here today.

The four of them, in silent agreement, turn to Jia Shiming.

The Striker has the same studied neutrality as always, carefully guarding his real thoughts and feelings. "Captain Tian?"

"Yes?" he replies, not sure what Jia Shiming intends.

Jia Shiming pauses. "I've learned a lot here at Royal Style. God Ye's knowledge of Strikers is thorough. I hope I'll be allowed to learn more in the future."

Tian Sen smiles. Does this mean he's going to stay? This rookie, really! "Keep working hard," he says. "Our season's not over yet."

Ye Xiu comes to breakfast the next morning wearing a sanitary mask. He still looks awful, but he's eating, and it feels a little like an apology.

Tian Sen isn't the only one smiling, either.

---

City B, home of team Royal Style. Su Muqiu isn't fond of the city, but the sight of it spread out beneath him makes his heartbeat quicken.

"Are we going to see Ye Xiu?" Mucheng asks once they've unpacked, without really expecting an answer. She's already familiar with her brother's avoidance of the subject.

"Not now. Maybe after the match tomorrow," Su Muqiu replies. Mucheng was always quicker to trust than he was.

It's been months, and Su Muqiu is no closer to deciding what to do about Ye Xiu than he was the night Ye Xiu confessed his insane story of a universe like a warped mirror and a leap through death and time.

Ye Xiu could produce no physical proof - the ID card in his pocket that day shows a past issue date. Yet the Su Siblings found themselves believing him anyway. Ye Xiu liked to tease, but he would never take a joke so far.

Truthfully, after accepting Ye Xiu's story, Su Muqiu's first reaction was grief. Believing his friend had returned to him alive, and finding out his own world's Ye Xiu was almost certainly still dead had been a blow.

But even as he grieved, Ye Xiu was also warm and alive, breathing within reach, watching Su Muqiu with old, sorrowful eyes and his clever hands folded in his lap.

The memory stirs an irresistible impulse; Su Muqiu pulls out his phone and messages, 'How are you feeling?'

Ye Xiu's QQ reply is almost instant - he still refuses to keep a phone, so he's probably messing around on an alt account before their game tomorrow. 'Good enough to beat you tomorrow.'

'Haha be serious' Su Muqiu replies.

'I'm always serious when it comes to winning.'

Su Muqiu sends an blank-faced smiley.

'I look bad so don't act surprised. But I really am feeling better,' Ye Xiu answers.

It's enough to satisfy Su Muqiu for the rest of the day, busying himself with captain's duties until he's relaxing in his hotel room that night.

Su Muqiu isn't angry with Ye Xiu for not telling them his real identity at first. Their ambush in Excellent Era's stadium was neither the place nor time to explain something as delicate as Ye Xiu's history. And he'd been honest with the Su siblings - they just hadn't believed him.

The night Ye Xiu confessed his origins, Su Muqiu went back to his hotel room and read through their entire QQ history without sleeping. In the entire time they'd been talking, Ye Xiu deliberately hadn't crossed the line beyond casual friendship. Whenever Su Muqiu ventured into topics he'd feel uncomfortable discussing with someone who wasn't his world's Ye Xiu, Ye Xiu would distract him with a well-timed taunt or drag him into discussing Glory theory, scrupulously maintaining Su Muqiu's boundaries without him ever realizing.

Which was such a *Ye Xiu* thing to do it makes Su Muqiu laugh. Even their plan for All-Stars was something Su Muqiu would do for a casual friend. His own, last second revision couldn't be blamed on Ye Xiu.

Su Muqiu sighs, turning off the lights and settling into bed.

A world where Su Muqiu died and Ye Xiu lived. Knowing that Ye Xiu would have been Glory's undisputed king is satisfying and painful at the same time. Was there no world where Su Muqiu and Ye Xiu could live on together and build their dream? Would it always have to be one or the other?

But they were together now, weren't they? Except Su Muqiu can't understand himself well enough to move forward, leaving their trio stuck in limbo.



Eventually, Su Muqiu falls asleep and dreams of what might have been. When he wakes up, his head is clear, and he remembers nothing. He's always been too practical to lose himself in dreams.

Excellent Era doesn't encounter Ye Xiu before their match. Suspecting Ye Xiu's design, Su Muqiu is content with this outcome; he has his hands full wrangling his players, and a match to win.

When Ye Xiu said he 'looked bad,' he was understating the situation, as always. Su Muqiu startles when Ye Xiu steps under the stage lights, his stomach flip-flopping uneasily. While the commentators burst into excited speculation, Su Muqiu frowns at the way Royal Style's black uniform brings Ye Xiu's pallor into relief and heightens the bruises under his eyes.

Ye Xiu's condition doesn't seem to affect his play; he wins his individual round with ease, probably traumatizing Liu Hao for life.

With one-half of their core recovering from illness, Su Muqiu expected Royal Style's mentality to be fragile, but they welcome their victorious teammate with wild cheers, showing more spirit than usual. These high spirits endure through the individual matches and group arena, bolstering Royal Style's performance. Entering the team battle, the score stands at 3-2, Royal Style in the lead.

For Royal Style's home game, they've picked the Misty Primeval Jungle map to restrict Su Muqiu's Launcher. Su Muqiu has played on every range restricting map in the Alliance database at this point, so he's cautious but not alarmed. Royal Style fades in and out of the mist and undergrowth, repeatedly ambushing Excellent Era before fleeing as Su Muqiu tries to pin them down, seeking a weak point Su Muqiu won't give them.

Then Su Muqiu's camera shakes, and the ground comes rushing toward him as his Quick Recover fails. At the same time, he hears rapid gunshots - a Spitfire's handgun and a Mechanic's rifle - and the team chat is flooded with shouts to protect their Cleric.

How had their formation been broken?

Su Muqiu curses, realizing the dim jungle lighting had hidden an ambush in the trees above. Dancing Rain tries to rise, but his character is pinned by a heavy weight on her back.

'Hello Captain Su' Ye Xiu types in the public chat as his spear slices away a thick chunk of Dancing Rain's health.

Su Muqiu's mind races furiously. How did *three* enemy players end up in their formation? Spitfire and Mechanic he can understand, but how did a *Battle Mage* get up there? They can't use Aerial Fire — it's too high to jump, and they can't climb!

Dancing Rain fires her cannon at the ground, intending for the knockback to throw Herald of Autumn off and free Dancing Rain. But Ye Xiu is already kicking off, gifting Dancing Rain a parting Dragon Tooth, as the recoil throws him toward Excellent Era's Cleric.

With Dancing Rain immobilized by the Stun effect, Su Muqiu can only watch as his Cleric is hooked out of their formation by Peaceful Hermit's scythe under Spirit Guidance. Ye Xiu's Herald of Autumn chases close behind with a Dragon Breaks the Ranks, gleefully pummeling the Cleric senseless. Following on his heels are Chang Jianping's Mechanic Starshot and Shen Wanhe's Spitfire Flash Memory using Aerial Fire to secure their escape, their bullets doubling as cover fire to ward off Excellent Era's pursuit.

Excellent Era gives chase, but the clearing Royal Style's chosen is split by an enormous half-fallen tree blocking their direct line-of-sight. Excellent Era can either crouch and go under the tree, where Starshot's mechanical summons are waiting, or go over the tree, where Royal Style's players can pick them off as they climb. Nor can they afford the time it would take to circle around. Royal Style's previous ambushes had patiently chipped away at their Cleric's health; even as Su Muqiu watches, his health bar has already slid down to half.

'Over,' Su Muqiu messages in the team chat, and his teammates charge forward. Hefting her cannon, Dancing Rain shoots a Stinger, intending to disrupt Royal Style long enough to give Excellent Era an opening.

It's knocked off course by a rifle shot, and the smaller shells the Stinger releases fall at the edge of Royal Style's position rather than the center. Any remaining damage is blocked by the golden glow of a Paladin's Holy Shield, and Su Muqiu's teammates are driven back by a wave of bullets. Dancing Rain's next attack is reflected back with a Halo Smash, but Su Muqiu can already hear the sounds of battle moving farther away. It's not much longer before their Cleric's icon greys out, despite Excellent Era's best efforts.

Su Mucheng's Qi Breaker is the next to fall as Royal Style turns back and mercilessly drags Excellent Era into a 5v4, using their greater numbers to full advantage. Lacking a healer and with their Best Partners separated, Excellent Era folds.

As they exit the player booths, Su Muqiu pays attention to the highlight replay displayed on the stadium screens, still unable to solve the mystery of how Ye Xiu executed that final ambush. Herald of Autumn is a Battle Mage, a class which shouldn't have the movement skills necessary to jump high enough to hide in a tree.

It was the fallen log - Ye Xiu climbed it, then used Starshot's Air Drop as a foothold to jump higher, securing his ambush position. What's amazing is the quickness and precise control required; the timing allowed no second chances. The broadcast team replays that moment again and again, Herald of Autumn executing the jump as smoothly and easily as walking on the ground.

Su Muqiu watches Ye Xiu celebrating his win with the rest of Royal Style, then shakes his head and leads his team off the stage.

Victory looks good on Ye Xiu. His eyes light up, and his mouth curls in that pleased smile, more genuine than his usual smirks.

It was only a pity that the two of them couldn't experience that feeling together.

Afterward in the preparation room, Su Muqiu scrubs a hand over his face and laughs at himself. What did he need to be confused about? Isn't their situation simple? However it came to pass, having Ye Xiu here is miraculous. Given this second chance, Su Muqiu wants a relationship with Ye Xiu. He knows that with certainty.

Then what's holding him back?

The Ye Xiu of his memories, the one who died - Su Muqiu doesn't want to forget him just because he has another Ye Xiu living alongside him now. How do you honor the dead without ignoring the living?

Su Muqiu wants to hold them both close, without losing a single memory. He's always been terribly possessive of those dearest to him.

Mucheng bumps his shoulder. "Made up your mind yet?"

"Yeah," Su Muqiu answers, phone already in hand.

'We don't leave until late afternoon tomorrow. Want to meet up?' he messages Ye Xiu.

'Sure. What time,' comes the reply an hour and a half later, while Su Muqiu is riding the bus back to their hotel.

'I'm getting you a phone for your birthday,' Su Muqiu types, getting a thrill out of the fact that he *can* buy Ye Xiu presents now.

'What makes you think I don't already have one.'

'I'm getting you another one. Mucheng will help me.'

'I'll be happy to lose it.' Ye Xiu includes a laughing smiley. 'Where are we going tomorrow?'

Su Muqiu pauses to think. 'You *did* just beat us. How about we get lunch to celebrate? Somewhere nice,' he suggests with a tinge of sadness. The Su siblings had never been able to afford eating at an expensive restaurant with their world's Ye Xu. Su Muqiu realizes they'd never been able to celebrate their Ye Xiu's birthday either, and frowns.

Then Ye Xiu sends a smirking smiley with the message 'Loser pays,' and Su Muqiu stops feeling regretful because he kind of wants to punch Ye Xiu.

But that's very normal, and nearly reassuring with how fond it makes him feel - Su Muqiu would have forced Ye Xiu to buy him food too if he'd thought of it first.

Su Muqiu mourns his missed opportunity for a free meal, and starts a dianping search for good City B restaurants.

---

They've won! They've beaten the Gunner God and three-time champion Excellent Era! Royal Style's fans are growing accustomed to victory, but this achievement will keep them up all night celebrating.

Exhaustion sunk bone-deep pulls Ye Xiu down, while the shared livewire excitement of his teammates buoys him up; Ye Xiu floats between the two extremes in an unsettling mixed haze. There's still a press conference to survive, dodging invasive questions from reporters about his health, as if Royal Style's team doctor hasn't been following him like a shadow all week.

On their way back to the club, the yellow city street lights smear and blend together in Ye Xiu's vision while his pulse pounds in his temples. He closes his eyes, muzzy from the medicine forced on him immediately after the match, then rouses himself, shakes off his daze, and borrows Shen Wanhe's phone.

As soon as he logs into QQ, he immediately opens the message waiting from Su Muqiu. As long as Su Muqiu is still reaching out, Ye Xiu has no reason to hesitate. He'll accept anything Su Muqiu wants to say, even if it's telling Ye Xiu to leave him alone.

Knowing his friend was alive was enough for Ye Xiu before. He could teach himself to be content with that again.

Still, his shoulders unknot and his whole body slumps into his seat when he reads Su Muqiu's invitation. Ye Xiu knew his Su Muqiu too well not to understand the significance. Su Muqiu's presence might be something Ye Xiu knew he could live without, but that didn't erase his hope for acceptance. Really, Ye Xiu shouldn't have allowed himself to be so self-indulgent.

"How are you feeling?" Tian Sen asks, pulling Ye Xiu aside as the rest of the team parades triumphantly through the entrance, arms slung around each other's shoulders.

"I'm fine," Ye Xiu replies, renewed exhaustion tugging at his limbs. The polished, honed focus required for being the team's shot caller in such a high-risk match is fading, leaving behind the warm anticipation of meeting the Su siblings tomorrow and the overwhelming desire to sleep for a week.

"Ah, Ye Xiu," calls Boss Liao. "Just who I wanted to see!"

Ye Xiu turns, sighing regretfully and calculating how quickly he can squirm out of his obligations.

Then Ye Qiu steps out from behind Royal Style's boss.

For a millisecond, Ye Xiu stills. The empty white silence filling his brain shatters under a surge of adrenaline, unpleasantly forcing him back to another mental peak. He recalls everything he's ever read about this world's Ye Qiu, who is not his brother and holds all the cards when it comes to Ye Xiu's identity. An opponent both familiar and unfamiliar, with unknown intentions, appearing in an unexpected time and place.

Ye Xiu dons his best smirk, the one guaranteed to draw the entire room's ire, and saunters forward. "Boss Liao, what can I do for you?" he asks like he's doing the man a favor.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ye Xiu can see Chang Jianping yanking on Ren Junchi's sleeve, glancing wide-eyed between Ye Qiu and himself. Ren Junchi's strangled shout of surprise draws the entire team's attention. Silence gradually falls under a blanket of intense curiosity.

They've made plenty of guesses about Ye Xiu's background, but having an identical twin brother appear wearing a three-piece tailored suit and a watch that costs more than most people earn in a month was probably more dramatic than they expected.

Boss Liao places a fatherly hand on Ye Qiu's shoulder. "This young man and I had a wonderful talk just now."

"We happened to run into one another leaving the stadium," Ye Qiu says modestly, lowering his eyes and watching Ye Qiu through his lashes. The smooth, pleasant modulation of his voice never falters. "Hello, Ye Xiu."

"Sorry, you have the wrong person," Ye Xiu replies, sticking his hands in the pockets of his team jacket. "I'm Ye Rui."

Ye Qiu laughs politely. "Always so fond of jokes. I had a *very interesting* conversation with a certain Supervisor Yan, and he told me quite a lot. I was just mentioning some of the things he said to Mr. Liao."

Boss Liao's expression is stormy. Looks like former head supervisor Yan didn't respect the NDA clause in his contract. Ye Xiu doubts he'll have a job past tonight, though he *will* have a very nice civil suit to console himself with. Guild Leader Meng will be pleased.

"I've never met you before," Ye Xiu says, giving Ye Qiu a long, slow blink. "Did you want an autograph or something?"

Ye Qiu's calm facade trembles. Boss Liao looks constipated. His teammates stare in fascinated horror. Ye Xiu maintains his indifferent expression.

"*Gege*, we look alike," Ye Qiu replies, the lines of his smile tighter than before.

"The resemblance *is* pretty good," Ye Xiu agrees, peering at Ye Qiu with a vague interest. "I'm more handsome though."

"Our ID card numbers are one digit apart," Ye Qiu bites out.

"Truely, a one-in-a-billion coincidence," Ye Xiu continues, shrugging as he starts to walk away.

Ye Qiu's 'respectable young master' persona finally breaks. "Are you serious? You shameless bastard—we're twins!" He looks much better with a faint red tinge to his cheeks and passion firing up his eyes.

"If there's nothing else you needed, Boss Liao, I'll be going," Ye Xiu calls, waving behind him.

Footsteps rush to catch up. “Where do you think you’re going! I came here to see you, stupid!”

Ye Xiu walks faster. Then he’s yanked backwards by hands grabbing the back of his jacket and spun around by his shoulders.

“Enough,” Ye Qiu says. His eyes gleam, but this time his anger burns cold, not hot. “We need to talk.”

Caught off guard, Ye Xiu is reminded that he really doesn’t know this world’s Ye Qiu at all, and seeks a path for retreat. “I’m tired. Can’t this wait?”

“If I let you go now, would you actually show up to meet me?”

“Yes,” Ye Xiu replies, half a beat too late to be believed.

The room’s collective disbelief is nearly palpable.

Exhaling, Ye Qiu shakes his head. “I’m not fifteen years old anymore. Don’t think you can make me angry enough that I storm off and forget what I came for.”

“Fine,” Ye Xiu replies, recognizing he’s out of room to maneuver. “But you don’t want to have this discussion here.”

“My driver is waiting outside,” Ye Qiu answers, keeping a firm grip on Ye Xiu’s elbow.

Ye Xiu resists the urge to tsk. Restraining him is unnecessary. Ye Xiu already knows Ye Qiu can run faster than him.

Royal Style’s players watch goggle-eyed as Ye Xiu is hustled away like a hostage being kidnapped by a better-dressed version of himself.

Ye Xiu makes firm eye contact with Tian Sen and Ren Junchi, who are both leaning forward like they’re about to jump out, and shakes his head. Chang Jianping sighs as if he’s being denied prime entertainment. Shen Wanhe has the eyes of a man wondering how, exactly, his life had come to this point. Beneath his normal distance, Jia Shiming also hides concern; Ye Xiu raises an eyebrow, as they sweep past, which seems to reassure him.

The car, like all of those owned by the Ye family, is black, tasteful yet expensive, and shines brightly beneath a coat of fresh wax. Ye Qiu shoves Ye Xiu in the back seat and slides in behind him. The Ye family’s driver shuts the door, trapping them both inside.

Once the car pulls away from the curb, Ye Qiu folds his hands in his lap and crosses his legs, ankle over knee. His face gives no hint of his thoughts, and he pierces Ye Xiu with his sharp gaze.

Ye Xiu recognizes this mask. Ye Qiu wears ‘ruthless businessman’ better at twenty-four than his own twin did. But this Ye Qiu doesn’t have a choice. He’s the Ye family’s true heir now. He can’t afford being coddled or indulged, because his Ye Xiu is never coming home.

Breathing in the smell of leather polish and beeswax, Ye Xiu ignores the ache in his heart and waits for Ye Qiu to make the first move. Exhaustion is knocking persistently against his bones; Ye Xiu shakes it off, forcing himself to remain awake and alert.

But Ye Qiu doesn't say a word, to Ye Xiu's surprise. He just studies Ye Xiu while the car takes them wherever he's chosen as their destination.

After perhaps half an hour, the car slows to a stop in front of a nondescript office building built of smog-stained concrete. Ye Xiu had been expecting an exclusive club, or a glass and steel high rise, and his estimation of Ye Qiu rises.

"Put these on," Ye Qiu says, shoving an ankle-length wool overcoat and a mask at Ye Xiu. "There are no cameras, but I don't want anyone seeing us together."

Wordlessly, Ye Xiu complies, shrugging on the coat. It must belong to Ye Qiu, because it fits perfectly; the lapels even carry a hint of cologne and a deeply familiar scent. Ye Xiu, whose self-control is strained both by his recovering body and his recent exertion, barely resists the urge to turn his head and chase the nostalgic smell.

The driver stays in the car, while Ye Qiu and Ye Xiu, still being led by the arm, enter the building. Passing the elderly guard dozing at his post, Ye Qiu guides them upstairs, passing through the security doors by punching in a series of passcodes from a paper he pulls from his pocket. From the way Ye Qiu is squinting and fumbling at the crabbed, foreign writing, Ye Xiu would wager those passwords don't belong to him.

Ye Xiu is impressed. Ye Qiu, showing patience, planning and decent execution? Perhaps he should die more often if it teaches Ye Qiu life skills, he reflects, laughing bitterly.

Finally, Ye Qiu shoves him into a nondescript corner office with greyish walls and particleboard furniture, then shuts the door and turns around, crossing his arms and scowling.

Ye Xiu steals the most comfortable looking chair in the room, sinking down with a sigh, and pulls out a toothpick which he begins rolling between his fingers.

Ye Qiu's scowl deepens, and he clenches his fists, dropping his arms down to his sides. "*What are you?*"

Minding the rage and frustration in Ye Qiu's voice, Ye Xiu still barely refrains from laughing. Is Ye Qiu expecting him to say he's an alien?

"I'm a professional Glory player," Ye Xiu says instead. "I play for Team Royal - "

Ye Qiu slaps the desk with an open hand. "Can you stop being yourself for *one* second? You know that's not what I meant! My brother is dead, so why the hell do *you* look identical to him, you damn imposter?"

The high, jagged edge in Ye Qiu's voice stops Ye Xiu cold. "*I am* Ye Xiu," he replies carefully. "*A* Ye Xiu, but not *your* Ye Xiu."

Ye Qiu sinks into the only other chair in the room. "Explain."

So Ye Xiu does.

By the end, Ye Qiu's posture is stiff with hostility, glaring at Ye Xiu like he's personally wronged him.

"What now?" Ye Xiu asks lazily, dangling one hand over the arm of his chair.

Ye Qiu shrugs.

Ye Xiu sighs, shaking his head. No matter how mature and responsible, Ye Qiu was still Ye Qiu. All plan, no goals.

"If you want, we can pretend we never met," Ye Xiu suggests, testing the waters. "I won't approach you or your parents. You'd never have to see me in person again."

Ye Qiu's expression gets even uglier.

"If that's all, I'm going back then," Ye Xiu says. The metro would have stopped running long ago. If he can't catch a night bus, Ye Xiu hopes he can find a taxi nearby.

Ye Qiu turns his back. "Fine. It's not like I care what you do. You're not really my brother."

Ye Xiu smiles tightly, getting up and going to the door. "Yes, that's right."

"What are you going to tell your teammates, fake?" Ye Qiu says suddenly.

Ye Xiu laughs. "Now that you've made such a dramatic entrance, I'll have to come up with something." Ye Qiu's already claimed the two are brothers, so Ye Xiu will stick to that and build something that invites people to fill in any blanks themselves.

"And why do you look like shit today?" Ye Qiu demands, sending an accusing glare over his shoulder at Ye Xiu.

Ye Xiu waves away Ye Qiu's concern. "Just a cold, nothing to be concerned about."

Ye Qiu's eyes narrow, and he falls silent.

Ye Xiu pauses one more time, but Ye Qiu doesn't ask any more questions. So he turns his back and walks away.

When Ye Xiu reaches the club around three in the morning, he realizes he's still wearing Ye Qiu's coat. He strokes the dark wool once, long fingers lingering, then hangs it up and hides it in the back of his closet.

---

Ye Qiu gives up on sleep after the first nightmare.

Panting and covered in a cold sweat, Ye Qiu buries his face in his hands, trying to forget the image of his brother reaching out towards Ye Qiu for help while his brother's skin blanched corpse blue and his amber eyes dulled.



He's dreamed of Ye Xiu's death so many times. Surrounded by strangers and far from home - who could call that kind? Had it been quick? Or had his brother suffered? Had he been afraid?

No one would tell Ye Qiu. All the adults claimed he was too young to know. Now, so many years have passed that Ye Qiu doesn't know how to ask.

Those dreams come less often now. This year is the tenth anniversary of his brother's death. Another five years after that and Ye Qiu will have lived more years alone than he lived with Ye Xiu at his side.

Ye Qiu rises and looks out his bedroom window, staring up at the sliver of silver moon. It's no mystery why Ye Qiu would dream of his brother tonight. It's that fake's fault. Seeing him look so wretched during his game last night, Ye Qiu had abandoned all his patience and directly carried out his simplest plan to meet the fake face-to-face. And what had he gained from it? Nothing!

Ye Qiu clenches his fists and goes to his computer, spitefully avoiding anything to do with Glory or games.

His thoughts still betray him. Ye Qiu wonders about the world the fake came from. How was it different? Was there a Ye Qiu there, just like him? Were they identical?

But...didn't that mean there was another Ye Qiu out there whose brother was gone? Who was missing that fake as much as he missed his Ye Xiu?

Ye Qiu scowls, shoving his chair back and stomping over to throw himself back on his bed. He doesn't care about a fake Ye Xiu.

Covering his eyes with his arm, Ye Qiu tries thinking of something else, *anything* else, but his thoughts are drawn back like a compass needle pointing north.

If the fake's spirit washed up here after death, who's to say the same thing hadn't happened to his brother? Could his Ye Xiu be out there somewhere, right now, with another Ye Qiu?

The thought is uncomfortable. For some reason, Ye Qiu feels a little guilty too.

Ye Qiu tosses and turns for several more hours, increasingly wild scenarios passing through his head. If the fake hadn't been so frustratingly vague about his life, maybe Ye Qiu could put these thoughts away, but all he can do is wonder.

Finally, around five in the morning Ye Qiu gives up and gets dressed. It's Sunday, so he has the day to himself until dinner with his parents. He tries reading for a few hours, before going out shopping to unsuccessfully distract himself until lunchtime.

Just as he's about to dig into his meal at a trendy, avant-garde western fusion eatery - picked specifically because Ye Xiu would hate it - Ye Qiu's phone pings. Curious, he puts down his chopsticks and opens the message. It's from the same business partner who introduced him to

‘Ye Rui’. Once they’d gotten past Ye Qiu’s resemblance to the Glory pro, they’d struck up an acquaintance under the false premise that both of them were Royal Style fans.

It’s a weibo video link accompanied by the message, ‘You’ve been here before, right?’ Ye Qiu loads the video, immediately recognizing the exclusive restaurant it’s filmed at. The recording quality isn’t good, obviously taken surreptitiously on someone’s cellphone, but it’s easy to recognize the three subjects: that fake, along with two people Ye Qiu hasn’t seen in a decade, Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng.

Ye Qiu scowls fiercely. That fake *never* left his club. That’s why Ye Qiu had to go through so much trouble to plan a meeting in the first place. Now he just shows up in public?

Grinding his teeth, Ye Qiu almost closes the video, but keeps watching out of stubborn anger. He’d run across the Su siblings while investigating ‘Ye Rui’, but hadn’t paid much attention other than recognizing them as Ye Xiu’s hosts, the ones to briefly hold a part of his brother Ye Qiu had never touched. From the video, it’s clear the fake knows them too.

From their clothes and manners alone, the trio of pro players couldn’t be any more obviously out-of-place if they tried. Su Muqiu gestures, deep into some explanation and oblivious to their surroundings. Su Mucheng pours the tea, content to listen, while the fake watches both of them, wearing a faint smile, before interjecting a quick remark that makes all three laugh.

Ye Qiu turns off his phone, setting it on the table harder than necessary, and returns to his meal in vain. His appetite’s evaporated and Ye Qiu just feels more irritated with every bite he forces himself to take. Trying not to think about the fake and failing completely makes Ye Qiu even grumpier. Also, why does it feel like he’s forgetting something?

Wait.

“That bastard stole my coat!” Ye Qiu hisses, slamming chopsticks down.

Fuck, obviously he can’t allow the fake to keep something that belongs to him. Ye Qiu pays his bill in a hurry, rushing out the door and trying to remember how close he is to the restaurant in the video.

Knowing he shouldn’t be seen with the fake in public, Ye Qiu orders his driver to park the car, then sends the man into the restaurant to demand the fake return his coat. Stewing in his irritation, Ye Qiu nearly drops his phone when it rings. He hastily picks up once he sees his driver’s number.

“You didn’t ask for your coat back. That means it’s a gift,” the fake’s voice laughs.

Ye Qiu nearly throws his phone. “That’s not how it works, bastard!”

“If I’m a bastard, what are you?”

This time, Ye Qiu really does throw his phone. Luckily, it rings again a moment later. Ye Qiu has to dive under the seat to retrieve it, emerging after a hurried scramble.

“If you want your coat that badly you can have it back. But I don’t have it with me right now. It’s at the club.”

Ye Qiu presses fingers against his temple, feeling a headache bloom. “Fine. We’ll drive back to the club and you’ll bring it out to me.”

“Can’t.”

Ye Qiu grits his teeth. “Why not?”

“I’m with Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng. I need to make sure they make it back to their hotel first.”

“*Fine*. I’ll give them a ride, and then you’ll return my coat.”

The fake’s voice is layered with satisfaction. “Deal.”

As he hangs up, Ye Qiu snarls to himself, irritation lingering in his blood. Forty-five minutes later, when the fake still hasn’t appeared, Ye Qiu fears he might burst a blood vessel from rage.

“Where were you?” he demands as the fake slides into the back seat, Su Muqiu behind him.

The fake glances over at him calmly. “We didn’t set a time to meet. Did I ever say we were finished eating?”

*No*, Ye Qiu had assumed, but that was beside the point! “Let’s just go already.”

Turning her head, Su Mucheng smiles from the front passenger seat. “Thank you for helping us out.”

“You’re welcome,” Ye Qiu replies, the politeness of a well-bred young master kicking in. Reminded he has guests, Ye Qiu reins in most of his ire behind mild pleasantness, his training reasserting itself.

Ye Qiu’s efforts are meaningless, because he’s completely ignored by the three pros. Ye Qiu can only sit and fume, rather bewildered at the turn his errand has taken as he listens in on a discussion that’s one part gossip, one part trash talk and all gaming jargon.

Since he only vaguely understands what they’re talking about, Ye Qiu’s attention begins to wander. Instead of paying attention to the words, he watches the three of them together, taking in every tiny change in their expressions and movements.

With the same face and the same aura, it’s so easy to imagine his brother in the fake’s place. Was his Ye Xiu such close friends with the Su siblings? Did his brother show the same enjoyment and dedication toward his games?

If his brother had lived, what would he have been like?

As the Su siblings wave goodbye and go inside their hotel's lobby, Ye Qiu bows his head in thought.

"I'll return your coat now," the fake says. Looking at him still raises Ye Qiu's hackles, but it's difficult to be as angry as before.

"No," Ye Qiu says. "There are some questions I want you to answer first."

"Mmm," agrees the fake, tilting his head to the side. "I'll answer them, but there's somewhere I want us to go first."

Mid-afternoon on an April Sunday, Beihai Park is crowded with tourists snapping photos and families out for a weekend adventure, too caught up in their own sightseeing among the gardens and other attractions to pay attention to the two more strangers who resemble a famous pro player. Since the fake is wearing a disguise, it's easy to blend in without drawing notice.

"Go ahead and ask. I could be playing Glory right now, and I don't want to have paid the admission fee for nothing," the fake prompts, steering their path toward the lake.

Ye Qiu presses his lips together, struck by a strong sense of déjà vu, but presses forward. "You said you didn't know how or why you ended up here."

At the fake's nod, Ye Qiu hesitates. There are so many things he wants to know, but he starts with something safe first. "Tell me about your world. Is it very different?"

The fake's gaze turns distant. "The more time that passes, the more differences I find. But it's mostly small changes. All the important historical events are identical."

"And me, what's my life like in your world?" Ye Qiu continues, giving in to his curiosity.

Laughing, the fake pats his shoulder. "You're always desperately trying to shove the heir's responsibility back on me, while I always escape. When I was fifteen I ran away just like your brother and only came back when I was twenty-eight."

Ye Qiu's eyes narrow. "How'd you know my brother ran away?"

"Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng told me," the fake explains, trudging along with his hands in his pockets.

Oh. Ye Qiu's anger drains away. He looks down at his feet, wondering if he really wants to say his next question out loud. "Why did you run away?" he finally dares.

When he looks up again, the fake is studying him with an unsettling, intense gaze. "I found the bag you packed, so I ran away first. I knew I'd survive better than you would, and I had a goal I wanted to achieve."

Ye Qiu breathes out carefully. "So you didn't think about running away before then?"

“No. I saw an opportunity and I took it.” The fake watches Ye Qiu a moment longer; the impression of vulnerability, of being taken apart and measured, draws out like torture. Ye Qiu exhales with relief when the fake looks out over the water again.

Then the fake says, “What happened to your brother was not your fault.”

“Why would I think that!” Ye Qiu retorts immediately, denying the tiny voice that has always whispered *if only, if only*.

If only Ye Qiu hadn’t tried running away, maybe his brother would still be alive. His parents had never known Ye Qiu was the one really planning to run, and he could never bring himself to confess. That guilt lived deep inside him, growing and festering undisturbed until now.

The fake watches him calmly. “I’m only saying it was your brother’s choice to take your place.”

“So it’s Ye Xiu’s own fault he died!” Ye Qiu spits furiously. Among the few people who knew Ye Xiu had run away, whether they dared say it out loud or not, most blamed Ye Xiu for causing his own death, believing he got what he deserved.

The fake shakes his head. “The fact that your brother got sick, isn’t that just chance? Sometimes people die in meaningless ways. That’s no one’s fault.”

Ye Qiu stares at him. Those words carry the ring of experience. Who had this person lost?

They keep walking in silence for a few more minutes before the fake leads the two of them off the path and sits down on the ground with a sigh.

“Why did you bring us here?” Ye Qiu asks, refusing to sit down.

“This is the first place I remember being after I came here,” the fake explains, leaning back and meeting Ye Qiu’s eyes. “Don’t you have anything else you want to ask? All this exercise doesn’t suit me.”

Ye Qiu scowls, crossing his arms. “Fine. Tell me about dying.”

For the first time, Ye Qiu sees his brother’s counterpart caught off guard, hesitation flickering across his face before it can be hidden behind a bland mask. “I’d rather not. I don’t think my experience is much like your brother’s. The Su siblings didn’t know why your brother died, but my death was much...slower.”

Ye Qiu’s stomach clenches, and he remembers why the dark circles and pale complexion of his brother’s counterpart had spurred him to act. Without caring about his suit, he drops down to the ground. “Are you dying now?” he demands.

“No, it’s just the flu -”

“How do you know?” Ye Qiu pushes, grabbing his shoulders. “You can’t go to a hospital or somebody would realize you’re supposed to be dead as soon as they ran your ID. How do you know you’re not dying?!”

His brother's counterpart exudes a carefully constructed composure. "I can't be certain, you're right."

*But there's nothing I can do about that*, goes unsaid between them. All his brother's counterpart can do is hope he's lucky and he never needs medical attention ever again, because the moment he becomes sick enough to need a hospital, he'll have to choose between his life or his lies.

His brother was always so careless with himself, Ye Qiu remembers with a chill.

"That's not something you need to worry about. I can take care of myself," his brother's counterpart says.

Ye Qiu almost snorts, because Ye Xiu is the one who's managed to die twice in two lifetimes, and if that shouldn't worry Ye Qiu what should?

His brother's counterpart carefully disentangles himself from Ye Qiu's grip, putting some distance between them.

Settling down, Ye Qiu rests his chin on his knees, watching the waves lap at the shore. "Do you miss your brother?"

"Always," his brother's counterpart replies.

But it was more than that, wasn't it? Ye Qiu sneaks a peek at his brother's counterpart. Hadn't he lost everyone all at once, not just his own brother?

"You must have been lonely when you came here," Ye Qiu says.

His brother's counterpart pauses. Ye Qiu can see him deciding whether or not he wants to lie. Finally his brother's counterpart shrugs. "Not as much now."

Ye Qiu is briefly grateful to the Su siblings, before he reminds himself he doesn't need to care about this person.

"Do you think...do you think my brother was afraid when it happened?" Ye Qiu dares to ask.

Stiffening, his brother's counterpart doesn't answer for so long that Ye Qiu thinks he won't say anything at all. Then he tips his head back and says, "No matter how much you prepare, I think everyone is afraid at the end."

Ye Qiu doesn't even think before he's leaning over and holding his brother's counterpart in a fierce embrace. It feels *right*, and it doesn't matter that it's not *his* brother because no version of Ye Xiu should ever wear that look on their face.

There's a sigh beside Ye Qiu's ear, and suddenly the body he's holding relaxes. Ye Qiu pulls him even closer. A whisper tickles his earlobe. "You're right. Dying is very lonely."

Neither of them rush to separate. They were born together, and perhaps they both instinctively seek that closeness. Ye Qiu only begins to worry when he realizes he's

supporting all Ye Xiu's weight, and pulls back to examine his brother's face.

"I'm just tired," Ye Xiu says.

Ye Qiu thinks that Ye Xiu has been tired for a very, very long time. Guiding Ye Xiu's head to rest on his shoulder, he wishes once more he had the certainty that Ye Xiu was healthy.

"When my brother was born," Ye Qiu says, "nobody knew it, but his heart wasn't formed quite right. When he caught an infection that affected his heart, the doctors didn't realize it in time, so he died."

"Your brother wouldn't have wanted to leave you alone," Ye Xiu says.

Ye Qiu has to close his eyes until he can breathe evenly again. "I want you to have my brother's identity," he says, drawing back and trying not to wipe his eyes. The Ye family isn't warm, or prone to physical affection, so it's a little awkward to be hugging like that.

Ye Xiu tsks, shaking his head. "We've only just met. I could be scamming you. Be a little more skeptical!"

Ye Qiu glares. "Do you want a legitimate identity or not?"

"That's not something you can decide," Ye Xiu disagrees. "You may be the Ye heir, but you don't have the money or authority to carry out that intention by yourself. How are you going to convince your parents?"

Ye Qiu scowls, because he hadn't thought that far ahead. "I'll figure something out. My brother isn't using his identity, so why can't you have it? You're sort of him, and you shouldn't have to worry about choosing between your health and your career.

"Alright, if you insist," Ye Xiu replies, going unsteadily to his feet.

"I do," Ye Qiu says, getting up as well. "And you can keep my coat."

Ye Xiu smirks. "So it *was* a gift then."

"You - you!" Speechless, Ye Qiu throws up his hands and stalks away.

Following behind him, he can hear Ye Xiu laughing.

Well, a coat was a small price to pay, Ye Qiu decides.

---

Tian Sen surveys his teammates, forehead creased with worry. "So nobody saw Ye Xiu come back to the dorms last night, and no one saw him leave again this morning?"

As everyone shakes their heads, Tian Sen wonders yet again where the hell Ye Xiu's escape skills came from, but he's so worried right now he can't properly care. His partner may be very self-sufficient, but he's still recovering from being sick and he's also terrifyingly good at pissing people off.

Sighing, Shen Wanhe holds up a scrap of paper with a few uneven characters. “Captain, I’m sure he’s fine. He’s just gone out to get lunch with the Su siblings.”

Ignoring his vice-captain, Tian Sen is pulling out his phone and pulling up QQ, planning on bothering the Su siblings until he’s provided proof Ye Xiu is with them.

Long used to their captain’s personality - none of them are allowed to cough until after Royal Style makes playoffs, or Tian Sen will break out the vitamins - the rest of Royal Style are happily gossiping about this latest juicy tidbit. Who would’ve expected Old Ye would have an identical twin? And a rich one too, by the look of it!

Hoping to catch Ye Xiu, the team had staked out Ye Xiu’s room last night, but he’d slipped past them somehow. They really might die of curiosity if they don’t get some answers soon, which is why they’re all gathered in the dorm hallway now. This time he won’t get away!

“Hey,” Ye Xiu says, casually wandering up behind them with his identical twin brother in tow.

“Hey Old Ye,” Ren Junchi responds without thinking as he trades speculations with Chang Jianping. Then he does a double take, spinning around and leveling an accusing finger. “What do you mean ‘hey’! Do you know how long we’ve been waiting for you, you shitty motherfucker!”

Ye Xiu’s twin sends him an unfriendly look. “Please don’t talk about my mother like that.”

“Ah, sorry?” Ren Junchi says, caught flat-footed, and looks at Tian Sen for help.

Tian Sen seizes Ye Xiu’s shoulders. “Old Ye, we were worried.”

Behind him, Shen Wanhe mutters, “We really weren’t that worried.”

“I left a note, Captain Tian,” his partner replies, rather bemused as he’s forced to tilt his head back to meet his captain’s eyes.

Chang Jianping immediately throws Ye Xiu to the wolves. “Old Ye, you left your phone. Again.”

Ye Xiu shrugs. “Did I?”

“Yes,” Tian Sen complains, stepping back. “More importantly, who’s this?”

“Hello,” Ye Xiu’s twin says, extending a polite hand with a pleasant smile. “I’m Ye Qiu. I apologize for the suffering my brother’s caused you.”

Tian Sen shakes Ye Qiu’s hand, looking from one twin to the other. Once you get past the face, they really aren’t identical at all. “Old Ye really isn’t that bad. He’s become a very reliable partner.”

Ye Qiu smiles gently, an expression that makes everyone’s hearts twist a little when directed toward them. It’s a little creepy seeing such an expression on Old Ye’s face. “Still, I know



how my brother can be. Thank you for taking care of him.”

“If you’re so concerned, then why haven’t we seen you before? Why doesn’t God Ye ever go home?” Jia Shiming asks.

Tian Sen frowns. “Jia Shiming, that’s not -”

“No, he’s right. I should have come before now.” Ye Qiu lowers his eyes, a trace of sadness creeping over his face. “I’m afraid it’s a long story.”

“I ran away when I was fifteen to play games,” Ye Xiu explains brazenly, cheeks flushing with only the faintest hint of embarrassment. “I ended up in City H and lived with Su Mucheng and Su Muqiu for a little. That’s how we know each other.”

“Our parents were angry, to say the least,” Ye Qiu says. “Then brother got really sick, and almost died.” He reaches out, touching Ye Xiu’s sleeve and watching his brother with sorrowful eyes.

“But the hospital made a mistake,” Ye Xiu continues. “I don’t know how it happened, but they told my family that I really did die. After I was well enough to leave the hospital, I moved around, living on what I could make from gaming. It’s only recently that my condition recovered enough to play competitively.”

Ye Qiu makes a supportive noise. “When I saw *gege* in your team’s advertisements, I was shocked, but I didn’t know how to approach him. I thought he must believe that we hated him.”

He gives Royal Style’s players a pleading look. “Our parents still don’t know my brother is alive, so we’d appreciate all of you keeping this quiet until we figure out how to break the news.”

Tian Sen gapes open-mouthed at the twins, and his eyes are so wide they might fall out of his head. Most of his teammates are in a similar state. Even poker-faced Jia Shiming looks dazed.

Chang Jianping swallows. “Old Ye, are you absolutely certain you’re not a web novel protagonist?”

“Why, it’s not that strange,” Ye Xiu says, lifting one shoulder indifferently. *Yes it is!* everyone present shouts silently in their hearts.

Royal Style’s players blink dumbly at one another. Somehow, they got the answers they always wanted without suffering? Why does this feel so strange?

“Thank you for explaining, Old Ye,” Tian Sen says finally. “Of course we’ll let you work things out with your family.”

Ye Qiu smiles, the image of a genteel young man overflowing with gracious relief. “Captain Tian, we really are grateful.”

Ye Xiu covers his face, muffling a cough.

---

Royal Style squeaks into the playoffs at eighth place, knocking out Misty Rain by a single point.

That night, the cheers in Royal Style's stadium shake the rafters. Not since season three has Royal Style earned the right to enter this glorious battleground. Playoffs! No matter how much players talked about reaching that goal, how many of them really believed in it?

Royal Style hadn't. Not really, not until an irritating, gifted Battle Mage wandered through their doors.

Tian Sen has to wipe away more than a few tears. This is the beginning he's dreamed of for his beloved team. He hasn't failed the legacy entrusted to him as captain and Peaceful Hermit's wielder. All those years of work, the struggle of believing he can make a difference - all of it was worth this moment.

He pulls Ye Xiu aside afterward, finding a quiet moment before the press conference. "I just wanted to thank you," Tian Sen says. "For being my partner. For believing in me, and in Royal Style."

"I should be the one thanking you for giving an old man like me a chance. And it was you who believed in your team more than anyone." Ye Xiu's eyes are amber from the light slanting over his shoulder. "But Captain Tian, aren't you a little early? We have a championship to win, don't we?"

Throwing back his head, Tian Sen laughs. "You're right, you're right. Let's bring home a trophy for Royal Style!"

Even after Tiny Herb defeats them in two games, none of the fans or commentators are disappointed by Royal Style's performance. With Ye Xiu as their steady commander, everyone praises their remarkable composure for a team without a single member who's experienced the atmosphere of playoffs before. Defeating the number one ranked team would be expecting too much.

In the press conference after their second defeat, Tian Sen feels clearly the weight of expectation from all their fans, and reaffirms his dedication in his heart. If Royal Style can make the playoffs, then why not a championship?

But the one the reporters really want to interview isn't Tian Sen, but the player seated beside him. Tian Sen is happy to stand aside, because Ye Xiu truly deserves the attention. His rookie year has been extraordinary in the Alliance's history, and now that Tian Sen understands everything he's overcome to be here, he feels true admiration for his partner.

"Congratulations to God Ye on receiving the Best Rookie award," praises the first reporter, casting a wary eye on Ye Xiu despite the relaxed atmosphere. Tian Sen's partner has a reputation for being difficult to interview.

But Ye Xiu seems too lazy or too pleased to stir trouble tonight. “Thank you. It’s not really surprising.”

The reporter grimaces, but Ye Xiu’s performance had been so outstanding compared to the other rookies that giving the award to anyone else would be larceny.

“How does it feel to begin your career knowing that your success is limited by your age? Don’t you regret missing your prime?”

Tian Sen tenses. He hates being reminded Ye Xiu can’t remain his partner for long, and the reporter is obviously fishing for drama.

Ye Xiu rests his chin on his palm and raises an eyebrow. “Why would I regret? If I can win a championship at eighteen, why can’t I win a championship at twenty-eight? I’ll just have to win more often since I have fewer chances.”

“So you don’t regret those lost years?” the reporter presses.

“Didn’t I already answer that? I couldn’t enter the league then, so I don’t regret not doing it. Spending any time here at all, I can only consider myself fortunate.”

Once Royal Style files out, passing Tiny Herb taking their place, Tian Sen notices Ye Xiu looking in one particular direction and follows his gaze. “Oh, Tiny Herb brought some of their trainees,” he remarks. “That’s Gao Yingjie, who’s being trained as Vaccaria’s successor. I don’t recognize the one next to him.”

“Mmm,” Ye Xiu replies in a tone that means he’s thinking. “His name is Qiao Yifan. Captain, do you think you could cover for me for a while?”

“You want to talk to him?” Tian Sen asks, taking a second look at the teenager. If Ye Xiu knows him, he must be special.

“I do.” Ye Xiu’s lips curve in a smile. “I think he’d make an excellent addition.”

If it’s for Royal Style’s sake, how can a captain argue? “Leave it to me,” Tian Sen promises.

Rising up on his toes, Ye Xiu pats Tian Sen’s shoulder, then slips off purposefully into the crowd.

---

“Do you think this is acceptable?” Tao Xuan demands, throwing the newspaper on his desk like an accusation.

The pages flutter open and scatter; Su Muqiu can read the ESports Weekly front page headline clearly: “Tiny Herb and Hundred Blossoms Advance to Finals!”

Su Muqiu raises his eyes, calmly meeting the boss’ gaze. “A championship is never guaranteed. Excellent Era made the semi-finals.”

“And who defeated you?” Tao Xuan continues. “Hundred Blossoms and Zhang Jiale! A Spitfire who’s never won a single championship beat you, Su Muqiu! Aren’t you supposed to be the Gunner God?!”

Su Muqiu breathes in. “Zhang Jiale and I are both God-level players. I may be better than him, but that doesn’t mean I always win. This time, Hundred Blossoms played better.”

Tao Xuan scoffs, turning sharply on his heel and sitting down behind his desk. His fingers tap against the wood while he surveys Su Muqiu.

Remaining relaxed, Su Muqiu returns the scrutiny with his usual friendly air.

“Samsara made the semi-finals for the first time,” Tao Xuan says. “Zhou Zekai’s performance was splendid. People are beginning to call him Glory’s new number one.”

“Really?” Su Muqiu answers without caring much. People have been predicting his downfall for years. Time would eventually dull his abilities, of course, but Su Muqiu had grown up gaming for his livelihood. Things like pride or fame were secondary to survival.

Tao Xuan leans back in his chair. “You should be careful, Su Muqiu. Or that ‘Gunner God’ title of yours won’t belong to you much longer.”

“Thank you,” Su Muqiu replies, as if Tao Xuan were really looking after his well-being. Behind his facade, Su Muqiu’s well-honed sense of danger prickles. So Tao Xuan’s greed is no longer satisfied by the money the Su siblings attract. After enduring a few more pointed warnings, he’s allowed to leave.

In the hall, Su Muqiu’s pleasant smile fades. He’d gone to see Tao Xuan regarding Liu Hao’s attitude, but it’s clear to him now that Tao Xuan - perhaps all the upper management - will not be of help.

*Find the bug*, Su Muqiu reminds himself, and heads for the nearest computer.

Herald of Autumn: I understand why you’d come up with this solution. This could backfire.

Dancing Rain: i know. but i need to keep Tao Xuan off my back. satisfying his greed is the easiest way to do that

Herald of Autumn: If it were really just greed, that would be much easier

The next day, Su Muqiu approaches Cui Li, the team manager, with a folder full of papers and a proposal.

“Trade Liu Hao?” Cui Li ponders. “Excellent Era has always had a Spellblade. Our fans expect us to field that class.”

“And we still will,” Su Muqiu argues, tapping the profile of a Spellblade trainee he’s earmarked as Liu Hao’s replacement. “But Excellent Era can’t afford to stagnate. Think of what we’ll gain if we dare!”

“Yes,” Cui Li agrees, thinking the idea through. “It will be expensive, but Excellent Era could use this kind of star.”

“Exactly!” Su Muqiu enthuses, dropping more bait. “Our investment will definitely pay off in the long run.”

Cui Li nods, pleased with himself. “Sun Xiang, was it?”

“Yes,” Su Muqiu replies, hoping that he isn’t arranging his own disaster. “I think he could be quite a strong helper.”

Cui Li is already gathering the folder of materials. “I’ll talk to Boss Tao. If he likes the idea, we’ll present the idea at the next management meeting.”

“Thank you, manager.” Su Muqiu grins. Taking in Sun Xiang may be a risk, but he believes in his ability to manipulate the situation with Ye Xiu’s knowledge and help. Besides, his situation isn’t like Ye Xiu’s. Sun Xiang plays melee classes, so Dancing Rain isn’t suitable for his style. A strong, frontline attacker like a Berserker is just what Excellent Era needs most.

Su Muqiu can’t let Ye Xiu be the only one strengthening his team, after all. Victory goes to those who work hardest, and Su Muqiu intends on having Ye Xiu buy *him* a free dinner after their next match.

---

On the morning of his *second* twenty-fifth birthday, Ye Xiu is woken up at six AM when someone bangs loudly on his door.

Since that’s still outdoing the very low bar set by his last birthday - the one he died on - Ye Xiu drags himself to the door in a relatively good mood.

The night shift guild member waiting on the other side wrings his hands and apologizes repeatedly for disturbing God Ye, but there’s a sullen young man waiting outside the club who insists Ye Xiu sent him. The security guards would have turned the teenager away, except a passing guild member recognized the name of Ye Xiu’s Ninja alt and decided they’d better check with him first, since everyone knew God Ye discovered and trained talented young players.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair, Ye Xiu can only laugh. Looks like his gambit to recruit Mo Fan actually worked. It’s been weeks since he gave Mo Fan his address, and he was beginning to believe his gambit had failed. But just as planned, once Mo Fan’s growing skills made the online game too boring, Mo Fan’s unique love for Glory drove him to accept joining a team. But this troublesome kid, did he really have to take such an early flight?

“When the training camp head supervisor comes in, tell him I recommended his new student,” Ye Xiu reminds the guild member in charge of Mo Fan, then goes back to sleep, still pleased with the progress of his stubbornest student.

Loafing into the guild room around ten with a youtiao hanging from his lips, Ye Xiu receives birthday greetings from the guild employees amid a shower of confetti dumped over his head by Ren Junchi and Chang Jianping.

Tian Sen scolds both of them while dusting Ye Xiu off. Shen Wanhe hunches behind his computer pretending he can't see what's going on, because then he'd have to take responsibility. Jia Shiming watches the whole fracas unfold with interest, and beside him their new rookie Summoner He Weitang doesn't know whether he's allowed to laugh without offending his seniors.

After their first taste of playoffs, Royal Style's main roster had unanimously decided to delay their vacation until after finals ended. Their summer days are spent working on individual practice until a BOSS spawns and the whole team gathers together for the hunt.

Last season, analyses of Royal Style all pointed out how the weakness of Ye Xiu's Herald of Autumn held the team back from utilizing their shotcaller's full potential. Guild Leader Meng and his subordinates had worked hard, but Herald of Autumn only had eight Silver equipment pieces when they finished the regular season. Ye Xiu intends to acquire the materials for at least two more, but his ambitions don't stop there. Really, the whole team's equipment needs to be raised a level, plus they need to stock materials for the level 75 update the year after next.

The other guilds can only suffer and surrender after being oppressed by a whole team of pros. Ye Xiu is presented so many BOSSes by the end of the day that his team claims each one counts as a present, absolving his teammates from the need for further gifts. If only all gifts were so useful. Ye Xiu wishes all his acquaintances gave him rare materials instead of gifts.

His QQ pings throughout the day as different pros offer their congratulations - or condolences - for reaching another year older. Even Ye Qiu appears and drags Ye Xiu away from his computer to eat a late lunch.

"Where's my present?" Ye Xiu asks as they walk.

Ye Qiu scowls and pokes him in the chest. "Shameless old man, isn't saving you from identity fraud enough?"

Ye Xiu tsks. "You forgot to buy me something, didn't you?"

"Where's *my* present?" Ye Qiu demands. "It's my birthday too!"

Ye Xiu shakes his head. "You expect a penniless elder to buy you trinkets? What a spoiled young master!"

Watching Ye Qiu fume for the rest of the meal is amusing; Ye Xiu considers this time between just the two of them quite nice.

Ye Xiu visits the training camp for the rest of the afternoon, checking on Mo Fan's enrollment and playing teaching matches with Tang Rou, Qiao Yifan, and the rest of the trainees.

After dinner he dungeons with the Su siblings. Ye Xiu received a box from them last week containing a tiny model of Herald of Autumn, and a plane ticket to visit them later this summer.

Ye Xiu falls asleep to Su Muqiu's voice in his ear, and dreams peacefully until morning.

---

The Su siblings own a modest apartment right around the corner from club Excellent Era. Fresh from the airport with a single carry-on slung over his shoulder, Ye Xiu is given the little-used guest room with a brand new computer barely out of the box.

The first few days of Ye Xiu's visit are a constant, three-way negotiation. There are too many phantoms lingering in the air - the Su siblings' memories of their Ye Xiu, Ye Xiu's severed relationship with his world's Su Muqiu, and the deep partnership and implicit trust he shared with Su Mucheng. Living beside a friend who shares the face of a ghost requires persistent mindfulness, and the three of them struggle against falling back into their memories, against slipping into old habits shared with those dead and lost.

Without a match to occupy him, Ye Xiu feels unmoored in City H, memory and reality clashing and overlapping, a jagged patchwork picture he can't trust. The disorientation is worse than it was in City B - so many of his most cherished memories are tied to this city, and Su Muqiu being, or *not* being present is especially jarring.

Naturally, they play Glory to cope. Glory is safe, Glory is reliable, and Ye Xiu has a very belated PK record to establish by trouncing Su Muqiu.

Su Mucheng allows this truce to hold for the first week, but insists the two of them leave the apartment for something more than food on the weekend. Ye Xiu and Su Muqiu are dragged blinking into daylight, and lacking any particular desire to sightsee they take Mucheng shopping instead.

It's something Ye Xiu had done with Su Mucheng, but never Su Muqiu. They were always too poor to spoil her when they were young. The mix of familiar and strange leaves him off-balance, but it's not unpleasant to have Su Muqiu beside him, carrying half of the bags.

Afterward, they go out for ice cream. Ye Xiu doesn't have a taste for sweets, so he never buys his own scoop. But when it was hot in the summer he'd steal a few bites from the Su siblings' portions. His spoon is half-extended before he remembers that sharing food is probably too intimate for their current relationship.

"No, it's okay," Su Muqiu says hastily when Ye Xiu hesitates. "I don't mind." Su Muqiu extends his cup, offering Ye Xiu a share of the treat. This was also a habit between them: Su Mucheng gets a whole portion, while Ye Xiu and Su Muqiu always share.

When Su Muqiu realizes what he's done, he chuckles helplessly. Ye Xiu gives him a wry smile, then makes a face when he tastes the overly sweet flavor Su Muqiu's chosen.

"We're really bad at pretending to be strangers," Su Mucheng says, licking her spoon.

“We’ve only met four times. If we’re not strangers, what are we?” Su Muqiu replies.

Su Mucheng considers the question, taking another bite. “I don’t think the usual rules cover this situation. Maybe we should make our own?”

“What did you have in mind?” Ye Xiu asks, taking another look at Su Muqiu’s ice cream before deciding the taste wasn’t worth the cold.

“We can decide when we need to,” Su Mucheng answers. “And we all have to agree. That seems fair.”

“Mmm,” Ye Xiu agrees, drowsy from the heat.

By dinnertime, fat dark clouds loom over City H. The trio hurry to order takeout, hoping to beat the storm. But just as they’re finished, the sky bursts open, sending down sheets of rain. The three of them gather by the door, watching the downpour. Five minutes, then ten minutes later, it’s clear the storm will last and their dinner is getting cold.

Su Muqiu hefts the plastic bag, grinning at the two of them. “Let’s make a run for it.”

“We’ll get soaked,” Su Mucheng replies.

“We won’t melt,” Su Muqiu counters, grin widening. “Ye Xiu can borrow my clothes if he needs.”

Ye Xiu sighs. “You’re going to make me run through the rain?”

“I didn’t bring an umbrella,” Su Muqiu laughs. “Besides, we don’t need one.”

Ye Xiu studies him for a moment. “No. I guess we don’t.” He holds out his hands; Su Mucheng takes his right hand, Su Muqiu his left. Then, after a deep breath, they dash out together, splashing through puddles and arriving at the apartment soaked to the skin, breathless with laughter.

---

With an accord established, the three of them ease into coexistence together, cautiously feeling their way forward.

Offered precious few chances to meet in person, most of Ye Xiu’s communication with Su Mucheng and Su Muqiu has been through QQ or phone, and they can’t discuss sensitive topics anywhere they might be monitored. While they know the basic facts of Ye Xiu’s life and rebirth, many things remain hidden. Ye Xiu’s visit is the first chance they’ve had since All-Stars to touch more profound and dangerous questions.

Over the two weeks of Ye Xiu’s visit, Su Muqiu and Su Mucheng have several opportunities to ask Ye Xiu about his death, or Su Muqiu’s death. By mutual agreement, they leave those conversations for the future. Someday, they will be close enough to earn that right. Until then, there are many things they can still share.



“Didn’t I tell you it would be Tiny Herb’s championship?” Ye Xiu gloats, lying on his belly with his head pillowed on his arms. The laptop streaming Tiny Herb’s post-match victory celebration is placed at the foot of the bed, precariously close to being pushed off.

Rolling over, Su Mucheng throws a handful of melon seeds at him. “You’re cheating.”

“Hey! Not on my bed,” Su Muqiu protests from Ye Xiu’s other side, kicking his sister’s calf with one socked foot. But Su Mucheng is vicious, and she squashes Ye Xiu underneath her as she lunges to take vengeance on her brother.

Su Muqiu is subjected to heavy pillow bombardment, with Ye Xiu trapped at the bottom of the pile, crushed underneath the Su siblings. In the chaos, the laptop tips over the edge of the bed, falling to the floor of Su Muqiu’s bedroom unnoticed.

“The screen’s cracked,” Su Muqiu reports mournfully after being kicked off the bed to lick his wounds in the desk chair.

“That one’s yours when we play Glory,” Ye Xiu announces, flopped on the bed recovering from being half-crushed to death.

“Hey!”

“That one is brother’s,” Su Mucheng agrees with a smile.

“I’m your captain Mucheng, you have to support me!”

“But Ye Xiu is our guest,” she protests. “Don’t I have to make him feel welcome?”

Su Muqiu looks Ye Xiu dead in the eye. “I’m throwing you out.” Slumping down in his chair, he clutches his heart and begins wailing, “My own sister, turning against me!”

Ye Xiu smirks while Su Mucheng collapses into a pile of giggles.

Being together like this really is wonderful.

---

“You’ll need to come in one more time to complete the paperwork, but everything is arranged to have you declared legally alive,” Ye Qiu explains, handing over a sheaf of papers to Ye Xiu. “You’ll be able to use your ID anywhere without problems.”

Ye Xiu leans back against the railing, flipping through the documents. It’s early morning, just after sunrise, and the two of them have returned to Beihai Park once again. “You’ve been working hard,” he teases, genuinely impressed by what’s been accomplished in such a short time.

Ye Qiu puffs up from the praise. “It wasn’t much. Once we received father’s support, the family’s connections made everything go smoothly.”

Then Ye Qiu’s expression twists. “Father hasn’t changed his mind. His condition for agreeing to go along with my wish is having you struck from the family register as soon as you’re

declared alive.”

Their parents had not wanted to meet Ye Xiu, but after a vial of blood and a cheek swab proved his identity beyond a doubt, they recognized the problem he posed. If Ye Xiu was exposed, the fallout would damage the Ye family’s reputation. Legitimizing Ye Xiu was the simplest solution to prevent embarrassment, so they allowed Ye Qiu to make the arrangements.

Sticking his hands in his pockets, Ye Xiu smirks. “Good. None of it belongs to me anyway. You can be the heir, Ah-Qiu, and I’ll play Glory.” He pretends to consider, then nods. “I bet I make more money than you do, too.”

“If you spend it all, you better not come crying to me,” Ye Qiu mutters, even though both of them know better.

“I’m not hopeless like you.”

Ye Qiu huffs, but it’s more resigned and irritated than properly angry.

“And Ye Qiu?”

“What?”

“Thank you,” Ye Xiu says, putting a hand on Ye Qiu’s shoulder.

Ye Qiu blinks rapidly, then clears his throat. “What will you do now?”

Looking up at the blue, cloudless sky, Ye Xiu shades his eyes with one hand, and the corners of his mouth turn upward. “Well, you never get tired of winning championships.”

## End Notes

Captain Tian Sen (Exorcist) - Peaceful Hermit  
Vice-captain Shen Wanhe (Spitfire) - Flash Memory  
Ren Junchi (Paladin) - Gentle Angel  
Chang Jianping (Mechanic) - Starshot  
Jia Shiming (Striker) - Wandering Sage  
He Weitang (Summoner) - Infinite Night (Season 8 Rookie)

In this verse, Guild Leader Meng was RS's VC for season 1&2. He's at least WXF's age, and was very much the one keeping GMY's personality in line. His departure is the beginning of RS's drop in performance. In the original verse he would have been ousted through management infighting, but discovering YX stabilized his position and gave him the chance to slowly push out the worst of the complaisance taking hold in RS's upper management.

叶睿 are the characters for Ye Xiu's stage name.

Original! YX had a congenital heart defect and died after a bad case of Endocarditis

Works inspired by this one

[Urban Legend #85466: Ye Rui really IS a-](#) by [Blurb\\_brain](#)

[I Run Towards the East, The Path to Glory Peak](#) by [Moustawott](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!