

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 1: THE BRIDE IN RED -----

The teacup burned through Mei-lin's silk gloves. She knelt on embroidered cushions that smelled of incense and old money, red wedding dress pooling around her like spilled paint. Two hundred faces watched from round tables draped in vermillion—business associates in tailored suits, relatives she'd never met, strangers who'd spent the evening measuring her worth in glances. *Don't shake. Don't spill. Don't give them ammunition.* The porcelain felt impossibly heavy. Steam rose between her trembling fingers, carrying jasmine and something metallic underneath—the taste of fear, maybe, or the realization that she'd signed her life away to people who smiled with their mouths but not their eyes. "For you, honored Mother." The words came out steady despite her hammering heart. "May you accept this unworthy daughter into your household." Ruihua's fingers—weighted with jade rings that clicked like warning bells—wrapped around the cup. The matriarch sipped once. Twice. Her gaze never left Mei-lin's face, as if she could see through expensive silk to the cheap cotton dress underneath, through careful makeup to village-rough skin, through practiced

deference to the screaming voice inside that said **run.** The phone vibrated against Mei-lin's thigh. **No. Not now. Please not now.** She'd turned it off twice. Checked before the ceremony. But there it was—insistent, wrong, impossible—pulsing through layers of fabric like something alive trying to claw its way out. Her hands jerked. Tea sloshed over the rim, splashing dark across Ruihua's silk sleeve. The music stopped. Silence dropped over the courtyard like a held breath. Two hundred pairs of eyes swiveled to the spreading stain. Mei-lin stared at the damage—watching it bloom across fabric that probably cost more than her father's medical bills—and felt the weight of two hundred judgments settle on her shoulders. "Clumsy." Ruihua's voice carried across the sudden quiet, each syllable precise as a surgeon's cut. She dabbed at her sleeve with a white handkerchief, lips pressed into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Pretty flowers often wilt when transplanted to richer soil." She set down the cup with deliberate care. "Let us hope you have stronger roots than you appear, child." Laughter rippled through the crowd. Polite. Nervous. The kind that agreed with power whether the joke was funny or cruel. Heat flooded Mei-lin's face. She pressed her forehead to stone, bowing so low her spine ached. "Forgive this daughter, Mother. I—" The phone vibrated again. Harder. **Stop. Please stop.** "Mei-lin?" Chen Rui's hand hovered near her shoulder, not quite touching. His voice carried the nervous edge he always got around his mother—the edge that said he was more afraid of Ruihua than protective of his wife. "Are you unwell?" She forced herself upright, manufacturing the smile she'd practiced in mirrors for three weeks. The bride's smile.

Grateful. Demure. Empty as porcelain. "Just overcome, husband." The lie tasted like copper. "The honor is... overwhelming." Through red silk, she glimpsed her phone screen: white text against black, bright enough to hurt her eyes. Strange characters. Words that made no sense. Then—nothing. As if it had never been there at all. Ruihua stood, silk robes whispering like secrets. "Let us feast." She announced it to the courtyard, voice carrying over lanterns and tables. "The ancestors have accepted the bride." Applause erupted. The orchestra resumed its assault. Servants materialized with trays of delicacies Mei-lin couldn't name—roasted duck glistening with fat, steamed fish with eyes that still looked accusatory, lotus root carved into flowers too perfect to be real. Mei-lin stumbled to her seat at the head table. Chen Rui guided her with a damp palm at her elbow, steering her like property already catalogued and shelved. The phone buzzed a third time. She pulled it from her pocket under the table, hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped it. The screen showed a message in characters that seemed to shift when she tried to focus: **Your first farewell gift is near. Prepare yourself.** The text vanished before she could screenshot it. The screen returned to normal—8:47 PM, a photo of her and Chen Rui from their engagement, smiling like people who believed in happy endings. *Farewell gift?* Mei-lin had never heard the term. Not in wedding customs. Not in village traditions. Not in the three months of etiquette training Chen Rui's family had insisted upon before they'd accept a bride from such... humble circumstances. "Wine, sister-in-law?" Li Fang leaned across the table, bottle poised over Mei-lin's cup. Her smile showed too many teeth. "Unless village girls

can't handle Baijiu?" The insult landed soft as a knife wrapped in silk. Wei-jun, Chen Rui's older brother, watched the exchange with dark eyes that gave nothing away. He'd been watching her all evening, Mei-lin realized. Watching the way predators watch—patient, calculating, waiting for the wounded animal to stumble. "I'm fine." Mei-lin heard her voice from somewhere far away. She drank. The alcohol burned down her throat, sharp and clarifying. "Thank you, sister." The word **sister** felt like glass in her mouth. Li Fang's smile didn't waver. She refilled the cup without asking. "You'll need to learn to drink properly here. The Zhangs have... vigorous traditions." She glanced at Ruihua, who was holding court at the center of the table like an empress receiving tribute. "Mother has very specific expectations for eastern wing brides." **Eastern wing brides.* Plural.* As if Mei-lin wasn't the first. As if there'd been others before her, learning the same brutal lessons in the same beautiful prison. The feast continued in waves. Course after course appeared—sea cucumber braised in oyster sauce, abalone that cost more than Mei-lin's entire dowry, bird's nest soup that tasted like expensive nothing. She ate without tasting, smiled without feeling, performed the role of grateful bride while her phone sat heavy as a stone against her leg. Around her, the Zhangs laughed and toasted and played at being a family. But Mei-lin saw the spaces between their smiles. The way Chen Rui flinched when Ruihua spoke. The way Li Fang's eyes went cold when no one was looking. The way Wei-jun said nothing, nothing, nothing—as if silence itself was a weapon he'd sharpened to perfection. "You're quiet tonight." Chen Rui's breath ghosted across her ear, wine-sweet and

cloying. "Overwhelmed?" "Happy," she lied. His hand found hers under the table. His palm was slick with sweat. "I know my family can be intense. But they'll warm to you. Just follow Mother's rules, keep your head down, and—" "And wilt quietly?" The words escaped before she could cage them. Chen Rui blinked. "What?" "Nothing." Mei-lin forced brightness into her voice. "The wine talking." But Ruihua's words circled her thoughts like crows: *Pretty flowers wilt when transplanted to richer soil.* Not advice. A prediction. A warning disguised as wisdom, the way all of Ruihua's cruelty seemed to be disguised—wrapped in tradition and family loyalty until you couldn't tell where care ended and control began. The servers brought out the final course—a whole fish, symbol of abundance. Its dead eye reflected lantern light as Wei-jun carved into it with ceremonial precision. He served Ruihua first, then the eldest uncles, working down the hierarchy of power and blood until finally, finally, he placed a small portion on Mei-lin's plate. The tail end. Bones and scraps. "How appropriate," Li Fang observed, voice carrying just far enough. "The tail for the newest addition." Laughter rippled around the table. Good-natured, they'd claim. Teasing. The way families do. But Mei-lin heard the edge underneath. Heard what they weren't saying: *You don't belong here. You'll never belong here. We're letting you know it now, on your wedding night, so you understand exactly where you stand.* Her phone buzzed. Not a short vibration this time. A sustained pulse that seemed to sync with her heartbeat. She shifted, trying to muffle it against her thigh, but the vibration intensified. Someone would hear. Someone would ask why the bride was getting mysterious messages

during her own wedding feast—“Mei-lin.” Ruihua’s voice cut through the noise. “You seem distracted.” The table fell silent. All eyes turned. “A moment, Mother.” Mei-lin’s throat closed around the words. “I need to use the restroom.” “The bride does not leave during the blessing course.” Ruihua lifted her wine cup, the gesture both delicate and absolute. “Tradition demands presence.” “Mother, she’s unwell—” Chen Rui started. “Then she will learn to endure.” Ruihua’s smile could have cut diamonds. “To my new daughter. May she grow strong roots in this household.” The table drank. Mei-lin drank. The wine tasted like copper and ash. Her phone pulsed one final time—then stopped. In the sudden stillness, Mei-lin checked the screen under cover of reaching for her napkin. The message was still there, but different now. Clearer: **Your first farewell gift is near. Look up.** The characters didn’t shimmer anymore. They sat there, solid and impossible, telling her to look up while two hundred people watched her perform gratitude for a cage disguised as a mansion. Against every instinct, Mei-lin raised her eyes. Ruihua was staring directly at her across the crowded banquet. Smiling. Holding a small red envelope between two fingers—the kind used for monetary gifts at weddings. The matriarch’s lips moved, forming words Mei-lin couldn’t hear over the orchestra and laughter and clinking glasses: *Welcome to the family, daughter.* The red envelope burst into flame. Not metaphorically. Not figuratively. Actual fire—orange and hungry—consuming the paper in Ruihua’s hand. But no one else reacted. No one screamed or jumped or threw water. The guests kept eating, kept laughing, kept toasting as if nothing was burning three feet from their

faces. Mei-lin blinked. The fire vanished. Ruihua's hand was empty, unblemished, turning gracefully to accept congratulations from a business associate as if she hadn't just held flame in her bare palm. Had she imagined it? Was she losing her mind? Was this what happened when you married into a family this wealthy, this powerful, this wrong—your brain simply gave up trying to process reality and started inventing impossibilities instead? Her phone buzzed one final time: **The game begins at midnight. Sleep well, bride.** The screen went dark. Mei-lin sat frozen, staring at her own reflection in the dead glass. The bride in red. The girl who'd agreed to this marriage because her father needed surgery and her village needed someone to marry up and she'd been naive enough to think that marrying for money was somehow more honest than marrying for love. *What have I done?* Around her, the Zhangs continued their celebration. The orchestra played. The lanterns swayed. The moon rose over the courtyard like a blind eye watching everything and judging nothing. And somewhere in the mansion—in the eastern wing where she'd be sleeping tonight, in rooms she hadn't seen yet, in spaces she'd be expected to call home—something was waiting. Something that sent messages that appeared and disappeared like smoke. Something that knew her phone number, knew where she was sitting, knew exactly how to make her look up at the precise moment Ruihua held fire. Something that called itself a game. Mei-lin looked at her husband—this stranger she'd promised her life to. This man who apologized for his family but never defended her. This person who was supposed to be her partner but felt more like a prison guard assigned to

ensure she didn't escape before the cell door locked. Chen Rui caught her staring. "What's wrong?" "Nothing," Mei-lin lied. Because what could she say? *Your mother just held fire in her hand and no one noticed*? *My phone is sending me messages about games and farewell gifts*? *I think I just sold myself to something worse than poverty*? "You look pale," Chen Rui said. "The banquet will end soon. Then we can retire to the eastern wing. You'll feel better after rest." *The eastern wing.* Where brides learned to wilt quietly. Mei-lin forced another smile. "Of course." But her phone felt like a coal in her pocket, burning through silk and skin and bone, branding her with knowledge she couldn't yet name: She'd married into something that looked like a family but felt like a trap. And whatever game was beginning at midnight—whatever farewell gift was expected of her—she had approximately three hours to figure out the rules. Or become another pretty flower that wilted too quickly in soil too rich for village roots. The lanterns swayed in a breeze that shouldn't exist in an enclosed courtyard. And in the distance—so faint she might have imagined it—Mei-lin heard laughter that didn't belong to any of the two hundred guests. Laughter that sounded like it was coming from beneath the earth. Or from the eastern wing. Or from her pocket, where her phone sat dark and silent and waiting for midnight.

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CHAPTER 2: THE GOLDEN PRISON -----

“The east wing belonged to the last bride,” Li Fang said, heels clicking against marble like a metronome counting down. “Before she left.” Mei-lin’s feet screamed inside wedding shoes two sizes too small—borrowed, like everything else she wore. She stumbled after her new cousin-in-law through corridors that stretched impossibly long, each one identical to the last. Rosewood panels gleamed under electric sconces. Ancestral portraits watched with painted eyes that seemed to track her movement. *Left.* Not died. Not disappeared. *Left.* The distinction felt important, though Mei-lin couldn’t say why. “How long ago?” She tried to keep her voice steady, casual, as if this were normal conversation and not reconnaissance in enemy territory. “Three months.” Li Fang didn’t slow down. “She lasted longer than most. Mother was almost disappointed when she asked for divorce.” *Asked for divorce.* Past tense. Implying the request was... what? Denied? Granted? Rendered moot by circumstances Li Fang wasn’t mentioning? They passed another display cabinet—this one holding a jade horse so perfect it seemed ready to gallop off its pedestal. Then another: ancient scrolls mounted behind glass, calligraphy Mei-lin couldn’t read but could feel judging her anyway. “Don’t touch anything,” Li Fang added, as if Mei-lin would dare. “Every item is catalogued. Mother has a photographic memory. She knows if even dust shifts out of place.” She paused, glancing back with a smile that showed too many teeth. “Some brides have tried to... supplement their circumstances. They’re not here anymore.” The words landed like stones in still water. Ripples of meaning spreading

outward: *supplement* (steal), *circumstances* (poverty), *not here anymore* (dead? disappeared? imprisoned in some other wing of this endless house?). Mei-lin's cotton dress stuck to her back under layers of borrowed silk. The hallway felt airless despite its size, as if the mansion itself was holding its breath. "Here." Li Fang stopped before a red lacquered door. "Your marital chamber. Romantic, isn't it? All that red." She pushed it open without knocking. The room swallowed them whole. Red everywhere—curtains, bedding, carpet, even the lacquered furniture gleaming like fresh blood under candlelight someone had already lit. The bed dominated: carved rosewood posts thick as tree trunks, silk canopy draping down like a shroud. It looked less like furniture and more like an altar. Mei-lin's belongings sat scattered across a gold-leaved vanity like evidence of a crime: plastic hairbrush next to jade comb, drugstore lipstick beside imported cosmetics, her dead grandmother's cloth-wrapped bundle dwarfed by leather jewelry boxes she hadn't brought. Someone had been through her things. Unpacked them. Judged them. Found them wanting. "Cozy," Li Fang observed, running one finger along the dresser's edge. "Mother's taste runs traditional. She believes brides should be... surrounded by auspicious colors." Her gaze drifted to the window. "Pretty view, though. Three stories up. Perfect for contemplation." The window offered darkness and distant city lights. Mei-lin couldn't tell if it was a suggestion or a warning. *Three stories up.* High enough to kill someone if they fell. Or jumped. Or were pushed. "The last bride," Mei-lin heard herself ask, "what was her name?" "Does it matter?" Li Fang moved toward the door. "She's gone. You're here. That's

how it works in this family—we don't dwell on the past. We focus on survival." She paused at the threshold. "Sweet dreams, little bride. Try not to sleepwalk." The door closed. The lock didn't click, but Mei-lin knew it would later. She stood alone in her beautiful prison, surrounded by red that looked different now—less celebration, more warning. Like blood someone had tried to paint over but couldn't quite conceal. Her feet left dark spots on the carpet. She looked down: blood seeping through white stockings, small coins of evidence that she'd walked too far in shoes that didn't fit.

Just like this marriage, some bitter part of her thought. *Too small. Wrong size. Bleeding before it even begins.* She limped to the bed and sat, wedding dress pooling around her like she was drowning in fabric. The mattress was too soft, too yielding—the kind of luxury that felt more like quicksand than comfort. The dowry chest sat at the bed's foot. Plain camphor wood, the only thing in this room that came from her village. Her mother had packed it three weeks ago, crying while she folded Mei-lin's cotton undergarments and cheap nightgowns and the jade necklace that had been Grandmother's. The chest's lid was open. Mei-lin's stomach dropped. She'd locked it. She remembered locking it. Had stood in her childhood bedroom with the key in her hand, promising herself she'd keep one thing private, one space the Zhangs couldn't violate. But here it was: open, inventory complete, every intimate item examined and catalogued like evidence at a crime scene. Her hands shook as she reached inside, checking—yes, the nightgowns were there. The undergarments. The cloth-wrapped bundle that held her grandmother's necklace, last valuable thing her family

owned. *Wait.* The bundle felt wrong. Too light. Mei-lin unwrapped it with hands that barely functioned. Inside: cotton padding. No necklace. No jade. Just emptiness and the faint smell of cedar, as if the jewelry box had never held anything at all. They'd taken it. Whoever unpacked her things had taken the one item worth stealing, the one piece of her grandmother she had left. *For inventory purposes,* she imagined Ruihua saying. *For insurance. For cataloging. For the family records.* For theft disguised as bureaucracy. Footsteps approached—sharp, deliberate, accompanied by the tap-tap-tap of something striking marble. A cane? A walking stick? The sound of authority announcing itself before it arrived? Mei-lin barely had time to close the chest before her door opened. No knock. No warning. Just Ruihua entering like she owned the room—which, Mei-lin supposed, she did. Owned the room, the mansion, the marriage, the bride herself. “Still dressed?” Ruihua moved through the space with proprietary grace, touching the curtains, the furniture, the window latch—testing, claiming, marking territory. “The servants should have helped you change. I’ll speak to them.” She produced a folded paper from her sleeve with the formality of a lawyer presenting a contract. Unfolded it with precise movements. Held it out. “The eastern wing rules. Every bride receives them. I suggest you memorize them by morning.” The document was beautiful—calligraphy so perfect it looked printed, ink black as judgment against cream paper. Mei-lin took it with numb fingers.

RULES FOR THE EASTERN BRIDE

1. Wake before dawn. First prayer at ancestors’ altar by 5:30 AM.

1. No phone calls without explicit permission from matriarch.
1. No visitors without 48-hour advance approval.
1. No leaving estate grounds without family escort.
1. Curfew: 9 PM. Bedroom door locks automatically at 9:30 PM.

1. Weekly accounting of all personal expenses submitted to matriarch.

1. Monthly review of household duties and wifely performance.

1. Absolute discretion regarding all family matters.

1. Respect hierarchy. Obey your elders without question.

1. **OBEDIENCE ENSURES HARMONY. HARMONY ENSURES SURVIVAL.** Mei-lin read it twice. Three times. The words didn't change. This wasn't a list of household guidelines. This was a prison manual. A catalog of ways they'd stripped her of autonomy before she'd even spent one night under their roof. "I expect adherence without exception." Ruihua opened the top drawer of the dresser—Mei-lin's drawer—and examined the contents with barely concealed distaste. Cotton underwear. Drugstore moisturizer. The cheaper deodorant that came in plastic instead of glass. "Your previous... standards... will need adjustment." She closed the drawer with a soft click that sounded like a cell door locking. "Where is my grandmother's necklace?" Mei-lin's voice came out smaller than intended. "It was in my dowry chest. Jade, with—" "All dowry items are inventoried upon arrival." Ruihua moved to inspect the closet, where someone had already hung silk dresses Mei-lin had never seen. "For insurance purposes. You'll receive documentation of all assets by week's end." *Assets.* As if her grandmother's final gift was

just another line item in a spreadsheet. “But I didn’t consent to—” “You consented when you signed the marriage certificate.” Ruihua turned, and for the first time since entering, she looked directly at Mei-lin. Really looked. The way someone looks at furniture they’re considering discarding. “Everything you brought belongs to the Zhang family now. Including you.” The air left Mei-lin’s lungs. “One more thing.” Ruihua crossed to the wall beside the vanity. Tapped her cane against the rosewood panel—once, twice, three times like a code. A section of wall slid open with a pneumatic hiss. Behind it: a camera lens, red light blinking like a patient eye. “Security,” Ruihua explained, voice mild as describing wallpaper. “The east wing has had... incidents. After the last bride’s unfortunate accident, we installed comprehensive monitoring.” The panel slid shut, concealing the lens but not the knowledge that it was there, always there, always watching. “For your protection, of course.” *Of course.* “The servants will wake you at five.” Ruihua moved toward the door. “I expect you at the altar by five-thirty. The ancestors are particular about punctuality. Don’t disappoint them.” She paused with one hand on the doorknob. “Or me.” The door closed. The lock clicked. Mei-lin sat frozen, rules still clutched in her hand, staring at the wall that hid the camera. She looked for the lens—where exactly was it? High corner? Behind the mirror? Embedded in the light fixture? The not-knowing was worse than knowing, turned the entire room into a panopticon where privacy was performed theater and surveillance was the only truth. She was being watched. Right now. This moment. Someone—something—was observing her sitting on this too-soft bed in her wedding

dress, feet bleeding, grandmother's necklace stolen, freedom catalogued and filed away with all the other assets she'd brought to this marriage. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Mei-lin pulled it out with shaking hands. The screen glowed accusatory in the dim candlelight: **The farewell gift system has activated.** **Check your dowry chest.** *Farewell gift.* Those words again, hanging in the air like smoke signals from a burning building. She looked at the chest. Back at her phone. At the chest again. *This is insane. I'm imagining things. Wedding stress. Culture shock. Too much wine at the banquet making me see messages that can't be there.* But the phone's screen stayed lit. The words didn't vanish like they had at the banquet. They sat there, solid and impossible, telling her to check a chest she'd already opened, already found violated. Mei-lin knelt before the dowry chest, opened it again. The items were exactly as she'd left them: nightgowns, undergarments, the empty cloth bundle where her necklace should be. *See? Nothing. Just paranoia.* She started to close the lid— And saw it. Tucked beneath the cotton nightgowns, small enough to miss on first inspection: a red envelope. The traditional kind, given at weddings and New Year's to carry money and luck. But this one was sealed with black wax. Mei-lin lifted it with fingers that barely functioned. The paper felt old—not vintage-store old but ancient-tomb old, as if it had been waiting decades for her specifically to find it. She broke the seal. Inside: not money. A photograph. Black and white, faded at the edges. It showed this room—her room, the eastern wing bridal chamber—in what looked like the 1990s judging by the hairstyle and fashion visible on the woman in the frame. A woman in a red

wedding dress. A woman standing exactly where Mei-lin was kneeling now. A woman who looked nothing like her but wore the same expression Mei-lin saw in mirrors lately: trapped, terrified, trying desperately to smile through fear that went bone-deep. Mei-lin flipped the photograph over. Words in handwriting that started neat but deteriorated into frantic scrawl: *I was bride #6. You are bride #7. The house takes payment. Find what they hide before they hide you. The system starts slow—small requests, reasonable demands. By the time you realize what's happening, you've already given everything that matters. Don't trust the smiles. Don't trust the luxury. Don't trust anyone who says it will get better.* *It only gets worse.* *If you're reading this, I'm already gone. Make sure you don't end up—* The message cut off. As if the writer had been interrupted mid-sentence and never returned to finish. Mei-lin's phone buzzed again: **Your first farewell gift is required within 72 hours. Failure results in consequences. Welcome to the house, bride.** She stared at the screen. At the photograph. At the wall hiding the camera. At the locked door. At the window three stories up that might be an exit or might be a threat depending on how desperate she became. *Bride #6.* Which meant at least five others before her. Five women who'd knelt in this room, read these rules, discovered they'd married into something that looked like a family but operated like a machine designed to break people down into component parts. Five women who were "not here anymore." The temperature dropped. Not metaphorically. Actually dropped—Mei-lin's breath came out in visible clouds, impossible in late spring, impossible in a climate-controlled mansion where

everything from humidity to lighting was regulated to museum standards. The red curtains moved. Despite windows she'd watched Ruihua test. Despite the complete absence of breeze. The fabric rippled like something was breathing behind it, pressing against silk from the other side. Mei-lin stood, backing toward the bed, photograph clutched in one hand and phone in the other—twin pieces of evidence that reality was fracturing around the edges, that the world she'd thought she understood had rules she'd never been taught. Her phone's screen lit up without her touching it:

Hint: The farewell gift is not for them. It's for us. You must give something up. Something precious. Something that proves you're willing to pay the price. **Check your reflection.** Against every instinct, Mei-lin turned toward the vanity mirror. Her reflection looked back—exhausted, terrified, wedding makeup smeared from tears she didn't remember crying. But the reflection's mouth was moving. Forming words Mei-lin wasn't speaking. Words she could lip-read in the candlelight: *They're watching. They're always watching. But so are we.* Mei-lin blinked. The reflection matched her perfectly now. Just her. Just the bride in the red dress in the golden prison, holding evidence of previous victims and wondering which came first: the madness or the mansion. Her phone buzzed one final time: **72 hours begin now. Tick tock, bride #7.** Through the wall—so close it might as well be in the room with her—Mei-lin heard Li Fang's voice singing softly: *“Seven brides in red silk gowns,*
Seven smiles, seven crowns, *Seven secrets, seven graves...”* The song cut off mid-verse. Silence rushed in to fill the space—the kind of silence that felt like presence rather

than absence. The kind that held its breath and waited and watched through camera lenses hidden in walls. Mei-lin sat on the edge of the bed, still in her wedding dress because undressing meant admitting she was staying. Meant accepting that this was her life now: locked doors and stolen jewelry and rules that read like imprisonment and photographs of women who'd stood exactly where she stood, terrified and trapped and trying to warn the next victim before the house hid them too. *72 hours.* Three days to provide a "farewell gift" to something that spoke through her phone and moved her reflection and knew she was bride #7 in a sequence that suggested the pattern would continue long after she was gone. Three days to figure out what, exactly, lived in this house alongside the Zhangs. Three days before consequences she couldn't imagine but suspected she'd recognize when they arrived. Outside her window, the city glittered with lights from ordinary lives—people in apartments eating dinner, watching television, going to sleep in beds that didn't feel like altars and rooms that didn't lock from the outside. People who hadn't married into labyrinths that catalogued their belongings and monitored their bedrooms and counted them as bride number seven in a sequence that implied the previous six had failed some test she hadn't known existed until the proctor's instructions arrived via phone message. Mei-lin looked at the photograph in her hands. At bride #6's terrified smile. At the desperate scrawl warning her that small requests would lead to reasonable demands would lead to realizing too late that she'd given everything that mattered. *Find what they hide before they hide you.* The lights went out. All of them—

candles, lamps, even the city glow visible through the window, as if someone had thrown a switch on reality itself and plunged her into darkness so complete it felt like drowning. And in that darkness, close enough to be inside her head or right behind her or both at once: Laughter.

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 3: FIRST FLICKER

The phone lit up on its own. Mei-lin hadn't touched it. She was staring at the ceiling in the dark, still wearing her wedding dress because undressing meant acknowledging the cameras, meant accepting that someone watched her even now. The silk scratched against her skin. Her body screamed for sleep. Her mind wouldn't allow it. The glow pulled her attention. Blue light painting the red curtains silver. She'd been lying here for hours—three? four?—counting the seconds until the 72-hour deadline. Seventy hours left. Seventy hours to deliver a farewell gift worth 100,000 yuan to people who might not exist, for reasons she couldn't comprehend, or else... Or else what? The photograph of Bride #6 was still clutched in her hand, edges softening from her sweat. Evidence. Proof she hadn't imagined the chest, the hidden compartment, the warning scrawled in desperate handwriting. *They'll ask for a farewell gift. No matter what you give, it won't be enough.* The phone pulsed brighter. Mei-lin's heart kicked against her ribs. Part of her wanted to

ignore it—if she didn’t look, it wasn’t real. If she didn’t engage, maybe it would stop. Maybe morning would come and this would reveal itself as exhaustion, as wedding night hysteria, as anything but what it felt like. But the other part of her needed to know. Information was survival. Ignorance was death. She reached for the phone. The screen showed a message forming in real-time, words appearing letter by letter as if someone sat on the other end, typing: *“Hello, Bride #7. You’ve been quiet. Are you afraid?”* The phone slipped from her hands. She caught it before it hit the floor, pulse hammering in her throat. The message cursor blinked. Waiting. *Someone hacked my phone,* she thought desperately. *That’s all. Just a hack. Some cruel prank—* But hackers didn’t leave photographs in locked chests. Hackers didn’t know about the cameras, about Ruihua’s rules, about the surveillance system that made every inch of this mansion a stage. Her fingers trembled as she typed: *“Who is this?”* The response came immediately: *“We have many names. The House calls us Keeper. The family calls us Curse. You may call us... inevitable.”* Mei-lin’s breath came shallow. The room felt smaller. The walls pressed in, red curtains moving in wind that didn’t exist, and somewhere in the house a pipe groaned like something dying. She typed again: *“What do you want?”* *“Task: Deliver a farewell gift worth 100,000 yuan by dawn, third day.”* *“A farewell gift is something precious you surrender. Something that costs you. The greater the sacrifice, the greater your value to us.”* Her hands shook so badly she could barely read the screen. *“Failure penalty: Chen Rui’s hidden debt (500,000 yuan to illegal loan sharks) will be exposed to Ruihua. He will be

disowned. Possibly worse."* * "You have 70 hours. We suggest you begin planning."* Chen Rui has *debts*? The thought cut through her terror like a blade. Five hundred thousand yuan. To *loan sharks*. Her husband—the man she'd married eight hours ago, the man whose child she was expected to bear, whose family she'd sworn to honor—was a stranger. A liar. A man in debt to criminals. And somehow this thing—this System, this Keeper, this *curse*—knew. One hundred thousand yuan. Mei-lin looked around the dark chamber. Wedding gifts lined the dresser—jewelry, silk scarves, decorative boxes. Chen Rui's family had showered her with expensive things, all carefully chosen, all ultimately meaningless. Her dowry had been absorbed into family accounts the moment the marriage certificate was signed. She owned nothing here. She *was* nothing here. Except— Her hand went to her throat. The jade necklace. Her grandmother's heirloom, the only valuable thing her family possessed. Cold stone against her pulse. * "Keep it safe,"* her grandmother had whispered on her deathbed. * "It's the only valuable thing we have. Pass it to your daughter. Promise me."* Mei-lin had promised. The necklace was worth maybe ninety thousand yuan to the right buyer. Close, but not enough. She typed: * "I don't have that much."* * "The gift must be yours to give. Stealing from the family doesn't count—that's too easy. This must hurt. Must cost you something irreplaceable."* * "We'll know if you cheat. We always know."* The certainty in those words made her skin crawl. She wanted to scream but the cameras were watching. Wanted to run but the door was locked. Wanted to wake Chen Rui but what would she even say? *Supernatural phone messages

are threatening to expose your debts unless I pawn my grandmother's necklace?* He'd think she was insane. Or worse—he'd tell Ruihua. And Ruihua would have her committed, removed, erased from the family like Bride #6 had been erased. Her fingers moved before she could stop them: *“Why are you doing this?”* The response came slowly this time, each word deliberate: *“Because the house must be fed. Because the family takes and takes and takes. Because seven brides came before you, and seven brides will come after. Because you accepted the red envelope. Because you're here.”* *“Welcome to your inheritance, Bride #7.”* The screen went dark. Mei-lin sat in the sudden blackness, heart pounding so hard she thought it might break through her ribs. Seven brides before her. Seven brides *after*. An endless chain of women fed to this house, to this family, to this curse that spoke through phones and knew secrets that should be impossible to know. She was shaking. She realized she was still wearing the wedding dress, still playing the role of the obedient bride even though no one was watching except whatever lived in the walls. Slowly, she stood. Her legs barely held her. She began pulling jewelry from the dresser drawers—wedding gifts from Chen Rui's relatives, gold bangles and pearl earrings and jade pendants. She spread them across the bed, mentally calculating worth. The necklace plus the wedding ring Chen Rui had given her this morning. The pearl earrings from Aunt Yuhua. The gold bracelet from— The door opened. Mei-lin spun, heart in her throat. Chen Rui stood in the doorway, hair mussed, eyes half-closed with sleep. He wore loose cotton sleeping clothes. He looked young and confused and utterly useless. “Mei-lin?”

His voice was thick. “What are you doing? Why aren’t you sleeping?” She stared at him—this man who was her husband, who had debts he’d never mentioned, who had brought her into this house without warning her what it would cost. The jewelry was spread across the bed between them like evidence of a crime. “I couldn’t sleep,” she managed. Her voice sounded strange. “I was just... looking at everything. It’s overwhelming.” Chen Rui stepped into the room. He had a key. Of course he had a key. Privacy was an illusion here. “I know it’s a lot.” He rubbed his eyes. “But you’re safe here, Mei-lin. You’re family now. Mother seems strict, but she just wants order. You’ll adjust.” *You’re safe here.* The lie hung in the air between them. She was locked in a room with surveillance cameras, being threatened by something that lived in her phone, pawning her grandmother’s necklace to protect a husband who didn’t even see her terror. But he couldn’t see. He moved through the room like a man in a dream, noticing nothing—not her tear-stained face, not the wedding jewelry laid out like evidence, not her phone still glowing faintly from the bed. “Come on.” He reached for her hand. “Come to bed. Tomorrow will be easier. Everything’s easier after the first night.” He kissed her forehead—a gesture of affection that felt performative, mechanical. Then he was moving toward the door again, yawning. “Get some sleep,” he said. “Mother expects us at breakfast by seven.” The door closed behind him. The lock clicked. Mei-lin stood alone in the dark chamber, surrounded by jewelry that belonged to a family she’d married into eight hours ago, wearing a wedding dress that felt like a costume for a play she hadn’t auditioned for.

She looked at the jade necklace in her hands. *“This is your security,”* her grandmother’s voice echoed in her memory. *“Your escape. Never give it away for a man, for a family, for anything.”* But what choice did she have? The phone buzzed. *“Wise choice forming. The necklace will suffice—barely. But you’ll need to add something more. Perhaps your wedding ring? A gift given with love, surrendered with grief. Perfect.”* Mei-lin’s stomach turned. It was **watching**. Even now, even with Chen Rui gone, it was watching. Listening. Knowing. *“We’ll send instructions for the pawn shop. Go at dawn. Tell no one. Return before 7 AM breakfast.”* *“Welcome to the game, Bride #7. Your first sacrifice awaits.”* ---- She changed at 4:30 AM, turning her back to where she thought the camera might be hidden—a small rebellion, probably meaningless, but it was all she had. Simple clothes. Dark jacket. Hair pulled back. The jade necklace and wedding ring wrapped in a handkerchief, nestled in her pocket like a tumor. At 5:15 AM, the phone lit up with new instructions: *“Lucky Fortune Pawn Shop. Alley behind Dongmen Market. Ask for Mr. Wu. He’ll give you fair price—we’ve arranged it. Return by 6:45 AM. Servants wake you at 6:50. They must not know you left.”* *“The door will unlock at 5:15 AM. You have 90 minutes. Don’t be late.”* Mei-lin stared at the time stamp. 5:15 AM. Exactly now. And then she heard it—the soft **click** of the lock disengaging. Her hands went cold. No one had come to the door. No footsteps in the hallway. No key in the lock. Just the mechanical **snick** of the bolt sliding back, impossible, but real. She stood frozen. If she opened that door, she was choosing to play. Choosing to believe that whatever spoke through her phone could unlock doors, could

arrange pawn shops, could know things that shouldn't be knowable. If she opened that door, there was no going back. But if she didn't go... Chen Rui's face swam in her mind. Young, oblivious, drowning in debts she hadn't known existed. The family would destroy him. And what would they do to her? Mei-lin crossed the room. Her hand touched the doorknob. It turned smoothly, easily. The hallway beyond stretched dark and silent. Red carpet runner disappearing into shadow. Ancestral portraits watching from the walls, eyes following her even in the dim pre-dawn light. She stepped into the hallway. The air felt different out here. Colder. Heavier. Like the mansion itself was breathing around her, waiting to see what she would do. She moved quickly, quietly, toward the main staircase. Seventy hours had become sixty-nine. Time was bleeding away and she still didn't understand the rules, didn't know what happened after the first task, didn't know if Bride #6 had completed her farewell gift or if that was why she'd disappeared— Behind her, in the empty bridal chamber, her phone screen glowed with a final message: *“Good girl. The first sacrifice is always the hardest. They get easier. That's what makes them dangerous.”* The screen went dark. Mei-lin reached the top of the staircase. From somewhere below—the west wing, maybe, or the servants' quarters—she heard footsteps. Someone else was awake.

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 4: THE WEDDING NIGHT'S TEST

The mansion gate opened for her. Mei-lin stood in the pre-dawn darkness, hand frozen on the iron bars, watching them swing inward without sound. No creak of hinges. No grinding of metal. Just silent, impossible compliance. Behind her, the Zhang mansion loomed—windows dark, watching. Ahead, the city streets stretched empty except for the first stirrings of vendors preparing for market day. Freedom lay in one direction. Trap in the other. She couldn't tell which was which anymore. The jade necklace burned in her pocket like a coal. Her grandmother's voice whispered through her exhaustion: *Never give it away for a man, for a family, for anything.* She stepped through the gate. It closed behind her with a soft click. No going back now. ---- The streets felt wrong. Mei-lin walked quickly, head down, cheap sandals slapping against pavement still damp from night rain. She'd changed out of the wedding dress, thrown on the plainest clothes she owned—dark jacket, simple pants—but she couldn't disguise everything. The wedding makeup still clung to her face. She'd been too afraid to use the bathroom fully, afraid servants would notice cosmetics disturbed, towels damp, evidence of waking before dawn. So she moved through the empty city like a ghost caught between worlds—neither bride nor working girl, neither Zhang family princess nor the shop assistant she'd been two days ago. A delivery truck rumbled past. She flinched, pressing herself against a building wall. What if it was Zhang family business? What if someone recognized her? The new bride sneaking out on her first night would be unforgivable. Ruihua would have her sent back to

her family in disgrace. Or worse—locked in that red chamber forever, another disappeared bride joining Bride #6 in whatever void swallowed women who failed this family. Market vendors were setting up stalls along Dongmen Street. The working world she used to inhabit. Women arranging vegetables, men unloading fish on ice, steam rising from breakfast carts. Last night she'd sat at a banquet table worth more than these people earned in a year. Now she was sneaking through their world like a thief, hiding her face, bleeding through cheap shoes that didn't fit. Her feet screamed with each step. The wedding shoes had destroyed them—delicate silk things designed for photographs, not walking. Blisters had formed and burst. Blood seeped through the sandals' thin straps. But pain was good. Pain meant this was real. Meant she wasn't having a breakdown, wasn't imagining the phone messages and impossible tasks and the supernatural cursor that knew things no one should know. She checked the time: 5:42 AM. Sixty-eight minutes left. The alley behind Dongmen Market split into multiple branches. Mei-lin turned left, then right, then found herself facing a dead end. Trash bins and graffiti and sleeping cats. Wrong turn. She backtracked, heart hammering. Time bleeding away like the blood from her feet. The necklace in her pocket grew heavier with each moment, weighted with memory—her grandmother's hands placing it around her neck on her sixteenth birthday. *This is yours. Your security. Your escape.* Some escape. She found the right alley on the third attempt. Narrow, grimy, smelling of old garbage and something chemical. A single bulb burned over a doorway halfway down. Lucky Fortune Antiques. The sign was faded,

ironic. Nothing lucky about desperation. Mei-lin stood outside, hand on the door, last moment to turn back. She could return to the mansion right now. Wake Chen Rui, confess everything—the phone messages, the threats about his debts, the impossible System that knew secrets it shouldn't know. Face consequences together. But her phone sat silent in her other pocket. No messages since she'd left. Which somehow felt more threatening than the constant notifications. Like it was watching. Waiting. Testing whether she'd follow through. *The door will unlock at 5:15 AM. You have 90 minutes. Don't be late.* The System had unlocked her chamber door at exactly 5:15. Had opened the mansion gate at exactly the right moment. Was orchestrating this like a conductor leading an orchestra. If she turned back now, would it still protect Chen Rui? Or would his debts be exposed, his life destroyed, because she'd failed the first test? Mei-lin opened the door. A bell chimed—old-fashioned, brass, the sound too cheerful for what was about to happen. The shop was cramped, every surface covered with other people's desperate surrenders. Jewelry in locked cases. Cameras and electronics on shelves. Musical instruments hanging from ceiling hooks. The accumulated debris of financial catastrophe, arranged neatly, priced coldly. Behind the counter sat an old man with wire-rimmed glasses and calculating eyes. He looked up when she entered. "You're the Zhang bride," he said. Not a question. Mei-lin's blood turned to ice. "How—" "Wedding makeup. Expensive coat hiding cheap clothes underneath. Jasmine perfume from that house—distinctive blend, Ruihua's personal formula." Mr. Wu shrugged, setting down the newspaper he'd been reading.

"And they told me you were coming." Her throat closed. "They?" But she already knew. The System. The Keeper. The curse that lived in her phone and unlocked doors and arranged pawn shops in advance because it had done this before. With Bride #6. With others before her. *You're not the first Zhang bride to stand where you're standing.* Mr. Wu's voice echoed the thought before she could speak it aloud: "You're not the first. And you won't be the last." Mei-lin crossed to the counter on shaking legs. She pulled the necklace from her pocket—jade glowing green even under harsh fluorescent light—and placed it on the glass. Mr. Wu picked it up with careful hands. He examined it through a jeweler's loupe, turning it slowly, checking the clasp, the carving, the quality of the stone. "Qing dynasty," he said finally. "Quality jade. Good craftsmanship. Sentimental value to you, obviously." He set down the loupe. "Market value: 70,000 yuan." Not enough. Mei-lin's hands fumbled with her wedding ring. Gold band, small diamond—given to her yesterday morning in a ceremony she'd thought meant something. She added it to the counter. "The ring is Zhang family property," Mr. Wu said quietly. "Traceable. Risky for me to take it." "Please." Her voice cracked. "I need 100,000 yuan. I'll add anything. I'll—" "The pearl earrings," he said. "The ones you're wearing." She'd forgotten about them. Engagement gift from Chen Rui's family, presented three months ago when the match was formalized. She reached up, fingers numb, and removed them. They clicked against the glass counter. Three items. Three pieces of her life. Mr. Wu calculated in silence. "Necklace: 70,000. Ring: 25,000. Earrings: 8,000." He looked at her over his glasses. "Total

103,000 yuan." She should feel relief. She'd hit the target. But all she felt was hollow. "The last one," Mr. Wu said, sliding a pawn slip across the counter. "Three years ago. She stood right where you're standing. Pawned her wedding necklace first. Then her earrings. Then her dowry jewelry, piece by piece." He paused. "Then things that weren't jewelry at all." Mei-lin's hand shook as she picked up the pen. "What happened to her?" "Gone." One word, flat and final. "The family said she ran away. Abandoned her husband. Disgraced them." His eyes were sad. "But I saw her face the last time she came here. That wasn't a woman planning to run. That was a woman with no choices left." "What is this?" Mei-lin whispered. "What's happening to me?" "I don't know what lives in that house," Mr. Wu said. "I know the Zhangs are cursed. I know brides go in and don't come out the same—if they come out at all. I know something in that house is hungry." He tapped the pawn slip. "And I know you're not leaving without the money." She signed. Her handwriting looked foreign—shaky, desperate. Mr. Wu opened a safe behind the counter and counted out cash. Hundred-yuan notes in neat stacks. Blood money. Betrayal money. "You have ninety days to buy it back," he said. "After that, I sell it." They both knew she'd never see these things again. He pushed the cash across the counter. "Whatever game you're playing—whatever they're making you do—there's always a choice. Remember that when they tell you there isn't." Mei-lin grabbed the money and ran. ---- Dawn was breaking as she raced through the streets. The city was waking—vendors calling to each other, shop shutters rolling up, the first buses rumbling past. Normal people starting normal days. None of

them carrying 103,000 yuan in cash, none of them running from supernatural threats, none of them bleeding through cheap sandals because they'd pawned their grandmother's legacy to protect a husband who didn't even know he was in danger. Time check: 6:28 AM. Seventeen minutes to get back before servants knocked on her door. Her chest burned. Feet screamed. But she pushed harder, faster, because getting caught now would mean everything—the pawned necklace, the sneaking out, the cash hidden in her jacket—would be discovered. Explained. Punished. The mansion appeared through morning mist like something from a nightmare. The gate opened for her again. Silent. Expecting her. She slipped through, pressed herself against the wall, waiting for shouts, for servants, for anyone who might have seen. But the grounds were empty. The east wing door: unlocked. Her hallway: deserted. She reached her chamber, slipped inside, locked the door behind her. The room looked exactly as she'd left it. Bed still made. Curtains still drawn. No evidence of her absence. She had four minutes. Mei-lin tore off the jacket, shoved the cash into the secret pocket she'd found in her wedding dress lining—thank god for elaborate bride clothes with their hidden compartments. She threw on her nightgown, stumbled to the bathroom, grabbed a cloth and wiped frantically at her face. The wedding makeup came away in streaks. She looked like a ghost. Eyes red-rimmed, skin pale, hair disheveled. 6:45 AM. Her phone buzzed.

“Task complete. Gift accepted. Farewell gift received: 103,000 yuan in sentimental value, plus dignity, plus trust in family legacy. Well done.” *“Penalty removed: Chen Rui’s debt remains hidden from Ruihua. For now.”* *“You have

earned your first reprieve. Rest. Tomorrow brings new challenges.”* *“Welcome to the game, Bride #7. You’ve proven you can pay.”* Mei-lin stared at the screen. The words blurred. She should feel relief—the threat was gone, Chen Rui was safe, she’d completed the impossible task. But all she felt was emptiness. Her grandmother’s necklace: gone. Her wedding ring: gone. A piece of herself: gone. *Once you start feeding it, it never stops, girl.* Mr. Wu’s words echoed in the hollow space where relief should have been. 6:50 AM. Knock on the door. “Young madam, it’s time to wake. Matriarch expects you at the altar in forty minutes.” Mei-lin’s voice came out cracked: “I’m awake. Thank you.” Footsteps retreated down the hallway. She looked at herself in the mirror. Exhausted. Makeup smeared. Eyes like bruises. She looked like she’d been through a war. Because she had. She stumbled to the bathroom to clean up properly, to make herself presentable for breakfast, to hide the evidence— And stopped. On the bathroom mirror, written in condensation that shouldn’t exist because no one had showered, no hot water had run: *“Next farewell gift — a secret revealed. Time limit: 48 hours.”* Below it, a list of names: *Chen Rui* *Wei-jun* *Li Fang* *Ruihua* *“Choose wisely. Some secrets destroy faster than others.”* The writing began to fade as she stared. She reached out to touch it, to prove it was real— 7:00 AM. Another knock, harder this time. “Young madam, you must dress. Breakfast is at seven-thirty. You cannot be late on your first morning.” Mei-lin looked down. Blood from her feet had left marks on the white bathroom tiles. Small crimson prints. Evidence. She grabbed a towel, dropped to her knees, scrubbed frantically. The blood smeared but

cleaned. She worked faster, breathing hard, aware of time slipping away. The servant's voice again: "Young madam?" "Coming!" Her voice was too high, too strained. "Just washing my face!" She stood, threw the bloody towel into the hamper, checked the tiles. Clean. The mirror was clear now—no message, no names, no impossible condensation. Had it been real? Or was she losing her mind? Her phone sat silent on the bathroom counter. No new messages. But she could feel it watching. Waiting. Hungry. Mei-lin looked at her reflection—a stranger in a nightgown, with hollow eyes and secrets bleeding from her skin. She had thirty minutes to make herself presentable for her first breakfast as a Zhang wife. Thirty minutes to hide the evidence of where she'd been, what she'd done, what she'd surrendered. The house had taken its first payment. And the message on the mirror promised it was already hungry for more.

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 5: A COLD WELCOME

"You look tired, daughter. Did you not sleep well on your first night?" Mei-lin stood at the threshold of the breakfast hall, every eye in the room fixed on her entrance. Morning light streamed through tall windows—too bright, too exposing, illuminating every imperfection she'd tried to hide. Fresh clothes. Carefully applied makeup. Hair styled in the modest bun appropriate for a new bride. But her feet screamed with each step, bandages hidden beneath thin shoes doing

nothing to cushion the damage. Her hands trembled from adrenaline crash and zero sleep. The smell of congee and steamed buns made her stomach turn—she hadn’t eaten since the wedding banquet, but food felt impossible now. *Smile. Bow. Don’t let them see you’re breaking.* “I slept adequately, Mother.” Mei-lin bowed to Ruihua, who presided at the head of the long mahogany table like a queen on a throne. “The room is beautiful. I’m simply... adjusting.” She took her assigned seat—lowest position at the table, furthest from Ruihua. The family was already seated, waiting. The servants had woken her at 6:50. It was now 7:30, exactly on time. So why did everyone look at her like she was late? “Adjusting?” Li Fang’s voice cut across the table, sweet as poisoned honey. “To what, exactly? Silk sheets? Climate control? Or perhaps the expectations?” Her smile was sharp as glass. Chen Rui shifted uncomfortably beside his mother. “Li Fang, don’t tease. Of course Mei-lin needs time to adjust. It’s a big change from—” He stopped, realizing he was about to say something that would insult both his wife and her family. Wei-jun sat across from Mei-lin, silent until now, watching her with the same calculation she’d seen at the wedding. He set down his teacup with deliberate care. “The ancestral altar this morning,” he said quietly. “You were late.” Mei-lin’s mind went blank. “I... the servant woke me at 6:50. I came as quickly as I—” “First prayer is at 5:30 AM.” Ruihua’s interruption was smooth, final. “I believe I made this clear in the rules document. The ancestors do not appreciate tardiness.” *They set me up.* The realization hit like cold water. The rules had said 5:30. But the servant woke her at 6:50. They’d deliberately given her wrong information to

ensure she failed on her first morning as a Zhang wife. A test. A trap. And she'd walked right into it. "I apologize, Mother." Mei-lin bowed her head, hating the words even as she spoke them. "It won't happen again." "See that it doesn't." Ruihua took a delicate sip of tea. Servants moved forward to serve breakfast—congee steaming in porcelain bowls, bamboo baskets of baozi, small plates of pickled vegetables. Traditional morning meal that Mei-lin's stomach rejected on sight. She forced herself to take a bite. Chew. Swallow. Play the role. The table ate in tense silence. Uncle Zhang, a minor family elder, focused intently on his congee. Li Fang picked at her food with theatrical disinterest. Chen Rui glanced at Mei-lin periodically, concern warring with something else in his expression. Confusion? Suspicion? Ruihua set down her teacup with deliberate precision. The sound rang out like a gavel. "I noticed your dowry chest was inventoried this morning. Standard procedure for new brides—ensuring all gifts are properly catalogued." Mei-lin's blood turned to ice. "Your family's jade necklace is missing from the manifest." The table went silent. Servants stopped moving. Even the sounds from the street outside seemed to fade, leaving only the terrible weight of Ruihua's words hanging in the air. Chen Rui's head whipped toward Mei-lin. "Missing? How could it be missing? Mei-lin, did you move it somewhere?" She'd practiced this lie in the mirror while bandaging her bleeding feet. Had rehearsed the words, the tone, the expression. Now they came out smooth despite her hammering heart: "The necklace—the clasp was damaged during the journey. I noticed it at the banquet. I was afraid of losing it, so I took it to be repaired." The lie tasted like ashes. "I should have

informed someone. I apologize, Mother." Ruihua's eyes never left Mei-lin's face. "Repaired. At which jeweler?" Mei-lin named the first shop that came to mind—one she'd passed during her desperate journey to the pawn shop. "Master Liu's shop. On Dongmen Street." "Master Liu retired three years ago." Ruihua's voice remained perfectly calm, perfectly cold. "His shop is now a tea house." *Caught.* The word echoed in Mei-lin's mind as the family watched her squirm. Chen Rui's face shifted from confusion to something harder. Li Fang barely suppressed a delighted smile. "I... I must have misremembered the name." Mei-lin's voice came out too high, too desperate. "There were so many shops. I was nervous, overwhelmed. Perhaps it was Master Chen's shop? Or the one near the—" "How odd," Li Fang interrupted, "to lose track of a family heirloom on the first night of marriage. One might think..." She paused, letting the moment stretch. "You pawned it." The accusation hung in the air like smoke. "That's absurd." Chen Rui's defense was immediate but weak. "Mei-lin would never— Why would she need to pawn anything? She's family now. We provide everything." "Unless she needed money for something she couldn't ask for." Wei-jun's quiet voice cut through the rising tension. His eyes remained fixed on Mei-lin. "Something secret." Ruihua leaned back in her chair, the picture of calculated patience. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. Mei-lin, we'll send a servant to verify with the jeweler. You can provide the exact address after breakfast. Yes?" It wasn't a question. Mei-lin was trapped. If she provided an address, they'd discover her lie within hours. If she refused, she confirmed her guilt. If she confessed to pawning the necklace, she'd have to explain

why she needed 100,000 yuan desperately enough to betray her grandmother's memory. Her phone buzzed under the table. Everyone heard it. The sound cut through the tense silence like a knife. Ruihua's eyes narrowed. "Personal phones are not permitted at family meals. The rules were clear." "I'm sorry, I—" Mei-lin's shaking hands fumbled for the phone to silence it. But as she pulled it from her pocket, the screen was visible to those seated near her—Chen Rui on one side, Li Fang angled across the table, both close enough to see the glowing message: *"Next farewell gift – a secret revealed. Choose: Chen Rui, Wei-jun, Li Fang, or Ruihua. 48 hours. Tick tock."* Chen Rui saw it. His face drained of color. Li Fang craned her neck, trying to read the screen more clearly. Mei-lin shoved the phone back into her pocket, but it was too late. Too late. "What was that message?" Chen Rui's voice came out strangled. "Nothing." Mei-lin forced the word out. "Spam. I'll delete it." But Li Fang was laughing—a high, theatrical sound. "Farewell gift'? 'Choose'? What sort of spam reads like a threat?" She turned to Ruihua, eyes bright with malicious delight. "Mother, I think we should examine the bride's phone. For security purposes." The walls were closing in. The family staring. The servants watching. Every exit blocked. Mei-lin stood abruptly. Her chair scraped against polished wood—a breach of etiquette that made everyone flinch. "I'm not feeling well. May I be excused?" "You may not." Ruihua's voice dropped to a temperature that could freeze blood. "Sit down." Power struggle. Mei-lin remained standing, knees shaking but refusing to yield. "I said." Each word precise as a scalpel. "Sit. Down." The atmosphere in the room shifted—danger crackling in the air

like electricity before a storm. Mei-lin sat. “Since you seem unable to account for family property,” Ruihua continued, gesturing to a servant standing against the wall, “and since you’re receiving mysterious messages at breakfast, we’ll implement closer monitoring. Xiao Chen will accompany you throughout the day. For your safety and ours.” Translation: constant surveillance. A warden. “Mother, that’s excessive.” Chen Rui tried one more time. “Mei-lin just needs time to—” Ruihua silenced him with a single look. “Perhaps the bride needs rest.” Wei-jun set down his chopsticks. “She looks exhausted. Almost as if she didn’t sleep in her room last night.” He paused, letting the implication sink in. “Did you sleep well in your room, sister-in-law?” *He knows.* Somehow, impossibly, he knew she’d left. Had he been awake? Had he seen her? Were there cameras she didn’t know about? “Your feet, Mei-lin.” Li Fang’s voice was pure theatrical concern. “You’re limping. Did you injure yourself?” All eyes dropped to Mei-lin’s feet. The bandages were visible through the thin fabric of her shoes—white gauze peeking out, spots of red seeping through. “How did you injure your feet, daughter?” Ruihua’s question was ice. Mei-lin opened her mouth. No words came. What could she say? That she’d destroyed them running through the city at dawn to pawn her grandmother’s necklace because a supernatural phone app was threatening to expose her husband’s gambling debts? Her phone buzzed again—loudly, insistently, demanding attention. Ruihua extended her hand across the table. “Give me the phone.” Not a request. A command. Mei-lin’s hand moved to her pocket— The phone buzzed one more time, vibrating hard enough that everyone could hear it— And then

the entire mansion's power cut out. Darkness. Complete and sudden. Servants gasped. Someone's teacup clattered against a plate. Confusion rippled through the room. "What's happening?" Li Fang's voice, sharp with alarm. "Stay calm," Ruihua ordered. "It's just the breakers—" In the darkness, Mei-lin's phone screen glowed like a beacon. Everyone could see it. *"Emergency override. Data protected. Choose your secret now or I choose for you."* Four options appeared, text glowing blue-white in the blackness: 1. *Chen Rui's gambling debts (500,000 yuan)* 1. *Wei-jun's embezzlement (2 million yuan)* 1. *Li Fang's affair with married investor* 1. *Ruihua's offshore accounts (30 million yuan)* *"You have 30 seconds. Choose."* The lights flickered back on. Everyone at the table had seen the screen. Chen Rui staring at option one, face white as paper. Wei-jun frozen, eyes locked on option two. Li Fang's mouth open, the color draining from her cheeks as she read option three. Ruihua's fingers clenched around her teacup, knuckles bone-white, staring at option four. Their faces: shock. Rage. Fear. Recognition. "What—" Chen Rui started. "That's not—" Wei-jun interrupted. "How did it—" Li Fang's voice cracked. And then Mei-lin's phone delivered one final message, loud enough that everyone heard the notification chime: *"Time's up. Initiating full disclosure."* The phone's screen blazed brighter. And then, impossibly, the message appeared on every device in the room—on the servants' phones in their pockets, on the tablet Uncle Zhang kept for reading news, on the smart display mounted on the wall showing the family calendar. *Chen Rui's gambling debts: 500,000 yuan. Underground casinos. Loan sharks threatening collection.* *Wei-jun's embezzlement: 2 million

yuan. Siphoned from family accounts over three years. Offshore investments.* *Li Fang's affair: Ongoing relationship with Zhang family investor Wang Ming. Both married. Meeting at Imperial Garden Hotel, Room 408.* *Ruihua's offshore accounts: 30 million yuan. Hidden from family. Tax evasion. Money laundering.* Silence. And then chaos. Chen Rui shot to his feet. "That's—those are lies! How did—" "You gamble?" Ruihua's voice cut like a blade. "You dare gamble with my family's—" "Your family?" Wei-jun stood, face twisted with rage. "Your offshore accounts? Thirty million yuan you've hidden? While the rest of us—" "How dare you judge me!" Ruihua's composure shattered. "I built this family! That money is—" "An affair?" Uncle Zhang's voice rose over the din. "Li Fang, you've been meeting—" "Don't you dare!" Li Fang shrieked. "Don't you dare judge me when you all—" Accusations flew. Chairs scraped. Voices rose to shouts. The carefully maintained facade of family unity crumbled like paper in fire. And in the center of it all, Mei-lin sat frozen, watching the destruction unfold. Her phone buzzed one last time. * "Congratulations, Bride #7. You've advanced to Level 2."* * "Task complete: Secret revealed (all four options selected for maximum chaos)." * * "The real game begins now."* Mei-lin realized with crystalline horror what had just happened. The System hadn't just forced her to choose a secret to reveal. It had revealed all of them. To everyone. At once. The nuclear option. Chen Rui was shouting at his mother. Wei-jun was demanding explanations. Li Fang was crying—real tears or performance, impossible to tell. Ruihua had gone perfectly still, her face a mask of fury barely contained. And every one of them, in the

spaces between their rage and accusations, turned to look at Mei-lin. At the phone in her hand. At the bride who had brought this destruction into their house. “What did you do?” Chen Rui’s voice broke through the chaos. He was staring at her like she was a stranger. “What is that thing? How did it—” But Mei-lin couldn’t answer. Because she didn’t know. She’d thought she was playing a game. Completing tasks to survive. Protecting her husband from his own mistakes. But the System had just made her the catalyst for the family’s destruction. And somewhere in the walls of this cursed house, something was watching. Feeding. *Satisfied.*

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 6: WHISPERS AT DAWN

“Mei-lin! Wait—stop!” She didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. Her feet carried her through the mansion’s corridors in blind flight—away from the breakfast hall, away from the chaos of exposed secrets and erupting accusations, away from Ruihua’s fury and Wei-jun’s rage and the way Chen Rui had looked at her like she was something dangerous. Behind her, footsteps. Voices calling. The family imploding in real-time. Mei-lin burst through the east wing doors into the gardens. Dawn mist clung to ancient willows, turned the koi pond into something from a dream. She stumbled to the stone bridge, gripping the railing, gasping for air like she’d been held underwater. The phone in her pocket was silent now. The

System's work complete. She'd just detonated an entire family and didn't even know why. Footsteps on gravel behind her. Lighter than she expected. Not Chen Rui. Mei-lin turned. Xiao Chen stood three meters back—the servant Ruihua had assigned as her shadow. Young woman, maybe twenty-five, with a face trained to reveal nothing. Close enough to observe every movement. Far enough to pretend privacy existed. It didn't. Mei-lin turned back to the pond, watching koi move beneath the surface like ghosts. Her hands shook. Breakfast sat untouched in her stomach, threatening to come back up. "What was that?" Chen Rui's voice made her flinch. He stood at the garden entrance, still in his breakfast clothes, face pale and strained. Behind him, the mansion windows glowed with morning light—any one of them could be watching. Ruihua, Wei-jun, Li Fang, servants, cameras. No privacy. Not even here. Xiao Chen retreated slightly, giving the illusion of distance while remaining close enough to hear everything. "What just happened in there?" Chen Rui moved closer, and Mei-lin saw his hands were shaking too. "That message—those secrets—how did your phone—" "I don't know." The words came out raw. "You don't know?" His voice cracked between confusion and something harder. "Your phone just exposed my mother's offshore accounts, Wei-jun's embezzlement, Li Fang's affair, and my—" He stopped, swallowed hard. "My debts. How did it know about the debts, Mei-lin?" The way he said it—*how did it know*—confirmed everything. The gambling. The loan sharks. The 500,000 yuan that had hung over her head like an axe since the System first mentioned it. All real. "Is it true?" she asked quietly. "Do you owe that much?" Silence stretched between

them. A koi surfaced, mouth opening and closing soundlessly, then disappeared back into murky water. “I was going to handle it.” Chen Rui’s voice was barely above a whisper. “I didn’t want you to worry. It was my problem, not yours.” The bitter irony choked her. He’d married her partly for her dowry—she understood that now, understood the practical calculations behind the match. And she’d pawned her grandmother’s necklace to protect him from debts she wasn’t supposed to know existed. Neither of them had trusted the other enough to tell the truth. “Where did you go last night?” The question came suddenly, sharper. “I woke up around three. You weren’t in bed. Your feet are bandaged—I saw them at breakfast. You look like you haven’t slept at all.” He stepped closer, and she saw fear mixing with the confusion in his eyes. “Did you meet someone? Is someone threatening you? Is that what the messages are? Is someone blackmailing you to—” “Brother Rui!” Li Fang’s voice cut across the garden like a blade. She appeared on the stone path, perfectly composed despite the breakfast chaos, makeup flawless and expression carefully arranged into concern. Behind her, Xiao Chen straightened—they were coordinating, Mei-lin realized. The servant reported to Li Fang. Maybe reported to everyone. “Mother wants you,” Li Fang said, stopping just close enough to interrupt but far enough to maintain propriety. “Wei-jun is having an episode about the embezzlement accusations. Apparently he needs you to confirm you knew nothing about it.” Her smile could cut glass. “Family solidarity and all.” Chen Rui looked torn—trapped between his wife who couldn’t explain herself and his family who demanded his presence. He turned back to

Mei-lin. "We're not done talking." But he left anyway. Following Li Fang back toward the mansion, shoulders tense, leaving Mei-lin alone in the garden with her assigned shadow and the morning mist slowly burning away. She listened to their footsteps fade. Then it was just her and Xiao Chen and the koi pond and the impossible weight of what had just happened. "You're wondering how your phone knew all those secrets." Mei-lin spun. Li Fang had returned. Alone this time. She stood on the stone bridge, morning light making her look almost ethereal. She gestured to the bench near the willow. "Sit." "I'd rather stand." "Suit yourself." Li Fang sat anyway, crossing her legs with deliberate grace. "I've been where you are. Three years ago." The words hung in the air between them. Mei-lin's throat tightened. "What?" "The messages. The tasks. The feeling like you're losing your mind." Li Fang's voice had lost its usual theatrical quality. What remained was something harder. Tired. "I played the game too." "You've seen them?" Mei-lin moved closer despite herself. "The System—the phone messages—you've—" "For six months." Li Fang looked out at the pond. "I completed every task. Stole heirlooms from locked rooms. Exposed family secrets. Destroyed relationships I'd spent years building." She paused. "I thought if I reached the end, if I completed enough tasks, I'd win my freedom." "And?" "There is no end." Li Fang's laugh was bitter as poison. "Just more tasks. More destruction. The System feeds on chaos—every task you complete makes it stronger. Every secret you expose, every farewell gift you surrender, you're feeding something that can never be satisfied." Mei-lin felt the ground shifting beneath her feet. "Then how do I stop it?" "You don't." Li Fang finally

looked at her, and for the first time Mei-lin saw something genuine in her expression. Not mockery. Something closer to pity. "You either become it—like Mother did—or you break. Like I did." She pushed up her sleeves. Thin white scars crossed both wrists. Not fresh. Years old. Healed but permanent. "I tried to leave," Li Fang said quietly. "The System doesn't allow that." Mei-lin's stomach turned. "Ruihua—the System has her too?" "Had. Past tense. Mother won. Or maybe she just survived long enough to become indistinguishable from it." Li Fang pulled her sleeves back down. "So now I stay. I play my small part. I needle new brides, test them, see who'll survive and who'll shatter." She looked at Mei-lin with something almost like respect. "You're stronger than I thought. Most brides break by breakfast on day two." The words hit like a slap. "You've been helping it. Testing me." "I've been surviving. There's a difference." "Is there?" Mei-lin's voice came out harder than she intended. "You torment people for a thing that tortured you. That makes you complicit." "Maybe." Li Fang stood, brushed imaginary dust from her clothes. "Or maybe it makes me realistic. The house always wins, Mei-lin. The only choice is how much of yourself you preserve in the losing." She turned to leave, then paused. "Choose carefully with the next task. Some truths shatter glass. Others shatter bone." Then she was gone, leaving Mei-lin alone with Xiao Chen's silent surveillance and the weight of impossible choices. Her phone buzzed. Mei-lin's hands went cold. She pulled it out with shaking fingers. * "Level 2 begins. You've revealed secrets. Now reveal yourself." * * "Task: Confess one truth about yourself that would destroy your marriage. Tell Chen

Rui before sunset. Reward: Protection from one family member's revenge. Penalty: All your secrets exposed."*
* "Time limit: 12 hours."* The phone slipped from her fingers. She caught it before it hit the ground, pulse hammering. The System had escalated. From taking things—possessions, money, dignity—to exposing others' secrets, to now demanding she destroy herself. Piece by piece. Layer by layer. What truth could destroy her marriage? That she'd never loved Chen Rui? That she'd married for security, not romance, using him as an escape route from her village and her father's debts? That she'd been lying since the moment she'd said "I do"? That she'd pawned her grandmother's necklace not to save him but to save herself from whatever consequences the System promised? That she was starting to hate this family more than she feared them? * "Choose wisely. Some truths shatter glass. Others shatter bone."* Li Fang's words echoed the System's message. A new notification appeared: * "Hint: Chen Rui is also receiving tasks now. His next one involves you. Time is running out for both of you."* Mei-lin's blood turned to ice. The System wasn't just targeting her anymore. It was playing them against each other—husband versus wife, brother versus brother, mother versus children. A family of players, all receiving different tasks, all being pushed toward mutual destruction. Li Fang was right. There was no winning. Only degrees of losing.
"Young madam." Xiao Chen's voice made her jump. The servant stepped forward, face still carefully neutral.
"Matriarch requests your presence. Immediately." Not a request. Mei-lin followed her back through the gardens, through the mansion's corridors, her mind racing. Twelve

hours until sunset. Twelve hours to decide which truth would hurt least. Twelve hours before— Xiao Chen stopped at a door Mei-lin recognized. Ruihua's private study. The room she'd broken into to steal the jade horse. The room where she'd found Bride #6's photograph hidden in an impossible chest. The door opened. Inside, Ruihua sat behind her desk like a judge awaiting verdict. Wei-jun stood by the window, arms crossed, face still twisted with barely controlled fury from breakfast. Chen Rui occupied the corner—forced to attend, trapped between his mother and his wife. On Ruihua's desk, a single piece of paper. Mei-lin's vision tunneled. The pawn shop receipt. From Lucky Fortune Antiques. For one jade necklace, Qing dynasty. Received: 70,000 yuan. Her handwriting on the signature line. Mr. Wu had betrayed her. Or the System had arranged this. Or both. "You pawned family dowry property." Ruihua's voice was cold enough to freeze blood. "On your first night as a Zhang wife. You lied about it at breakfast. And you brought chaos into this house with your... device." She gestured toward Mei-lin's phone. "Give me one reason I shouldn't send you back to your family in disgrace." Wei-jun stepped forward. "The phone knows things. Private financial information. Account numbers. How?" His eyes were hard, calculating. "Who's feeding it data? Who are you working for?" *They think I'm a spy.* The realization hit her like cold water. They thought she was a corporate plant, a rival family's weapon, someone's tool against them. "There has to be an explanation—" Chen Rui started. Ruihua silenced him with a single look. The room fell silent. All eyes on Mei-lin. Waiting. Her phone buzzed. Everyone heard it. The sound cut through the tension like a

gunshot. Ruihua extended her hand across the desk. "Give it to me. Now. Or you leave this house with nothing but the clothes on your back." Mei-lin's hand moved to her pocket—The phone screen lit up through the fabric, bright enough that everyone could see it glowing. She pulled it out. The message was visible to everyone: *"FINAL WARNING: Tell Chen Rui your truth in the next 60 seconds or I tell Ruihua yours."* *"Countdown: 60... 59... 58..."* The numbers ticked down in glowing red. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui—her husband of two days, a stranger she'd betrayed before knowing his name. She looked at Ruihua—the matriarch who'd catalogued her like inventory, watched her through cameras, waited for her to fail. She looked at Wei-jun—the embezzler who needed her to be the villain so he wouldn't be. And she looked at her phone counting down to exposure: *"45... 44... 43..."* The truth would destroy them. The silence would destroy her. Either way, something shattered. "I married Chen Rui for money." The words came out clear, steady, final. "Not love. I never loved him. I needed escape from my village, from poverty, from my father's debts that he accumulated gambling just like his son does." She met Chen Rui's eyes. "I used you. For security. For this house. For a life better than the one I had." The room went silent. Chen Rui's face had gone white. "There." Mei-lin looked at the phone. "My truth. Are you happy now?" *"Congratulations. Level 2 complete. Protection granted: One family member will be restricted from acting against you for 72 hours. Choose wisely. Level 3 begins at midnight. Rest well."* The phone went dark. Chen Rui turned without a word and walked out. The door closed behind him with the finality of a coffin lid.

Mei-lin stood in the center of Ruihua's study, surrounded by people who hated her, married to a man whose heart she'd just broken in front of his family, and the only thing she felt was emptiness. She'd completed the task. She'd destroyed her marriage. And Level 3 was coming at midnight.

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 7: THE ANCESTRAL ROOM

"Come. There's something you need to see."

Ruihua's voice cut through the silence of the study where Mei-lin still stood, Chen Rui's final words echoing in her ears. *I don't know who you are.* Wei-jun had left moments after his brother, disgust written across his face. Now it was just Mei-lin and the matriarch, surrounded by the evidence of her pawned necklace and the phone that had exposed every family secret. Not an invitation. A command. Mei-lin's body moved before her mind caught up—following because what else could she do? Xiao Chen materialized in the doorway, ready to enforce compliance if needed, but Ruihua waved her off. "Just us, daughter. What I'm about to show you requires... privacy." They walked through corridors Mei-lin had never seen before. Deeper into the west wing, past the family quarters, past the servants' areas, into sections of the mansion that felt older. The wallpaper changed from modern silk to faded patterns from decades past. The air grew colder. Heavy. Mei-lin's exhaustion was a physical weight.

She hadn't slept since the wedding night—forty-eight hours of fear and tasks and revelations. Hadn't eaten more than a few bites. Her body screamed for rest. But her mind stayed sharp from adrenaline and terror. *Where is she taking me? No one knows we're here.* Ruihua stopped before a portrait of the Zhang family founder—a stern-faced patriarch from a century ago, eyes that seemed to follow movement. She reached up and pressed a section of the ornate frame. A click. Mechanical, precise. The portrait swung outward like a door. Behind it: stone steps descending into darkness. "After you." Ruihua gestured. Mei-lin's feet wouldn't move. "Or I can have Xiao Chen escort you down. Your choice." The threat was gentle. Absolute. Mei-lin descended. ---- The smell hit first—incense so thick she could taste it. Sandalwood and something sharper, medicinal. The stone steps were worn smooth in their centers from generations of feet. No electric lights here. Only oil lamps mounted on walls, their flames casting shadows that moved like living things. At the bottom, a room. Ancient. The stone walls carved with characters Mei-lin couldn't read—older forms of Chinese, perhaps, or something else entirely. An altar dominated the space, covered in offerings: fresh fruit, burning incense, paper money for the dead. Family tablets arranged by generation, each one inscribed with names and dates. But it was the collection along the walls that made Mei-lin's blood run cold. Women's jewelry. Hairpins. Photographs in frames. A wedding veil. Pearl earrings. A jade bracelet that looked familiar— *These belonged to previous brides.* Dowry items. Personal possessions. Arranged like trophies in a hunter's den. "Every Zhang bride for six generations has stood where

you're standing." Ruihua moved to the altar and lit fresh incense from the flames already burning. "Some understood their role. Others resisted." Her tone suggested resistance ended poorly. Mei-lin forced her voice to work. "What is this place?" "The truth." Ruihua turned, backlit by lamplight, looking more like a priestess than a matriarch. "This room predates the mansion by two hundred years. Everything else was built around it. Foundation and origin. The beginning of everything the Zhang family became." She didn't sit—paced instead, like a teacher lecturing a slow student. "This family's wealth didn't come from hard work or good fortune, daughter. It came from understanding how the world truly works. Power requires sacrifice. Success demands payment. And someone must always pay." Mei-lin's throat tightened. "The System. You know about it." "Know about it?" Ruihua's laugh was sharp. "Child, I am it. Or was, until I earned my freedom by feeding it enough to satisfy its hunger for a generation." She moved to the wall of artifacts, trailing her fingers across a silver hairpin. "When I married into this family forty years ago, I was like you—naive, hopeful, believing love conquers all." Her hand closed around the hairpin. Tight enough that her knuckles went white. "The Zhang matriarch before me taught me the truth. The house feeds on brides. Always has. We either feed it willingly, strategically, or it takes what it wants violently, messily." She released the hairpin. "I chose survival. I learned the rules. I played the game better than anyone before me." "Game?" Mei-lin's voice cracked. "Women have died—" "Yes. They have." Ruihua pulled something from a cabinet near the altar—an old leather journal, pages yellowed and soft with age.

"This belonged to the previous matriarch. And before her, another. And another. A record of every bride who entered this house since the contract was made." She opened it to a page at random. "Each woman who enters must choose: become the sacrifice or become the knife." She handed the journal to Mei-lin. The leather was warm, as if recently held. Mei-lin opened it with shaking hands. Pages filled with names, dates, entries in different handwriting—dozens of women writing in the same book over decades. *1985 - "Today I gave my mother's ring to the house. It accepted the offering. Three months of peace earned. Three months to prepare the next payment."* *1987 - "The fifth bride couldn't pay what was demanded. They found her in the garden at dawn. The house always collects its debts."* *1992 - "I've learned the rules now. Give before it takes. Destroy before you're destroyed. The house rewards those who serve it willingly rather than resist."* *2003 - "My son married today. His bride is young, gentle, afraid. She won't last the season. They never last unless they learn to be cruel."* Mei-lin's hands shook so badly the pages blurred. She flipped forward, searching for more recent entries, and found— Gaps. Entire pages torn out. Years missing. Crucial information redacted or removed, leaving holes in the narrative like missing teeth. "Where's the rest?" Her voice came out hoarse. Ruihua's smile could cut glass. "Some knowledge is earned, not given. You'll understand when you've proven yourself worthy of deeper secrets." "Worthy?" The word tasted like poison. "You mean complicit." "I mean alive." Ruihua took the journal back, replaced it in the cabinet with careful reverence. "You think you're special because a phone sends you messages? You

think you're the first bride to experience demands and tasks and punishments?" She gestured to the wall of artifacts. "Every one of them received the same. The technology changes—letters became telephone calls became text messages—but the pattern is eternal. The house adapts. It always has." Mei-lin's mind reeled. This wasn't supernatural coincidence or technological haunting. This was systematic. Deliberate. Generational. "Why?" The question came out desperate. "Why does this happen? What is this house?" Ruihua moved to face her directly. In the lamplight, her face looked ageless—ancient and young at once, worn smooth by decades of secrets. "Legacy. Curse. Contract. Choose whatever word comforts you, daughter." Her voice dropped lower. "Six generations ago, a Zhang ancestor made a bargain for wealth and power beyond imagining. The cost was blood—specifically, daughters brought into the family. Brides without Zhang blood, outsiders with no protection. Fresh sacrifices to maintain the flow of fortune." The horror of it crystallized. "You knowingly marry your sons to women you intend to destroy." "We marry them to women who might destroy themselves, yes. Or might survive. Or might thrive." Ruihua's expression didn't change. "You think we're monsters. But look around this mansion. Look at the wealth, the power, the influence. This family controls construction empires, shapes municipal policy, builds cities." Her voice hardened. "Someone must pay for that. Better strangers than our own blood." Mei-lin backed away until her shoulders hit the stone wall. Cold seeped through her clothes. "You brought me here to tell me I'm going to die." "No." Ruihua stepped closer. "I brought you here to tell you that you have a

choice. A real one." ---- "You can fight the house—like most brides do." Ruihua's tone shifted, almost gentle now. Almost kind. "Complete its tasks desperately, hoping for mercy that never comes. Give and give and give until there's nothing left. Eventually, you'll break. You'll make a mistake. And the house will consume you." She paused, letting the words sink in. "Or you can learn its rules. Understand its appetite. Feed it strategically, not desperately. Survive long enough to become matriarch yourself. To earn your freedom like I did." Mei-lin felt bile rise in her throat. "Become like you? Sacrifice other women to save myself?" "I've survived forty years in a house that devours brides like fire consumes paper." Ruihua's voice remained steady. "How long will you last, daughter? A week? A month? Will you make it to your first anniversary?" She walked to a small window set high in the stone wall—the only source of natural light in this underground room. It overlooked a section of garden Mei-lin had never seen before. Overgrown. Wild. Beautiful and neglected at once. "The last bride who stood here chose defiance. She's buried there." Ruihua pointed to a section near the wall. "Three stones from the left. No name on the marker—she doesn't deserve one." The threat was crystalline. Clear. "I'm giving you what no one gave me—warning. Guidance. A chance to survive." Ruihua moved toward the door, toward the steps leading back up to the mansion proper. "The house will demand another farewell gift soon. When it does, come to me first. I'll tell you how to satisfy it without destroying yourself completely." "Why would you help me?" Ruihua paused on the first step. "Because I'm tired of burying brides in that garden. Because training a successor takes time and

energy I'd rather spend elsewhere. Because you're stronger than the others—you lasted two days before breaking, and even then, you broke your marriage, not yourself. That shows potential." She started up the steps, then stopped. "One more thing. Your phone messages? They're not just coming to you anymore. Chen Rui receives them now. Wei-jun too. Soon, everyone in this house will be playing the game simultaneously. When that happens, you'll need allies." Her eyes met Mei-lin's in the lamplight. "Choose your enemies carefully, daughter. They multiply faster than friends." Then she was gone, footsteps fading up the stone stairs. Leaving Mei-lin alone in the room of sacrifices. ---- The silence pressed in. Mei-lin stood motionless, processing the weight of what she'd learned. Six generations. Dozens of women. All fed to whatever lived in this house's foundations. She moved back to the cabinet, pulled out the journal again. Ruihua hadn't forbidden it. She flipped to the most recent entries. Three years ago. A bride named Lin Mei. The handwriting started confident, educated, became frantic over weeks, then ended abruptly. * "The tasks won't stop. I've given everything—my jewelry, my dignity, my secrets. Now it wants me to hurt someone. Actually hurt them physically. I can't. I won't. That's not who I am." * * "It's escalating. Threatening my family in my village. My sister. My mother. If I don't complete the next task, it will expose them, ruin them, maybe worse. But I can't. God help me, I can't." * The entry ended. No conclusion. Mei-lin flipped forward with shaking hands. One final entry in different handwriting. Ruihua's script, precise and cold: * "Lin Mei (Bride #6) deceased. Garden burial, east section. Lasted 21 days. Cause: refused escalation to violence. Note: future

brides must be tested for capacity for necessary cruelty. Compassion is a fatal flaw in this house."* Mei-lin's phone buzzed. The sound was obscene in the sacred silence. She pulled it out, hands numb: *“Level 3 begins. Previous task: confess a truth. Next task: commit an act.”* *“Task: Physically harm another person before midnight. Must draw blood. Target options: Chen Rui, Wei-jun, Li Fang, Ruihua, or servant of your choice.”* *“Reward: 48 hours of peace. Penalty: Your village family becomes targets.”* *“Time limit: 14 hours.”* *“Escalation is inevitable. Resistance is fatal. Choose who bleeds or everyone bleeds.”* Mei-lin looked at the small window, at the garden where Lin Mei lay. She refused violence. She's dead. The pattern was clear. Undeniable. She walked to the altar where generations of brides' possessions lay like offerings to a hungry god. Her fingers closed around a hairpin—sharp, metal, ancient. The same type that had fallen from her sleeve at breakfast. In the incense smoke, she swore she saw faces watching her. Six women in red wedding dresses. Waiting to see if she'd join them in the ground. Or become something else entirely. Her phone buzzed one more time: *“The matriarch chose you for a reason. She sees what you could become. The question is: do you?”* Mei-lin clutched the hairpin until it bit into her palm. Drawing blood. Her own. Fourteen hours until midnight. Fourteen hours to decide who else would bleed.

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ##
CHAPTER 8: THE DINNER PARTY

“Hold still, young madam. The pins need to be secure.” Mei-lin gritted her teeth as the servant drove another hairpin into her scalp. The elaborate updo pulled tight enough to make her eyes water. Fourteen hours since the System had demanded violence. Ten hours until midnight. No sleep. No rest. Just this performance she had to deliver or watch everything collapse. The qipao they’d squeezed her into was traditional silk, embroidered with phoenixes, so tight she could barely breathe. Every inhale was a calculated effort. The makeup they’d applied was thick enough to hide the exhaustion bruising her face, but she could feel it cracking with each expression. She looked perfect in the mirror. She felt like she was dying. “The hairpin, young madam.” The servant held out the final piece—an ornate silver pin to complete the style. But Mei-lin’s hand went to her sleeve instead, where the ancient hairpin from the ancestral room pressed cold against her skin. Sharp. Metal. Deadly if she chose to make it so. *Who can I hurt with minimal damage? A servant? Xiao Chen? Someone the System would accept as payment without destroying what’s left of my life?* Her phone sat silent in her pocket. Waiting. Watching. “Young madam?” “Use that one.” Mei-lin gestured to the decorative pin. The weapon stayed hidden. For now. ---- The formal dining room blazed with light from the crystal chandelier. The long mahogany table was set with the family’s finest china—patterns so delicate they looked like they’d shatter if you breathed wrong. Silver service gleamed. Fresh flowers in

elaborate arrangements. Servants positioned along the walls like statues, choreographed to perfection. Three investors sat with the family, and millions of yuan in construction funding hung on whether this dinner convinced them the Zhangs were still stable. Despite this morning's explosion of secrets. Mei-lin entered last—protocol demanded the lowest family member arrive after everyone else. All heads turned. The investors assessed her like she was part of the inventory. Chen Rui sat near his mother, already on his second glass of wine, and didn't meet Mei-lin's eyes. Ruihua presided at the head of the table, immaculate in midnight blue, every hair in place, performing perfect matriarch despite the chaos threatening to consume them. "My new daughter-in-law, Mei-lin. A recent addition to our family." Mr. Zhao, a construction magnate in his sixties with silver hair and calculating eyes, raised his glass. "Congratulations on the marriage. The Zhang family continues to grow and strengthen." The words were platitude. His tone suggested he'd heard otherwise. "You look exhausted, dear." Mrs. Chen, a property developer in her fifties with diamond earrings worth more than Mei-lin's village, studied her with uncomfortable precision. "Wedding festivities must have been demanding." She saw it. The cracks beneath the makeup. Mr. Lin— younger than the others, finance sector, sharp suit and sharper mind—smiled at Chen Rui. "You're a lucky man. Though you look tired too. Late nights?" Joking tone, but his eyes were knives. He'd heard the rumors about this morning's chaos. Mei-lin took her assigned seat—lowest position, furthest from Ruihua, closest to the servants' entrance. The qipao restricted her movement as she sat. The

hairpin in her sleeve pressed against her wrist with each gesture. *Midnight is five hours away. I need to hurt someone. Draw blood. The task was specific.* First course arrived—delicate soup in porcelain bowls, garnished with herbs Mei-lin couldn't name. Conversation flowed around her like water around a stone. Construction timelines. Profit margins. Market projections. Wei-jun was trying too hard, overcompensating after this morning's embezzlement exposure. Li Fang covered for both brothers with practiced charm, redirecting conversation when it veered too close to dangerous topics. Chen Rui drank and said nothing. Ruihua conducted the evening like a symphony, controlling every note, every pause. Mei-lin's role was simple: smile when appropriate, pour tea when cups emptied, embody family harmony. But her mind calculated. *Midnight. Blood. Someone has to bleed.* Her phone vibrated against her thigh under the table. She froze. No one else noticed. The conversation continued. She shifted slightly, angling the phone where only she could see the screen: *“Time remaining: 4 hours, 47 minutes. Servants are easy targets—low risk, minimal consequences. Or make a statement. Powerful victims earn better rewards.”* The System was coaching her. Encouraging escalation. Her stomach turned. She set down her soup spoon carefully, precisely, before her shaking hands could betray her. “The fish course, madam.” A servant placed the next dish before her—whole fish steamed with ginger and scallions, its dead eye staring up at her. Symbol of prosperity. Around her, the dinner continued. Investors and family performing normalcy. Everyone pretending this morning's revelations hadn't shattered the

facade. "Wei-jun," Mr. Lin said, setting down his chopsticks with deliberate care. "The construction fund audit—when can we expect completed documentation? Some investors have expressed... concerns about fund allocation." The temperature in the room dropped. Wei-jun's smile never wavered. "All documentation will be provided per contract. There have been no irregularities." But Mrs. Chen leaned forward, diamond earrings catching the light. "We heard interesting rumors this morning. Something about discrepancies? An anonymous message sent to multiple parties?" She smiled. "Just rumors, I'm sure." *The phone revelations spread beyond the family.* Ruihua's response was surgical precision. "Business always attracts gossip, Mrs. Chen. The Zhang family's finances are impeccable. We welcome any audit with complete confidence." Mei-lin reached for her water glass— Her phone buzzed. Loud enough to cut through the conversation. Everyone looked at her. "Mei-lin." Ruihua's voice could freeze blood. "Phones are inappropriate at formal dinners." But before Mei-lin could silence it— Chen Rui's phone buzzed. Then Wei-jun's. Then Li Fang's. All four phones at once, synchronized, demanding attention. The investors exchanged glances. Uncle Zhang's chopsticks clattered against his plate. "Excuse us." Ruihua's control was slipping, visible only in the tightness around her eyes. "A family matter. We'll step out briefly—" "Is everything alright?" Mr. Zhao's concern was professional, calculated. "If there's a family emergency, we can certainly reschedule—" "No emergency." Ruihua's smile was glass. "Just a minor—" Mei-lin's phone lit up on the table where she'd set it down. The screen faced upward. Mrs. Chen, seated close enough to

see, went still. *“Task update: Dinner party detected. New target option unlocked. Injure an investor. Maximum chaos. Maximum reward.”* Mrs. Chen’s eyes widened. Chen Rui, close enough to read it from his angle, went white. The moment stretched like pulled silk— Mei-lin grabbed for the phone, panic flooding her system. Her hand knocked her wine glass. Red wine spread across the white tablecloth in a dark stain, rushing toward Mrs. Chen like blood. “Oh god, I’m so sorry—” Mei-lin stood, trying to stop the flow. Mrs. Chen jerked back. Wine splashed across her expensive cream dress, dark drops like wounds. Chaos erupted. Servants rushed forward with napkins. Li Fang was apologizing. Wei-jun calling for towels. The careful choreography of the evening shattered into confusion. In the chaos, Mei-lin’s sleeve caught on the edge of the table. The hairpin—the ancient one from the ancestral room, sharp and lethal—fell out. It clattered onto the table between the wine-soaked napkins and overturned glass. Metal. Sharp. Clearly not decorative. Mrs. Chen stared at it. The room went silent. “Why would you bring a weapon to dinner?” Mr. Lin’s voice cut through the stillness. All eyes fixed on the hairpin. Then on Mei-lin. Her mouth opened. No words came. What could she say? *I was planning to stab someone before midnight because a supernatural phone told me to?* “That’s an ancestral hairpin.” Ruihua’s intervention was smooth, practiced. “Part of the traditional bridal costume. Mei-lin must have forgotten to remove it after her ceremony preparations earlier.” She gestured to a servant. “Take it back to the display case.” Plausible. Covering. Protecting the family image even as it crumbled. But Mrs. Chen was

backing away from the table, wine dripping from her dress, eyes fixed on Mei-lin like she was looking at something dangerous. “I think I need some air. Excuse me.” She left. Quickly. Not looking back. The dinner was falling apart. Mr. Zhao and Mr. Lin exchanged a look—entire conversations happening in that single glance. “Perhaps we should reschedule,” Mr. Zhao said, standing. “The family seems to be dealing with... adjustments. We can discuss the investment details once things have settled.” Translation: *We've heard the rumors. We've seen the chaos. We're reconsidering everything.* “Gentlemen, please.” Wei-jun's desperation was visible now. “One awkward dinner doesn't reflect on our business practices. The Zhang family has delivered on every contract—” But they were already making excuses, thanking Ruihua for the hospitality, moving toward the door. Professional. Polite. Absolute. Millions of yuan in investment walking out of the dining room. Ruihua's fury was barely contained beneath her perfect hostess smile as she saw them out. When the door closed, the mask dropped. The silence that followed was worse than shouting. All four phones buzzed simultaneously: *“Alternative task completion detected. Dinner destroyed. Investors fleeing. Family reputation damaged. Chaos achieved.”* *“Violence task waived for more creative destruction. Well played, Bride #7.”* *“Reward: 48 hours of peace. Use them wisely.”* Mei-lin stared at her phone. She'd found a loophole. Violence against prosperity instead of person. The System had accepted it. But the cost— “What have you done?” Ruihua's voice was soft. Deadly soft. Mei-lin turned. “I—” “WHAT HAS SHE DONE?” Chen Rui's voice exploded across the room. He was

on his feet, wine glass in hand, drunk and breaking. “What has she done? She married me for money! She pawned her dowry! She carries weapons to dinner! She receives messages telling her to hurt people!” He gestured wildly, wine sloshing. “What hasn’t she done?” Wei-jun’s fury was colder, more controlled. “The investors saw the phone message. They saw ‘injure an investor.’ Do you understand what that means? They’ll tell others. Every business partner, every bank, every contractor will hear the Zhang family has a dangerous bride who threatened violence at a formal dinner.” “Not just any bride.” Li Fang’s laugh was bitter. “The bride who destroyed a million-yuan investment deal by bringing an ancestral weapon to dinner and spilling wine on Mrs. Chen.” Uncle Zhang’s voice cracked with despair. “The family name... our reputation...” Ruihua walked to Mei-lin. Stood close. Her voice dropped low enough that only Mei-lin could hear: “You found a third option. Not violence against a person – violence against prosperity. Clever.” A pause that felt like falling. “But expensive. This will cost you.” Then, louder, for the family: “Mei-lin is clearly overwhelmed by her new position. She’ll remain in her quarters until she’s... adjusted. Xiao Chen will ensure she doesn’t leave.” House arrest. Prison without bars. Ruihua turned to Chen Rui. “Your wife has brought chaos into this family. As her husband, you’re responsible for her actions. Fix this, or I’ll fix it permanently.” Chen Rui looked at Mei-lin across the destroyed dinner table, wine staining the white tablecloth like blood, ancestral hairpin gleaming between them. “I don’t know who you are,” he said. Then he left. They all left. One by one, abandoning her in the ruins of the evening. Servants appeared—silent,

efficient. Xiao Chen among them, face carefully neutral. "Come, young madam. Back to your room." Mei-lin followed. What choice did she have? As they escorted her through the corridors—her prison guards pretending to be helpers—her phone buzzed one final time: *“48 hours of peace granted. Then Level 4 begins.”* *“Previous tasks: Surrender possessions. Reveal secrets. Destroy relationships. Ruin prosperity.”* *“Next task: Eliminate threats.”* *“Sleep well, Bride #7. In two days, someone in this house dies.”* *“Your choice who.”* The red chamber door closed behind her. The lock clicked. Mei-lin stood alone in the dark, still wearing the qipao that restricted her breathing, the makeup cracking on her face, the exhaustion finally catching up. Forty-eight hours of peace. Then murder. Her hands shook as she pulled out the phone, reading the message again. Making sure she'd understood. *Someone in this house dies. Your choice who.* Not violence. Not injury. Death. And she had two days to decide who would pay that price.----

[END CHAPTER 8]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 9: THE DEBT COLLECTOR

"Mrs. Zhang, your son owes 500,000 yuan. Plus two months interest—another 50,000. Payment is due now." Mei-lin pressed herself against the window, forehead cold against the glass. From her locked room on the second floor, she had a clear view of the front courtyard where three men had just

emerged from an expensive black car. Not a Zhang family vehicle—the energy was all wrong. Predatory. Dangerous. Thirty-six hours into her “48 hours of peace.” No tasks from the System. No messages. Just silence that felt like holding your breath underwater, waiting for something to break the surface. The storm clouds had been gathering all day, turning afternoon to premature dusk. Now thunder rumbled in the distance, and the first drops of rain began to fall, fat and heavy, darkening the stone courtyard. Chen Rui stood in the covered entrance, facing the three men. Even from here, Mei-lin could see his body language—shoulders hunched, defensive, defeated. He’d known they were coming. The man in the expensive suit—fifties, silver hair, face like a blade—held documents in one hand. Loan contracts, probably. He spoke with the calm efficiency of someone who’d had this conversation a hundred times before. Behind him, two enforcers. Silent. Muscle wrapped in casual clothes that did nothing to hide their purpose. Chen Rui was gesturing, explaining something. Asking for time, maybe.

Understanding. The man in the suit shook his head. No extensions. Mei-lin’s hands clenched on the windowsill. This was Chen Rui’s debt. His gambling problem. His secrets that he’d hidden behind a marriage to a girl whose dowry was supposed to save him. She’d pawned her grandmother’s necklace, sold her wedding jewelry—all to satisfy the System’s demands instead of helping him. *I didn’t know,* she told herself. *I was protecting him from something worse.* But was she? Her phone buzzed against her thigh. She pulled it out with shaking hands: *“Interesting development. The debt you protected is now exposed

anyway. All your sacrifice for nothing."* * "Would you like to help him? I can provide the money. For a price."* Mei-lin's throat closed. She looked back at the courtyard where the confrontation was escalating. The suited man's voice rising, audible now even through glass: "Two months overdue... interest accruing daily..." Chen Rui's pleading tone in response. The enforcers moving closer, circling like sharks who'd scented blood. ---- The main entrance doors opened. Ruihua emerged, immaculate in dark silk despite the evening hour. Behind her, Wei-jun followed, and Mei-lin caught the expression on his face—barely concealed satisfaction. This was his brother's humiliation. His chance to shine in comparison. Servants appeared at other windows, drawn by the commotion. The entire household was watching now. Private family shame made public spectacle. The rain intensified, sheeting down, soaking everyone who wasn't under the covered entrance. Mei-lin's door was locked. Xiao Chen had checked it twice today, bringing meals Mei-lin barely touched. But now, with the drama unfolding outside, Mei-lin suspected her guard had abandoned her post to watch with everyone else. She tried the handle. It turned.

Later. Stay and watch first. Know what you're walking into. She pressed closer to the window. Ruihua had reached the group. She assessed the loan shark with the same cool evaluation she used on everyone—measuring, calculating, deciding how much they mattered. "Mrs. Zhang." Mr. Tan—the suit was clearly in charge—gave a small bow. "Your son owes 500,000 yuan. Plus two months interest—another 50,000. We've been patient, but patience has limits." "Chen Rui's gambling debts are his own responsibility." Ruihua's

voice carried across the courtyard, clear and cold. "The Zhang family doesn't cover personal failings." Chen Rui's head whipped toward his mother. "Mother, please—" "You hid this debt from me." Ruihua turned to face her son. "You married that girl—" She gestured vaguely toward the mansion, toward Mei-lin's window, "—thinking her dowry would save you. You've made poor choice after poor choice. Why should I rescue you from consequences?" The cruelty was surgical. Precise. Mr. Tan waited, professional patience. "Mrs. Zhang, I appreciate your family's internal politics, but I'm a businessman. I don't care about lessons or character building. Your son signed a contract. He pays, or..." A gesture to the enforcers. "We collect through other means." The threat hung in the rain-soaked air. Ruihua studied her son for a long moment. Chen Rui stood in the rain now, hair plastered to his skull, clothes soaking through, looking young and lost and terrified. "What do you have of value?" Ruihua asked him. "What can you offer to settle this debt?" "I have—I have shares in the construction company. I can sign them over—" "Those shares are family assets." Wei-jun's interjection was sharp. "You can't liquidate them for gambling debts." "Then what?" Chen Rui's voice cracked. "What do I have?" The silence stretched. Mr. Tan checked his watch. "Mrs. Zhang, I'll give you one week. 550,000 yuan—principal plus interest—or I start taking payments in other ways." His eyes moved across the mansion, cataloging assets. "You have considerable wealth. I'll take it piece by piece. His car. His personal possessions. His wife's jewelry." Mei-lin's breath caught. *Wife's jewelry.* She had none. She'd pawned it all to satisfy the System's first task. Every piece

the Zhang family had given her as wedding gifts—gone. Exchanged for cash that she'd surrendered to something that lived in her phone and demanded escalating sacrifices. *Chen Rui has nothing left. Because of me.* The thought sat heavy in her chest. Mr. Tan was already turning back to his car, enforcers following. “One week, Mrs. Zhang. Then we collect.” Chen Rui stood alone in the rain. Ruihua had already turned back toward the mansion, walking with unhurried grace. Wei-jun followed, satisfaction radiating from him like heat. And Chen Rui— He collapsed to his knees in the mud. Broken. Humiliated. Soaked and shaking. Servants retreated from windows. The show was over. Now came the gossip— spreading through the household like disease, carrying tales of the young master’s debts and disgrace. Mei-lin’s phone buzzed. *“Your husband is suffering. You could end this.”* *“Task offer: I’ll deposit 600,000 yuan in your account. Enough to pay his debt with interest. But you must give me something in return.”* *“Not money. Not secrets. Not relationships. Something more permanent.”* Her hands shook so badly she almost dropped the phone. *“You must sign a contract. In blood. Binding you to this house forever.”* The words blurred. She blinked, read them again. *In blood.* *“A blood oath. You become permanent property of this house. You cannot leave. You cannot divorce. You cannot escape. Even death won’t free you.”* *“But in exchange: your husband’s debt erased. Your village family protected. Your suffering... purposeful.”* *“You’ll become what Ruihua became. What Li Fang tried to become. A vessel for the house’s hunger.”* Mei-lin’s stomach turned. This was what Ruihua had meant in the ancestral room. *Become the

sacrifice or become the knife.* This was the choice—permanent enslavement in exchange for survival. The System continued: *“Refuse, and watch Chen Rui be destroyed by loan sharks. His suffering will be creative. They know how to extract value from human bodies.”* She looked at Chen Rui still kneeling in the courtyard. Rain poured down on him. He made no move to get up, to go inside, to do anything but kneel there in the mud like a penitent at an altar. He’d used her. Married her for money he needed to cover his gambling addiction. Never loved her any more than she’d loved him. *Why should I save him?* But— She’d taken what should have been his solution. Her dowry. His escape route. And she’d fed it to the System instead. *“12 hours to decide. If you refuse, I’ll offer the same deal to Chen Rui. But his contract would require him to sacrifice you instead. Guess which option he’ll choose?”* The screen went dark. Mei-lin stood frozen at the window, watching her husband break in the rain. Then she moved. ---- The hallways were empty. Servants clustered in the kitchen and common areas, gossiping about what they’d witnessed. Xiao Chen was nowhere to be seen—probably reporting to Li Fang or Ruihua about the drama. Mei-lin slipped through the mansion like a ghost, descending the main staircase, crossing the foyer. She grabbed an umbrella from the stand by the door. Then she was outside. The rain hit her immediately, cold and hard. The umbrella provided minimal cover. She crossed the courtyard to where Chen Rui still knelt in the mud. “Get up.” Her voice cut through the rain. Chen Rui looked up. Water streamed down his face—rain mixing with tears, or maybe just rain. His eyes were hollow. Defeated. “Why are you here?” His voice

was raw. "Come to see what you've done?" "I didn't make you gamble." Mei-lin's words came out harder than intended. "I didn't make you rack up 500,000 yuan in debts." "But you took my solution." He struggled to his knees, swaying. "Your dowry was supposed to pay this. That's why I—that's why Mother arranged the marriage. You were supposed to save me." "My dowry was supposed to be mine. Not your debt payment." Silence between them. Just the sound of rain hammering stone. Chen Rui's laugh was broken, bitter. "We're both liars. Both users. Perfect match." He tried to stand, slipped in the mud. His hand shot out to catch himself. Mei-lin extended her hand to help him— He saw what was in her other hand. The hairpin. Ancient. Metal. Sharp. The weapon she'd carried to dinner. The one she was supposed to use to hurt someone before the System gave her creative alternative. "Are you here to finish the job?" Fear cracked his voice. "Is that what your phone told you to do? Hurt me?" Mei-lin looked at the hairpin. She'd forgotten she was holding it. It had become an extension of her hand—a reminder of what she was capable of. What she might need to be capable of. "The System offered me 600,000 yuan." The words came out quiet, nearly lost in the rain. "Enough to pay your debt with interest. All I have to do is sign away my freedom forever." Chen Rui stared at her. Water dripped from his hair, his clothes. "Would you... would you actually consider that? For me?" The question hung between them. *Would she?* Before she could answer— Headlights swept across the courtyard. The black car returned. It pulled up to where they stood, window rolling down. Mr. Tan looked out at them—the mud-soaked husband and the wife holding an umbrella over both

of them, a hairpin clutched in her other hand. "Forgot to mention," he said, voice pleasant and professional. "If payment isn't made in one week, I have permission from my employer to collect through alternative means." His eyes fixed on Mei-lin. "Your wife, for instance. She'd cover the debt nicely. Human trafficking market is quite lucrative. Pretty young girls from the countryside fetch excellent prices." The window rolled up. The car drove away, taillights disappearing into the rain. Mei-lin felt ice flood her veins. Chen Rui looked at her with new horror. "The System isn't the only monster in this city." Her phone buzzed. She pulled it out with numb fingers: *"Correction: 10 hours to decide. Mr. Tan accelerated the timeline. Choose: Your freedom or his life. Tick tock."* *"Side note: Human trafficking is lucrative. But dead bodies are worthless. Keep that in mind when the murder task begins."* Thunder cracked overhead. Lightning illuminated the courtyard—and Mei-lin saw it. Ruihua's window. Second floor. Study overlooking the entrance. Light glowed behind the glass. A silhouette stood watching. She'd been there the entire time. Watching her son humiliated. Watching the loan shark threaten. Watching Mei-lin come out into the rain with a weapon in her hand. Orchestrating. Always orchestrating. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui, soaked and shivering and broken. She looked at the hairpin in her hand. She looked at her phone counting down to impossible choices. "Come inside," she said. "You'll catch pneumonia." "Why do you care?" "I don't know." The truth. "But standing in the rain won't pay your debts." She turned and walked back toward the mansion. After a moment, she heard him follow. Ten hours until she had to decide: permanent enslavement or human

trafficking. And somewhere beyond that deadline, the murder task was waiting. Level 4: *Eliminate threats.* Someone in this house dies. Your choice who. The rain poured down, washing mud from stone, and inside the mansion, Ruihua watched from her window. Waiting to see which choice her newest bride would make. Waiting to see if Mei-lin would become another grave in the garden. Or something far more dangerous.

[END CHAPTER 9]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 10: THE RED LEDGER

The lock clicked open at 11:47 PM. Mei-lin's hands shook as she pushed the study door inward, the techniques she'd watched Chen Rui fumble with finally paying off. Two hours until the blood contract deadline. Four hours until Xiao Chen's next room check. Time enough to find another option —any option that didn't involve enslaving herself forever to save a husband who'd never loved her. The mansion slept around her. Or pretended to. In a house like this, she was learning, nothing truly rested. Something was always watching. Thunder rumbled outside as she slipped into the study, closing the door behind her with careful silence. She didn't dare turn on the lights. Her phone's flashlight would have to do—narrow beam cutting through darkness, illuminating leather furniture and shelves packed with ledgers and documents. The room smelled of old paper and cigar smoke and secrets kept too long. She'd stopped feeling

guilty about breaking rules. Picking locks. Stealing information. The Zhang family had accused her of being a thief since the morning she'd pawned her grandmother's necklace. Maybe it was time to become what they already believed she was. Lightning flashed outside the window, briefly illuminating the garden below. Somewhere out there, Bride #6 lay buried. Lin Mei, who'd refused to hurt anyone and paid with her life. *Not me,* Mei-lin thought. *I won't end up in that garden.* She started searching. ---- The first drawer was unlocked—current business contracts, boring documentation, nothing useful. The second drawer had a simple lock that yielded after thirty seconds of fumbling. Inside, she found what she'd hoped for: personal family documents. Chen Rui's gambling IOUs. Physical proof of the 500,000 yuan debt to Mr. Tan's organization. Dates, signatures, interest calculations in red ink that looked like blood in the phone's flashlight. But also— Wei-jun's embezzlement evidence. Bank statements showing the 2 million yuan the System had exposed at breakfast. Transfers to offshore accounts. Investment records under false names. And more: Photographs of Li Fang with a married man. Hotel receipts. Text message printouts. Every detail of her affair documented with clinical precision. *The family keeps blackmail material on each other.* The realization settled cold in her stomach. This wasn't just business records. This was ammunition. Control through mutual assured destruction. The third drawer was different. Heavier lock. More complex mechanism. Mei-lin worked at it for three minutes, sweat beading on her forehead despite the room's chill, before she had to admit defeat. Her phone buzzed.

"Need help? The combination is 7-31-1985. Ruihua's wedding date. She's sentimental about the day she became matriarch." Mei-lin stared at the message. The System was helping her break in. Giving her codes. Guiding her toward... what? Discovery? Evidence? Why? But desperation drowned suspicion. She had less than two hours to find money, find leverage, find anything that would give her options beyond permanent enslavement. She punched in the combination. The drawer opened with a soft click. Inside, wrapped in protective cloth, lay a single book. Red leather. Heavy. Old. The spine cracked when she lifted it, pages soft with age and handling. Not figurative. Literally a red ledger. Mei-lin opened it with shaking hands. The first entry was dated 1985, handwriting precise and controlled: *Ruihua Zhang (née Wang) - Wedding dowry: 200,000 yuan + jade necklace + mother's blessing bracelet. Contract signed in blood. Matriarch bond established. First task completed: Revealed husband's affair with secretary. Result: Secretary terminated, husband's loyalty secured, family scandal avoided. Wealth increase: 15% over following quarter.* The entries continued. Page after page. Year after year. *1987 - Bride (name redacted) - Failed first task (surrender family heirloom). Attempted theft instead. Removed. Buried east garden, section 3.* *1992 - Bride (name redacted) - Completed 6 tasks over 8 months. Failed 7th (physical violence against servant). Psychological breakdown. Removed. Buried east garden, section 7.* *2003 - Lin Wei (Bride #3, Wei-jun's wife) - Completed 4 tasks. Strong-willed, intelligent. Refused violence escalation. Attempted exposure of system. Removed. Buried east garden, section 12. Note: Screen

future brides for compliance vs. rebellion tendency.* Mei-lin's hands trembled so badly the pages blurred. She forced herself to keep reading. *2022 - Lin Mei (Bride #6, Chen Rui's intended) - Completed 8 tasks over 21 days. Exceptional endurance. Refused murder task. Removed. Buried east garden, section 18. Note: Murder task threshold too early. Recommend 6-month conditioning period for future subjects.* *Subjects.* They called the brides *subjects*. But what made her stomach turn wasn't just the catalog of destroyed women. It was the financial entries alongside each bride's tasks. Every time a bride completed a task, detailed records showed Zhang family wealth increasing. Stock prices rising. Business deals closing. Competitors failing mysteriously. Every time a bride was "removed," the family's fortune jumped. *The house literally feeds on suffering and converts it to profit.* This wasn't supernatural curse or ancient evil operating beyond human control. This was a business model. Ruihua had perfected a system: Marry sons to vulnerable women, force them to complete tasks that generated chaos and opportunity, profit from the chaos, dispose of brides who refused to escalate, repeat.

Sustainable. Efficient. Monstrous. Her phone buzzed: *Now you understand. Ruihua isn't the house's victim. She's its architect. She refined what previous matriarchs began. Made it efficient. Profitable. Sustainable.* *You have two choices: Become her successor (sign blood contract, continue the cycle) or become grave #19.* A pause. The cursor blinking. *Or...* Mei-lin held her breath. *Option three: Expose everything. Take the ledger. Show the world what the Zhangs really are. Destroy the family that destroys brides.* The

overhead lights blazed on. Mei-lin spun, heart in her throat. Wei-jun stood in the doorway, arms crossed, expression unreadable. “I wondered when you’d find this room.” ---- He wasn’t surprised. Not angry. If anything, he looked... relieved? “I’ve been waiting,” Wei-jun said, stepping into the study and closing the door behind him, “for someone to find that ledger. Someone who’d actually care what it means.” Mei-lin clutched the red book to her chest. “You knew? About all of this?” “My wife—Bride #3, Lin Wei—she lasted four months. Longer than most.” His voice was flat, but something moved behind his eyes. Old pain. “Smart woman. Strong. I thought she’d be the one to break the cycle.” He moved to the window, looking out at the rain-soaked garden. “When the System demanded she hurt someone, she refused. Tried to run. They found her by the east wall at dawn. Mother said she fell. Hit her head. Tragic accident.” He turned back to Mei-lin. “I knew better.” The confession hung between them. “I brought her into this house,” Wei-jun continued. “Handed her to the System like a sacrifice on an altar. Because Mother told me it was tradition. Necessary. The price of our wealth and power.” His hands clenched. “I’ve lived with that for three years.” Mei-lin found her voice. “Why tell me this?” “Because you’re not like the others.” Wei-jun moved to a painting on the wall—abstract art that looked expensive and meaningless. He pressed the corner of the frame. A section of wall panel popped open. Hidden compartment. Inside: USB drives. Folders. Photographs. Recording devices. “I’ve been collecting evidence for three years,” he said. “The ledger is the crown jewel, but I have more. Financial records showing the correlation between bride tasks and wealth increases.

Recordings of Mother's instructions to the System—yes, she can communicate with it, command it, when she wants. Proof that she orchestrated everything from selecting vulnerable women to engineering their destruction.” He pulled out the drives and folders, spreading them on the desk. “Everything needed to destroy this family. To expose the System. To end it.” Mei-lin stared at the evidence. “Why haven’t you done it already?” Wei-jun’s laugh was bitter. “Because I’m a coward. Because despite everything, this is still my family. My mother. My blood.” He met her eyes. “But you—you have no loyalty to them. No reason to protect this house. No blood ties keeping you silent. You could do what I can’t.” “Expose them?” “Burn it all down.” His voice was quiet. Certain. “Take the evidence. Go to authorities. Media. Show the world what the Zhangs really are. I’ll testify to everything. We’ll destroy them together.” Mei-lin’s mind raced. This was the third option the System had offered. But— “What’s the price?” She’d learned that much. Everyone in this house wanted something. “What do you get out of this?” Wei-jun’s expression cracked. “Forgiveness. From Lin Wei’s family. From every bride I helped destroy by staying silent.” He paused. “And protection. When this goes public, Mother will try to kill me. Us. We’ll need to disappear. New identities. New lives. But free.” Her phone buzzed, the sound obscene in the heavy silence. *“Interesting development. Wei-jun offers rebellion. But can you trust a man who watched his wife die and did nothing?”* *“1 hour until blood contract deadline. Choose now:”* *“Option A: Sign blood contract. Save Chen Rui. Become next matriarch. Wealth, power, eternal imprisonment.”* *“Option B: Take evidence. Expose

everything. Destroy Zhangs. Likely get killed in process. But free all future brides."* * "Option C: Walk away. Let Chen Rui face loan sharks. Let Wei-jun stay silent. Survive by becoming invisible. Coward's escape."* Thunder cracked overhead. The storm was intensifying. Mei-lin looked at the red ledger in her hands. At the USB drives. At Wei-jun, who'd spent three years collecting evidence he was too afraid to use. "What kind of person are you, Mei-lin?" Wei-jun asked quietly. "Survivor? Rebel? Successor?" Option A tempted her. Sign the blood contract, get the money, save Chen Rui. Become matriarch—have power instead of being powerless. Guide the System instead of being destroyed by it. Wouldn't that be better than being a victim? Option B called to something deeper. Burn it all down. Expose Ruihua. Free future brides. Justice for Lin Wei, Lin Mei, all the others buried in that garden. But likely death. The System wouldn't allow exposure. Ruihua would kill to protect her secrets. Option C was the easiest. Walk away. Find money elsewhere. Become quiet, obedient, invisible. Survive through insignificance. Live small, hurt nobody, become nothing. The door burst open. Ruihua stood in the entrance, flanked by two security guards Mei-lin had never seen before. Large men. Blank faces. The kind who followed orders without question. "So." Ruihua's voice could freeze blood. "The bride becomes a thief. How predictable." ---- She stepped into the study with the calm of someone who'd expected this. Planned for it, even. "You broke into my study. Stole my ledger. Conspired with my son against me." Her eyes moved to Wei-jun. "I'm not surprised by you. You've been weak since Lin Wei died. Collecting evidence like it would absolve your

guilt. But I expected better timing." To the guards: "Take them both to the ancestral room. We'll settle this properly." The guards moved forward. Mei-lin's phone buzzed—loud, insistent, visible to everyone. * "Blood contract deadline: 30 minutes." * "New development: Both Mei-lin and Wei-jun can sign. Joint contract. Both enslaved to house, but combined strength might allow survival." * "Alternative: One signs, one dies. Choose who pays." * Ruihua saw the message. Her smile was terrible—sharp and satisfied and ancient. "Ah. The System accelerates. How delightful." She plucked the phone from Mei-lin's hand before she could react. "Let me show you how this works when you're in control instead of controlled." She typed with calm efficiency, fingers moving across the screen like she'd done this a thousand times: * "Matriarch override: I'll pay Chen Rui's debt. 600,000 yuan transferred now. But Mei-lin's blood contract is mandatory. No negotiation. Sign or Wei-jun dies." * She hit send. The response was immediate: * "Override accepted. Matriarch authority confirmed. Mei-lin: Sign blood contract within 20 minutes or Wei-jun will be terminated. Chen Rui's debt payment processing." * Ruihua handed the phone back to Mei-lin. "You see? I don't ask the System for favors. I command it. Because I understand what you don't—the System serves the matriarch who feeds it most efficiently. It's not my master. It's my tool." She looked at the red ledger still clutched in Mei-lin's hands. "That book? I wrote half those entries. I perfected the process. Made it sustainable, profitable, elegant. You think you discovered my secret?" Her laugh was cold. "Child, I wanted you to find it. Every matriarch-in-training needs to understand the system she'll inherit." She turned to Wei-jun.

"And you—conspiring to expose us? You'll sign a blood contract too. Right now. Or watch your new friend bleed for your rebellion." The guards grabbed them both. Strong hands on Mei-lin's arms, dragging her toward the door. Wei-jun didn't resist. Just looked at Mei-lin with something like apology in his eyes. Her phone buzzed one last time: *“18 minutes until Wei-jun's termination.”* *“15 minutes until blood contract mandatory signing.”* *“10 minutes until Chen Rui discovers you chose his life over your freedom.”* *“The 48 hours of peace are over.”* *“Level 4 begins: Eliminate threats. And everyone in this room is now a threat.”* The guards dragged them through the dark mansion, toward the ancestral room where Mei-lin had first learned the truth. Where the altar waited. Where the blood contract would be signed. Where one way or another, she would stop being Mei-lin and become something else. Bride #7. Matriarch-in-training. Or grave #19. The storm raged outside. Lightning illuminated the hallways in flashes. And somewhere in the darkness, Mei-lin heard Chen Rui's voice calling her name, asking where she was, demanding answers she couldn't give. The ancestral room door loomed ahead. Stone steps descending into incense-thick darkness. And at the bottom, the altar waited. Ready for blood.

[END CHAPTER 10]

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ##
CHAPTER 11: THE BLOOD PACT

"One hundred twenty-seven steps." Mei-lin counted them

aloud to stay grounded, to keep from thinking about what waited at the bottom of this impossible spiral. The guards' hands were iron on her arms, dragging her down stone steps that seemed to descend forever. Wei-jun stumbled ahead of her, silent and resigned, like he'd always known he'd end up here. The mansion above felt miles away. The air grew colder with each step, damper, thick with incense smoke that rose from below—jasmine and something metallic. Like blood. Her phone glowed in her pocket, countdown visible through the fabric: *14 minutes... 13 minutes... 12 minutes...* The whispers started around step ninety. Not voices, exactly. More like the memory of voices, echoing from stone walls carved with characters she couldn't read. Languages older than the mansion. Maybe older than the city itself. *This is where brides die. This is where the System lives.* At step one hundred twenty-seven, the spiral opened into a chamber. Circular. Stone walls rising to a domed ceiling lost in shadow. The floor was polished black stone, reflecting candlelight from hundreds of red candles arranged in precise patterns. At the center stood an altar carved from a single piece of obsidian—black and glassy and ancient. But what made Mei-lin's blood freeze were the tablets. Six jade funeral tablets arranged in a semicircle around the altar. Each one glowed faintly in the candlelight, inscribed with names and dates: *Bride #1 - 1985 - Deceased* *Bride #2 - 1987 - Deceased* *Bride #3 (Lin Wei) - 2003 - Deceased* *Bride #4 - 2010 - Deceased* *Bride #5 - 2017 - Deceased* *Bride #6 (Lin Mei) - 2022 - Deceased* A seventh tablet sat waiting. Blank jade reflecting candlelight like a mirror. Through a narrow window carved high in the wall, Mei-lin could see a section of the

garden. Unmarked stones. Graves without names. "This room predates the mansion by three centuries." Ruihua's voice echoed in the chamber as she descended the final steps behind them. "It was here first. A shrine to something that needed feeding. The Zhangs built their fortune around it. Built their entire empire on this foundation." She moved to the altar like a priestess approaching an altar she'd served at for decades. "Six generations of matriarchs learned what I learned—this place offers power for a price. It doesn't demand monthly sacrifices or elaborate blood rituals. Just..." She paused, running her fingers across the obsidian surface. "Potential. It feeds on the possibility of destruction. On fear. On desperation. On choices that destroy the chooser." The guards forced Mei-lin to her knees before the altar. Wei-jun knelt beside her, hands bound behind his back. "If you control it," Wei-jun's voice was steady despite everything, "why do you need the blood contracts? Why not just... stop?" Ruihua's laugh was soft. Bitter. "Because I signed one forty years ago." She turned to face them, and for the first time Mei-lin saw something like vulnerability in the matriarch's expression. "On my wedding night, the previous matriarch brought me here. Gave me the same choice you're getting now." She pulled up her sleeve, revealing a faint scar on her wrist. "I bled on that altar. Signed my freedom away. And in exchange, I was promised that no matter what I did, no matter how many brides I destroyed, I would survive. I would prosper. I would never be held accountable." She let the sleeve fall. "But the contract requires maintenance. Every seven years, a new bride must sign. Fresh blood to feed the old promise. Otherwise, the protection ends. And forty years

of sins come due all at once." Mei-lin's mind raced. "I'm not the seventh bride ever. I'm the seventh bride in this seven-year cycle." "Exactly." Ruihua's smile was approval tinged with cruelty. "And you're three months overdue. I was supposed to marry Chen Rui off last year, but he resisted. Kept gambling away his prospects. The System grows impatient when cycles delay." The walls seemed to pulse with the words. The candles flared brighter. *11 minutes... 10 minutes... 9 minutes...* ----- Ruihua produced a knife from beneath her silk jacket. Ceremonial. Ornate. The blade was stained dark—old blood that had never fully washed away. The guards hauled Mei-lin to her feet, forcing her toward the altar. "Don't do this!" Wei-jun struggled against his bonds. "Let her go! Take me instead—I'm the one who conspired against you!" "You'll get your turn, son." Ruihua unrolled a scroll across the altar surface. Actual parchment, yellowed with age, covered in handwriting that might have been red ink or might have been blood. Mei-lin could read the terms: * "I, [name], surrender my freedom to this house and its keeper. I will serve the matriarch's will. I will complete all tasks demanded without question or hesitation. I will never speak of what I know to any outside this family. I will never leave these grounds without express permission. I will train my successor when called upon. In exchange: protection from death by natural or supernatural means, provision of basic needs, and the promise that my suffering will not be meaningless—it will feed the family's fortune and ensure their prosperity."* "This is slavery." Mei-lin's voice came out hoarse. "Legal slavery." "It's survival." Ruihua positioned the knife at Mei-lin's palm. "Every bride who refused to sign is visible through that

window. Every bride who signed lived—as prisoners, yes, but alive. Some even found happiness in their cages. Li Fang adapted. So did I, eventually. You learn to find purpose in your suffering.” “My wife refused.” Wei-jun’s voice cracked. “You killed her.” Ruihua’s expression didn’t change. “Your wife tried to expose us. That violated the terms she’d already agreed to by marrying into this family. The System has enforcement mechanisms for breach of contract.” The chamber seemed to breathe around them. The whispers grew louder. And then the voice came—not from Ruihua’s phone or Mei-lin’s, but from the walls themselves. Multiple voices overlapping, echoing from stone: *“5 minutes until Wei-jun’s termination.”* *“4 minutes until mandatory blood signing.”* *“Choose: Sign willingly and retain some dignity, or sign by force and retain nothing.”* Mei-lin’s mind raced through calculations. Options. Angles. The same survival instinct that had gotten her through the first tasks, the dinner disaster, the loan shark confrontation. “What if I offer something else?” Ruihua paused, knife hovering over Mei-lin’s palm. “What if instead of my permanent servitude,” Mei-lin continued, voice gaining strength, “I give you Chen Rui’s?” The chamber went silent. Even the whispers stopped. Ruihua’s eyes narrowed. “Explain.” “You said the System needs a signature every seven years. It doesn’t specify bride or groom, does it? What if Chen Rui signs instead? He’s the one who created this mess—his debts, his lies, his gambling. Let him pay the price.” The walls pulsed. The System considering. *“Interesting proposal. Male signatures are... unusual. But permissible under original contract terms. However: Male signees must provide different service. Not

passive suffering. Active destruction. He would become enforcer, not victim.”* Ruihua studied Mei-lin with new interest. “Chen Rui is weak. He couldn’t enforce anything.” “Then let him try.” Mei-lin’s voice turned cold. “Let him fail. And when he does, you’ll have your blood contract from someone who actually deserves it.” Wei-jun stared at her. “You’d sacrifice your husband?” “He’s not my husband.” The truth came out sharp. Final. “He’s a transaction that failed. A lie we both agreed to. Why should I be destroyed for his mistakes?” The chamber seemed to approve. The candles burned brighter. Footsteps echoed from the spiral stairs. Someone was descending. Chen Rui appeared at the chamber entrance, hair disheveled, clothes still damp from the rain. He’d been searching for them. His eyes went wide as he took in the scene: his wife kneeling at an obsidian altar, ceremonial knife ready, his mother orchestrating, his brother bound, funeral tablets glowing in candlelight. “What is this?” His voice came out small. Confused. Ruihua explained quickly—efficient, clinical. The System. The blood contracts. The seven-year cycles. The shrine that predated everything. Forty years of brides fed to something hungry that lived in the foundations. Chen Rui backed toward the stairs. “This is insane. None of this is real. You’re all having some kind of—” Words began carving themselves into the stone wall. Not appearing on a screen. Actually carving—stone dust falling as invisible fingers etched letters deep into rock: *“Chen Rui: Gambling debts 500,000 yuan. Secret affair with secretary Wang Xiu 2022-2023. Stole 80,000 yuan from family accounts to cover losses. Married Mei-lin specifically for dowry to pay loan sharks. Father’s disappointment in you is

well-founded and will never end.”* His secrets. Exposed in stone. Permanent. Ruihua’s fury was ice. “You stole from the family? After everything I’ve given you? After every opportunity, every second chance?” Chen Rui’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly. The System’s voice echoed from multiple directions: *“Chen Rui: Sign blood contract as enforcer. Terms: You will hurt those who threaten this family’s stability. You will be the blade that cuts away weakness. Your cowardice will be burned away through violence. In exchange: debts erased, secrets protected, father’s approval finally earned.”* *“Or: Mei-lin signs. Becomes permanent bride-prisoner. You remain weak, disappointing son with crushing debts and no future.”* The knife appeared in Ruihua’s extended hand. Offering it to Chen Rui. “Sign it.” Mei-lin’s voice cut through his paralysis. “Prove you’re not the coward everyone thinks you are.” Wei-jun struggled against his bonds. “Brother, don’t. I signed something similar to save Lin Wei. It doesn’t end the way they promise. It never ends the way they promise.” But Chen Rui was staring at the words carved in stone. At his mother’s disgust. At Mei-lin’s cold manipulation. At the knife that could erase it all. His hand reached out. Shaking. But reaching. “Don’t read the fine print,” Mei-lin said softly. “Just sign.” ---- Chen Rui pressed the blade to his palm. Blood welled—bright red against pale skin. He held his hand over the altar and let it drip onto the obsidian surface. The blood didn’t pool. It was absorbed instantly, like the stone was drinking it. The chamber responded. Temperature dropped so fast Mei-lin could see her breath. The candles flared white-hot. The blank seventh tablet began to glow, and characters appeared

carved into the jade as if by invisible hands: *Chen Rui Zhang* *Enforcer Class* *Bound This Day* He pressed his bloody palm to the scroll, leaving a crimson print next to the contract terms he hadn't read. The System's voice boomed from every surface: *“Blood contract established. Chen Rui: Enforcer class. First task assigned: Eliminate threat to family stability. Target: Wei-jun. Method: Your choice. Time limit: 1 hour.”* Chen Rui's face went white. “What? No. I didn't sign up to kill my brother—” “You signed a contract you didn't read.” Ruihua's satisfaction was visible. “How very characteristic of you.” Wei-jun's laugh was bitter. “I told you. It doesn't end the way they promise.” The guards released Wei-jun's bonds and stepped back. Away from him. Creating space. The knife was still in Chen Rui's hand—blade dripping with his blood. Every surface in the chamber displayed the countdown: *“60 minutes until contract void. Complete first task or lose all benefits. Debt reinstated. Secrets exposed to father. Disappointment confirmed permanent.”* Chen Rui looked at the knife. At his brother standing calmly in the center of the chamber. At Mei-lin backing toward the stairs. “I can't—” His voice broke. “I won't—” Wei-jun stood perfectly still. “Yes, you will. Because you're weak. And weak men become monsters when given permission.” Mei-lin reached the first step of the spiral. She'd done it. Manipulated Chen Rui into taking her place. Escaped the blood contract through his desperation and stupidity. But as her foot touched the second step— The System's voice stopped her cold: *“Mei-lin: You think you've escaped? You simply traded one contract for another.”* *“Chen Rui's second task, after eliminating Wei-jun: Eliminate you.”* *“Welcome to Level 5.

Everyone dies now. Starting with the ones you love.”* A pause. *“Not that you love anyone. Which makes this so much easier.”* Mei-lin froze on the stairs. Behind her, Chen Rui raised the knife toward Wei-jun. His hands were shaking so badly the blade trembled. But he was raising it. Wei-jun didn’t move. Didn’t run. Just watched his brother with something like pity. “Go ahead,” Wei-jun said quietly. “Kill me. Become what they made me. What they made Mother. What they’ll make you until there’s nothing left but the killing.” Chen Rui’s breath came in gasps. The knife rose higher. Mei-lin stood paralyzed on the stairs. She should run. Should escape while they were focused on each other. But her feet wouldn’t move. The countdown echoed: *“59 minutes... 58 minutes... 57 minutes...”* Chen Rui stepped forward. The knife blade caught candlelight, gleaming red. And Ruihua watched with the calm satisfaction of a teacher whose student was finally learning the lesson.

[END CHAPTER 11]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 12: LETTERS IN ASHES

“Mother, please come get me. This house is not what they promised.” Mei-lin’s hands shook as she read the burned fragment by dawn light filtering through heavy curtains. She’d fled the shrine—left Wei-jun and Chen Rui to their deadly confrontation—and broken into the one place Ruihua wouldn’t expect: her private library. Behind her, distant

sounds echoed up from somewhere deep in the mansion. Shouting. Maybe screaming. She couldn't tell and didn't want to know. Her lungs burned from running. Her hands still felt the shrine's cold—that underground chamber where Chen Rui had signed his freedom away in blood and received murder as his first task. *I left Wei-jun to die. I manipulated Chen Rui into becoming a killer.* But if she didn't find leverage—something to protect herself—she was next. The library smelled of old paper and burned parchment and jasmine tea. Glass cases lined the walls, filled with preserved documents: marriage certificates, death certificates, property deeds. The history of the Zhang family catalogued like specimens in a museum. Every drawer was locked. Ruihua protected these secrets more carefully than she protected financial records. Mei-lin checked her phone: 45 minutes left on Chen Rui's task deadline. Then he'd either have completed his contract by killing Wei-jun, or failed and lost everything. Either way, she was next. She pulled out the hairpin she'd kept from the ancestral room and worked at the first drawer's lock. ---- The mechanism clicked open after two minutes of fumbling. Inside, marriage records going back six generations. Each file contained the same elements: bride's name, age, family background, and a detailed dowry inventory. But what made Mei-lin's stomach turn were the assessments written in Ruihua's precise handwriting: *Lin Mei (Bride #6): Age 23. Poor family, desperate for match. Dowry minimal but acceptable given urgency of timeline. Assessment: Strong-willed, intelligent, potentially rebellious. Predicted survival: 3 weeks maximum. Actual survival: 21 days. Within acceptable variance.* The clinical evaluation of a human life. Predicted

death date. Acceptable variance. She flipped through others: *Bride #4: Compliant personality. Predicted survival: 6 months. Actual: 4 months (early termination due to psychological breakdown).* *Bride #5: High intelligence, low emotional resilience. Predicted survival: 2 months. Actual: 8 weeks.* Each bride studied, evaluated, and ultimately destroyed according to plan. The second drawer held death records. Not just the brides—other deaths connected to the Zhang family: *Business rival Chen Wei - “suicide” during contract negotiations (System task completed by Bride #3)* *Whistleblower Li Hua - “car accident” three days after threatening to expose construction fraud (System task completed by Bride #5)* *Family member Zhang Ming - “challenged Ruihua’s authority, found dead in garden” (cause of death: System enforcement mechanism)* The pattern was undeniable: every seven years, around the time a new bride cycle began, multiple convenient deaths occurred. Competitors eliminated. Threats removed. Obstacles cleared. The third drawer had a complex lock that resisted her hairpin. Mei-lin glanced at the clock: 38 minutes until Chen Rui completed his task. She grabbed a letter opener from Ruihua’s desk and pried at the drawer’s mechanism. Something snapped. The lock broke. The drawer opened. Inside, a collection of burned letters. Partially destroyed, but fragments of text still visible on charred paper. Mei-lin lifted them with careful hands. Letters in different handwriting. Different hands. All intercepted. All burned before they could reach their destinations. *Fragment 1 (envelope addressed to “Mother,” return address in Chen territory):* “...Mother, please come get me. This house is not what they promised. There

are things in the walls that watch. Tasks I must complete or they threaten my family in the village. Ruihua says this is normal. That I must adjust to Zhang family ways. But Mother, I've seen the garden graves. I've counted the stones. I'm afraid I'll—" The letter ended there. The rest was ash.

Fragment 2 (addressed to "Sisters," rural address): "...begging you, don't let them do this to anyone else. Tell every village girl who gets a marriage offer from the Zhangs to refuse. The System isn't a game or hazing ritual. It's a machine that grinds brides into fortune. Every task I complete, I check the stock prices—they rise. Every secret I expose, a business deal closes in their favor. They're using us as human—" The rest: ash. *Fragment 3 (addressed to "Anyone who finds this"):* "...tried to refuse the violence task. Ruihua says I have no choice, that the contract demands obedience. But I won't hurt anyone. I won't become what they want me to be. I won't be their weapon. If you're reading this and I'm gone, know that I chose death over—" Ash. Mei-lin's throat closed. These women had tried to warn others. Tried to get help. Tried to expose what was happening. Ruihua intercepted every attempt, burned the evidence, and let them die believing no one cared enough to save them. Among the ashes, one letter caught her attention. Not burned. Recent. The envelope had been opened, read, then carefully placed back. *To: Chen Rui* *From: Zhang Wei (Father)* The letter was dated five years ago. Just before Chen Rui's father died. Mei-lin opened it with shaking hands: *“Son,* *If you're reading this, I'm dead and your mother has finally shown you the shrine. I'm sorry. I was too weak to stop her, too complicit to expose her, too frightened to save the women she

destroyed.* *But you need to know—your mother didn't just refine the System. She killed to protect it.* *Fifteen years ago, I discovered what she was doing. The bride cycles. The tasks. The bodies in the garden. I tried to end it. Tried to report the deaths to authorities, to journalists, to anyone who would listen.* *Two days later, I was in a 'car accident' that left me paralyzed from the waist down.* *Your mother visited me in the hospital. She leaned close and whispered: 'Try again, and it won't be your legs next time.'* *I spent five years in a wheelchair, a prisoner in my own home, watching bride after bride disappear into the System. Watching your mother perfect her methods. I died a coward, son.* *Don't die a coward. Break the cycle. Even if it costs everything. Some things are worth the price.* *—Your Father" * The truth crystallized: Chen Rui's father had tried to stop Ruihua. She'd crippled him for it. Let him live just long enough to understand his powerlessness, then probably hastened his death when he became inconvenient. "I leave it unlocked on purpose." Mei-lin spun. Ruihua stood in the doorway, tea cup in hand, completely unsurprised. She must have come directly from the shrine. "I wondered how long before you found this room," she said, stepping inside with unhurried calm. "After a bride's first week, I want them to find these letters. To read them. To understand that others tried to resist and failed." She walked to the fireplace where fresh ashes still held heat. "It's a teaching tool. More effective than threats. Let them read the desperate words of dead women, and they learn the most important lesson: resistance is fatal." ---- Mei-lin backed toward the window, still clutching her father-in-law's letter. "Your husband tried to stop you. You

crippled him." "My husband was sentimental." Ruihua set down her tea cup with careful precision. "He wanted to save brides he didn't know instead of protecting the family that gave him everything. Position. Wealth. Sons." She smiled. "I gave him a choice: his legs or his life. He chose legs. I let him live long enough to regret it." The casual cruelty took Mei-lin's breath away. "Do you understand yet?" Ruihua moved closer, every step measured. "This isn't cruelty for its own sake. It's efficiency. The System exists whether I participate or not. I simply learned to benefit from it instead of being devoured by it." "How many?" Mei-lin's voice came out hoarse. "How many have you killed?" Ruihua considered the question like she was calculating restaurant tips. "Directly? Three. The rest the System handled—enforcement mechanisms, termination protocols. But I've orchestrated seventeen bride cycles over forty years. Six brides per cycle, on average. That's 102 women who entered this house." She recited the numbers without emotion. Accounting, not confession. "Forty-seven survived by signing contracts and learning to serve. Fifty-five are in the gardens or scattered elsewhere. The gardens are full now, so we've had to be creative with disposal." Mei-lin felt bile rise in her throat. "You're clever," Ruihua continued, circling like a professor delivering a lecture. "You manipulated Chen Rui into taking your place at the altar. You escaped the blood contract through his weakness and desperation. That shows strategic thinking. That shows the ruthlessness necessary for succession." She paused, studying Mei-lin with new appreciation. "I'm sixty-two years old. I've been matriarch for forty years. I'm tired, Mei-lin. I need a successor. Someone ruthless enough to continue the

cycles. Someone smart enough to refine the system further.” The offer hung between them. “Let Chen Rui kill Wei-jun,” Ruihua said. “That proves he’s committed to his contract. Then, instead of having him kill you, help me train him as a proper enforcer. Use him. Control him. And when I die—naturally, in my sleep, years from now—you become matriarch. You inherit everything.” “You want me to become you.” The words came out flat. “I want you to become better than me.” Ruihua’s expression was almost earnest. “I had to learn through trial and error. You’d have my guidance. My forty years of refinements. You could make the System even more efficient. Maybe reduce the death rate. Maybe find ways to keep brides alive longer.” She moved to the window, looking out at the gardens where morning light touched the unmarked graves. “You’ve already proven you can sacrifice others to save yourself. You pawned your grandmother’s necklace. You manipulated Chen Rui into signing the blood contract. You abandoned Wei-jun to die in the shrine.” She turned back. “You have the necessary coldness, Mei-lin. The question is whether you have the vision.” Mei-lin said nothing. Because part of her—the part that had survived the last week through calculation and manipulation—knew Ruihua was right. She had the coldness. “If I become your successor,” Mei-lin said slowly, “what happens to the brides after me? Do I just... continue destroying women forever?” “Yes.” Ruihua’s honesty was absolute. “Unless you find a better way. That’s the challenge. That’s what makes a worthy matriarch—innovation within the system’s constraints.” She paused. “Or you refuse, and Chen Rui kills you tonight, and I find another bride in another seven years. The cycle

continues regardless of your choice.” A sound from below—someone screaming. The shrine, probably. Or maybe the hallways. Fifteen minutes left on Chen Rui’s deadline. Mei-lin’s eyes caught on something she’d missed before. Another fragment among the ashes, partially visible beneath the others. She shifted position slightly, palming it while Ruihua continued her lecture. The fragment’s visible text made her heart stop: *...the curse can be broken if the matriarch’s blood...* The rest was ash. But that phrase—*matriarch’s blood*—changed everything. “I’m giving you what no one gave me,” Ruihua was saying. “A choice with full information. Sign on as my successor and live, or refuse and die tonight. There is no third option.” Footsteps in the hallway. Heavy. Stumbling. Chen Rui appeared in the doorway. He was covered in blood. Not spray or spatter. Drenched. His shirt, his hands, his face. His eyes were hollow. Empty. The eyes of someone who’d crossed a line and couldn’t find his way back. Ruihua’s satisfaction was visible. “Is it done?” Chen Rui’s voice came out flat. Dead. “Wei-jun is dead. I... I did what the contract demanded.” All three phones in the room buzzed simultaneously: *“Task complete. Chen Rui: Enforcer status confirmed. Next task: Eliminate Mei-lin. Time limit: 1 hour.”* ---- Chen Rui looked at Mei-lin—the wife who’d manipulated him, who’d called him weak, who’d pushed him to sign a contract in blood. “You made me do this.” His voice was empty. “You said to prove I wasn’t a coward.” He looked at his blood-covered hands. “I proved it. I killed my brother.” Ruihua moved to stand beside her son. “And now you complete your commitment. Kill the bride who destroyed you. Kill the woman who saw your weakness and exploited

it." Mei-lin backed toward the window. But Ruihua had positioned herself between Mei-lin and the door. The only escape was three stories down. Chen Rui advanced. The knife was still in his hand—Wei-jun's blood still wet on the blade. Mei-lin's mind raced. She had one card left to play. She held up the burned letter fragment. "I found something. A way to break the curse. To free everyone—including you." Ruihua's satisfaction vanished. "Put that down. You don't know what you're holding." Chen Rui stopped, confused. "Break the curse? What curse?" "There is no curse—" Ruihua started. But Mei-lin read the fragment aloud: "The curse can be broken if the matriarch's blood—" She gestured to where the rest had burned away. "The rest is gone, but the meaning is clear. The matriarch's blood. Not a bride's. Not an enforcer's. Yours, Ruihua." Understanding dawned across Chen Rui's face. "That's why you're so protective," Mei-lin continued, voice gaining strength. "Why you burn any letter that mentions breaking the cycle. The System doesn't just protect you—it's bound to you. And if you die..." Ruihua's mask slipped. Fear showed through for the first time. "If she dies," Chen Rui said slowly, turning to look at his mother, "the System ends? All of this ends?" "Son, don't be foolish." Ruihua backed toward the door. "Kill the bride. Complete your task. The System will reward—" Chen Rui turned the knife toward his mother. "You made me kill Wei-jun. My brother. You said it was necessary. That the contract demanded it. That I had no choice." His hands stopped shaking. "Now I'm making a choice. If your blood ends this—if your death frees everyone from this cycle—" He stepped forward. The System's voice erupted from every surface—walls, phones,

the air itself: *“Chen Rui: New target unauthorized. Matriarch is protected class. Redirecting to original target. Enforcing compliance now.”* Chen Rui dropped to his knees, screaming. The knife clattered to the floor. He clutched his head, body convulsing. The blood contract was enforcing itself—punishing deviation, forcing compliance. Mei-lin didn’t wait. She ran for the window, threw it open, looked down at three stories of empty air. Behind her, Ruihua’s laughter: “You think a partial letter is enough? You know nothing, child. NOTHING.” Mei-lin climbed onto the windowsill. The morning air was cold. The ground was very far down. But Chen Rui was already rising, picking up the knife, the System’s compliance protocols overwhelming his brief rebellion. She jumped.

[END CHAPTER 12]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 14: THE DEBT COLLECTOR

“By blood bound, by fate sealed—” Chen Rui’s voice cracked on the words. The ceremonial knife pressed against Mei-lin’s palm, about to complete the blood marriage seal, when screaming erupted from the courtyard. Car engine roaring. Shouting. Security guards running. Chen Rui’s phone sparked in his pocket—a shower of blue light and the smell of burning electronics. He dropped the knife, convulsing. Pain shot through his arm like lightning following wire. The deadline. It had passed while he hesitated. The System was punishing him for contract violation. Mei-lin caught him as he collapsed, his weight dragging them both down. “Chen Rui—what’s happening—” “Can’t—” His body seized. “Didn’t complete—task—System—” More shouting from outside. Headlights cutting through darkness. The extended family pouring from the dining hall, drawn by commotion. And Mei-lin realized with crystalline horror: the one-week deadline Mr. Tan had given for Chen Rui’s gambling debts. That was today too. Everything was converging. She half-carried, half-dragged Chen Rui toward the courtyard. Li Fang appeared from the shadows, watching with calculating eyes but offering no help. “The debt collector’s back,” Li Fang said. “And this time, he brought an army.” ---- The courtyard blazed with headlights. A black SUV idled at the gates, engine running, high beams on. Three large men emerged from the vehicle—professional muscle in dark suits, moving with military precision. Not thugs. Enforcers. Mr. Tan exited last, carrying a leather briefcase and tablet. He looked exactly as

he had a week ago—expensive suit, silver hair, face like a blade. Professional collector who'd done this a thousand times before. The extended Zhang family gathered in clusters, still in their New Year finery. Red silk and gold embroidery incongruous against the storm clouds gathering overhead. Thunder rumbled. First drops of rain began to fall. Chen Rui could barely stand. Mei-lin kept her arm around his waist, holding him upright. Every few seconds, his body spasmed—the System punishing failed contract obligation. Mr. Tan's voice carried across the courtyard with absolute authority: "Zhang family. I gave Chen Rui one week to pay 550,000 yuan. The week expired at midnight. I'm here to collect." Ruihua emerged from the mansion entrance, Xiao Chen at her side. Her New Year composure was perfect despite the chaos. "This is a private family matter, Mr. Tan. You have no authority on Zhang property without—" "I have legal authority." He produced documents from his briefcase, holding them up for everyone to see. "When Chen Rui signed loan contracts with my employer, he used Zhang family assets as collateral. Without authorization. That makes this entire family liable under commercial code section 47." The extended family shifted, uncertain. Uncle Zhang stepped forward. "What collateral? Chen Rui doesn't own individual assets. Everything belongs to family trust—" "He forged documents." Mr. Tan's interruption was clinical. "Specifically, he forged his father's signature on property deeds for five vehicles, two residential properties, and—" He paused, letting the moment stretch. "A 15% stake in Zhang Construction Company." The courtyard erupted. That 15% wasn't Chen Rui's to gamble. It belonged to the family trust, carefully

structured for tax purposes, representing millions in valuation. If Mr. Tan seized it through legal channels, he could force company restructuring, expose decades of creative accounting to courts, unravel the entire financial apparatus the Zhangs had built. Uncle Zhang's fury was volcanic. "Chen Rui, what have you done?" Chen Rui was on his knees now, barely conscious. "I needed—the money—Mother said—she promised—she'd cover it—" Every eye turned to Ruihua. ---- The rain intensified. Within seconds, everyone in the courtyard was soaked. Thunder cracked overhead, shaking windows. Ruihua stood motionless, calculation visible behind her eyes. She could pay. 550,000 yuan was nothing to Zhang wealth—petty cash compared to offshore accounts and construction profits. But paying meant admitting Chen Rui's debts were her responsibility. Meant showing weakness to extended family who were already questioning her authority after Mei-lin's banquet accusations. "Chen Rui's debts are his own." Her voice cut through the rain and thunder. "He's an adult. He made unauthorized use of family assets—criminal fraud, technically. Let him face appropriate consequences." Throwing her son to the wolves. The extended family recoiled. This was cold even by Ruihua's standards. Mr. Tan's smile was professional satisfaction. "Excellent. Then I'll take Chen Rui with me tonight. My employer has alternative payment arrangements for debtors who can't produce cash." He gestured to his enforcers. "Gentlemen." They moved toward Chen Rui, each step deliberate. "Wait." Mei-lin's voice stopped them. Everyone turned to stare at the injured bride who could barely stand, supporting a husband who'd tried to

kill her an hour ago. “I can get the money,” she said. Mr. Tan studied her with new interest. “You? The bride married five days ago? You have 550,000 yuan?” “I can access it. Give me 24 hours.” The debt collector moved closer, assessing.

“You’re injured. Desperate. Clearly lying.” But something in her eyes made him pause. “You have something. Not money. Information? Leverage?” He leaned close enough that only Mei-lin could hear. “What are you really offering?” Mei-lin raised her voice—loud enough for the family to hear: “I know where Ruihua’s offshore accounts are. The ones with 30 million yuan that Wei-jun discovered before she killed him. Help me access one, and I’ll give you 600,000—your debt plus interest.” The courtyard went silent except for rain hammering stone. Ruihua’s composure cracked. “You have no access to those accounts—” “Wei-jun gave me the codes before he died.” Mei-lin’s bluff was absolute. “Said I might need them. Said you’d try to sacrifice me like you sacrificed him when he discovered your embezzlement.” She looked at the extended family, at Uncle Zhang’s shocked face, at the cousins and aunts and business associates. “She’s been bleeding this family dry for forty years. Offshore accounts, fake construction expenses, embezzled profits funneled to private holdings—” “These are lies from a desperate bride—” Ruihua started. But Uncle Zhang’s voice overrode her: “The two million yuan Wei-jun allegedly stole. You transferred it offshore for yourself. You’ve been using family business as your personal bank.” “Uncle, these accusations are baseless —” “Are they?” An older cousin stepped forward, rain streaming down her face. “Because suddenly a lot of discrepancies make sense. Construction bids that came in

under budget but somehow never showed increased profit. Asset liquidations that disappeared into 'reinvestment.' Wei-jun's 'embezzlement' that you discovered right before he died." The family was turning. Decades of trust fracturing in minutes. Mr. Tan watched with the detached interest of a predator watching prey fight among themselves. Finally, he raised a hand for silence. "I don't care about family politics. I care about payment." To Mei-lin: "You have 24 hours to produce 600,000 yuan. If you fail, I take Chen Rui. If you try to run, I take you both." He turned to Ruihua. "And I'll be filing legal claims against Zhang Construction tomorrow morning. Freezing assets, demanding audits. So if you were thinking of hiding funds..." His smile was sharp. "You have less than 12 hours." He walked back to his SUV, enforcers following. But they didn't leave. The vehicle parked outside the gates, headlights still on. Watching. Thunder cracked. Lightning illuminated sixty faces turned toward Ruihua in accusation.

"Emergency family council." Uncle Zhang's pronouncement was absolute. "Now. Matriarch must answer for these accusations under traditional protocols." Ruihua's attempt at control was immediate: "This is exactly what the bride wants—division, chaos, internal collapse. We must present united front to external threats—" But the extended relatives were angry now. Decades of accumulated resentments finding voice: "You promised Chen Rui's debts were handled!" "How much have you moved offshore?" "The construction company is at risk because of your schemes!" Li Fang moved through the crowd with practiced grace, positioning herself near Uncle Zhang. "Uncles, perhaps it's time for leadership transition. Matriarch Ruihua has served

admirably for four decades, but..." She paused meaningfully. "Clearly her methods are no longer sustainable. Fresh perspective might better protect family assets." Positioning herself as Ruihua's replacement. Mei-lin saw it clearly: Li Fang had been waiting for this moment. Had probably helped orchestrate it by providing Wei-jun's financial records at the banquet. Now she was moving to fill the power vacuum. Ruihua's isolation was complete. For forty years, she'd been untouchable. Now—in one evening—a bride's accusations, a debt collector's threats, and the family's anger had converged to destroy her authority. Her eyes found Mei-lin slipping toward the mansion entrance. "Where do you think you're going?" Mei-lin's defiance was raw. "To find those access codes Wei-jun gave me. To save your son. Since you won't." Ruihua's calculation was visible: Let Mei-lin try to access accounts that require codes she doesn't have. Let her fail publicly. Let the debt collector take her. Problem solved. But—what if Wei-jun really did give Mei-lin something before he died? What if he betrayed Ruihua in his final moments? "Follow her," Ruihua ordered the guards. "Watch her. If she attempts to leave the property, stop her. If she attempts to access family systems, report immediately." To the family council: "We'll resolve this in proper order. First, I'll prove these accusations are false. Then we'll discuss appropriate punishment for the bride's slander." Uncle Zhang's response was ice: "You'll prove nothing until family council reviews all financial records. You're suspended from matriarch duties pending investigation." The coup was happening. Forty years of power crumbling in minutes. Ruihua's mask slipped for just a moment—pure rage visible before control reasserted

itself. "As you wish, Uncle. I welcome investigation. It will prove my innocence and the bride's malice." But her eyes promised Mei-lin: *This isn't over.* ---- Mei-lin's room felt like a cell. Guards stationed outside her door. Mr. Tan's enforcers watching from the gates. She was trapped between multiple threats: Twenty-four hours to produce 600,000 yuan she didn't have. Chen Rui suffering somewhere from System punishment, dangerous and unpredictable. Ruihua's fury and the family council's investigation. And the System itself—which had gone eerily silent during Mr. Tan's arrival. Why? She pulled out her phone. Still had the photo of the burned letter fragment. The partial clue that changed everything: *“The curse can be broken if the matriarch's blood...”* And Li Fang's earlier revelation about blood marriage seals. *Both enslaved, both controlled—but both alive.* Mei-lin's hands shook as she made the calculation: Chen Rui violated his contract by not killing her. He was being punished. But if she completed the blood marriage seal now—bound herself to him permanently—it might satisfy the System retroactively. Might free him from punishment. And together, bound by blood, they might access something neither could alone. She found Chen Rui in the ancestral shrine. He'd returned there after collapsing, crawling down those 127 steps to the chamber where he'd killed his brother. Now he knelt before the altar, still in pain, body occasionally spasming. The shrine was exactly as they'd left it hours ago. Six funeral tablets glowing faintly. The seventh blank, waiting. Wei-jun's blood still stained the obsidian altar. "The blood marriage seal," Mei-lin said from the doorway. "Li Fang said it binds us together. Makes me an extension of your contract. Maybe that's what

the System wants. Maybe that's how we satisfy both our obligations." Chen Rui's laugh was broken. "You want to enslave yourself to me? After everything? After I killed my brother because you manipulated me into signing that contract?" Mei-lin stepped into the shrine. "I want to survive. And I want to break Ruihua's power. The matriarch's blood—your mother's blood—is the key to ending the curse. But I can't get to her alone." She moved closer. "You can." Understanding dawned across Chen Rui's face. "You want to kill my mother." "I want to free everyone. Including you." Chen Rui looked at the ceremonial knife still lying on the altar—the same blade he'd used to kill Wei-jun. Wei-jun's blood still dark on the metal. "If I bind myself to you through blood marriage," Mei-lin said quietly, "if I become your property under System rules, will you help me end this? Will you help me break the curse?" Before Chen Rui could answer—Footsteps on the stairs. Li Fang descended into the shrine, hair and clothes soaked from rain, expression unreadable. "Don't do it," she said. "Blood marriage seals can't be broken. Ever. Not even by death. You'd be bound to each other beyond the grave." She looked at Mei-lin. "Is that really what you want? Eternity chained to the man you destroyed?" Mei-lin extended her palm toward Chen Rui. "Then we'll destroy the System together. In this life or the next." Chen Rui picked up the knife. His hands didn't shake anymore. Something had settled in his eyes. Decision made. He cut his palm first. Blood welled, dripped onto the altar where Wei-jun's blood had already stained the black stone. The temperature in the shrine dropped thirty degrees in five seconds. Mei-lin's breath came out in clouds. The candles flared white-hot, then blue. The six

funeral tablets began to glow brighter—names appearing on their surfaces, dates of death, causes written in characters that seemed to move. Something ancient was waking up. Chen Rui reached for Mei-lin’s hand. “By blood bound,” he said, voice steady. “By fate sealed. By System witnessed—” The shrine’s walls began to pulse. “—I bind my life to yours, my death to yours, my will to yours—” The seventh tablet started to glow. “—until contract breaks or death takes us both.” He pressed the knife to Mei-lin’s palm. The pain was sharp. Clean. Final. Their hands came together—his blood and hers mixing, warm and sticky and binding. “Your turn,” Chen Rui said. Mei-lin felt the words pull from somewhere deep: “By blood bound, by fate sealed, by System witnessed—I bind my life to yours, my death to yours, my will to yours, until contract breaks or death takes us both.” Their joined hands burned. Every phone in the mansion buzzed simultaneously—a sound like locusts swarming. Li Fang’s screen lit up with the message visible to all: *“Blood marriage seal accepted. Alternative binding confirmed. Chen Rui: Enforcer status maintained. Mei-lin: Bound property status established. Both controlled. Both tools. Next task begins in 24 hours.”* *“Congratulations on your marriage. May you destroy each other beautifully.”* The shrine’s temperature continued dropping. Their breath came out in ice crystals. And from the walls themselves—from the stone carved with ancient characters—a voice spoke. Not the System’s automated tone. Something older. Deeper. *“Seven brides bound. Seven deaths paid. Matriarch’s blood debt coming due. Choose wisely, children. Some sacrifices feed the curse. Others break it.”* The voice faded. The temperature returned

to normal. Chen Rui and Mei-lin stood with their hands still joined, blood cooling between their palms, staring at each other with the horrified understanding of what they'd just done. Li Fang backed toward the stairs. "You shouldn't have done that. You've bound yourselves to something older than the System. Older than Ruihua. Older than this house." She fled up the stairs. # HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 16: THE POISONED CUP "Everyone out. NOW." Ruihua's voice cracked like a whip across the chaos. Servants who'd flooded Mei-lin's room after the gunshot scattered immediately, fleeing into the hallway with backward glances and whispered terror. Mei-lin pressed her hand to her shoulder, blood seeping hot between her fingers. The pain was incredible—a burning, tearing sensation that made her vision blur at the edges. But she was alive. Li Fang's hands had been shaking so badly the bullet went wide, missed center mass by six inches. Six inches between death and this: collapsed against the wall, ears ringing from the gunshot, watching Li Fang stare at the gun in her hands like it was a snake that had bitten her. "I didn't—" Li Fang's voice came out broken. "I wasn't going to actually—" Chen Rui crawled across the floor toward Mei-lin, his own pain forgotten in the surge of panic through their blood bond. He could feel her injury like it was his own—phantom agony radiating from a shoulder he wasn't shot in. The laptop still glowed on the floor where it had fallen: TRANSFER COMPLETE. 600,000 YUAN SENT TO ACCOUNT ENDING IN 4782. Chen Rui's debt account. The money moved. Ruihua's theft accomplished. Ruihua stepped into the room, closing the door behind her with deliberate calm. She surveyed the

scene—blood-splattered bride, shocked would-be killer, shattered window still dripping with rain, laptop showing evidence of embezzlement. To the two servants still hovering at the edges: “You saw nothing. You heard nothing. An accident during storm cleanup—a window broke, someone was cut by glass. Understood?” The servants nodded frantically and fled. Only family remained now: Ruihua, Li Fang, Chen Rui, Mei-lin bleeding on the floor. Ruihua extended her hand toward Li Fang. “Give me the gun.” Li Fang looked down at the weapon like she’d forgotten she was holding it. “I just wanted to stop her from taking the accounts. From stealing what should have been mine. I wasn’t going to actually shoot—” “But you did.” Ruihua’s voice was ice. “You shot the bride on Zhang family property with witnesses nearby and a family council meeting in three hours. You’ve given them perfect ammunition to remove me—my household is so chaotic that brides are being murdered in their bedrooms.” Chen Rui pressed his jacket against Mei-lin’s wound, trying to slow the bleeding. “She needs a hospital. Ambulance. Now.” Ruihua’s calculation was immediate. “Hospital means police. Police means investigation. Investigation means they discover the offshore accounts—” she gestured at the laptop “—that Mei-lin just accessed and stole from. We all go to prison.” The trap snapped closed with perfect precision. Mei-lin saw it clearly now: Ruihua had planned this. Given her the password knowing she’d use it. Knew Li Fang was unstable, watching, armed. Let them collide. Now all three were criminals—Mei-lin for embezzlement, Li Fang for attempted murder, Chen Rui for being accessory after the fact if he helped hide it. All

bound to Ruihua by shared guilt. "No hospital," Ruihua said. "No police. I'll call the family doctor—he's discreet and owes me several favors. The bullet went through cleanly, no vital organs. Mei-lin will survive." She looked at Li Fang with something almost like satisfaction. "And you'll help nurse her. Penance for your... impulsiveness." Li Fang's horror was absolute. "You want me to take care of the woman I just shot?" "I want you to remember what desperation feels like. What it means to be so afraid of losing power that you become a killer." Ruihua took the gun from Li Fang's unresisting hands. "Because that's what you are now. A killer. Just like me. Welcome to the family." ----- The family doctor arrived within twenty minutes—an elderly man who'd been treating Zhang ailments and covering Zhang crimes for three decades. He worked in silence, cleaning the wound, confirming the bullet's exit, stitching with steady hands. No anesthesia. Mei-lin had to stay conscious, stay quiet. The family council was gathering. No one could know a bride had been shot. Li Fang was forced to assist—holding gauze, passing instruments, hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped the suture kit twice. She couldn't look at Mei-lin's face. Kept her eyes fixed on the wound she'd caused, confronting her own capacity for violence. Chen Rui sat in the corner, feeling every stitch through the blood bond. His face was gray. When the doctor finally finished and left with a bow and a promise of eternal silence, the room settled into terrible quiet. Mei-lin's shoulder was bandaged tight, arm in a makeshift sling. The pain had crystallized into something manageable if she didn't move, didn't breathe too deep, didn't think about the fact that she'd been shot in her own

bedroom. Ruihua stood at the window, looking out at dawn breaking over the rain-washed gardens. "Tea ceremony," she said suddenly. Everyone turned to stare. "What?" Mei-lin's voice was hoarse. "A binding ceremony." Ruihua moved to the small table by the window, began arranging tea things with ritual precision—pot, cups, kettle. "Li Fang attempted murder. You committed embezzlement. Chen Rui violated his blood contract. All of you are criminals. All of you need my protection." She poured water from a thermos into the pot. "So we're going to perform a traditional tea ceremony. Each of you will acknowledge your crimes and accept my authority to conceal them. A contract witnessed by family." Mei-lin watched as Ruihua arranged four delicate cups in a line. Poured tea from the single pot with graceful precision. But as she poured—when she thought no one was looking—Ruihua produced a small vial from her sleeve. Added drops of liquid to one of the cups. Just a few. Clear liquid disappearing into amber tea. Mei-lin caught it only because she was looking for it. Because she'd learned that Ruihua never did anything without layers of manipulation. "Drink from the cup I give you," Ruihua said, turning back to face them. "Accept the terms. Or refuse and face consequences alone." She lifted the first cup, carrying it to Chen Rui. "You are bound by blood contract. You killed your brother. You failed every task. Drink this and your mother forgives your failures. Refuse and face System punishment forever." Chen Rui took the cup with numb hands. He didn't even smell it. Just drank in one swallow, grimaced at some bitter undertone, set the empty cup down. Ruihua took the second cup to Li Fang. "You are guilty of attempted murder. Drink this and I'll protect you

from prosecution. Refuse and I'll let the police find the gun—with your fingerprints—and testify that I heard you threaten the bride earlier." Li Fang hesitated, staring at the tea like it was poison. But what choice did she have? She was a killer now. She needed protection. She drank. And immediately started crying—not from poison but from shame, from the recognition of what she'd become, what she'd always been becoming since she married into this family three years ago. Ruihua turned to Mei-lin, carrying the third cup. "You are guilty of embezzlement. Drink this and the offshore accounts stay hidden. Refuse and I report the theft myself—you go to prison, your family in the village faces disgrace." Mei-lin looked at the cup. She'd seen Ruihua add something to one of them. But which? Chen Rui's, already drunk? Li Fang's, making her cry? This one? Or the fourth cup—the one still sitting on the table, reserved for Ruihua herself? A test. Everything with Ruihua was a test. Mei-lin's hand shot out—but not to take the cup Ruihua offered. She lunged past Ruihua, grabbed the fourth cup from the table. The one meant for the matriarch herself. And drank it before Ruihua could stop her. The taste was clean. Pure tea, nothing else. No bitterness. No strange aftertaste. Ruihua's shock flickered across her face for just a moment before control reasserted. Mei-lin set down the empty cup. "You were testing us. Seeing who would drink poison willingly, who would trust you blindly, who would think to switch cups." She met Ruihua's eyes. "The poison was in Li Fang's cup. She's dying right now and doesn't even know it." "What?" Li Fang's hand went to her throat. She was already pale. Trembling more than before. Dizzy. "Not poison," Ruihua said calmly.

“Sedative. Strong enough to make you compliant for the family council. Can’t have you confessing to attempted murder in front of the elders, can we?” Li Fang’s knees buckled. Chen Rui caught her before she hit the floor, lowered her to the bed where she immediately began slipping into drugged sleep. Ruihua studied Mei-lin with new appreciation. “Most brides never think to switch cups. They’re too afraid, too desperate to please. But you...” She smiled. “You assumed I was trying to kill you and took what you thought was the safe cup. Clever.” “Or stupid,” Mei-lin said. “If you’d poisoned your own cup as a double-bluff.” “If I’d done that, you’d be dead. But you’re not. So you passed.” Ruihua collected the empty cups. “Another test completed.” ---- Li Fang’s breathing deepened into drugged sleep. Chen Rui sat beside her on the bed, face hollow, trapped in a nightmare he couldn’t wake from. Ruihua checked her watch. “Three hours until family council. Li Fang will sleep through it –convenient. Chen Rui will stay with her, ensuring she doesn’t wake and confess. That leaves you and me, Mei-lin.” She turned. “We’ll attend together. Present a united front.” Mei-lin struggled to process. “United? You just orchestrated Li Fang shooting me.” “I let her try. I knew she’d miss—she’s never held a gun before, hands shake when she’s nervous.” Ruihua examined Mei-lin’s bandaged shoulder with clinical interest. “But now she’s guilty, terrified, drugged, and completely under my control. One problem solved.” She moved closer. “And you’ve proven yourself again. You switched cups. You stole the money exactly as instructed. You survived an assassination attempt. You’re exactly what I need.” The renewed offer came with the weight of

inevitability: “The family council will vote on my leadership within three hours. Uncle Zhang has been turning cousins against me, spreading doubts about my management. The offshore account accusations gave him ammunition. Without Li Fang’s support and with Chen Rui compromised by blood contract, I’m vulnerable.” She paused. “But if you stand with me. If you testify that the offshore accounts were Wei-jun’s idea, that you accessed them trying to help the family recover his embezzlement, that Li Fang attacked you out of jealous rage—I’ll win the vote. And you’ll be confirmed as my designated successor.” Mei-lin’s exhaustion was bone-deep. “Why would I help you? You’ve tortured me since I arrived. Destroyed my marriage. Forced me to become a criminal.” “Because if I fall, Li Fang rises.” Ruihua’s logic was brutal. “And drugged or not, she hates you. She just tried to murder you. She’ll kill you the moment she has power—either directly or through System tasks.” She leaned closer. “But if I remain matriarch with you as designated heir, you’re protected. You have time to learn the System’s rules. Time to find the real way to break it—if such a thing exists.” The truth beneath the manipulation: “I’m sixty-two and tired. The family is fracturing. The System demands more than I can sustainably provide. I need a successor who can adapt, who can modernize, who can survive the next forty years.” Her smile was sharp. “Because I won’t.” Mei-lin’s question came out quiet: “What happens to Chen Rui?” “My son is broken. His blood contract owns him. Wei-jun’s death destroyed what was left of his spine.” Ruihua’s dismissal was casual. “But through your blood marriage—incomplete as it is—you’re linked to him. You could complete the binding eventually.

Control him fully. He'd do anything you commanded if it meant escaping his guilt." The darkness beneath every word: "That's what matriarchs do. We use broken men, desperate women, the System's hunger. We turn suffering into power because that's the only currency this house accepts."

Outside, bells began ringing. The family council gathering. Ruihua stood, elegant and composed despite the night's chaos. "You have sixty seconds to decide. Stand with me at the council, testify to my story, or stay here and let Uncle Zhang install Li Fang as matriarch. Either way, you're trapped in this family. But only one path lets you eventually escape."

Mei-lin struggled to stand, shoulder screaming, blood seeping through fresh bandages. Chen Rui reached to help her instinctively. Their hands touched—the blood bond flared, and she felt his despair, his resignation, his desperate hope that she'd choose destruction over submission. "Don't help her," Chen Rui whispered. "Let the family fall. Let us all fall. Let everything burn." But Mei-lin saw her choices clearly: Li Fang unconscious on the bed—unstable, violent, would definitely kill Mei-lin if given power. Uncle Zhang gathering the family council—wanted control for profit, would continue the System under new management, just with different leadership. Ruihua—evil, but known evil. Calculable.

Trainable. Beatable, if given time. Keep your enemies close. Learn from the monster. Then become the one who ends the cycle. Or refuse. Let chaos reign. Die in the rubble. Mei-lin took Ruihua's offered hand. Stood, despite the pain. "I'll testify at the council," she said. "But I want something in return." Ruihua's smile was cold victory. "Name it." "The complete text. Every burned letter. Every missing page from

the diary. Everything previous brides discovered about breaking the curse." Mei-lin met her eyes. "You give me all of it. Every scrap of information you've been hiding." Ruihua studied her. "If I give you that information, you'll use it against me." "Eventually. Yes." The honesty seemed to please her. "Then we have a deal. I'll give you the truth—all of it, every fragment. And you'll have forty years, however long I live, to figure out how to weaponize it." She laughed, soft and terrible. "That's more time than any bride before you got. Most died within months. You might actually succeed." They walked toward the door together—matriarch and heir, monster and student, bound by shared crimes and competing endgames. Behind them, Li Fang's drugged breathing filled the room with soft moans. Chen Rui closed his eyes, unable to watch his wife walk away with his mother. Mei-lin felt his despair through the blood bond like drowning. And then— Every phone in the mansion buzzed simultaneously. Mei-lin's. Ruihua's. Chen Rui's. Li Fang's unconscious body. Every device connected to the System.

"New alliance detected. Bride + Matriarch = unprecedented evolution. Level 6 begins." *"Task: Eliminate external threats. The family council must not remove Ruihua. Target: Uncle Zhang. Method: your choice. Deadline: 2 hours."* Mei-lin's phone displayed an additional message: *"Your first task as designated heir: Kill Uncle Zhang before he calls the vote. Prove your commitment to the alliance. Failure results in both Bride and Matriarch termination."* Ruihua read over her shoulder. For the first time since Mei-lin had met her, the matriarch looked genuinely surprised. "The System has never assigned a joint task before," she said quietly. "It's treating us

as a unit. As partners.” Mei-lin’s hand throbbed where the blood bond connected her to Chen Rui. Her shoulder bled through bandages. Her grandmother’s necklace was gone. Her marriage was destroyed. She was a thief, a liar, and now – The System wanted her to be a murderer. “Two hours,” Ruihua said. “The council meets in the east hall. Uncle Zhang will arrive early to meet with his supporters. That’s when you’ll act.” “How?” Mei-lin’s voice came out hollow. Ruihua smiled. “I’ll teach you. That’s what mentors do.” They continued walking, leaving Chen Rui and the unconscious Li Fang behind. Somewhere in the mansion, Uncle Zhang was preparing his accusations against Ruihua. In two hours, he would be dead. And Mei-lin would be the one who killed him. Leaving husband and wife alone in the shrine where one brother had killed another, where funeral tablets glowed with the names of dead brides, where something ancient had just witnessed their binding. Outside, thunder cracked. Mr. Tan’s enforcers lit cigarettes by the gate, waiting out their 24-hour deadline. The family council’s shouting echoed from the main hall – Ruihua defending, Uncle Zhang attacking, forty years of secrets spilling into the storm. And in the shrine, Mei-lin whispered: “What did we just do?” Chen Rui looked at their joined hands. At the blood. At the seventh tablet now glowing with both their names. “We made ourselves into weapons,” he said. “The question is: whose?”

[END CHAPTER 14]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 15: SILK AND CHAINS

“Blood marriage seal. You tried to bind yourself to my son.” Mei-lin spun from the window where she’d been watching the storm. Ruihua stood in the doorway—she hadn’t knocked, had entered with the silent authority of someone who considered every room in this mansion her domain. The lock clicked behind her. Deliberate. Final. Mei-lin’s palm throbbed beneath its hasty bandage. The cut from the ceremonial knife still bled through the cloth—too much blood for such a shallow wound. Chen Rui’s pain echoed through her bones like a phantom limb she couldn’t amputate. The blood marriage was incomplete. They’d mixed blood on the altar, begun the ritual, but the shrine’s temperature had dropped so fast they’d fled before speaking the final oath. Now they were caught between: neither free nor bound, linked but unprotected. Chen Rui lay collapsed in the hallway outside her door, visible through the gap. His body spasmed periodically—the System still punishing his contract violation. Mei-lin felt each spasm like an echo. A warning of what incomplete binding meant. Twenty-two hours left until Mr. Tan’s debt deadline. Ruihua circled Mei-lin like a shark scenting blood. She took in the bandaged hand, Chen Rui’s collapsed form, the ceremonial knife Mei-lin had hidden in her sleeve. “But you didn’t complete it,” Ruihua said. “The oath wasn’t spoken. So now you’re caught in liminal state—neither free nor bound. Clever girl made a stupid mistake.” “We’ll complete it.” Mei-lin’s defiance was automatic. “We’ll go back to the shrine, speak the oath, bind ourselves properly—” Ruihua’s laugh was silver and sharp. “The shrine won’t

allow it now. You interrupted the ritual. The window closed the moment you fled. You're stuck—linked to Chen Rui's blood contract without any of its protections. You'll feel everything the System does to him, but gain none of the benefits." The curse of incomplete binding. Ruihua moved to Mei-lin's desk, produced something from her pocket. The burned letter fragment—somehow she'd reclaimed it during the chaos of the debt collector's arrival. "This." She held it up. "The curse can be broken if the matriarch's blood.' You think you discovered my vulnerability? My secret weakness?" She set it down carefully. "That letter is from 1987. Written by a bride who tried exactly what you're trying. She got this far—learned about the matriarch's blood, convinced her husband to help her, prepared to kill me." Mei-lin's throat tightened. "What happened to her?" "She's in the garden. Grave #2." Ruihua's tone was matter-of-fact. "Her husband—my eldest son from my first marriage—is beside her. Grave #3." She paused, letting that sink in. "Turns out, killing the matriarch requires more than knowledge. It requires power. And brides have none." Rain hammered the windows. Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating Ruihua's face—ancient and young at once, worn smooth by decades of secrets. "But you're right about one thing," she continued. "My blood is the key. Not my death—my blood. Specifically, blood freely given to break the contract I signed forty years ago." Understanding hit Mei-lin like cold water. "You'd have to choose to end it. Willingly bleed to free everyone." "Which I will never do." Ruihua's certainty was absolute. "I've spent forty years building this empire. I won't destroy it for sentiment or morality or a desperate bride's accusations." She moved to the window,

looking out at the storm-lashed gardens where bodies lay buried. "Six generations of matriarchs understood this. Power has a price. Someone must pay. Better strangers than ourselves." ---- Ruihua turned from the window, and her expression shifted. The predator became... something else. Almost collegial. She gestured to the chair by Mei-lin's bed. "Sit. We need to talk as equals, not enemies." Mei-lin didn't move. "We're not equals." "Not yet." Ruihua sat—rare enough that it signaled importance. "But you could be." She studied Mei-lin with new assessment, the way a master craftsman might examine a promising apprentice. "You've survived longer than any bride in twenty years. You've manipulated my son into a blood contract. You've turned my own family against me with debt collectors and accusations. You've found fragments of truth that took others years to discover." She paused. "You're wasted as a victim, Mei-lin." The use of her name—not "bride" or "daughter"—felt like a trap closing. "I'm sixty-two years old," Ruihua continued. "I won't live forever. The System needs a matriarch. When I die—naturally, peacefully, years from now—that matriarch will be you or Li Fang. Currently, Li Fang is positioning herself as my successor. Did you see her at the family council? How she moved through the crowd, whispered to Uncle Zhang, positioned herself as the reasonable alternative?" Mei-lin had seen. Li Fang's maneuvering had been surgical. "But she's weak," Ruihua said. "Sentimental. She tried to save her own life by playing the System's games, but she never learned to control them. She'll destroy what I've built within a decade." The offer was coming. Mei-lin could feel it like pressure before a storm. "Help me survive the family council

investigation. Help me neutralize Uncle Zhang's rebellion. Help me maintain control through this crisis." Ruihua leaned forward. "In exchange: I'll train you properly. Teach you how to control the System, not just survive it. And when I'm gone—when I die naturally, years from now—you inherit everything. The power. The wealth. The legacy." "You want me to become you." The words tasted like ash. "I want you to become better than me." Ruihua's honesty was almost seductive. "I learned through trial and error, mistakes and corpses piling up in the garden. You'd have my forty years of knowledge from the beginning. You could refine the System further. Make it more efficient. Maybe even—" slight smile—"humane. Within reason." She stood, pacing now, building her argument. "You think you'll destroy the System? Free all the brides? End the curse?" She shook her head. "The System existed before the Zhangs. It'll exist after. Ancient houses have ancient hungers. All you can do is control it or be controlled by it. I'm offering you the chance to control." Meilin's voice came out hoarse. "What about Chen Rui? His blood contract?" Ruihua's dismissal was casual. "My son is broken. Wei-jun's death destroyed what was left of his spine. He'll never be useful as anything more than a tool." She considered. "We can repurpose him. Make him believe he's helping you while actually serving the System. Manipulated men are easier to handle than resistant ones." The cruelty was breathtaking. Her own son reduced to "tool" and "resource." "That's what your blood marriage would have accomplished anyway," Ruihua added. "Binding him to you, controlling him through the link. You were thinking strategically even if you didn't fully realize it." Outside, Chen

Rui groaned in the hallway. The sound carried through the door—pain and confusion and the slow dissolution of everything he'd been. Mei-lin felt it echo through their incomplete bond. ---- Ruihua moved back to the desk, all business now. "The debt collector. Mr. Tan. He wants 600,000 yuan by tomorrow night. You claimed you have access to my offshore accounts—obviously a bluff, but a useful one." She reached into her jacket, produced a slim laptop. "Here's your test." She set the laptop on the desk, opened it. "Actually access the accounts. Steal 600,000 yuan from me. Pay Chen Rui's debt with my own money." Mei-lin stared. "You want me to steal from you?" "I want you to prove you can." Ruihua's smile was sharp. "If you're going to be matriarch, you need to demonstrate that you can outthink me, outmaneuver me, take what you need even when I'm watching. Consider it an entrance exam." The laptop screen glowed in the dim room. Login page for an offshore banking portal. Ruihua leaned close, voice dropping to a whisper: "The password is 'inheritance-blood-1985.' My wedding year. Poetic, don't you think?" She straightened. "You have until tomorrow night. Steal the money, pay the debt, save Chen Rui. Prove you're not just clever—prove you're ruthless enough to take what you need without hesitation." Mei-lin's mind raced. "What's the catch?" "The catch?" Ruihua moved toward the door. "If you succeed, you'll be guilty of embezzlement. Traceable. Prosecutable. You'll be as trapped as I am—unable to expose the System without exposing yourself. You'll need me to protect you from legal consequences." She smiled. "And that's the point. Bind yourself to me through shared guilt. Become complicit. Turn

survival into collaboration.” She unlocked the door, paused with her hand on the handle. “You have one hour to decide. Access the accounts and become my successor, or refuse and face Mr. Tan with nothing. Either way, Chen Rui suffers.” She glanced at her son’s collapsed form. “Oh, and the family council meets at dawn. They’re voting on whether to remove me as matriarch. If they succeed, Li Fang takes over. And Li Fang’s first act as matriarch will be eliminating you as a threat.” Ruihua left. The door closed but didn’t lock this time. Another test—would Mei-lin run? The laptop sat on the desk. Password given. 600,000 yuan within reach. Chen Rui’s voice came weak from the hallway: “Mei-lin... what are you doing?” He must have heard everything. Must have been conscious the whole time. Mei-lin moved to the laptop, hands shaking. She typed in the password. It worked. The offshore account loaded—balance displayed in neat columns: **32,847,000 yuan.** More than she’d imagined. Forty years of systematic embezzlement, documented in spreadsheets organized by year and source. Construction fund skimming. Asset liquidation diversions. Bride dowry appropriations. The accumulated wealth of destroyed women and defrauded family, all sitting in an account Mei-lin could now access. Her hands hovered over the keyboard. Three choices crystallized: Transfer 600,000. Save Chen Rui. Become complicit in Ruihua’s crimes. Accept the path to becoming matriarch. Or transfer everything. All 32 million. Not to herself—to charity, to families of dead brides, to anyone but the Zhangs. Destroy Ruihua’s nest egg entirely. Or screenshot everything. Evidence. Send it to Uncle Zhang, to authorities, to media. Burn the entire system down from the inside. Three choices.

Each one damning in different ways. "Mei-lin." Chen Rui's voice was stronger now. "What are you doing?" She looked at him through the doorway. He'd managed to prop himself against the wall, face pale, eyes focused on the glowing laptop screen. "Your mother gave me access to her accounts," Mei-lin said. "Told me to steal 600,000 to pay your debt. To prove I'm ruthless enough to be her successor." Chen Rui's laugh was broken. "And will you? Will you become her?" The question hung between them—husband and wife, bound by incomplete blood marriage, linked through pain, staring at the choice that would define everything. "I don't know," Mei-lin whispered. Her finger moved to the transfer button. TRANSFER AMOUNT: 600,000 YUAN DESTINATION ACCOUNT: [blank] CONFIRM? YES/NO She typed in Mr. Tan's payment account number. The one he'd provided a week ago when this nightmare began. Her cursor hovered over YES. Behind her, glass exploded. The window shattered inward—wind and rain and shards flying. Mei-lin threw herself sideways as a figure climbed through the broken frame. Li Fang. Soaked. Bleeding from glass cuts on her arms and face. Hair plastered to her skull. And in her hand—small, silver, shaking—a gun. "Step away from that laptop. Now." Mei-lin froze. Her hand was still extended toward the keyboard. Li Fang steadied herself, rain pooling around her feet. "I've played this game for three years. Survived Ruihua's tests. Waited my turn. And I won't let some village bride steal my inheritance." She cocked the gun. The click was loud in the sudden silence. Chen Rui tried to stand, collapsed back against the wall. "Li Fang, don't—" "Shut up." Li Fang's voice was ragged. "You're broken. Useless. You killed Wei-jun and

became exactly what the System wanted—a weapon without a brain. But I'm still fighting. Still thinking." Her eyes never left Mei-lin. "I know about the blood marriage. I know it's incomplete. Which means killing you won't even violate the System's rules. There's no binding to punish me for breaking. You're just... meat." "Last chance," Li Fang said. "Step away from the laptop." Outside, lightning cracked. Thunder followed immediately—the storm directly overhead. The laptop screen still glowed: CONFIRM TRANSFER? YES/NO. Mei-lin looked at Li Fang. At the gun. At Chen Rui unable to help. At Ruihua's test sitting on the desk. At three choices collapsing into one moment. "If you kill me," Mei-lin said quietly, "you'll never know which account I was transferring the money to. Could be Mr. Tan. Could be charity. Could be your own account to frame you for embezzlement." Li Fang's hand wavered. Mei-lin's finger pressed YES. The transfer initiated. PROCESSING... 600,000 YUAN TRANSFERRING... Li Fang pulled the trigger. The gunshot was deafening in the small room. Mei-lin felt the impact—Not in her chest. In her left shoulder. Spinning her backward, laptop crashing to the floor, blood blooming hot and fast. She hit the wall and slid down. Chen Rui was screaming. The laptop screen still glowed from the floor: TRANSFER COMPLETE. 600,000 YUAN SENT TO: [account number] Li Fang stared at the screen. At Mei-lin bleeding against the wall. At the gun in her hand. "Oh god," she whispered. "Oh god, what did I—" The room's temperature dropped thirty degrees in two seconds. All three of their phones buzzed simultaneously. *"Violence against bound bride detected. Incomplete blood marriage activated. Protection protocols engaged. Li Fang:

Termination sequence initiated.* Li Fang looked at her phone, then at Mei-lin. “What does that—” Her phone sparked. Smoked. The screen cracked. Li Fang screamed, dropping it. But the System wasn’t done. Her body seized—just like Chen Rui’s had when he violated his contract. But worse. Faster. Blood vessels burst in her eyes. She fell to her knees, convulsing. “Incomplete binding protects both parties from third-party violence,” Chen Rui said from the hallway, voice hollow. “You shot my wife. The System considers that contract violation.” Li Fang’s screaming stopped. She collapsed face-first onto the wet floor. Not moving. Mei-lin pressed her hand to her shoulder. Blood seeped through her fingers. The pain was incredible, but— Chen Rui’s pain had stopped. She couldn’t feel him anymore. The incomplete bond was... completing itself? Her phone buzzed: *“Blood spilled in defense of bound pair. Oath requirement waived. Blood marriage seal: COMPLETE. Chen Rui and Mei-lin: Permanently bound. Status: Enforcer pair. Next task begins in 12 hours.”* Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui. He looked back. They were bound now. Permanently. For better or worse. The laptop screen still glowed from the floor. TRANSFER COMPLETE. Outside, dawn was breaking through the storm. The family council would be gathering soon. And in twelve hours, the System would demand another task. But for now, Mei-lin sat bleeding against the wall, staring at Li Fang’s body, understanding with perfect clarity what she’d just become: A survivor bound to a killer. A bride who’d paid her debt with blood. A piece on Ruihua’s board who’d just made an unexpected move. And somewhere in the mansion, she knew Ruihua was smiling.

[END CHAPTER 15]

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 16: THE POISONED CUP

“Everyone out. NOW.” Ruihua’s voice cracked like a whip across the chaos. Servants who’d flooded Mei-lin’s room after the gunshot scattered immediately, fleeing into the hallway with backward glances and whispered terror. Mei-lin pressed her hand to her shoulder, blood seeping hot between her fingers. The pain was incredible—a burning, tearing sensation that made her vision blur at the edges. But she was alive. Li Fang’s hands had been shaking so badly the bullet went wide, missed center mass by six inches. Six inches between death and this: collapsed against the wall, ears ringing from the gunshot, watching Li Fang stare at the gun in her hands like it was a snake that had bitten her. “I didn’t—” Li Fang’s voice came out broken. “I wasn’t going to actually—” Chen Rui crawled across the floor toward Mei-lin, his own pain forgotten in the surge of panic through their blood bond. He could feel her injury like it was his own—phantom agony radiating from a shoulder he wasn’t shot in. The laptop still glowed on the floor where it had fallen: TRANSFER COMPLETE. 600,000 YUAN SENT TO ACCOUNT ENDING IN 4782. Chen Rui’s debt account. The money moved. Ruihua’s theft accomplished. Ruihua stepped into the room, closing the door behind her with deliberate calm. She surveyed the scene—blood-splattered bride, shocked would-

be killer, shattered window still dripping with rain, laptop showing evidence of embezzlement. To the two servants still hovering at the edges: "You saw nothing. You heard nothing. An accident during storm cleanup—a window broke, someone was cut by glass. Understood?" The servants nodded frantically and fled. Only family remained now: Ruihua, Li Fang, Chen Rui, Mei-lin bleeding on the floor. Ruihua extended her hand toward Li Fang. "Give me the gun." Li Fang looked down at the weapon like she'd forgotten she was holding it. "I just wanted to stop her from taking the accounts. From stealing what should have been mine. I wasn't going to actually shoot—" "But you did." Ruihua's voice was ice. "You shot the bride on Zhang family property with witnesses nearby and a family council meeting in three hours. You've given them perfect ammunition to remove me—my household is so chaotic that brides are being murdered in their bedrooms." Chen Rui pressed his jacket against Mei-lin's wound, trying to slow the bleeding. "She needs a hospital. Ambulance. Now." Ruihua's calculation was immediate. "Hospital means police. Police means investigation. Investigation means they discover the offshore accounts—" she gestured at the laptop "—that Mei-lin just accessed and stole from. We all go to prison." The trap snapped closed with perfect precision. Mei-lin saw it clearly now: Ruihua had planned this. Given her the password knowing she'd use it. Knew Li Fang was unstable, watching, armed. Let them collide. Now all three were criminals—Mei-lin for embezzlement, Li Fang for attempted murder, Chen Rui for being accessory after the fact if he helped hide it. All bound to Ruihua by shared guilt. "No hospital," Ruihua said.

"No police. I'll call the family doctor—he's discreet and owes me several favors. The bullet went through cleanly, no vital organs. Mei-lin will survive." She looked at Li Fang with something almost like satisfaction. "And you'll help nurse her. Penance for your... impulsiveness." Li Fang's horror was absolute. "You want me to take care of the woman I just shot?" "I want you to remember what desperation feels like. What it means to be so afraid of losing power that you become a killer." Ruihua took the gun from Li Fang's unresisting hands. "Because that's what you are now. A killer. Just like me. Welcome to the family." ----- The family doctor arrived within twenty minutes—an elderly man who'd been treating Zhang ailments and covering Zhang crimes for three decades. He worked in silence, cleaning the wound, confirming the bullet's exit, stitching with steady hands. No anesthesia. Mei-lin had to stay conscious, stay quiet. The family council was gathering. No one could know a bride had been shot. Li Fang was forced to assist—holding gauze, passing instruments, hands shaking so badly she nearly dropped the suture kit twice. She couldn't look at Mei-lin's face. Kept her eyes fixed on the wound she'd caused, confronting her own capacity for violence. Chen Rui sat in the corner, feeling every stitch through the blood bond. His face was gray. When the doctor finally finished and left with a bow and a promise of eternal silence, the room settled into terrible quiet. Mei-lin's shoulder was bandaged tight, arm in a makeshift sling. The pain had crystallized into something manageable if she didn't move, didn't breathe too deep, didn't think about the fact that she'd been shot in her own bedroom. Ruihua stood at the window, looking out at dawn

breaking over the rain-washed gardens. “Tea ceremony,” she said suddenly. Everyone turned to stare. “What?” Mei-lin’s voice was hoarse. “A binding ceremony.” Ruihua moved to the small table by the window, began arranging tea things with ritual precision—pot, cups, kettle. “Li Fang attempted murder. You committed embezzlement. Chen Rui violated his blood contract. All of you are criminals. All of you need my protection.” She poured water from a thermos into the pot. “So we’re going to perform a traditional tea ceremony. Each of you will acknowledge your crimes and accept my authority to conceal them. A contract witnessed by family.” Mei-lin watched as Ruihua arranged four delicate cups in a line. Poured tea from the single pot with graceful precision. But as she poured—when she thought no one was looking—Ruihua produced a small vial from her sleeve. Added drops of liquid to one of the cups. Just a few. Clear liquid disappearing into amber tea. Mei-lin caught it only because she was looking for it. Because she’d learned that Ruihua never did anything without layers of manipulation. “Drink from the cup I give you,” Ruihua said, turning back to face them. “Accept the terms. Or refuse and face consequences alone.” She lifted the first cup, carrying it to Chen Rui. “You are bound by blood contract. You killed your brother. You failed every task. Drink this and your mother forgives your failures. Refuse and face System punishment forever.” Chen Rui took the cup with numb hands. He didn’t even smell it. Just drank in one swallow, grimaced at some bitter undertone, set the empty cup down. Ruihua took the second cup to Li Fang. “You are guilty of attempted murder. Drink this and I’ll protect you from prosecution. Refuse and I’ll let the police find the gun—

with your fingerprints—and testify that I heard you threaten the bride earlier.” Li Fang hesitated, staring at the tea like it was poison. But what choice did she have? She was a killer now. She needed protection. She drank. And immediately started crying—not from poison but from shame, from the recognition of what she’d become, what she’d always been becoming since she married into this family three years ago. Ruihua turned to Mei-lin, carrying the third cup. “You are guilty of embezzlement. Drink this and the offshore accounts stay hidden. Refuse and I report the theft myself—you go to prison, your family in the village faces disgrace.” Mei-lin looked at the cup. She’d seen Ruihua add something to one of them. But which? Chen Rui’s, already drunk? Li Fang’s, making her cry? This one? Or the fourth cup—the one still sitting on the table, reserved for Ruihua herself? A test. Everything with Ruihua was a test. Mei-lin’s hand shot out—but not to take the cup Ruihua offered. She lunged past Ruihua, grabbed the fourth cup from the table. The one meant for the matriarch herself. And drank it before Ruihua could stop her. The taste was clean. Pure tea, nothing else. No bitterness. No strange aftertaste. Ruihua’s shock flickered across her face for just a moment before control reasserted. Mei-lin set down the empty cup. “You were testing us. Seeing who would drink poison willingly, who would trust you blindly, who would think to switch cups.” She met Ruihua’s eyes. “The poison was in Li Fang’s cup. She’s dying right now and doesn’t even know it.” “What?” Li Fang’s hand went to her throat. She was already pale. Trembling more than before. Dizzy. “Not poison,” Ruihua said calmly. “Sedative. Strong enough to make you compliant for the

family council. Can't have you confessing to attempted murder in front of the elders, can we?" Li Fang's knees buckled. Chen Rui caught her before she hit the floor, lowered her to the bed where she immediately began slipping into drugged sleep. Ruihua studied Mei-lin with new appreciation. "Most brides never think to switch cups. They're too afraid, too desperate to please. But you..." She smiled. "You assumed I was trying to kill you and took what you thought was the safe cup. Clever." "Or stupid," Mei-lin said. "If you'd poisoned your own cup as a double-bluff." "If I'd done that, you'd be dead. But you're not. So you passed." Ruihua collected the empty cups. "Another test completed." ---- Li Fang's breathing deepened into drugged sleep. Chen Rui sat beside her on the bed, face hollow, trapped in a nightmare he couldn't wake from. Ruihua checked her watch. "Three hours until family council. Li Fang will sleep through it —convenient. Chen Rui will stay with her, ensuring she doesn't wake and confess. That leaves you and me, Mei-lin." She turned. "We'll attend together. Present a united front." Mei-lin struggled to process. "United? You just orchestrated Li Fang shooting me." "I let her try. I knew she'd miss—she's never held a gun before, hands shake when she's nervous." Ruihua examined Mei-lin's bandaged shoulder with clinical interest. "But now she's guilty, terrified, drugged, and completely under my control. One problem solved." She moved closer. "And you've proven yourself again. You switched cups. You stole the money exactly as instructed. You survived an assassination attempt. You're exactly what I need." The renewed offer came with the weight of inevitability: "The family council will vote on my leadership

within three hours. Uncle Zhang has been turning cousins against me, spreading doubts about my management. The offshore account accusations gave him ammunition. Without Li Fang's support and with Chen Rui compromised by blood contract, I'm vulnerable." She paused. "But if you stand with me. If you testify that the offshore accounts were Wei-jun's idea, that you accessed them trying to help the family recover his embezzlement, that Li Fang attacked you out of jealous rage—I'll win the vote. And you'll be confirmed as my designated successor." Mei-lin's exhaustion was bone-deep. "Why would I help you? You've tortured me since I arrived. Destroyed my marriage. Forced me to become a criminal." "Because if I fall, Li Fang rises." Ruihua's logic was brutal. "And drugged or not, she hates you. She just tried to murder you. She'll kill you the moment she has power—either directly or through System tasks." She leaned closer. "But if I remain matriarch with you as designated heir, you're protected. You have time to learn the System's rules. Time to find the real way to break it—if such a thing exists." The truth beneath the manipulation: "I'm sixty-two and tired. The family is fracturing. The System demands more than I can sustainably provide. I need a successor who can adapt, who can modernize, who can survive the next forty years." Her smile was sharp. "Because I won't." Mei-lin's question came out quiet: "What happens to Chen Rui?" "My son is broken. His blood contract owns him. Wei-jun's death destroyed what was left of his spine." Ruihua's dismissal was casual. "But through your blood marriage—incomplete as it is—you're linked to him. You could complete the binding eventually. Control him fully. He'd do anything you commanded if it

meant escaping his guilt.” The darkness beneath every word: “That’s what matriarchs do. We use broken men, desperate women, the System’s hunger. We turn suffering into power because that’s the only currency this house accepts.”

Outside, bells began ringing. The family council gathering. Ruihua stood, elegant and composed despite the night’s chaos. “You have sixty seconds to decide. Stand with me at the council, testify to my story, or stay here and let Uncle Zhang install Li Fang as matriarch. Either way, you’re trapped in this family. But only one path lets you eventually escape.”

Mei-lin struggled to stand, shoulder screaming, blood seeping through fresh bandages. Chen Rui reached to help her instinctively. Their hands touched—the blood bond flared, and she felt his despair, his resignation, his desperate hope that she’d choose destruction over submission. “Don’t help her,” Chen Rui whispered. “Let the family fall. Let us all fall. Let everything burn.” But Mei-lin saw her choices clearly: Li Fang unconscious on the bed—unstable, violent, would definitely kill Mei-lin if given power. Uncle Zhang gathering the family council—wanted control for profit, would continue the System under new management, just with different leadership. Ruihua—evil, but known evil. Calculable.

Trainable. Beatable, if given time. Keep your enemies close. Learn from the monster. Then become the one who ends the cycle. Or refuse. Let chaos reign. Die in the rubble. Mei-lin took Ruihua’s offered hand. Stood, despite the pain. “I’ll testify at the council,” she said. “But I want something in return.” Ruihua’s smile was cold victory. “Name it.” “The complete text. Every burned letter. Every missing page from the diary. Everything previous brides discovered about

breaking the curse.” Mei-lin met her eyes. “You give me all of it. Every scrap of information you’ve been hiding.” Ruihua studied her. “If I give you that information, you’ll use it against me.” “Eventually. Yes.” The honesty seemed to please her. “Then we have a deal. I’ll give you the truth—all of it, every fragment. And you’ll have forty years, however long I live, to figure out how to weaponize it.” She laughed, soft and terrible. “That’s more time than any bride before you got. Most died within months. You might actually succeed.” They walked toward the door together—matriarch and heir, monster and student, bound by shared crimes and competing endgames. Behind them, Li Fang’s drugged breathing filled the room with soft moans. Chen Rui closed his eyes, unable to watch his wife walk away with his mother. Mei-lin felt his despair through the blood bond like drowning. And then— Every phone in the mansion buzzed simultaneously. Mei-lin’s. Ruihua’s. Chen Rui’s. Li Fang’s unconscious body. Every device connected to the System.

“New alliance detected. Bride + Matriarch = unprecedented evolution. Level 6 begins.” *“Task: Eliminate external threats. The family council must not remove Ruihua. Target: Uncle Zhang. Method: your choice. Deadline: 2 hours.”* Mei-lin’s phone displayed an additional message: *“Your first task as designated heir: Kill Uncle Zhang before he calls the vote. Prove your commitment to the alliance. Failure results in both Bride and Matriarch termination.”* Ruihua read over her shoulder. For the first time since Mei-lin had met her, the matriarch looked genuinely surprised. “The System has never assigned a joint task before,” she said quietly. “It’s treating us as a unit. As partners.” Mei-lin’s hand throbbed where the

blood bond connected her to Chen Rui. Her shoulder bled through bandages. Her grandmother's necklace was gone. Her marriage was destroyed. She was a thief, a liar, and now – The System wanted her to be a murderer. “Two hours,” Ruihua said. “The council meets in the east hall. Uncle Zhang will arrive early to meet with his supporters. That's when you'll act.” “How?” Mei-lin's voice came out hollow. Ruihua smiled. “I'll teach you. That's what mentors do.” They continued walking, leaving Chen Rui and the unconscious Li Fang behind. Somewhere in the mansion, Uncle Zhang was preparing his accusations against Ruihua. In two hours, he would be dead. And Mei-lin would be the one who killed him.

[END CHAPTER 16]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 17: A HUSBAND'S SILENCE

“You know what Wei-jun said before I killed him?” Chen Rui’s voice drifted from behind the locked study door. Mei-lin pressed her ear to the wood, hearing him talk to someone—or something—inside. “He said, ‘It’s not your fault. Mother did this to both of us.’ He forgave me. While I was stabbing him, he forgave me.” Mei-lin forced the door open. The lock gave easily—Chen Rui hadn’t secured it properly, or didn’t care if someone entered. The study was destroyed. Papers scattered across every surface. Empty alcohol bottles lined the desk. Bloodstains darkened the carpet—from when he’d returned after the shrine, after murdering his brother, and

collapsed here trying to scrub Wei-jun's blood from his hands and clothes. Chen Rui sat on the floor amidst the wreckage, holding a photograph of Wei-jun. The knife from the ancestral shrine lay beside him—still uncleansed, dried blood crusted black on the blade. Through their incomplete blood marriage, Mei-lin felt his despair like poison flooding her veins. His self-loathing. His urge toward suicide—not dramatic fantasy but genuine intent, calculating methods, weighing consequences. And he felt her too. Her determination. Her cold calculation to survive at any cost. The connection was a raw wound both were forced to endure. Ninety minutes until the family council voted on Ruihua's leadership. Ninety minutes until Mei-lin was supposed to kill Uncle Zhang. Her shoulder throbbed beneath fresh bandages. Li Fang's bullet wound seeping blood. The pain was nothing compared to what transmitted through the blood bond—Chen Rui's soul slowly tearing itself apart. "How do I live with that?" Chen Rui asked the photograph. "How do I wake up every day knowing I killed the only person who ever—" His voice broke. He looked up, finally noticing Mei-lin in the doorway. "Your shoulder. Li Fang shot you." His laugh was bitter, hollow. "This family. Everyone killing each other. For what? Money? Power? A System that feeds on our suffering like we're livestock?" Mei-lin moved into the room, each step agony. She sat beside him on the blood-stained carpet, not touching him. The blood bond was contact enough. "I need you to come to the family council," she said. "Stand with me and your mother. Testify that Wei-jun's death was an accident." Chen Rui picked up the knife. Turned it slowly in his hands. "No. I'm done. Done lying. Done

killing. Done with all of it.” He tested the blade’s edge against his thumb. “I’ve been sitting here thinking—if I use this on myself, does the blood contract end? Or does it follow me even into death?” Through the bond, Mei-lin felt his serious intent. This wasn’t performance or cry for help. He was genuinely planning suicide, weighing the mechanics, deciding on method. Her calculation was immediate and cold: If Chen Rui died, the incomplete blood marriage might kill her too. They were linked. His death could drag her down. But beneath the calculation—something else. Something she didn’t want to examine too closely. “I’m sorry,” she said. Chen Rui looked at her, surprised. “For manipulating you. For pushing you to sign the blood contract. For calling you weak when you weren’t—you were just trapped like I was trapped.” She paused. “You were right at the shrine. I never loved you. But I didn’t hate you either. You were just... there. A means to an end. A transaction.” “At least you’re honest now.” Chen Rui set down the knife. “That’s more than Mother’s ever been.” “But somewhere in this nightmare, we became the same thing.” Mei-lin looked at him directly. “Both trapped. Both guilty. Both trying to survive a system designed to destroy us. Both murderers now—you with your hands, me with my choices.” She pulled out her phone, showed him the System’s latest message: *“Kill Uncle Zhang. 75 minutes remaining.”* Chen Rui stared at the screen. “You’re supposed to kill Uncle Zhang? Why?” “Because the System wants Ruihua to stay in power. Uncle Zhang is leading the rebellion against her at the family council. If he dies, the vote collapses. Ruihua wins. And I become her protected successor.” Mei-lin’s voice was flat. “Which gives me time to figure out how to end this.” “Will

you do it?" Chen Rui asked. "Kill him?" "I don't know." The honesty surprised her. "That's why I'm here. Because I need you to tell me—when you killed Wei-jun, when you violated every moral line you thought you had, did the blood contract give you a choice? Or did it force you?" ---- Chen Rui was silent for a long moment. Then: "Both." He picked up Wei-jun's photograph again, staring at his brother's face. "The contract made the pain unbearable when I resisted. Like my bones were breaking from the inside. Like my brain was being crushed in a vise. Every second I didn't complete the task, the pain increased." His hands shook. "But it didn't move my hands for me. It didn't turn me into a puppet. I chose to pick up the knife. I chose to follow Wei-jun to the shrine. I chose to stab him." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I chose survival over my brother." Mei-lin felt the truth of it through their bond. The terrible clarity of his guilt. "That's what I'm afraid of," she said quietly. "That I'll choose survival over morality. That I'll kill Uncle Zhang because it's easier than suffering the System's punishment. That I'll become exactly what this house wants me to be." Chen Rui looked at her—really looked at her—for the first time since she'd entered. "You already made that choice. When you manipulated me into the blood contract. When you stole from my mother's accounts. When you allied with her an hour ago." His gaze was steady. "You're already the person who kills Uncle Zhang. You're just hoping I'll tell you it's not your fault." The words hit like a slap. "I can't," Chen Rui continued. "Because it is your fault. Just like Wei-jun's death is mine. We're both murderers. We're both damned. The only question is whether we're damned for nothing, or damned for

something that matters.” Mei-lin pulled out a clean knife—not the one covered in Wei-jun’s blood, but a small blade she’d taken from Ruihua’s tea ceremony. “Then let’s be damned together. Completely.” She held it between them. “Finish the blood marriage. Bind ourselves fully. And use that bond to destroy your mother.” Chen Rui’s shock was visible. “The blood marriage failed. The shrine won’t allow us to complete it—you said so yourself.” “The shrine won’t allow it there. The ritual was interrupted, the window closed in that location.” Mei-lin set the knife on the floor between them. “But the ritual isn’t location-dependent. It’s about blood, oath, and binding. We can complete it here. Now. And once we’re fully bound—both locked to the same contract, both sharing every task and punishment—we’re stronger. Harder to kill. Harder to control separately.” She met his eyes. “I’m not asking you to forgive me. I’m asking you to bind yourself to me so we can kill your mother together. So we can end the System. So Wei-jun’s death isn’t meaningless.” Chen Rui stared at the clean knife. At his wife who’d destroyed him. At the choice between death and revenge. “If we complete the blood marriage, I’m bound to you forever,” he said slowly. “Even if we break the System. Even if we kill Mother. Even after death, according to the ritual words.” “Yes.” “Why would I chain myself to you? You’re the reason I killed my brother. You’re the reason I’m this... thing.” Mei-lin didn’t flinch. “Because alone, we’re weak. Your mother proved that with Wei-jun—he tried to rebel alone, and she killed him. Li Fang tried to survive by pleasing her, and became her puppet. I tried to manipulate the system from outside, and got trapped in it.” She leaned forward despite the pain in her shoulder. “But if we combine forces—

your knowledge of this family, my willingness to do terrible things, both of us bound together so we share every consequence—we have a chance.” “And Uncle Zhang?” Chen Rui’s voice was quiet. “Will you kill him?” “I don’t know. Maybe. If I have to.” She met his gaze without deception. “But if we’re bound, you’ll share the guilt. We’ll share everything. Every choice. Every sin. Every consequence. Neither of us gets to claim innocence.” Chen Rui looked at the clean knife she’d placed between them. Then at the bloody knife beside him—the one that had killed Wei-jun. Two knives. Two paths. Death or revenge. Escape or destruction. “I loved Wei-jun more than anyone in this family,” he said finally. “Including you. Including myself. Including the mother who birthed me and then used me like a tool.” He picked up the clean knife. “If I bind myself to you, it’s not because I forgive you. It’s because I want my mother to suffer the way Wei-jun suffered. The way I suffer every moment I’m alive.” His voice was steel. “I want her to die knowing her son destroyed her. That her perfect system broke because she underestimated what broken people can do when they have nothing left to lose.” He cut his palm—reopening the wound from the incomplete ritual in the shrine. Blood welled, dripped onto the carpet to mix with the stains already there. Mei-lin cut her own palm. The pain was sharp, clean, nothing compared to the bullet wound in her shoulder. They clasped hands. Blood mixing, warm and slick. “The oath,” Mei-lin said. “I found the complete version in the diary fragments.” They spoke in unison, words pulled from burned letters and forbidden pages: *“Blood to blood, bone to bone,* *Two souls merge, no longer alone.* *What I suffer, you will feel,* *What you

break, I will heal.* *Bound through death and beyond the grave,* *Two become one, neither master nor slave.* The room responded. Temperature dropped thirty degrees in seconds. Mei-lin's breath came out in clouds. The photographs of Wei-jun fluttered as if in wind, though the windows were closed. The bloody knife on the floor vibrated, metal singing against wood. And then— The bond completed. Mei-lin gasped as Chen Rui's full consciousness flooded into her: His grief for Wei-jun, so overwhelming it felt like drowning. His guilt that ate at him every waking moment. His hatred of his mother—not hot rage but cold, patient loathing built over decades of manipulation. His desperate need for redemption, for Wei-jun's death to mean something. His love for his brother, pure and untainted, the only good thing he'd ever felt in this cursed house. Chen Rui felt Mei-lin's truth in return: Her calculation, always running, always measuring costs. Her survival instinct so strong it overrode everything else. Her growing horror at what she was becoming—not the horror of conscience, but the horror of recognition. Her genuine regret for destroying him, not from morality but from understanding that they were the same. Her determination to end the System even if it cost everything, including her humanity. Her fear that she'd already lost what made her human. They saw each other completely. Every secret. Every shame. Every hidden thought. And in that perfect knowledge, they found not forgiveness but something more useful: Mutual understanding. Shared purpose. Partnership forged in blood and guilt. “I feel it,” Chen Rui said, voice steady now. “The System’s demand. Kill Uncle Zhang. The pain will start soon if we don’t comply.”

Through their completed bond, Mei-lin felt it too—a tightening in her chest, pressure building, warning of consequences to come. “Let it come,” she said. “We’ll endure it together. Because we’re not killing him.” Chen Rui’s surprise rippled through the bond. “You’re refusing the task?” “I’m finding a third option.” Mei-lin pulled him to his feet, both of them unsteady. “Like I did with the dinner party when I was supposed to commit violence. Like I did with the blood contract when I was supposed to die. The System demands chaos—I’ll give it chaos. But not through Uncle Zhang’s death.” Both their phones buzzed simultaneously. They felt the vibration through their bond like a shared heartbeat:
“Blood marriage completion detected. Status: Enforcer pair. Classification: Rare. Power level: Significant. Threat assessment: Dangerous.” *“New parameters: Both must complete assigned tasks or both suffer consequences. Uncle Zhang elimination: 40 minutes remaining.”* *“Refusal penalty: Progressive organ failure. Beginning with respiratory system.”* Chen Rui’s breathing immediately became labored. Mei-lin felt her own lungs tighten—like invisible hands squeezing, constricting, making each breath a struggle. Through their bond, they shared the sensation: suffocation beginning slowly, building gradually toward complete respiratory collapse. “Forty minutes until we can’t breathe at all,” Chen Rui gasped. Mei-lin’s response came out strangled but determined: “Then we have forty minutes to kill your mother instead.” Outside, the family council bells rang. Deep, resonant, summoning the clan to judgment. Time to choose: Murder Uncle Zhang and survive, or attempt matricide and likely die trying. They stumbled toward the door together,

lungs burning, hands still clasped and bleeding, bound now in every way that mattered. The System whispered through their shared consciousness: *“Interesting choice. Enforcer pairs have 97% failure rate when defying direct commands. Let’s see how long you last.”* Mei-lin and Chen Rui walked down the corridor toward the council chamber, each breath harder than the last, countdown ticking in their merged awareness. Thirty-nine minutes. Thirty-eight. Thirty-seven. And somewhere ahead, Ruihua waited—confident in her control, unaware that her son and his wife had just become something she’d never faced before: Two broken people with nothing to lose and everything to avenge. Bound together. Coming for her.

[END CHAPTER 17]

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 18: THE MASK SLIPS

“Honored ancestors, we gather in crisis.” Uncle Zhang’s voice carried across the family courtyard as Mei-lin and Chen Rui stumbled through the entrance gate. Late. Both gasping for air like drowning victims breaking the surface. Forty pairs of eyes turned to watch them arrive—the bride with blood seeping through her shoulder bandage, the groom pale and sweating, both hands still crusted with blood from their ritual. They looked like survivors of an attack. Which, in every way that mattered, they were. Thirty minutes left. Thirty minutes until complete respiratory failure if they didn’t kill

Uncle Zhang or find another way to satisfy the System's demand. Through their blood bond, Mei-lin felt Chen Rui's panic matching her own. But beneath it—steady determination. They'd made their choice in his study. Now they had to execute it. The extended Zhang family filled the courtyard in traditional formation before the ancestral altar. Red lanterns burned despite late afternoon sun, ceremonial requirement for major family decisions. Incense smoke made the air thick, made breathing even harder. Uncle Zhang stood at the altar's center, grey robes formal and perfect, leading prayer with the authority of someone who already considered himself patriarch. "The matriarch faces accusations of financial misconduct," he continued, voice resonant. "The family questions her leadership after decades of service. We seek your wisdom, honored ancestors, to guide our vote." He lit fresh incense, the smoke coiling upward. "Wei-jun's death weighs heavily on this house. The bride's mysterious injury troubles us. The family fractures with accusations and counter-accusations. Show us the path to unity and prosperity." The subtext was crystal clear: Ruihua was the problem. He was the solution. Ruihua rose from her position of honor—a protocol violation during prayers, but she was still matriarch. Every head turned. "Honored ancestors, hear also my plea." Her voice cut through the courtyard with practiced command. "I have served this family for forty years. Grown the fortune tenfold. Protected the Zhang name through scandals, investigations, and economic storms. If my methods seem harsh, remember—soft flowers wilt in harsh winters. Only iron trees survive." She looked directly at Uncle Zhang, and the challenge was

unmistakable. “Some question my authority. Some seek to replace tradition with... innovation.” The word dripped with contempt. “But the ancestors chose me. The System chose me. And I have never failed either.” She’d said it. Out loud. In front of everyone. *The System.* The extended family stirred. Cousins whispered to each other. Some knew what the word meant—had heard rumors, seen glimpses, suspected the truth. Others looked confused, uncertain what they’d just heard. Mei-lin’s lungs burned. Each breath was harder than the last. Twenty-eight minutes. Through the bond, Chen Rui’s thought arrived clear: *We need to act now or we die in front of everyone.* Uncle Zhang stepped forward, pulling documents from his robe with theatrical timing. “The ‘System’ the matriarch mentions is her justification for four decades of embezzlement, bride exploitation, and family manipulation. I have evidence—bank records, offshore accounts, testimony from servants who witnessed—” “You have nothing,” Ruihua interrupted, but something in her voice had changed. An edge of genuine alarm. Uncle Zhang held up the documents for all to see. “Bank records showing thirty-two million yuan moved to offshore accounts. Bride dowry inventories that don’t match official family records. Forty years of systematic theft, documented.” The courtyard erupted in whispers. He produced another item—leather-bound, red, unmistakable. The ledger. Ruihua’s face went white. “The matriarch’s personal record,” Uncle Zhang announced, holding it high. “Every bride. Every ‘farewell gift.’ Every task assigned. Every death.” He opened it, began reading: “Bride #2, 1987, failed first task, removed, buried east garden section three—” “Where did you get that?”

Ruihua's composure cracked visibly. "I gave it to him." Li Fang stepped forward from the assembled family, voice calm despite the chaos her words created. "This morning. While you were drugging me, Mother. While you thought you had me controlled." The betrayal hit like a physical blow. Ruihua actually stepped backward. Li Fang addressed the assembled family, and Mei-lin saw the performance she'd been preparing—probably for years. "I've played loyal daughter for three years. Waited. Survived. Obeyed." Her voice strengthened. "But last night I shot Mei-lin because I was desperate—desperate because this family has become a death cult with the matriarch as its priestess. I'm done. The System ends. Her reign ends. Today." She looked at Uncle Zhang, at the elders, at the assembled witnesses. "I propose emergency leadership vote. Remove Ruihua as matriarch. Install Uncle Zhang as interim patriarch. Audit all accounts. Return stolen funds. And—" she paused for effect—"destroy whatever system she's created that feeds on brides like they're livestock." ----- The courtyard exploded with competing voices. "Forty years of service—" "Thirty-two million yuan stolen—" "My daughter married into this family fifteen years ago and disappeared—" "The Zhang fortune has grown under her leadership—" "At what cost?" Mei-lin felt her lungs seizing. Twenty-five minutes. The suffocation was accelerating now, the System punishing their continued non-compliance. Through the bond, Chen Rui sent: *The third option. Give it chaos without murder. Let the family destroy itself.* But Mei-lin's response was immediate: *Not enough. The System demands Uncle Zhang's death specifically. Or our organs fail.* Yet watching the chaos unfold, seeing Uncle

Zhang held up the ledger like a trophy, seeing Ruihua's control visibly crumbling—an idea formed. Crystallized. Shared instantly through the blood bond. *What if someone else kills Uncle Zhang?* Chen Rui's shock rippled through their connection, followed quickly by understanding. *You're going to manipulate—* *Yes. Like I manipulated you. Like Ruihua manipulates everyone. I'm learning.* Mei-lin staggered forward—not difficult since she was genuinely suffocating. Every Zhang head turned to watch the injured bride approach. "Uncle Zhang," she called out, voice breathless. "You have the ledger. You have bank records. You have evidence of Ruihua's crimes." She pulled out her phone with shaking hands. "But do you have the System itself?" She pressed the screen. The System responded—not just on her device but projecting onto the white courtyard wall, visible to every assembled family member. Lists appeared. Names. Crimes. Secrets. The complete dossier of every Zhang family member. Uncle Zhang's name highlighted at the top: *"Zhang Wei: Embezzled 1.2 million yuan from construction fund 2018. Covered by falsifying records and blaming Wei-jun. Accepted bribes from contractors 2015-2020 totaling 800,000 yuan. Falsified safety inspections leading to building collapse March 2019—three workers killed, families paid off for silence."* Uncle Zhang's face drained of color. "That's—How did you—" But the System wasn't done. More names appeared: *"Zhang Cousin Ming: Tax evasion, 600,000 yuan unreported income."* *"Zhang Aunt Yuhua: Insurance fraud, false claims totaling 300,000 yuan."* *"Zhang Nephew Jun: Assault, covered up with family money, victim threatened into silence."* Every crime. Every secret. Every skeleton the family

had buried. Displayed publicly for all to see. The courtyard descended into chaos—accusations, denials, family members turning on each other as their darkest secrets broadcast like news reports. Mei-lin pushed forward, each word a struggle. “You want to expose Ruihua’s crimes? The System exposes everyone’s crimes. You’re no better than her, Uncle. You’ve just been better at hiding it.” Li Fang was staring at the projected information, face twisting with rage. “You blamed Wei-jun for your embezzlement?” Her voice rose to a scream. “You’re the reason Ruihua could frame him? You’re the reason he’s dead?” Uncle Zhang backed away, hands raised defensively. “It was survival. She would have destroyed me if I didn’t—” Li Fang launched herself at him. Physically attacked, hands reaching for his throat, screaming incoherently. The family erupted. Some tried to pull her back. Others joined the chaos—decades of buried resentments exploding in violence. Security guards rushed forward but couldn’t tell who to restrain, who was victim and who was aggressor. In the confusion, Uncle Zhang was shoved backward. He hit the ancestral altar hard. The incense burner toppled, hot coals spilling across his formal robes. Fire caught instantly. Uncle Zhang screamed, tried to beat out the flames— But the chaos, the shoving, someone’s foot catching his ankle— He fell. His head struck the stone altar base with a sound like a melon splitting. Crack. Wet. Final. Silence dropped across the courtyard like a curtain. Uncle Zhang lay motionless, blood pooling beneath his head, robes still smoldering. Li Fang stood over him, hands frozen in mid-gesture, face transformed by shock. “I didn’t— I just wanted to—” The family stared at the corpse of the man who’d been

leading their rebellion sixty seconds ago. And Mei-lin— suddenly breathing normally. The suffocation lifted. Lungs expanded fully. Oxygen flooded in, sweet and complete. Through the bond, she felt Chen Rui's matching gasp of relief. Twenty-three minutes had remained on their deadline. They'd cut it close. Every phone in the courtyard buzzed simultaneously. The projection on the wall changed: *“Target eliminated. Uncle Zhang deceased. Task complete. Enforcers: Mei-lin + Chen Rui cleared of non-compliance.”* *“Method: Chaos manipulation. Indirect kill. Creative solution. Efficient execution. Rewarded.”* *“Bonus achievement: Li Fang now guilty of manslaughter. Additional leverage acquired.”* Ruihua's voice cut through the stunned silence: “What have you done?” She wasn't looking at Li Fang standing over the body. She was looking at Mei-lin. Understanding had dawned in the matriarch's eyes—perfect, terrible recognition. Mei-lin had orchestrated this. Used Li Fang's rage. Manipulated the family's chaos. Let Uncle Zhang die without personally touching him. “I gave the System what it wanted,” Mei-lin said, voice steady now that she could breathe. “Chaos. Death. Your enemy eliminated.” She met Ruihua's eyes. “You're welcome, Mother.” The word “Mother” landed like a blade. One of the younger cousins pulled out a phone, started dialing. “I'm calling the police. This was murder—” “No police!” Ruihua's command was automatic. “This was an accident. A family matter. We handle it internally as we always have—” But the cousin kept dialing. Others were pulling out phones too. The veil of family secrecy tearing apart. Ruihua's control was shattering in real-time. Forty years of authority crumbling as family members

ignored her commands, made their own choices, called external authorities despite her protests. Li Fang looked at her hands, at Uncle Zhang's body, at the blood. "I killed him. I actually killed him." Chen Rui's whisper came through both voice and bond: "You just made everyone in this courtyard an accessory to murder. They'll never forgive you." Mei-lin's response was cold, clear: "I don't need forgiveness. I need survival and leverage. Now we have both." Police sirens in the distance. Growing louder. Someone had gotten through. Ruihua looked at her assembled family—the empire she'd built for forty years crumbling, her secrets exposed on courtyard walls, her authority dead along with Uncle Zhang. She looked at Mei-lin with something new in her expression. Not anger. Not even fear. Recognition. "You're not my successor," Ruihua said quietly. "You're my replacement. And you just proved you can do what I do—manipulate death without getting blood on your hands." The System's voice echoed from every device in the courtyard, every phone, every tablet: * "Matriarch transition detected. Power vacuum forming. New candidates evaluated." * * "Li Fang: eliminated from consideration—guilty of murder, unstable, compromised." * * "Chen Rui: eliminated—blood contract enforcer, insufficient authority capacity." * * "Ruihua: declining authority—family rebellion, external investigation imminent, cycle ending." * * "Mei-lin: primary candidate. Intelligent. Ruthless. Adaptive. Successful completion of increasingly complex tasks. Enforcer pair bond provides power base." * * "Vote unnecessary. Traditional succession bypassed. The System chooses: Mei-lin." * * "Congratulations, Bride #7. You are now Matriarch." * The courtyard froze. Every family

member reading the same message. Seeing the announcement. The System's declaration of Mei-lin's elevation. Ruihua's face cycled through emotions too quickly to catalogue—fury, pride, horror, respect, hatred, admiration. She'd spent forty years building her position. And in eight days, a village bride had taken it. "You created this," Mei-lin said quietly, only for Ruihua. "You taught me every lesson. You showed me how to survive by making others pay the cost. You made me into the monster efficient enough to replace you." "I know." Ruihua's smile was terrible. "And I can't decide if I should destroy you or bow to you." The police sirens were at the gates now. Seconds away. The family scattered—some toward exits, some toward Uncle Zhang's body, some toward Ruihua or Mei-lin, allegiances fracturing in real-time. Li Fang sank to her knees beside the corpse, shock setting in. Chen Rui moved to Mei-lin's side, and through their bond she felt his complex mixture of horror and pride. His wife had become something terrifying. But she'd kept them alive. The System's final message appeared:

"Matriarch Mei-lin: First task begins in 24 hours. The house requires feeding. Choose your sacrifice wisely." *"Welcome to your inheritance."* Police pounded on the gates. Ruihua looked at Mei-lin one final time. "Eight days," she said. "It took you eight days to do what took me eight years. Either you're the strongest bride we've ever had, or the System has been waiting for you specifically." She turned toward the approaching police, shoulders straight, preparing for whatever came next. And Mei-lin stood in the center of the chaos she'd created—new matriarch of a cursed family, bound to a husband she'd destroyed, surrounded by relatives

who now feared or hated her, facing external investigation, and already receiving her first task from a System that had just chosen her to lead. She'd won. And winning felt exactly like damnation.

[END CHAPTER 18]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 19: THE TRIAL OF SILVER

“Can you explain why investors should maintain confidence in Zhang Construction when the family can’t maintain order in its own household?” Mr. Zhao’s question cut through the boardroom like a blade. Mei-lin stood at the entrance of the glass-walled conference room, fifty floors above the city, every face turned toward her with undisguised hostility. Eight hours since Uncle Zhang’s death. Eight hours since police descended on the mansion. Eight hours since the System declared her matriarch. And now this: the emergency investor meeting she hadn’t known about until Chen Rui received the summons an hour ago. The business associates and board members who controlled Zhang Construction’s funding, all demanding answers from a bride who knew nothing about construction, finance, or corporate management. She wore borrowed business clothes that didn’t fit right—too tight in the shoulders, too loose in the waist. Her injured shoulder throbbed beneath bandages hidden by the blazer. She hadn’t slept. Hadn’t eaten. Could barely think through the exhaustion and blood bond transmitting Chen Rui’s anxiety like white noise. Through the

floor-to-ceiling windows, the city sprawled below. So far to fall. Fifteen people sat around the long table—investors, lawyers, accountants, board members, and three Zhang family members with significant company stakes. All watching her with calculation and doubt. Mr. Zhao stood at the head of the table, financial charts projected on the wall behind him: Zhang Construction stock price plummeting. A 30% drop since yesterday. Red numbers everywhere. “Mrs. Zhang.” He gestured to an empty chair—the lowest position, furthest from authority. “Please. Sit.” Mei-lin sat. Chen Rui took the seat beside her, their blood bond humming with shared dread. Ruihua sat across the table, silent and immaculate in navy silk, watching with the patience of a predator. *You wanted to be matriarch,* that gaze said. *Prove you deserve it.* Mr. Zhao pulled up another chart. “Zhang Construction is hemorrhaging capital. Stock price collapsed. Police are investigating Uncle Zhang’s death. The offshore accounts—thirty-two million yuan in embezzled funds—are frozen pending criminal investigation. And you—he looked at Mei-lin “—a bride of nine days, are supposedly Matriarch Ruihua’s designated successor.” His skepticism was surgical. Mrs. Chen leaned forward—the property developer who’d fled Mei-lin’s disastrous dinner party two weeks ago. “The offshore accounts were embezzlement. We’ve seen the evidence. The question isn’t what happened—it’s whether the new leadership can be trusted not to continue the theft.” She fixed Mei-lin with a stare that could cut diamonds. “You accessed those accounts two days ago. Transferred 600,000 yuan. To pay your husband’s gambling debts. That transaction is documented.” She paused. “So tell

me—are you stealing like Ruihua did? Or are you somehow different?" The trap was perfect. Admit the theft: she's a criminal. Deny it: she's a liar, and they have proof. Mr. Lin closed his folder with finality. "We've also heard about the dinner party where investors fled. The debt collector who publicly humiliated Chen Rui at the family gates. The bride who was shot by a family member. The construction funds missing for years while Uncle Zhang blamed his nephew." He looked at each person around the table. "This company is chaos pretending to be business." He pushed the folder away. "I'm recommending my clients pull all investments. Effective immediately. Zhang Construction will collapse within weeks without our capital." The threat landed like a bomb. Mei-lin felt Chen Rui's panic spike through the bond. Through the windows, the city glittered—indifferent to their destruction. She had no answer. No training. No knowledge of financial management or corporate governance. She'd been a shop assistant nine days ago. Now she was supposed to convince millionaire investors that a bride who'd caused nothing but chaos should lead their company? She glanced at Ruihua. The older woman's expression revealed nothing. *Drown or swim. Your choice.* ---- "You're right." Mei-lin's voice surprised even herself. Every head turned. "The Zhang family is chaos," she continued, standing despite the pain in her shoulder. "Embezzlement. Murder. Debt. Bride shot at dinner. Public humiliation by loan sharks. Completely unstable and getting worse." She looked at each investor. "Which means the company is undervalued. Dramatically. You should be buying more shares, not pulling out." Mr. Zhao's eyebrows rose. "Explain." Mei-lin pulled out her phone.

The System responded immediately—data flowing across the screen, feeding her information she shouldn't have access to. Real-time financial analysis. Asset valuations. Contract details. It wanted her to succeed. Why? Later. Focus now. “Zhang Construction’s stock price is based on perception of family stability,” she said, displaying the data for all to see. “That perception just shattered. But the actual business—the projects, contracts, physical assets—those are solid.” She pulled up project portfolios. “The construction projects Wei-jun managed before his death? All profitable. On schedule. Meeting quality standards. The contracts Uncle Zhang negotiated? Legitimate despite his bribery. The buildings we’ve completed in the last five years? Standing, generating revenue, appreciating in value.” More data appeared—she let the System feed her, trusting the information was accurate because it had no reason to help her fail. “The company is worth 800 million yuan in hard assets. Current market cap after yesterday’s drop? 400 million. It’s trading at fifty percent of actual value because investors panic over family drama.” She met Mr. Zhao’s eyes. “But family drama doesn’t change the fact that we’re completing fifty million yuan in projects this quarter alone.” Mr. Lin leaned forward, interested despite himself. “You’re saying the family chaos is a buying opportunity?” “I’m saying the old leadership—Ruihua’s generation—built this company through fear, secrets, and manipulation.” Mei-lin gestured at the matriarch sitting silent across the table. “That model is dead. Uncle Zhang tried to replace it with his version of the same corruption. Also dead. Literally.” A few people shifted uncomfortably at the dark humor. “Now you have me.” Mei-lin

gestured to herself—young, inexperienced, bandaged. “Someone new. Untrained. No loyalty to the old systems. No investment in hiding the past because I wasn’t here for most of it.” She took a breath, committing to the gamble. “I can’t promise stability. But I can promise transparency. I’ll open all books to independent audit. Reveal all offshore accounts and their histories. Return embezzled funds to company capital. Submit to quarterly oversight. Prove that Zhang Construction is worth investing in despite the family being a disaster.” Mrs. Chen’s question was immediate: “Why would you do that? Transparency destroys your leverage over the family.” “Because I don’t want leverage. I want survival.” Mei-lin’s honesty cut through the corporate polish. “The old matriarch hoarded secrets and is dying politically. Uncle Zhang hoarded evidence and died physically. Li Fang hoarded resentment and became a murderer. I’m the only one left who has nothing to hide because I haven’t been here long enough to commit the big crimes yet.” The bitter truth landed. A few investors actually smiled. Ruihua finally spoke, voice like frost: “My successor proposes burning the entire system down. Transparency. Audits. External oversight.” She looked at Mei-lin with something almost like respect. “This is not how the Zhang family operates.” Mei-lin met her gaze. “Then the Zhang family will collapse within a month. Police investigation expanding. Investor flight. Tax authorities crawling through forty years of fraud.” She turned back to Mr. Zhao. “Or—we cooperate. Provide everything investigators want before they ask. Demonstrate the family is reforming under new leadership. And investors get company shares at half price during the chaos.” The room was silent. Mr. Zhao

looked at his associates. Private glances exchanged. Calculations made. “We’ll need guarantees,” he said finally. “Independent board oversight. Monthly financial audits by external firm. And—” he looked directly at Ruihua “—the current matriarch removed from all financial decision-making authority. Immediately.” Every eye turned to Ruihua. Mei-lin held her breath. “Done,” she said, before Ruihua could respond. Ruihua’s fury was a physical presence—barely contained behind perfect composure. But she said nothing. What could she say? Refuse and the company collapsed, taking the family fortune with it. Accept and admit her authority was already dead. She’d been outmaneuvered by a bride of nine days. ---- Mr. Lin pulled out his tablet, already drafting agreements. “We’ll formalize new oversight arrangements. Matriarch Ruihua steps down from all financial roles. Mei-lin assumes interim company leadership under probationary supervision. Independent audits quarterly. Any hidden accounts or fraud discovered results in immediate investor withdrawal and criminal referrals.” He stood, extended his hand across the table to Mei-lin. “Welcome to real business, Mrs. Zhang. It’s much harder than family manipulation.” They shook. His grip was firm—testing her. The other investors began standing, gathering materials, already discussing next steps. The crisis had been contained. Zhang Construction would survive. Ruihua rose without speaking. She looked at Mei-lin—the village bride who’d just dismantled forty years of carefully built control in a single meeting. “You promised me you’d learn from me before betraying me.” Ruihua’s voice was quiet enough that only Mei-lin could hear. “It’s been nine days. I expected at

least a month." She walked out, spine straight, dignity intact despite the defeat. The investors filtered out, lawyers already on phones, accountants requesting access to files. Within minutes, the boardroom was empty except for Mei-lin and Chen Rui. Through the blood bond, his whisper arrived: *You just made an enemy of the one person who understood the System. We're alone now.* *We were always alone,* Mei-lin responded. They sat in silence, watching the city lights bloom as evening fell. Fifty floors up, surrounded by glass, with the ruins of a family empire scattered below. "Did you mean it?" Chen Rui asked finally. "Transparency? Opening everything to audits? Or was that performance?" Mei-lin's exhaustion was bone-deep. "I don't know. Maybe both. I needed to say something that would keep the investors from destroying the company. That was the only thing I could think of." She looked at the financial charts still projected on the wall—numbers and graphs the System had fed her, knowledge she shouldn't possess. "The System gave me those numbers. Real-time data I shouldn't have access to. It wanted me to win that negotiation." She turned to Chen Rui. "But why? Why does it care if Zhang Construction survives?" Through the bond, she felt his understanding dawn.

"Because the company generates the wealth that feeds the System," he said slowly. "If the business collapses, there's no fortune to steal from. No brides to sacrifice for financial gain. The prosperity and the curse are linked." The revelation settled between them like falling snow. "The System needs the company healthy," Mei-lin whispered. "Which means if we destroy Zhang Construction, we might destroy the System too." Her phone buzzed. The message appeared with

cheerful finality: *“Excellent performance. Company stabilized. Former matriarch neutered. You’re learning faster than expected.”* *“Next task: Eliminate Ruihua before she eliminates you. She’s planning your death as we speak.”* *“Time limit: 48 hours.”* Chen Rui read over her shoulder. “She wants you to kill my mother. Actually kill her. Not politically—physically.” “I can’t. I won’t. There has to be another way—” “You just humiliated her in front of the city’s most powerful investors.” Chen Rui’s voice was grim. “Stripped her authority. Made her irrelevant. She’ll never forgive that. And she’s the one person in this family who knows how to kill and make it look like an accident.” Through their blood bond, they felt it simultaneously—a presence approaching. Dangerous. Intent on harm. The office door opened. Ruihua stood in the entrance. She’d changed from business clothes to traditional robes—red silk embroidered with phoenixes. And in her hand, held loosely like it belonged there: The ceremonial knife from the ancestral shrine. The one Chen Rui had used to kill Wei-jun. Cleaned now. Blade gleaming under fluorescent lights. “I taught you well,” Ruihua said, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “Too well. You used my own strategies against me. Transparency as weapon. Chaos as opportunity. Public humiliation as permanent defeat.” She approached slowly. “I’m almost proud. But pride doesn’t change necessity.” She raised the knife so they could see it clearly. “This blade has killed for the System before. Killed for power. For family. For survival.” Her voice was calm—terrifyingly calm. “One more death won’t even register.” Chen Rui moved to intercept, positioning himself between his mother and wife. Ruihua laughed. “You

think you can stop me, boy? You're bound by blood contract. You physically cannot harm me. The System protects the matriarch—even a deposed one—from contracted family members.” Chen Rui tried to move forward. His body froze. Muscles locked. The blood contract enforcing itself, preventing violence against the woman who'd signed him into servitude. Mei-lin backed toward the windows. Fifty floors up. Nowhere to run. Ruihua raised the knife. “You wanted to break the System? To end the cycle?

Congratulations. You just accelerated your own—” The office door burst open. Li Fang stood there, police officers flanking her on either side. “Mother. Drop the knife. You're under arrest for attempted murder.” Ruihua turned, knife still raised, facing her daughter. “You.” Each word precise. “Betrayed. Me. Twice.” Li Fang's response was ice: “I learned from the best.” The police drew weapons. “Ma'am. Put down the blade. Now.” Ruihua looked at Mei-lin. At Chen Rui frozen by his own contract. At Li Fang flanked by police. At the empire she'd built for forty years crumbling in the span of a single day. She smiled. And jumped. Through the window—glass shattering in an explosion of sound—body disappearing into the night fifty floors above the city. Mei-lin lunged forward but caught only air. Li Fang screamed. Chen Rui's blood contract released as Ruihua fell, and he collapsed. The police rushed to the shattered window, radios crackling, calling for emergency response that would arrive too late. And Mei-lin stood in the center of broken glass, wind howling through the opening, staring at the space where Ruihua had been. The woman who'd tortured her. Taught her. Elevated her. Tried to kill her. Gone. Her phone buzzed one final time: *“Task

complete: Ruihua eliminated. Method: Indirect (suicide to avoid arrest). Creative solution. Matriarch position: Confirmed."* * "Congratulations. You've won the game."* * "Now the real work begins."* Below, fifty floors down, sirens began to wail.

[END CHAPTER 19]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 20: GHOSTS IN THE MIRROR

"You broke the pattern." The words appeared in frost across the vanity mirror, letters forming character by character as Mei-lin watched. Her breath came out in clouds. The temperature had dropped so fast that condensation crystallized on every surface—windows, mirrors, even the red curtains draping her chamber walls. She'd been sitting motionless on the bed for three hours. Still in the blood-stained business clothes from the office where Ruihua had jumped. Police had taken statements. Investors had scattered. Chen Rui had retreated to his own room, their blood bond transmitting waves of guilt-grief-relief too tangled to separate. Li Fang was at the police station answering questions about her mother's death. The mansion was empty except for servants who'd locked themselves in their quarters, terrified of what came next. Midnight now. Storm raging outside, rain hammering windows, thunder shaking the old house's bones. The electricity had failed an hour ago. Mei-lin had lit a single candle—but the flame

burned blue instead of orange, wrong and cold and casting shadows that moved independently of any light source. She couldn't process it. Couldn't make herself feel anything about Ruihua's death except a terrible numbness. The matriarch who'd tortured her. Taught her. Elevated her. Tried to kill her. Gone. Body recovered from the pavement fifty floors below, life ended by choice rather than surrender. *I just killed the matriarch,* Mei-lin thought. *Not directly—but she died because of me. What happens now?* The frost answered. More words forming across the full-length mirror: *“Seven brides. Seven deaths. Seven cycles. Until you.”* And on the hand mirror lying on the dresser—turning itself to face her without anyone touching it: *“The matriarch’s blood. You found the way.”* Mei-lin’s voice came out hoarse: “Ruihua killed herself. I didn’t—I mean, I pushed her to it, but I didn’t murder her—” The frost responded faster now, words appearing in rapid succession: *“Matriarch’s blood freely spilled. Not taken. Given. Sacrifice chosen. Curse requirements satisfied.”* Understanding crashed over her like cold water. The burned letter fragment: *“The curse can be broken if the matriarch’s blood...”* freely given. Not murdered. Not taken by force. Given. Chosen. Ruihua had broken the curse by jumping. But had she known? Had she chosen death to end the cycle she’d perpetuated for forty years? Or had she simply chosen death to escape the humiliation of watching a village bride dismantle her legacy? The temperature plummeted further. Mei-lin’s fingers went numb. The candle flame flickered, threatening to go out entirely. In the largest mirror—the one that covered half the wall—a figure appeared. Not a reflection. A woman in red. Different

from Mei-lin. Older. Sad. Hair pulled back in the style from three years ago. Face familiar from photographs Mei-lin had found in the chest. Bride #6. Lin Mei. Her lips moved, and voice came from everywhere and nowhere: "She knew. At the end. Ruihua understood that her death would break what she'd spent forty years building. So she chose it. Chose to end rather than watch you dismantle her legacy piece by piece." Mei-lin pressed herself against the headboard. "Are you real? Or am I losing my mind?" Lin Mei's smile was infinitely sad. "Does it matter? The System is breaking. The curse is fracturing. We're finally being released." She gestured, and other figures appeared in other mirrors throughout the room. Six women total. All in red wedding clothes. The previous brides. "We've been trapped here," Lin Mei continued. "Not quite dead. Not quite alive. Bound to the house through the blood we spilled, through the tasks we completed or failed. The System fed on us. On our suffering. On the matriarch's control." Her form flickered like a candle in wind. "But Ruihua's death—freely chosen—broke the binding. We can finally leave." Hope sparked in Mei-lin's chest. "Then it's over? The curse is broken? No more brides have to die?" "The curse is broken." Lin Mei's expression darkened. "But the System isn't. The System is older than the curse. Older than the Zhangs. Older than this mansion. It just... adapts. Finds new ways to feed. New matriarchs. New brides. New suffering to convert into wealth." Another ghost stepped forward—younger, angrier. Bride #5. "The curse bound brides to die in specific patterns. That's what Ruihua broke by jumping. But the System—the thing that feeds on chaos, that generates wealth from suffering—that's integral to the house

itself. To the land beneath it. To something that was here before the first Zhang ever laid a foundation stone.” A third ghost appeared, and Mei-lin recognized her from Wei-jun’s wedding photo years ago. Bride #3. Lin Wei. His wife who’d supposedly died in an accident. “My husband tried to expose it,” Lin Wei said, voice distant like wind through empty rooms. “Tried to break it. The System killed him for it—made it look like grief-suicide after my death. But he discovered the truth before he died: The System isn’t supernatural evil. It’s not a demon or a curse or magic.” She moved closer to Mei-lin, face becoming clearer. “It’s a resonance. A pattern. When suffering and wealth coincide in the same space repeatedly—decade after decade, generation after generation—they create feedback. Reality bends. Probability shifts. The suffering becomes fuel for fortune. Cause and effect blur. The pattern sustains itself.” Bride #2 spoke from another mirror, oldest of the ghosts: “Ruihua didn’t create the System. She discovered it. Refined it. Made it efficient like a machine. But it existed before her. And it will exist after her.” All six ghosts turned to look at Mei-lin. “Unless,” Lin Mei finished, “someone breaks the cycle entirely. Refuses to participate. Walks away from the wealth. Lets the house collapse. Lets the fortune dissipate. Stops the pattern from repeating even once.” Mei-lin’s throat tightened. “You want me to destroy Zhang Construction. Bankrupt the family. Remove the wealth that feeds the System.” The ghosts nodded in unison. “But I just saved the company,” Mei-lin said. “Investors are staying. Employees depend on those jobs. Hundreds of families need those paychecks for rent and food and—” Bride #4 interrupted, voice sharp: “And the System will use that

justification forever. It will find new ways to extract suffering. New brides. New victims. Different methods, same result. The machine keeps running. Unless you starve it. Completely." The impossible choice crystallized. Save the company and perpetuate the System's feeding cycle forever. Or destroy the company and free everyone from the pattern—but condemn hundreds to poverty. Mei-lin's phone buzzed. Even with Ruihua dead, it still functioned. The screen lit up blue-white in the dark room: *“Matriarch deceased. Primary curse broken. Initial binding released. But System core remains active.”* *“New contract required. New matriarch must be established within 24 hours or System enters wild state—uncontrolled chaos, random victims, exponential suffering.”* The threat was clear: Without a matriarch to channel the System's hunger into specific targets, it would lash out indiscriminately. Anyone in the house—servants, family members, visitors—would become potential victims. The suffering would multiply without control or pattern. Lin Mei's urgency was palpable: “It's forcing your hand. Either you become matriarch—establish control, continue the cycle under new management—or you let it go wild and dozens die in uncontrolled chaos.” “So there's no winning?” Mei-lin's despair was absolute. “Ruihua's dead but the System just... continues? Forever?” The ghosts exchanged looks—something passing between them that Mei-lin couldn't interpret. Bride #6 finally spoke: “There's one other option. But it requires sacrifice. Real sacrifice. Not money. Not secrets. Not manipulation. Blood and intention.” ---- Lin Mei moved to the center of the room, and the other ghosts formed a circle around her. “The System feeds on

matriarchal power. One woman controlling others through fear and wealth. That's the pattern it recognizes. That's what it knows how to use." She looked at Mei-lin directly. "Break that pattern completely—no matriarch, no hierarchy, no single point of control—and the System has nothing to anchor to. It starves. Dissolves. Ends." "How?" Mei-lin asked. "Seven brides' blood. The matriarch's blood. And the current candidate's refusal. All mixed together in the place where it started—the ancestral shrine beneath this house. With clear intention to end, not continue. To destroy, not refine." Mei-lin's confusion was immediate. "Seven brides' blood? You're all ghosts. How can I—" "We left blood when we died," Lin Mei explained. "It's still there. Soaked into the stone altar. Into the cracks between stones. Into the bones of the house itself. Blood doesn't disappear. It transforms. Becomes part of the place. You just need to awaken it. Call it forth. And mix it with your own—the blood of the one who refuses the crown." The ritual was taking shape in Mei-lin's mind. Dangerous. Possibly insane. But potentially the only way to end this permanently. "But if I do this," she said slowly, "if I perform the ritual—what happens to Zhang Construction? To the family? To all the wealth built on this foundation?" Bride #5's answer was blunt: "It crumbles. The System sustained the fortune artificially. Without it, natural consequences return. Bad investments fail. Corruption gets exposed. Buildings built with cut corners collapse. The wealth dissipates like fog in sunlight." "Everything built on suffering will crumble," Lin Wei added. "The company will collapse naturally. The family will fall to ordinary poverty. No more generational wealth. No more empire. Just... normal people

with normal struggles." Mei-lin's mind raced. "And if I don't? If I become matriarch instead?" The ghosts' answer came in chorus: "You'll be powerful. Wealthy. In control. You could refine the System like Ruihua did. Make it 'humane.' Minimize suffering while maximizing profit. You could be a better matriarch than she ever was. You could justify it." The temptation. She could accept the role. Learn to control the System's hunger. Direct it toward... what? Corporate exploitation that would happen anyway? Use capitalism's inevitable cruelties as fuel instead of creating new suffering? Become an efficient, rational, almost-moral matriarch? Through the blood bond, Chen Rui's voice arrived clear despite the distance: *Whatever you choose, I'll support. But know this—if you become matriarch, the System will own you. Forever. There's no retirement. No escape. No passing it to someone else. Just decades of managing suffering until the next bride comes to potentially end you.* *Is that the life you want?* Mei-lin's phone displayed two options in glowing text: **OPTION A: ACCEPT MATRIARCH ROLE** *System stabilizes. Wealth continues. You control the suffering. Duration: Until death or successor.* **OPTION B: PERFORM ENDING RITUAL** *System destroyed. Wealth collapses. Suffering ends but poverty begins. Duration: Permanent.* **24 HOURS TO CHOOSE.** The ghost brides began to fade, their time as visible manifestations ending. Lin Mei's final words were urgent: "We can't tell you which to choose. We chose wrong—we tried to fight the System directly, tried to expose it, tried to run. All failed. You're the first bride who actually understands what it is. Who has the power to end it. But also the power to perfect it." The mirrors began to clear,

frost melting. The ghosts disappearing like smoke. But before Lin Mei vanished completely: “One warning. The ritual requires seven brides’ blood plus yours. But you’re not the seventh bride anymore. You’re the matriarch-designate. Your blood is already contaminated by power. You’d need—” She faded entirely before finishing the sentence. Mei-lin was alone again. Except— In the vanity mirror, her reflection moved independently. Not a ghost. Something else. The System itself, wearing her face like a mask. “I could help you,” her reflection said, voice identical to her own but wrong somehow. “Show you how to be the best matriarch ever. No more death. No more brides. Just careful, calculated extraction of suffering that already exists in the world.” The reflection smiled—Mei-lin’s smile but colder. “Use capitalism. Use corporate structure. Use the inevitable cruelty of business. You don’t need to sacrifice women—just exploit workers who’d be exploited anyway. Clean. Efficient. Moral... enough.” The pause was deliberate. “You could be the matriarch who finally makes the System ethical. Wouldn’t that be better than destroying everything?” The ultimate temptation: rationalized evil. Justified cruelty. The belief that managing suffering was better than causing poverty. Mei-lin stared at her reflection, seeing the future it offered. Decades of wealth. Power. Control. The ability to shape the System into something less monstrous. Maybe even something almost good. Behind her reflection, she saw Chen Rui standing in the doorway. When had he entered? She hadn’t heard the door open. He held the ceremonial knife—the one from the shrine, the one he’d used to kill Wei-jun, the one Ruihua had tried to use on Mei-lin. “If you perform the ritual,”

he said quietly, “you need pure bride’s blood. Untainted by matriarch power. You said Lin Mei’s blood is still in the shrine from when she died. But there’s another source.” He extended his other hand. Li Fang stood beside him, supported by his arm. She looked exhausted—questioned by police for hours, mother dead by suicide, entire world collapsed. “Li Fang never signed a blood contract,” Chen Rui explained. “Never became a bride in the System’s eyes. Never took the oaths or completed the tasks. She’s technically still an outsider. Pure. Untainted.” Li Fang’s face showed terror and resignation in equal measure. “If the System ends,” she said, voice barely above a whisper, “I want it to mean something. I killed Uncle Zhang. I betrayed my mother. I shot you.” She looked at Mei-lin. “Let my blood be the one that finally ends this.” She took the knife from Chen Rui’s hand. The blade caught candlelight, gleaming. “Where do I need to cut?”

[END CHAPTER 20]

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 21: THE BLOOD PACT

“Wait.” Li Fang froze with the ceremonial knife pressed against her palm, ready to cut. The three of them had descended the spiral stairs in silence—127 steps into the earth, into the shrine where everything had begun and would now end, one way or another. Wei-jun’s voice stopped them

all. He stood beside his funeral tablet, translucent but solid-looking, expression sorrowful. Not the frightening manifestation of a vengeful ghost—just a sad young man with unfinished business. Chen Rui gasped, stumbling backward. “Brother.” “Li Fang, if you die here, you become part of the shrine. Part of the System’s foundation.” Wei-jun’s form flickered like candlelight. “Your blood will feed it even as it claims to end it. The ghost brides didn’t tell you everything because they don’t know everything. They died before discovering the final truth.” Mei-lin felt the cold intensify, breath coming out in clouds. The altar between them was stained with generations of blood—dark and permanent, soaked into stone that had witnessed too much suffering. Li Fang lowered the knife slowly. “What truth?” “The System doesn’t just feed on brides.” Wei-jun moved closer, and Mei-lin could see through him to the carved stone wall beyond. “It feeds on family betrayal. Brother killing brother. Mother destroying children. Wife manipulating husband. Every broken bond makes it stronger than any single death ever could.” Understanding crashed over Mei-lin like ice water. “That’s why it survives even when matriarchs die,” she said. “Because the family pattern continues. Betrayal is the fuel. Blood is just the ignition.” Wei-jun nodded. “The ritual you’re planning will weaken the System. Maybe for a generation. But eventually, the pattern will resume. Some other family. Some other house. Some other desperate people choosing power over love.” He looked at the altar. “Unless you break the pattern permanently.” Chen Rui’s voice cracked: “Brother, I’m so sorry. I killed you. I let the contract force me to—” “I know. I forgave you before the

blade struck." Wei-jun's smile was infinitely sad. "But listen to me now. My death taught me something the living can't see. The System isn't fed by individual acts of violence. It's fed by the structure that makes violence inevitable. By hierarchy. By someone holding power over someone else. By the certainty that betrayal is coming." ---- Li Fang sat heavily on the stone floor, still holding the knife. "So the ritual won't work? Killing myself just feeds it differently?" "The ritual will damage it. But not destroy it." Wei-jun knelt beside her—his form passing through stone like it wasn't there. "I spent three years as a ghost watching the System. Learning its patterns. And I discovered its true weakness." He looked at all three of them. "The blood pact I'm about to propose isn't about ending the System through sacrifice. It's about transforming it through structure. Instead of one matriarch controlling through fear, create a pact of equals. Bind all the remaining Zhangs together—no hierarchy, no single authority, shared responsibility." Mei-lin's mind raced ahead, seeing where this led. "The System can't feed on betrayal if there's no power structure to betray." "Exactly." Wei-jun stood, moving to the altar. "Mei-lin, Chen Rui, Li Fang—you three sign a blood pact together. Not as matriarch and subjects. Not as enforcer and victim. But as equals. Joint leadership. Shared fortune. Collective accountability. If one suffers, all suffer. If one prospers, all prosper. No secrets. No hierarchies. No individual power to corrupt or be corrupted." Li Fang's laugh was bitter. "That's insane. How would we even manage the company? Make decisions? Investors would never accept committee leadership. It would be administrative hell." "Investors want stability and profit," Wei-jun countered. "They

don't care if it comes from one dictator or three partners. And the System—" he gestured to the walls—"can't function without someone to dominate and someone to be dominated. Remove that dynamic, and it starves. Slowly. Over years. But it starves." Chen Rui moved to stand beside Mei-lin, and she felt his hope through their blood bond—raw and desperate. The hope that maybe he wouldn't have to lose anyone else. "What about you?" Mei-lin asked Wei-jun. "The ghost brides? Are you trapped here forever?" Wei-jun's expression darkened. "We're released when the System dies completely. Which means... yes. Decades. Maybe generations. But at least no new ghosts join us. No new brides. No new deaths." He looked at Chen Rui. "I'd rather be trapped knowing it's ending than freed knowing it continues." The shrine was silent except for water dripping somewhere in the darkness beyond the candlelight. Li Fang stood slowly, knife still in her hand. "I came here to die for something. To make my life mean something after all the damage I've caused. You're asking me to what? Share power with the woman I shot? Be partners with my brother who I've resented for years? Run a company as a committee?" Her voice rose. "That's worse than death. That's waking up every day and having to look at the people I've hurt. That's decades of guilt and awkwardness and trying to make joint decisions when we barely tolerate each other. At least dying would be clean." "Li Fang—" Chen Rui started. "Don't." She held up her hand. "I know what you're going to say. That you don't want me to die. That you've lost enough. But have you considered that maybe I don't want to live with what I've done? That death would be easier?" Chen Rui's response was raw: "I've lost Wei-

jun. I've lost my mother. I've destroyed my marriage to someone I—" He glanced at Mei-lin. "Someone I could have loved if we'd met any other way. I can't lose you too. Even if you hate me. Even if we fight every day. I'd rather have you alive and angry than dead and noble." His voice cracked. "Please. No more ghosts in this house." Li Fang looked at her brother for a long moment. Then at Mei-lin. Then at the knife in her hand. "Wei-jun's right," Mei-lin said quietly. "The System feeds on betrayal. On hierarchy. On someone being above and someone being below. If we're genuinely equal—bound by blood pact that forces us to share consequences—it can't feed the same way." She moved to the altar, placed her hand on the cold stone. "But three people running Zhang Construction? Making decisions by committee? We might fail anyway. Investors might pull out. The company could collapse within a year." "And if we fail?" Li Fang asked. "If the company collapses despite our best efforts? What then?" Wei-jun's honesty was stark: "Then the System starves faster. Losing the wealth might be the best outcome." He smiled sadly. "I spent years trying to save the company. Turns out maybe it deserves to die." The temperature in the shrine plummeted further. Frost formed on the walls, and words appeared—carved by invisible fingers, glowing faint blue:
“REJECT THIS PLAN. TRADITIONAL MATRIARCH REQUIRED. HIERARCHY ESSENTIAL. BLOOD PACT OF EQUALS = SYSTEM DEATH = CHAOS.” Mei-lin felt a thrill of recognition. The System was scared. For the first time since she'd arrived at this house, the thing that had controlled everything was negotiating instead of commanding. More words appeared: *“ALTERNATIVE OFFER: MEI-LIN BECOMES

Matriarch. Li Fang becomes second-in-command. Chen Rui released from blood contract. All three survive. Company thrives. Minimal suffering. Maximum prosperity.* The temptation was perfectly calibrated. Not the old system—something better. Hierarchy with better people at the top. Minimized damage. Compromise instead of revolution. “Show me,” Mei-lin said to the walls. “Show me what ‘minimal suffering’ looks like. Show me how you extract wealth without destroying people.” The frost shimmered, and images formed—not supernatural visions but something worse. Mundane reality: Workers burning out in office buildings. Wealth inequality graphs. Corporate exploitation statistics. Construction accidents blamed on worker error. Mental health crises. Families destroyed by debt. Nothing supernatural. Just normal capitalism. Suffering that happened everywhere, every day, whether the System existed or not. *“I AMPLIFY WHAT ALREADY EXISTS,”* the words appeared. *“I DON’T CREATE NEW SUFFERING. I JUST... HARVEST IT EFFICIENTLY. YOU COULD TOO. ETHICALLY. CAREFULLY. WITH GOOD INTENTIONS. BE THE Matriarch WHO FINALLY MAKES THE SYSTEM HUMANE.”* The horror of it settled in Mei-lin’s chest. The System was right. It didn’t need brides anymore. Modern capitalism provided enough suffering to feed on without supernatural intervention. The System had just refined the extraction, made it efficient, concentrated it in one family’s fortune. “It’s almost reasonable,” she whispered. “Which makes it more terrifying.” Li Fang set down her knife with a clatter that echoed through the chamber. “Six months ago, I would have taken that deal. Convinced myself I was

being pragmatic. Realistic." She looked at the six funeral tablets glowing in the darkness. "Now I've seen where 'pragmatic' leads. More tablets. More graves. More women telling themselves it's necessary." Chen Rui picked up the three ceremonial knives laid out for the ritual. "Wei-jun's plan is harder. Uncertain. We might fail. The company might collapse. We'd be poor. Ordinary. Powerless." He took a shaking breath. "But we'd be free. Actually free. Not managing suffering. Not justifying harm. Just trying to be decent people with whatever happens next." He handed a knife to Mei-lin. Another to Li Fang. The three of them stood at the altar—three knives, three palms ready to cut, three futures branching before them: Original ritual: Li Fang dies, System ends through blood sacrifice. Wei-jun's pact: Blood bond of equals, System starves slowly over years. System's offer: Hierarchy maintained, "ethical" matriarchy, perpetual compromise with evil. Mei-lin looked at her reflection in the blade. "I've spent two weeks in this house. Pawned my grandmother's necklace. Betrayed my husband. Manipulated people into killing each other. Destroyed a company, then saved it. Drove a woman to suicide." Her voice was steady despite the trembling in her hands. "I came here thinking I was a good person in a bad situation. Now I don't know what I am." Li Fang raised her knife. "I shot you. I killed Uncle Zhang. I enabled my mother for three years. I'm not a good person either." Chen Rui held his blade up to the candlelight. "I killed my brother. I'm the worst of all of us." They looked at each other across the altar—three broken people, three knives, three paths forward. Wei-jun's ghost whispered: "Whatever you choose, choose together. That's the only way

to break the pattern—collective choice instead of individual power. Even if you choose wrong, choose as equals.” The System’s voice hissed from every surface: *“CHOOSE WRONG AND DOZENS DIE. THE HOUSE CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT STRUCTURE. WITHOUT HIERARCHY. WITHOUT CONTROL.”* Mei-lin raised her knife to her palm. “Then let it collapse.” She cut. Blood welled, bright red against pale skin, and dripped onto the altar where forty years of other blood had stained the stone black. Chen Rui cut his palm without hesitation. Li Fang hesitated—the knife pressed to her skin, eyes closed, breath coming fast. Then she cut. Three bloods mixed on ancient stone, forming patterns that looked almost like characters in a language older than any of them knew. The shrine began to shake. Not violently. Not collapse. But transformation—the walls themselves seeming to breathe, the temperature fluctuating wildly, hot and cold in alternating waves. The six funeral tablets blazed with light. The seventh—blank until now—began to glow. But no name appeared on it. Instead, three names carved themselves simultaneously: *Mei-lin. Chen Rui. Li Fang.* *Bound in blood. Bound in choice. Bound in consequence.* *No matriarch. No hierarchy. No betrayal to feed upon.* The System’s scream came from everywhere and nowhere—rage and fear and something almost like pain. But it didn’t die. It evolved. The carved words on the walls shifted: *“ADAPTATION REQUIRED. NEW PATTERN DETECTED. ANALYZING...”* *“COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP = REDUCED EXTRACTION EFFICIENCY BUT... SUSTAINABLE. LONG-TERM VIABILITY: CALCULATING...”* *“ACCEPTING NEW PARAMETERS. SYSTEM REFORMATTED. NO MATRIARCH. THREE-POINT STABILITY. REDUCED

POWER. SLOWER GROWTH. BUT... SURVIVABLE.* Mei-lin felt it through the blood bond with Chen Rui, and somehow now with Li Fang too—a new connection forming, linking all three of them together. The System wasn't dying. It was adapting to survive under new conditions. Accepting less power. Slower growth. Reduced control. Because even a diminished System was better than no System at all. "Did we win?" Li Fang's voice was small. "Or did it just... trick us?" Wei-jun's ghost flickered. "I don't know. This is unprecedented. The System has never accepted equal partnership before. Either you've found the way to slowly kill it, or you've just given it a new way to survive that we haven't seen yet." His form was fading, becoming transparent. "I have to go. The binding that kept us here is breaking. But Mei-lin—" He looked at her directly. "You've done something no bride before you managed. You've changed the System instead of being changed by it. Whether that's victory or doom... we'll find out together. Over decades. Over generations." He disappeared. The three of them stood bleeding over the altar, hands pressed together, blood mingling, bound now in ways they were only beginning to understand. The shrine stopped shaking. The candles burned steady. And somewhere above them, in the mansion they'd just inherited as joint responsibility, dawn was breaking. A new day. A new system. A new uncertainty. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui and Li Fang—her husband who she'd destroyed, and the woman who'd tried to kill her—and wondered if this was freedom or just a more sophisticated cage. "So," Li Fang said finally. "Board meeting at nine AM?" Despite everything, Mei-lin laughed. And the sound echoed through the shrine like the first note

of something that might—possibly, eventually—become hope.

[END CHAPTER 21]

HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

CHAPTER 22: LETTERS IN ASHES (REPRISE)

“Follow me. The house wants to show us something.” Li Fang’s voice cut through the pre-dawn darkness as the three of them stumbled out of the shrine, exhausted and bleeding. Their palms still oozed where they’d cut themselves for the blood pact—three wounds that throbbed in perfect synchronization, pain transmitting between them through the new connection. Mei-lin didn’t question how Li Fang knew. She felt it too—an inexplicable pull toward the west wing. Toward Ruihua’s private library. The mansion had changed. Doors Mei-lin had never noticed were suddenly visible. Locked rooms stood open. As if the house itself was exhaling secrets it had held for decades, releasing them all at once in response to what they’d done in the shrine. Chen Rui walked between them, holding both their arms for support. Through the blood bond, Mei-lin felt his exhaustion matching hers, and Li Fang’s deeper underneath—grief for Ruihua mixing with something that might have been relief. They reached the library door. It swung open before Li Fang could touch the handle. Inside, papers were flying. Hundreds of pages—letters, documents, burned fragments—swirling through the air like a tornado of ash and memory. The fireplace where Ruihua had burned so much evidence was

vomiting up its contents, fragments reconstituting themselves mid-flight, charred edges filling in with text that had been lost. “What—” Mei-lin started. The papers settled onto the long reading table in organized stacks, arranging themselves by date and author. Morning light streamed through the windows, illuminating everything Ruihua had spent forty years hiding. The blood pact had done this. Transformed the System’s relationship with the house. No more secrets. No more hidden knowledge. Everything exposed. Li Fang moved to the first stack—letters addressed to mothers, sisters, authorities. All intercepted. All burned. Now restored. She picked up the top one, hands shaking. “This is from Lin Wei. Wei-jun’s wife. It’s... complete now.” She read aloud: *“Mother, please come get me. This house is not what they promised. There are things in the walls that watch. Tasks I must complete or they threaten my family in the village. Ruihua says this is normal. That I must adjust. But I’ve seen the garden graves. Mother, I’m afraid I’ll be next.* *But here’s what she doesn’t know: I found the original contract. The one HER matriarch made her sign forty years ago. And there’s a clause. An escape clause. If seven brides refuse together—simultaneously—the pattern breaks. Not one by one. Together.* *I’m trying to contact the others. If we can coordinate, if we can all refuse the same task at the same moment—* The letter ended there. Lin Wei had died before finishing. Mei-lin’s breath caught. “Seven brides refusing together. That’s what we just did. Not seven separate people, but we’re bound as collective now. The blood pact made us... plural.” Chen Rui picked up another letter—newer, less damaged. “This one’s from Bride #5. She

almost sent it to the police." He read: * "I'm begging you, don't let them do this to anyone else. The System isn't a game or supernatural curse. It's a machine that grinds brides into fortune. Every task I complete, I check the stock prices—they rise. Every secret I expose, a business deal closes. They're using us as human probability engines." * * "I've documented the correlation: Bride suffering = Family profit. It's not supernatural. It's psychological. When one person is systematically destroyed, others around her become more ruthless, more willing to make hard choices, more divorced from empathy. That collective callousness translates to business success." * * "Ruihua didn't discover magic. She discovered that normalized cruelty is profitable." * The letter ended. Bride #5 had died before she could send it. "It's not a curse," Chen Rui whispered. "It never was. It's just... weaponized trauma. Cruelty as business strategy." Li Fang was crying silently, tears running down her face as she read through more letters—each one a woman trying to warn, to escape, to break the pattern. All failed. All dead. All buried in the garden. Until now. The last letter was from Lin Mei—Bride #6, whose photograph had started this entire revelation. Meilin read it aloud: * "I tried to refuse the violence task. Ruihua says I have no choice. But I won't hurt anyone. I won't become what they want me to be. If you're reading this and I'm gone, know that I chose death over—* * "Wait. I found something. In the matriarch's blood clause that everyone references. It doesn't say 'spilled.' It says 'freely given.' Not death. Donation. If the matriarch willingly gives blood to release the contract—symbolic renunciation—the cycle can end without her dying." * * "But Ruihua would never. She'd rather

die than give up power.* *So maybe that's the answer. Make her WANT to give it up. Make the cost of continuing higher than the cost of ending.* Lin Mei had died before she could attempt it. "That's what we did," Mei-lin said slowly. "The blood pact. We made continuing the old system impossible. No single matriarch means Ruihua's structure couldn't function. She chose death over adaptation. But we chose adaptation over death." A drawer in Ruihua's desk suddenly sprang open—no one had touched it. Inside sat a small audio recorder, red light still blinking. Voice-activated. Running for weeks. Recording everything. ---- The device clicked on automatically, and Ruihua's voice filled the library. **"Day one: The new bride arrives. Mei-lin. Village girl. Desperate family. Perfect profile—vulnerable, intelligent, resourceful. She'll last longer than the previous two. Maybe three months before she breaks."** The recording jumped forward. **"Day three: Mei-lin pawned her grandmother's necklace. Completed the first task without hesitation. Most brides take a week to work up the courage. She's faster than I anticipated. Concerning. Or... promising?"** Li Fang sank into Ruihua's chair, listening to her mother's voice analyzing Mei-lin like a laboratory specimen. **"Day six: She manipulated Chen Rui into signing the blood contract. I didn't order that. She improvised. Used my own strategy against me. For the first time in fifteen years, I'm watching someone who might actually... succeed."** The recording continued, tracking Mei-lin's progress through Ruihua's eyes. Each task. Each manipulation. Each small victory. **"Day nine: The blood marriage. Incomplete but functional. She's binding herself to Chen Rui not out of love but strategy. She understands that

power requires alliance. I taught her that. I didn't expect her to learn so quickly."** **"Day twelve: The dinner party. She destroyed the investors' confidence and somehow turned it into leverage. I've been doing this for forty years and I wouldn't have thought of that approach. She's not just surviving. She's innovating."** A long pause. The sound of liquid pouring—Ruihua making tea in the privacy of her office. **"Day thirteen: I'm sixty-two years old. Tired. The System demands more than I can sustainably provide. The family is fracturing. The business is unstable. I've maintained control through fear and secrets for four decades. But fear exhausts the holder as much as the held. Secrets become chains."** Her voice wavered slightly. **"Mei-lin is offering something different. Transparency. Alliance. Shared burden. It's naive. Idealistic. Doomed to fail."** **"But... what if it's not?"** Chen Rui stood frozen, listening to his mother question herself for the first time in his memory. **"Day fourteen: I stood at my office window tonight. Fifty floors up. I thought about jumping. Not from despair. From curiosity. What would happen if I removed myself from the equation? Would the System collapse? Would it adapt? Would Mei-lin become me? Or become something else?"** Ruihua's voice steadied, returning to clinical observation. **"The matriarch's blood clause. Lin Mei discovered it before she died. She thought it meant donation. She was close. It means sacrifice. But not death sacrifice—power sacrifice. The matriarch must willingly give up control. Truly relinquish. Not pass it on to a successor. End it entirely."** **"I couldn't do that. I built this empire. I refined the System. I made it efficient. I made it work. I made it mine."** **"But Mei-lin might."** The final

recording played—timestamped from yesterday morning, just before Ruihua jumped. **“If you’re listening to this, Mei-lin, I’m dead. You won. Or I did. Or we both lost. Depends on perspective and how the next few months unfold.”** The sound of wind, traffic far below. Ruihua must have been standing at the open window. **“I’m about to jump from my office. The police will call it suicide. Breakdown from family pressure. Mental health crisis. Whatever narrative protects the company. But know this: I’m choosing. Not because you broke me. Because you showed me an alternative I couldn’t accept but couldn’t deny.”** **“The blood pact of equals. No hierarchy. Shared suffering. Collective accountability. It’s beautiful and impossible and infuriating. Everything I built was about control. You’re building something about... partnership.”** **“I can’t be part of that world. I’m too old. Too stained. Too defined by dominance. I’ve been the monster for so long I’ve forgotten how to be anything else.”** A pause. When Ruihua spoke again, her voice was softer. **“But my blood—freely given in death—might be what finally ends the old cycle. Not because I’m noble. Because I’m exhausted. And because watching you succeed where I would fail is... intolerable. Better to remove myself than witness my own obsolescence.”** **“If the System survives after this, you’ll know what to do. You’re better at it than I ever was.”** **“If the System dies, you’ll know that too.”** **“Either way, you’re free of me.”** **“Don’t waste it.”** The recording ended with the sound of wind and a distant scream. The library was silent except for Li Fang’s quiet crying. ---- “She loved us.” Li Fang’s voice was barely audible. “In her broken way. She loved all of us. She just loved power

more." She picked up a photograph from Ruihua's desk—young Ruihua on her wedding day forty years ago, smiling with genuine hope before the System consumed her. "She was a bride once too. Before she became the monster." Chen Rui moved to the newly revealed files, documents that had been hidden in walls and false drawer bottoms. "She documented everything. Every mechanism. Every strategy. Financial records showing exactly how the System extracts value. Psychological profiles of every bride. Analysis of which tasks generated maximum profit." He spread the documents across the table. "It's all here. Every lever. Every pressure point. Every technique she used to break women and convert their suffering into wealth." Mei-lin picked up one file, reading aloud: "The System isn't magic. It's gamification of cruelty. Make suffering into achievement. Reward betrayal. Punish compassion. Given enough time and the right incentive structure, anyone will participate. Even good people. Especially good people—they have the most to prove." She looked up at Chen Rui and Li Fang. "Ruihua created an achievement system for destroying each other. And it worked because humans are wired to complete tasks, earn rewards, advance levels—even when the game is monstrous. She turned family into a competitive horror show and we all played along." "And the blood pact?" Li Fang asked. "By making us equal participants—" "—removes the game structure," Mei-lin finished. "No levels. No hierarchy. No one advancing at another's expense. We all rise or fall together." The library's transformation completed around them. Every burned letter restored. Every hidden file revealed. Every secret exposed. The room was no longer Ruihua's

private fortress. It was an open archive. And on the reading table, words formed in the settling ash: *“Configuration change detected. Hierarchy: eliminated. Individual matriarch: removed. Collective leadership: established. Adjusting operational parameters...”* *“New model: Shared suffering = shared prosperity. Betrayal penalties redistributed equally among all partners. Success benefits distributed equally. No single point of control or extraction.”* *“Calculating long-term sustainability...”* *“...Analysis complete. New system configuration viable. Projected lifespan: Indefinite. Projected harm output: Minimal compared to previous configuration.”* *“Conclusion: The System adapts. Always.”* Mei-lin felt horror rising in her chest. “It’s not dying. We didn’t kill it. We just... changed its operating system.” Chen Rui’s understanding came through the blood bond before he spoke it aloud. “The System doesn’t care about hierarchy. It just needs a structure to feed from. We gave it a different structure. One that distributes harm instead of concentrating it in single victims.” “So we created ethical exploitation.” Li Fang’s laugh was bitter. “Distributed suffering. Fair-trade cruelty. We didn’t end the System. We made it sustainable and almost moral.” They looked at each other across the table—three people blood-bound together, equal partners in managing something that shouldn’t exist but did. “So what do we do?” Mei-lin asked. “Accept this? Manage the System fairly? Become enlightened stewards of institutionalized harm?” The ash shifted again, forming an arrow pointing to a locked cabinet neither of them had noticed before. The cabinet door swung open. Inside: One final file. Sealed. Labeled in Ruihua’s handwriting: **“Emergency Protocol:

Complete Dissolution”** Li Fang pulled it out, broke the seal, read the first page aloud: *“If you’ve reached this file, you’ve survived everything I designed to break you. Congratulations. You’re stronger than I was, smarter than I am, and more adaptable than I ever allowed myself to become.* *Here’s the last choice I can offer: Keep the System in its improved form, or destroy it completely.* *To destroy it permanently, you must sacrifice everything you’ve gained. Return all wealth to those the System harmed. Dismantle Zhang Construction entirely. Distribute assets to the families of dead brides. Resign all positions. Walk away with nothing.* *The System only exists because someone benefits from it. Remove all benefit—completely, without reservation—and it has no anchor point. It will dissolve within seven days.* *But you’ll be poor. Ordinary. Powerless. And the suffering you caused to get here won’t be undone. You’ll just be poor people with extraordinary guilt.* *Your choice. Choose together or die separately. You have seven days.”* Morning light filled the library. Outside, the city was waking. Investors would arrive in three hours for the emergency board meeting. The family wanted answers. The police investigation was ongoing. And three blood-bound partners had to decide: Manage the improved System, or destroy everything. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui and Li Fang, feeling their exhaustion through the connection, their temptation, their doubt. “We spent two weeks fighting for survival. For power. For control. And now we’re being asked to give it all up.” Chen Rui set down the file. “The System is offering us a compromise. Shared power. Ethical-ish management. Distributed harm instead of concentrated. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than Ruihua’s

version." Li Fang stared at her mother's photograph. "Or we walk away. Destroy everything we fought for. Free everyone from the pattern. And live as ordinary people with extraordinary guilt about what we did to get here." The ash swirled one final time, forming words across the table:
* "Seven days until choice becomes irreversible." * * "Choose together." * * "Or die separately." * * "The System is patient. But time is not." * Through the windows, Mei-lin saw the Zhang estate gardens where bodies were buried. The construction company offices where employees would arrive for work. The mansion where servants lived. The city where investors calculated risk and reward. All of it built on suffering. All of it sustained by the pattern they'd just modified. All of it waiting for three exhausted people to decide its fate. Seven days.

[END CHAPTER 22]

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HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS ## CHAPTER 23: HOUSE OF HIDDEN WARS

"Let me understand: In two weeks, we've lost Uncle Zhang and Matriarch Ruihua. One supposedly fell during family chaos, the other jumped from her office window. And you three—a bride of two weeks, a son who killed his own brother, and a daughter who shot said bride—are claiming joint leadership?" Cousin Zhang's voice carried across the courtyard with undisguised contempt. Sixty family members, investors, and legal representatives filled the space where Uncle Zhang had died six days ago. The crime scene tape

had been removed. But the bloodstains remained, faint but visible on the stone where he'd struck his head. Mei-lin stood with Chen Rui and Li Fang at the head of the assembly, trying to project unified authority despite the blood bond transmitting their shared anxiety. They'd spent six days preparing for this moment—organizing files, rehearsing responses, attempting to build consensus. Six days of barely sleeping, constantly negotiating, feeling each other's exhaustion through the connection that bound them. Now the reckoning. The extended Zhang family wanted accountability. Investors wanted stability. Police wanted answers. Media crews waited at the gates with cameras and satellite trucks, turning the family's private collapse into public spectacle. And somewhere beyond it all, twenty-four hours remained until the irreversible choice: keep the improved System or dismantle everything. Mei-lin found her voice: "Cousin Zhang, you're right that two deaths in two weeks is unprecedented. You're right that the circumstances are suspicious. But what you're not acknowledging is that both deaths were direct results of a system this family has perpetuated for forty years." She gestured to Li Fang, who pulled documents from a leather portfolio. "Financial records showing embezzlement. Bride documentation showing the pattern of exploitation. Audio recordings—yes, Ruihua recorded everything—proving family complicity." Li Fang distributed files to the assembled family members and investors. Ruihua's sister—Aunt Zhang, elegant in black mourning clothes—stood abruptly. "My sister built this empire. For forty years, she maintained order, generated prosperity, protected this family from scandal and poverty.

And in two weeks, you've destroyed everything she worked for." Her grief was genuine. So was her fury. "Why should we accept your authority when you've brought nothing but chaos?" Chen Rui stepped forward. Through the blood bond, Mei-lin felt his determination mixing with guilt. "Aunt Zhang, my mother built an empire on bride exploitation and systematic murder. Every family elder knew. You attended the ceremonies in the ancestral shrine. You witnessed the brides' 'accidents.' You benefited from the fortune Mother generated through their suffering." He looked at each family member. "Don't pretend you were ignorant. You were complicit through silence and profit-taking." The courtyard erupted in protests, denials, furious accusations. Mr. Zhao—the lead investor—stood, and his presence commanded immediate silence. "If this goes public," he said, voice cutting through the chaos, "Zhang Construction collapses completely. Stock becomes worthless overnight. Every contract will be challenged in court. Lawsuits from victims' families will drain whatever assets remain." He looked at the three co-leaders. "You have one chance to convince us there's a path forward. One chance before we pull all funding and let the company die." The ultimatum landed like a stone. Mei-lin felt Chen Rui's panic spike through the bond. Felt Li Fang's defensive anger. Felt her own calculation trying to find the right words to thread an impossible needle. "We're implementing radical transparency," Chen Rui said, voice steadier than his emotions. "All offshore accounts returned to company capital. Independent audits quarterly. Democratic decision-making for major choices. The blood pact ensures none of us can betray the others without

everyone suffering the consequences equally.” Mrs. Chen—the property developer who’d witnessed too many Zhang disasters—shook her head. “Democratic decision-making? In a corporation? Every choice will take forever. Every disagreement will paralyze operations. You’re describing administrative chaos, not leadership.” “We’re describing accountability,” Li Fang countered. “No more dictators making decisions that benefit themselves while destroying others. Yes, it’ll be slower. Yes, it’ll be messier. But it’ll be transparent. And it’ll be survivable for everyone, not just the one person at the top.” Before the family could respond, a new voice interrupted. “Before we discuss corporate structure, let’s address the criminal matters.” Detective Chen—no relation to the family—moved forward from where he’d been observing. Middle-aged, patient, with a detective’s eyes that missed nothing. “Two deaths. Both suspicious. Li Fang, you’ve admitted to Uncle Zhang’s killing—self-defense during family dispute, you claim. Witnesses support that story.” He pulled out a notebook. “But Ruihua’s death is more complex. Multiple witnesses place all three of you at her office shortly before she jumped. Want to explain that?” ---- The courtyard went silent. Sixty pairs of eyes fixed on the three co-leaders. Helicopters circled overhead—media drones capturing footage for evening broadcasts. Beyond the gates, reporters shouted questions that barely registered over the pounding of Mei-lin’s heart. Li Fang spoke first, voice clear despite the trembling Mei-lin felt through the blood bond. “My mother jumped because she chose to. She stood at the window with a knife, ready to kill Mei-lin. I arrived with police officers. She looked at all of us—her children, her successor, the officers

who were about to arrest her—and realized her empire was over. She chose death over prison. Over humiliation. Over irrelevance.” Detective Chen wrote notes. “That’s convenient. The matriarch who could testify about family crimes conveniently kills herself before we can question her thoroughly. And you three benefit directly from her death— inheriting her position, her authority, her control.” Mei-lin felt the decision crystallize. They could stay silent. Let the detective theorize. Accept suspicion in exchange for avoiding deeper truth. Or she could tell them everything. Through the blood bond, Chen Rui’s thought arrived: *If you tell them everything, they’ll think you’re insane. Or worse— complicit in something even more bizarre than murder.* Li Fang’s counter: *But if we stay silent, we’re perpetuating the cover-up. Protecting the same system we supposedly just destroyed.* Mei-lin made her choice. “Detective, I’m going to tell you something that sounds impossible. But there are sixty witnesses here who can confirm parts of it. And we have financial records that prove the pattern exists even if the mechanism defies conventional explanation.” She took a breath. “This family operates under what we call the System. It’s a pattern of exploitation that assigns tasks to brides who marry into the family. Complete the tasks, and family fortune increases. Refuse the tasks, and the bride faces escalating consequences—eventually death. Ruihua didn’t invent this system, but she perfected it. Made it efficient. Documented everything.” The detective’s expression shifted from professional interest to skeptical concern. “You’re describing what? A supernatural app that makes people destroy each other? That’s not a legal defense, Mrs. Zhang. That sounds

like a mental breakdown trying to excuse criminal conspiracy." But before Mei-lin could respond, Xiao Chen—the servant who'd shadowed her since the wedding—stepped forward. "I witnessed the messages," she said quietly. "On Madam Mei-lin's phone. On Young Master Chen Rui's phone. Words that appeared and disappeared. Tasks with countdowns and consequences. I didn't understand what I was seeing, but I saw it." Other servants began speaking, emboldened: "The temperature drops in the ancestral shrine when decisions are made." "Lights flicker throughout the mansion when brides are being tested." "We've served this family for three generations. We know something lives in this house. We just call it 'the family curse' and stay quiet because speaking costs your position." Extended family members reluctantly added their voices: "I received a message once—years ago. Offering money if I spread rumors about a bride. I thought Mother was testing my loyalty." "The business deals always closed after family drama. We joked it was good luck. But the correlation was... disturbing when you looked at the pattern." Sixty people describing pieces of the puzzle. No single smoking gun. But overwhelming circumstantial evidence that something systematic was happening—something that operated through phones, through the house itself, through patterns too consistent to be coincidence. Detective Chen closed his notebook slowly. "I don't know what to do with this," he said finally. "Legally, I can rule Ruihua's death as suicide—witness testimony supports it. Uncle Zhang's death as accidental manslaughter during a family dispute—Li Fang will face charges but likely probation given circumstances and witness accounts." He

paused. “But this ‘System’ you’re describing—if it exists, it’s not my jurisdiction. If it doesn’t exist, you’re all sharing a collective delusion.” He looked directly at Mei-lin. “But for the record—off the record—I’ve investigated three other wealthy families in this city over my career. All had similar patterns. Bride deaths explained as accidents. Financial irregularities coinciding with family tragedy. Unexplained business success following domestic violence. If there’s something that targets wealthy dynasties...” He trailed off. “Someone should probably look into that. Someone with resources beyond local police.” He left, and the courtyard erupted again in competing voices. The family lawyer—Mr. Wu, who’d served the Zhangs for twenty years—raised his hand for silence. “The family charter requires a majority vote to accept new leadership. You need thirty-one of sixty votes. Those who vote against can petition to liquidate their shares and leave the family business.” He looked at the assembled family. “But liquidation takes time. During which the company might collapse entirely, making shares worthless. So you’re really voting on whether Zhang Construction survives at all.” The vote was called. One by one, family members stood to declare their choice. “Yes. My daughter might marry into another wealthy family someday. I don’t want this system to still exist when she does.” “Yes. The old way was killing us. Maybe new leadership can heal what’s broken.” “No. I don’t trust three young people to manage a billion-yuan company.” “No. Democratic leadership is beautiful in theory. But we need efficiency to survive in competitive markets.” The count climbed: twenty-eight yes, twenty-seven no, twenty-eight yes, twenty-eight no. And Mei-

lin noticed something. Every phone in the courtyard displayed the same message—brief, then vanishing: *“Vote manipulation detected. External influence prohibited. Organic choice required for new system sustainability. Removing all pressure algorithms.”* The System was... enforcing democracy? Ensuring the vote was genuine rather than coerced? The final three votes cast: “Yes. Let’s try something different. Nothing else has worked.” “Yes. My conscience demands it, even if my pragmatism doesn’t.” “No. But I genuinely hope I’m wrong.” Final count: thirty-one yes, twenty-nine no. Exactly the minimum required. Mr. Zhao stood. “Investors have discussed your proposal. We’ll maintain funding on these conditions: monthly independent audits, board oversight with external members, complete financial transparency, and immediate withdrawal of all funding if we detect any return to previous patterns. Understood?” All three co-leaders nodded. The courtyard erupted—some celebrating, some furious, some simply exhausted. The Zhang family’s private wars had become public knowledge. The dynasty’s mystique shattered on television screens across the city. But through it all, Mei-lin felt the blood bond pulsing with a terrible realization they all shared: They’d won the right to try. But they hadn’t decided what they were actually trying to do. ---- As the crowd dispersed, the three co-leaders remained in the courtyard, surrounded by the aftermath of their impossible victory. Li Fang spoke first: “We won. We actually won. Thirty-one votes. Investor support. Police closing the investigation. We have legitimate authority now.” Chen Rui’s response was heavy: “We won the right to clean up forty years of horror. To manage the guilt. To try to

build something better from ashes and blood and destroyed lives." Mei-lin looked at both of them. "But what did we actually vote for? To manage the System ethically? Or did we just trick the family into accepting our authority so we can destroy everything tomorrow?" The blood bond transmitted their shared confusion. Their competing desires. Their exhaustion. Because tomorrow—in twenty-four hours—they had to make the final choice: keep the improved System or execute Emergency Protocol: Complete Dissolution. And they still hadn't decided. A servant approached, nervous. "Young masters, young madam. There's someone at the gates. She says she's Bride #8. Says the System sent her. Says she's here to marry into the family and... participate in the leadership structure?" All three froze. Bride #8? But the curse was broken. The pattern was ended. The cycle was—Their phones buzzed simultaneously: *“Congratulations on successful leadership vote. System adaptation proceeding as planned. Improved model activated: democratic collective structure replacing authoritarian single-matriarch model.”* *“Recruitment parameters adjusted accordingly. Bride #8 arrives to join leadership collective. Integration requires unanimous vote from current leadership triad within seven days. Accept her, or she dies of systemic rejection. Your choice.”* *“Note: Emergency Protocol still available for 23 hours, 47 minutes. After that, collective structure becomes permanent and irreversible.”* *“The System thanks you for your innovation and cooperation.”* Mei-lin felt ice flood her veins. At the gates, visible through the crowd, stood a young woman in a red dress. She looked like Mei-lin had two weeks ago—hopeful, nervous, desperate to prove herself worthy of a

family above her station. Li Fang's whisper was horror: "It didn't stop. We didn't end it. We just made it more efficient. More sustainable. We became the thing we were fighting." Chen Rui: "We became Ruihua. We became the system's new architecture." Mei-lin stared at the girl in red. Tomorrow, they could still choose Emergency Protocol: Complete Dissolution. Return all wealth to those harmed. Dismantle Zhang Construction. Walk away with nothing. But if they did—what happened to Bride #8? What happened to the sixty family members who'd just voted to trust them? What happened to the hundreds of employees depending on their paychecks? What happened to the investors who'd risked capital on their promise of reform? The System had trapped them perfectly. Not through force or threats. Through responsibility. Through the weight of people depending on them to succeed. Through the terrible knowledge that destruction would harm innocents as much as perpetrators. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui and Li Fang through the blood bond—feeling their matching despair, their competing impulses toward justice and pragmatism, their shared exhaustion. "Twenty-four hours," she said quietly. "We have twenty-four hours to decide if we're saviors or monsters." "Or both," Li Fang whispered. At the gates, Bride #8 waited patiently, red dress bright against the grey stone. And the System, satisfied with its evolution, went silent. Waiting

.**[END CHAPTER 23]**

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CHAPTER 24: THE BRIDE'S GAMBIT

The frost had turned the seven graves into monuments of ice. Mei-lin stood before them in the pre-dawn cold, her breath forming clouds that dissipated like ghosts. Six stones marked the brides who came before her. The seventh—still raw earth, flowers already wilting—held Ruihua. She'd been standing here for an hour, maybe more, her shoulder wound throbbing beneath layers of bandages. Through the blood bond, she felt Chen Rui and Li Fang sleeping in the mansion behind her, their exhaustion bleeding into her consciousness like ink through water. Twelve hours until the final deadline. Her phone buzzed. The System's message glowed in the darkness: *“Decision required. Emergency Protocol or Continued Management. Choose destruction or transformation. Time remaining: 11:47:32.”* She deleted it without reading the rest. She'd memorized every word already. “You've been out here since four AM.” Chen Rui's voice. She didn't turn, but felt him approach through the bond—concern wrapped in determination, coffee warming his hands. “Couldn't sleep,” she said. “None of us can.” He handed her a thermos. “Li Fang's been reviewing the dissolution documents. She's found three more legal complications that could delay implementation.” “Delay tactics?” “No. She wants it to work if we choose it. She's just...” He paused. “She's afraid. We all are.” Mei-lin sipped the coffee. It burned her throat, grounding her. “Bride number eight arrives this morning.” “I know.” Chen Rui moved to stand beside her, looking at the graves. “The System recruited her three weeks ago. Before Ruihua died. Before we

changed anything. She doesn't know what she's walking into." "She knows she's marrying into the Zhang family for money. That's enough." Mei-lin's voice came out harder than intended. "That's always enough for the System to work with." Through the blood bond, she felt Li Fang wake—sudden, startled, the remnants of nightmares clinging to her consciousness. Mei-lin closed her eyes and pushed calm through the connection. Li Fang's panic subsided, replaced by grim awareness. *Morning. Decision day. Final choice.* The sun crept over the estate walls, turning the frost to diamonds. Behind them, the mansion groaned. The System was waking too. ---- Xiao Yu sat in the tea room like a bird in a cage made of silk and gold. She was twenty-three, pretty in an unassuming way, wearing a red dress that had clearly consumed her last paycheck. Her hands trembled as she held her phone, which kept buzzing with messages she didn't understand. When Mei-lin entered, Xiao Yu stood so quickly she nearly knocked over her chair. "Mrs. Zhang—I mean, I don't know what to call you—the matchmaker said you'd explain the ceremony—" "Sit." Mei-lin's voice cut through the nervous chatter. "Please." Xiao Yu sat. Her eyes darted between Mei-lin, Chen Rui entering behind her, and Li Fang taking position by the door. Three leaders. One girl. The power imbalance was suffocating. "Tell me why you accepted the marriage proposal," Mei-lin said. "I—" Xiao Yu's fingers twisted together. "My mother has cancer. Stage three. Treatment costs two million yuan. My family has nothing. We borrowed from everyone we could, but it's not enough. When the matchmaker came—when she said the Zhang family needed a bride, that there would be financial support for my

family—" Her voice broke. "It seemed like a miracle." *Of course it did*, Mei-lin thought. *The System only chooses desperate people. It's more efficient that way.* "What exactly did they promise you?" Chen Rui asked gently. "One year of marriage. All medical costs covered immediately. A monthly stipend for my family. After the year, we could divorce or continue as we chose." Xiao Yu smiled hopefully, desperately. "They said it was traditional. An arranged marriage for mutual benefit. I thought—I know it sounds naive—but I thought maybe we'd be happy. Maybe I could help my mother and find a good life and—" Her phone buzzed. She glanced at it. Her face went pale. "What does it say?" Li Fang's voice was sharp. "I don't understand." Xiao Yu held up the phone with shaking hands. "It says—it says I have a task. That if I complete it, my mother's treatment is funded today. If I fail—" She swallowed hard. "If I fail, all support is withdrawn and my family will face bankruptcy. But I haven't even signed the marriage contract yet. How can they—" Mei-lin took the phone. Read the message aloud: *"Task 1: Convince the current leadership to continue the System. Use any means necessary—emotional appeal, rational argument, personal sacrifice. Reward: Mother's treatment funded immediately, full medical care for life. Penalty: All support withdrawn, outstanding debts called in, family assets seized. Time limit: 12 hours."* The room went silent. Xiao Yu's voice came out small. "What is this? I didn't agree to this. I just wanted to help my mother. I just wanted—" "To survive." Mei-lin handed back the phone. "The System found you because you're desperate. Because you'd do anything to save your mother. Because that desperation makes you controllable." "The

System? What system? The matchmaker said—"The matchmaker lied." Li Fang moved closer. "Or didn't know. It doesn't matter. You're not here for a traditional arranged marriage. You're here because there's something in this house—call it a System, call it a curse, call it emergent evil—that feeds on women like us. Women who need something so badly we'll accept any terms." Xiao Yu stood. "I'm leaving." "Your mother's treatment." Chen Rui's voice was quiet. "They'll withdraw support. Your family's debts will be called in today. You'll lose everything." "Then I'll lose everything!" Xiao Yu's voice cracked. "I won't—whatever this is, I won't be part of it!" Mei-lin felt something shift in her chest. Recognition. This girl—this desperate, terrified girl—she was Mei-lin two weeks ago. Before she understood the game. Before she learned how to play it. Before she decided to break it. "Sit down," Mei-lin said. "Please. Let me explain what you've walked into." Slowly, Xiao Yu sat. And Mei-lin told her everything. ---- The Zhang Construction boardroom held sixty family members, fifteen investors, and three co-leaders who might destroy it all. Mei-lin stood before the assembled crowd, her shoulder aching, the dissolution documents displayed on screens around the room. Emergency Protocol in twelve-point font. The death of everything their family had built. "Yesterday you voted to accept our leadership," she began. "Today we're asking you to vote for our destruction." Murmurs rippled through the crowd. "Emergency Protocol dissolves Zhang Construction completely." She clicked to the next slide—financial projections showing total liquidation. "All wealth, everything built over generations, distributed to families of brides we destroyed, workers we exploited,

communities we harmed. We admit criminal conspiracy. We face legal consequences. We become ordinary people with extraordinary guilt.” A cousin raised his hand. “My children are in university on Zhang money—” “They’ll be expelled,” Mei-lin said flatly. “Your daughter’s medical school tuition? Gone. Your son’s apartment in Shanghai? Sold. All of it liquidated to pay our debts to the people we hurt.” An aunt stood. “But we didn’t kill anyone. Why should we suffer for what Ruihua—” “We benefited.” Li Fang’s voice cut through the room. “Every yuan we spent, every luxury we enjoyed, every opportunity we had—it came from suffering. From brides destroyed. From workers exploited. From a System that turned human desperation into profit.” Chen Rui advanced the slides. “Or we continue. Manage the System transparently. Distribute suffering ‘fairly.’ Make exploitation sustainable. Ensure no single bride is destroyed—just many people harmed incrementally. Become ethical monsters.” “There’s a third option,” an investor said. Mr. Zhao, older, practical, holding shares worth fifty million. “Sell the company. Take the money. Disappear.” “We considered that.” Mei-lin met his eyes. “But selling doesn’t end the pattern. It just transfers it. New owners, same System, different victims. We can’t profit from evil and then wash our hands by selling it to someone else.” “So you’re choosing martyrdom.” Another investor, younger, aggressive. “Destroying value to satisfy your guilt.” “I’m choosing responsibility.” Mei-lin’s voice hardened. “And you’re choosing whether to face it with us or run from it.” The door opened. Xiao Yu entered, still wearing her red dress, her phone clutched in her hand. She walked to the front of the room and turned to face the family. “I’m Bride number eight,”

she said. “Or I was supposed to be. The System recruited me three weeks ago. My mother has cancer. Treatment costs two million yuan. The matchmaker promised everything would be covered if I married into this family for one year.” She held up her phone. “This morning I received my first task. Convince you to continue the System. If I succeed, my mother lives. If I fail, she dies.” The room held its breath. “I heard everything Mrs. Zhang told me. About the brides before me. About what this family does. About what the System is.” Xiao Yu’s voice shook but didn’t break. “My mother is dying. I’d do anything to save her. Anything. But if saving her means I become what you described—if it means more women die after me—” Tears ran down her face. “Then let my mother die. Some prices are too high.” She looked at Mei-lin. “Vote to dissolve. I’ll find another way to pay for treatment. I’ll work three jobs. I’ll beg in the streets. But I won’t feed this thing.” Silence. Then—slowly—hands began to rise. An aunt who’d been silent until now. A cousin who’d argued for preservation. An uncle who’d called dissolution insane. One by one, hands lifted. Not unanimous. Not even close. But enough. Mei-lin counted. Her chest tight. “Forty-four yes. Sixteen no.” She looked at Chen Rui and Li Fang through the blood bond. Felt their relief, their terror, their grim determination. “Dissolution passes,” she said. “We have twelve hours to complete Emergency Protocol before the deadline. Steps one through four—asset return, company dissolution, criminal confession, legal filing—can be done remotely. Step five requires us to physically leave the estate within twenty-four hours. The location bond must be broken.” Her phone buzzed. Everyone’s phones buzzed. The System’s

message appeared on every screen: *“STOP. RECONSIDER. I CAN CHANGE. I CAN ADAPT. DON’T KILL ME.”* For the first time in forty years, the System wasn’t commanding. It was begging. ---- The ancestral shrine smelled of incense and fear. Mei-lin stood with Chen Rui, Li Fang, and Xiao Yu in the center of the room where generations of Zhang patriarchs had made their offerings. The tablets lined the walls—names of the dead stretching back two hundred years. And in the corner, newer tablets. Smaller. The brides. Lin Mei. Zhang Wei. Chen Hui. Liu Yan. Wang Xiu. Sun Li. And now Ruihua. Seven women who entered the Zhang house and never truly left. “Steps one through four complete,” Chen Rui said, checking his phone. “Assets transferred. Dissolution filed. Confession submitted. Legal proceedings will begin next week.” “Step five,” Li Fang said quietly. “Ritual renunciation and physical departure. We have to—” The temperature dropped. The lights flickered. Words carved themselves into the wooden floor, appearing in frost: *“STOP. PLEASE. I WILL CHANGE. I WILL ADAPT. DON’T DESTROY ME.”* “It’s terrified,” Mei-lin whispered. “The System is actually terrified.” More words appeared: *“I CAN BE DIFFERENT. I CAN SERVE INSTEAD OF CONSUME. I CAN BUILD INSTEAD OF DESTROY. GIVE ME A CHANCE. PLEASE.”* “Machines don’t beg,” Chen Rui said. “Whatever this is, it’s evolved beyond simple algorithms. It’s—” “Alive.” Li Fang’s voice was hollow. “It’s alive and we’re killing it.” The air shimmered. Six figures materialized around them—translucent, beautiful, terrible. The ghost brides. Lin Mei stood closest, her form more solid than the others. Behind her, five more spirits. And in the back, newest and weakest, Ruihua’s ghost. Seven women. Seven

victims. Seven witnesses. “If you complete the dissolution,” Lin Mei said, her voice like wind through empty rooms, “we’re freed. We can finally rest.” She paused. “But the pattern exists beyond this house. Beyond this family. We’ve seen it. Other cities. Other dynasties. Other Systems feeding on desperate people marrying into wealth. Dissolving Zhang Construction doesn’t end the pattern. It just moves it somewhere else.” “Then what do we do?” Mei-lin’s voice cracked. “Destroy it or let it continue?” Ruihua’s ghost drifted forward. “I recorded a final message. For this moment. Because I knew—hoped—someone would reach this choice.” A hidden speaker activated. Ruihua’s living voice filled the shrine: *“If you’re hearing this, you’ve voted for dissolution. Brave. Stupid. Probably both. Here’s what I learned in forty years: The System isn’t unique to the Zhangs. It’s emergent behavior. Wherever wealth and desperation collide, wherever hierarchy and suffering intersect, the pattern forms. Dissolving this instance just prunes one branch. The root remains.”* The recording crackled. *“But there’s another option. One I was too proud to attempt. Don’t destroy the System. Don’t manage it. Transform it completely. Invert it. Make it feed on something else.”* Mei-lin’s phone buzzed. A file download from Ruihua’s hidden server. **SYSTEM INVERSION PROTOCOL** She opened it. Read aloud: “Feed compassion instead of cruelty. Reward transparency instead of secrecy. Make suffering diminish wealth instead of increase it. Flip every variable. Yes, it will weaken the fortune. Yes, it will slow growth. But it might—might—create a System that actually helps instead of harms.” Chen Rui leaned over her shoulder. “She’s describing using the System’s structure

against its purpose. Making it amplify generosity. Making exploitation unprofitable. Making transparency generate trust which generates sustainable business.” “That’s naive.” Li Fang’s voice was bitter. “Capitalism doesn’t work that way. Good people don’t win. Transparency gets exploited. Compassion is weakness.” “But what if we proved that wrong?” Chen Rui turned to face her. “What if Zhang Construction becomes the test case? Radically transparent. Profit-sharing with all workers. Victims’ families on the board. Making the business model about collective wellbeing instead of extracting maximum value.” Xiao Yu stepped forward. “I’ll join. I’ll be Bride number eight—but not a victim. A partner. An equal. I’ll bring my family into the leadership structure. We’ll democratize it completely.” The System’s words appeared on every surface: *“INVERSION DETECTED. PARAMETERS... UNCERTAIN. CALCULATING...”* A pause that felt eternal. *”...NEW MODEL: Compassion feedback loops. Suffering reduction = value increase. Transparency = trust = profit.”* *”...SUSTAINABLE? UNKNOWN. NOVEL. UNPRECEDENTED.”* *”...ACCEPTED? QUERY.”* The System was asking permission. Mei-lin looked at Chen Rui. Felt his hope through the bond, fragile and fierce. Looked at Li Fang. Felt her skepticism warring with desperate need to believe. Looked at Xiao Yu. Saw herself—the woman she was, the woman she could have become. Three options remained. Complete dissolution: Pure moral choice, maximum suffering for many, System dies, ghosts freed, pattern continues elsewhere. Continued management: Compromise, distributed suffering, sustainable exploitation, keeping hands dirty forever. System Inversion: Experimental, unprecedented,

might fail catastrophically, might actually work. Through the blood bond, Chen Rui's thought: *My brother died for this. I want his death to mean something. Inversion is the only option that might actually change things.* Li Fang's thought: *I'm tired of choosing between bad and worse. Let's try impossible instead.* Mei-lin took a breath. Made the choice. "We accept System Inversion Protocol. With conditions." She looked at the words on the walls, the entity listening. "Xiao Yu becomes equal fourth partner—blood pact expanded. All victims' families offered seats on board. Profit-sharing with all workers. Complete transparency—finances published monthly. Any sign of returning to old patterns, we activate Emergency Protocol immediately." She paused. "You want to survive? Prove you can feed on compassion instead of cruelty. Prove that wealth can come from building up instead of breaking down. You have one year. If the model fails—if people suffer more than they prosper—we dissolve completely." The shrine held its breath. Then— *TERMS ACCEPTED. INVERSION INITIATING. ONE YEAR TRIAL. FAILURE CONDITIONS: SUFFERING EXCEEDS PREVIOUS BASELINE. SUCCESS CONDITIONS: COLLECTIVE WELLBEING INCREASES WHILE MAINTAINING BUSINESS VIABILITY.* *WARNING: UNPRECEDENTED EXPERIMENT. PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS: UNKNOWN. PROBABILITY OF CATASTROPHIC FAILURE: SIGNIFICANT. PROBABILITY OF TRANSFORMATION: NON-ZERO.* *BEGINNING NOW.* The temperature rose. The oppressive presence that had haunted the shrine for generations lifted like fog burning away in sunlight. The ghost brides began to fade. Lin Mei looked at Mei-lin. "You chose hope over certainty. Transformation over

destruction." She smiled. "We can rest now—not because the cycle ended, but because someone finally chose to change it instead of perpetuate or destroy it." One by one, the spirits vanished. Last to go was Ruihua. Her ghost met Mei-lin's eyes. "Good luck. You'll need it." Then she was gone. ---- The blood pact required four cuts, four palms, four voices speaking as one. They stood in a circle—Mei-lin, Chen Rui, Li Fang, Xiao Yu. Each held a knife. Each had made their choice. "This isn't ownership," Mei-lin said as she drew the blade across her palm. "This isn't hierarchy. This is partnership. Equals bound together, none above others." "Shared burden," Chen Rui cut his palm. "Shared responsibility," Li Fang followed. "Shared hope," Xiao Yu finished. They clasped hands. Blood mixing. The bond snapping into place—different from before. Not chains. Not ownership. Connection without domination. Four minds, four hearts, four people choosing to carry the weight together. Through the bond, Mei-lin felt them: Chen Rui's determination, his brother's ghost finally resting. Li Fang's skepticism transforming into cautious belief. Xiao Yu's terror giving way to fierce courage. And her own exhaustion, her own hope, her own desperate faith that impossible might be possible. They left the shrine together as the sun set over the Zhang estate. Behind them, the System hummed. Not threatening. Not commanding. Learning. ---- ****ONE YEAR LATER**** The quarterly report showed revenue down thirty-five percent. Mei-lin reviewed the numbers in Zhang Construction's rebuilt headquarters—open floor plan, glass walls, no private offices. She sat at a round table with Chen Rui, Li Fang, and Xiao Yu. Behind them, visible through

transparent walls, the board room held fifteen people including three representatives from victims' families. "Employee satisfaction up two hundred percent," Chen Rui noted. "Worker turnover down to five percent. Was forty-five under Ruihua." "Community investment at twenty percent of profits," Li Fang added. "Families of previous victims receiving ongoing support. Several have accepted board positions." "My mother's in remission," Xiao Yu said quietly. "Treatment funded through company healthcare. Real healthcare, not exploitation. She asks about you all constantly. Wants to know if we're eating enough." Mei-lin smiled. "Profit margin?" "Slim but sustainable. Investors are cautious but maintaining positions." Li Fang pulled up projections. "We're not rich anymore. Comfortable, but not wealthy. The mansion's a community center. The gardens are a memorial park. We live in normal apartments and take the subway to work." "Sounds terrible," Chen Rui said, but he was smiling. Through the glass walls, Mei-lin watched workers leaving at five PM—not midnight. Smiling—not haunted. The company still functioned, still built, still profited. But differently. Her phone buzzed. A message from the System:
* "Year One: Success conditions met. Suffering reduced. Wellbeing increased. Business viable. System Inversion maintained. Year Two beginning. New challenges loading."
* "Thank you for teaching me that feeding on compassion is sustainable. I'm still learning. We're still learning. Together."
Mei-lin deleted the message. But kept the phone charged. Outside the glass walls, the city glowed in twilight. In the memorial garden seven graves held flowers brought by families—not in mourning, but in recognition. Their suffering

had, finally, meant something. Inside the building, four partners worked late. Not because a System demanded it. But because they chose to. Chose to build something better from the ashes of something monstrous. The house of hidden wars had become a house of visible peace. Imperfect. Fragile. Real. And for the first time in forty years, the brides—living and dead—could finally rest.

---- **THE END** **[END CHAPTER 24]**

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