

48 Hours 21

Chapter 21: Desert Island Survival (End)

Bell's English was excellent, probably because he was English.

...

The first thing they did upon their return from their expedition to the center of the island was to plant the seeds they collected in the vegetable garden. Zhang Heng went back and forth, eventually deciding on giving up on the idea of making a skirt. It was mostly because he still would not be able to cosplay as Monkey King without the staff.

In the end, Bell conjoined the two pieces of jaguar pelt into carpets. Not long after, the breeding garden was full of animals the explorer brought back from his hunts.

Mickey Mouse seemed slightly taken aback by the sudden increase of neighbors. Zhang Heng even found the dodo bird's wife allowing the two people on the island to enjoy some eggs at last.

Finally, Zhang Heng had this feeling that he had conquered nature. He had eaten more than 20 varieties of vegetables, added two more seasonings to his pantry, owned a pond full of seafood, which he could take from whenever he liked and ate meat every day. Most importantly, he eventually found someone he could talk with.

That feeling was just like when Robinson met Friday.

Well... alright. From the student-teacher perspective, probably more like Friday.

For 4 hours every day, Zhang Heng would be learning English from Bell, which included listening, speaking, reading, and writing. On top of that, he continued his archery practices, although he'd already achieved his goal. Over the course of the year, it had now become a habit. The only thing was, that he no longer spent as much time on it as he used to. As an added bonus, Bell taught him some defensive moves.

His time on the island was coming to an end. On the 520th morning, a rescue vessel passing by spotted the signal fire by the beach and sent a lifeboat to the island. Before the boat could even reach the shore, a woman jumped off the vessel and came running towards the men in tears.

"My wife, Kaya!" The explorer dropped the homemade fishing rod in his hand and stood up abruptly.

The relieved couple embraced each other.

Bell then removed the blade he stowed across his waist and placed it in Zhang Heng's hand.

"As per our agreement previously, this belongs to you now. I've been to many dangerous places all over the world... the polar regions, deserts, highlands... but this was the first time I've been marooned on a desert island. It has been an incredibly unforgettable and valuable experience. You are my forever friend. Of all our days here, it's not just you who was the one learning. I've also learned a lot from you – I learned for the first time that there's such a thing as grammar in the English language."

“...”

“Let’s go, my friend. We should go home.”

Zhang Heng followed the Butre couple onto the lifeboat, surprised to see that there were reporters from several TV stations on board. Everyone roared into claps and applause the moment they caught a glimpse of the explorer who had returned safely.

On the ship, Zhang Heng took a long, hot bath and changed into clothes the sailors had provided. Finally, that feeling of returning to a civilized society dawned upon him. Instead of joining the celebration, however, Zhang Heng found himself a secluded and quiet corner on the ship that no one would take notice of. He was almost two hours away from leaving this virtual world.

It felt like the longest two hours of his life.

Zhang Heng was wondering what the return process was going to be like when suddenly, darkness enveloped everything around him, and a familiar voice spoke in his ear.

[Arrived at the return deadline. Task completion confirmed...]

[Beginner’s edition of Desert Island Survival successfully completed. The first round of the game is over. Returning to reality...]

...

When Zhang Heng’s vision had been restored, he found himself sitting by the bar holding the cup of water and lime he’d taken a sip from.

The first thing he did was to reach out and touch his face. That thick stubbled and coarse skin weathered by the wind, and the sun was gone.

The bartender lady, obviously considerate, took out a compact mirror from her purse and passed it to him.

With the help of the little mirror, Zhang Heng was able to confirm that he looked no different from when he first walked into the bar. He was still dressed in his sports attire and running shoes. His swiss army knife was still safely tucked away in his pocket.

“So, what was that? A strange dream?”

“No, you did disappear for two hours... not just from this building or this bar – you could not be found in every corner of this world.” The bartender took back her compact. “Now, you must have a lot of questions, but unfortunately, I cannot answer most of them. You will have to find that out for yourself in the game.”

Zhang Heng listened, speechless.

“What I can tell you is that this game takes place once every month. You can pick whatever time you like to come to the checkpoint and join the game. It won’t always be the Sex and the City bar, though. There is more than one checkpoint in every city. If you can’t find them, you can always give customer service a call and use the special login service after paying a sum. Failure to log in on time will result in your

disqualification. Also, game participants, by default, must accept a strict non-disclosure agreement. You're forbidden to disclose anything related to anyone other than the players and staff. Mm, I think that about sums up the basic restrictions. Don't hold on to your fluke mind."

The bartender rubbed her chin. "What else is there. Let me think... oh, other than log-ins, the game venues also provide other services. You can consult customer service for more details."

Peeled off a sticky note and scribbling down some numbers, she continued, "This is the number. Don't call for nothing because I am your customer service."

"You have an awful lot of jobs." Zhang Heng noted in surprise.

"It's not like I have a choice. Houses in big cities are so expensive." The bartender sighed. "Alright. Is there anything else?"

Zhang Heng searched his pocket and took out a furry item. "Tell me. The services you mentioned. Do they also include item identification?"

Everything from the game, not excluding even the beard and the scar on his shoulder, the collection of stoneware he made, and the knife that Bell gifted him, did not make it back with him to reality.

Everything had just been sitting quietly in his pocket

"Game item?" The bartender gasped. "It looks like you've got yourself quite the bounty this time. These kinds of things are very uncommon. Most people can't even find one after several rounds of the game. I do provide an identification service here, but it's going to cost you five game-points. Do you have it?"

"How do I pay?"

The bartender took out a tablet and after a few taps, brought up a payment interface. "Just enter your player ID number. No need to worry about other people using your number, though – you have to be present for the payment to be effective."

Probably because he had seen too much since he set foot in the bar, Zhang Heng had already turned a little numb.

He had already memorized the set of numbers and quickly regurgitated them. After keying them in, the bartender slid on a pair of gloves before placing the rabbit's foot into a small wooden box.

"This will take some time, about two to three days. I'll text you when it's done."

Drawn to her movements, Zhang Heng had a sudden ominous feeling. "Wait. Now, why are you bring so careful?"

Chapter 22: A Precious Pearl

"Fine. Considering you've just made a transaction with me, I'll reveal something useful to you." The bartender took off her gloves. "Do you know why game items are so valuable?"

"Err... I think you've mentioned that there are very few of them."

“Rarity does not equate to value. The term ‘game item’ is used to correspond with the theme, and it’s not accurate at all. In reality, this is a very magical item. It contains inconceivable supernatural forces. They work in both games and reality. If you use it well, it will be beneficial to you. But sometimes, it could create problems for you. No one can guarantee that this force will bring positive effects, so you have to be extra careful when handling game items. Just because it has not been identified yet does not mean that the results are not present. Speaking of which, did anything strange happen to you after you picked it up?”

“No.” Zhang Heng thought back to the time after the rabbit’s foot was given to him. His life went on without incident.

“Then, this is probably not the type with negative effects, or perhaps it could be triggered under specific conditions.” For some reason, the bartender’s tone was laced with pity. “When these negative effect game items are used well, they can do wonders. A wooden box made of tullewood can isolate its supernatural powers – the best option to store the items. If there’s a need, you can always buy them from me. Oh, and also, if you have any game items that you do not need, you can choose to leave it here so I can help you sell it. There’s always a large-scale auction at the end of every year. Keep an eye on your mailbox. An e-mail will be sent to you before the event. If there’s nothing else, we’ll meet again next time.”

...

The bartender’s service was terrible. That initial excitement after earning his five game-points had dwindled and suddenly lost all interest to explain anything else to her.

Zhang Heng asked her what services were available at the game site, and she said that she would send him a pdf to him through WeChat.

Upon exiting the metal room, Zhang Heng was bombarded with loud thumping music, which he no longer thought was raucous. After spending a year and a half on that island, hearing the symphonies of a civilized society made him feel a little warm and fuzzy inside.

Zhang Heng descended the iron ladder and quickly disappeared amongst the crowd of people.

Although it was already one in the morning, the number of cars parked outside the bar seemed to have increased.

Zhang Heng did not return to school because one, it was quite late already, and two, too much information had been dumped on him for the past two hours. He needed to go someplace quiet to sort through and digest them. Besides that, there was something else he needed to verify.

So, Zhang Heng checked into a room in the express hotel by the road and asked the receptionist for a pen and some paper. Tired as he was, he did not feel like sleeping right now. He turned on the table lamp and promptly listed down every important detail that had happened today and his theories.

When dawn broke, he reread the stack of lists he had written and rewritten, tore them up, and flushed them down the toilet.

After that, he checked out of the room before heading straight to the archery range across the road, the very place he’d been coming to train.

As soon as it opened at 8 am, Zhang Heng went in, took out the SF recurve bow he deposited there, and selected a 30-meter archery range.

He drew his bow and released an arrow.

6th Ring.

Zhang Heng was not at all surprised. He had been using a primitive homemade bow and was not used to this modern bow yet. The first shot was just a test. Of course, it was not the least bit startling that the results weren't satisfactory. Adjusting his angle, he released the bowstring once more.

The second one was much better.

8th Ring.

That very moment, Zhang Heng's coach walked in. He was just about to greet his student but decided not to bother him when he saw how absorbed Zhang Heng was. He stood silently at the back with his thermos cup, ready to correct Zhang Heng's posture and movement.

Then the next arrow pierced the ninth ring.

Not bad. That was a good shot; the instructor thought to himself. Most of the time, when newcomers first started, they would have kinds of problems ranging from not holding the bow firmly enough to the wrong posture, thus deviating from their center of gravity.

Zhang Heng had only just begun to pick up the sport, but his posture was spot-on as if he had done it many times before. It was solid as a mountain.

If that was not talent, then what was that?

Zhang Heng's coach was a former member of the city's archery team. Alas, his talent was limited. No matter how hard he trained, he could not seem to improve. Soon after, he was defeated by an amateur who had only trained for less than half a year. Disappointed in himself, he left the professional circle and was invited by the archery range's owner to coach there.

Seeing how well the sport had been doing these two years, he could not help but feel a stirring inside him. But he was too old for this – he had no more potential left to discover. Even if he returned to the game, he would end up nowhere.

Thus, he decided to focus his attention on the young people training in the range. He wanted to see if he could develop a keen eye for scouting able players and take talented apprentices under his wing.

Who would know that perhaps one day, one might be able to compete at the national level and fulfill his dream on his behalf?

With that thought, he began to keep an eye out for potential candidates. Initially, he focused mainly on eight to fourteen-year-olds, the best age for laying a foundation. Any older and it would be too late, which was why he never paid too much attention to Zhang Heng.

In the three previous sessions, this young man did not show any special skills and was no different from amateur hobbyists who played just for sport.

Zhang Heng's progress gave him quite a shock.

He had not even started training but yet, he was surprisingly good. He had risen so quickly above his peers from the same batch.

At the same time, however, the instructor felt sorry for Zhang Heng. The boy had gotten in touch with the sport too late in the game. Even if he had the talent, without sufficient practice, it would be extremely challenging for him to go any further.

While these thoughts were running through the instructor's mind, Zhang Heng drew in a deep breath. When he was done with the adjustment, he released five arrows in succession.

Each shot was less than 2 seconds apart.

Out of the five arrows, the 4th hit the 10th ring, and a slightly faulty one landed on the 9th ring.

Zhang Heng knew that this had to do with his coordination. He was used to that body back on the desert island. A year and a half ago, his strength and response had already deviated by a little. However, from these few shots, he had already found out what he needed to know.

The skills he had gained while training retained in his muscle memory. Now, he just needed two weeks of practice to return to his level back on the island.

In fact, with a more powerful and more accurate modern bow, his shots would have much higher accuracy and a greater range.

It appeared that the skills acquired in the game could be brought back to reality.

This was actually not too surprising since those skills did not fall from the sky – he had actually trained hard for them.

Zhang Heng also noticed that unlike traditional games, this game did not utilize the four attributes system. The body he 'used' in the game was his own. When he was in trouble, he had to use his knowledge and abilities to solve them. Therefore, the skills each person developed were essential. Thinking about it now, those extra 24 hours did not seem so bad after all.

This meant that he would have more game-time compared to the other players, and could better improve himself. The critical thing here was that these in-game improvements were just as applicable in reality.

Zhang Heng groaned, utterly unaware of how much his five shots had affected his instructor.

The latter nearly dropped his mug.

A hardworking amateur hobbyist could hit 49 points with five arrows. However, considering how recent Zhang Heng had started learning, which were only three sessions and that quick succession of shots – only a precious handful of hobbyists would be able to do that.

He was a prodigy! A prodigy for sure! What other explanations could there be? The coach was now seeing Zhang Heng in a completely different light. He looked at Zhang Heng as if he was looking at an inimitable jade. The longer he looked, the more he liked what he saw.

How could I not have noticed such a brilliant treasure?

Chapter 23: Warning Sign

Within half a minute, the coach envisioned how, under his guidance, Zhang Heng would advance by leaps and bounds. He would shock the judges in his first competition and then return defeated from the nationals, but just as he was about to give up, he would rise from the ashes under his coach's counsel. He would finally join the national team and win the Olympic gold medal. The instructor even thought about the interviews that would take place after that.

In the end, before this youngblood's story could even begin, it died a premature death at the young man's tactful decline.

Archery was just a hobby for Zhang Heng. He had no plans to make a living out of it.

In fact, he knew better than anyone else that his archery skills were simply a culmination of time. He did not possess any unique talents. He might perhaps be able to become master among the amateurs, but if he had gotten involved in the professional circle, it would be challenging, to say the least, for him to rise to the top.

On top of that, this was the second time Zhang Heng had rejected his instructor. The latter finally recognized that the young man before him had no intention of mixing in this circle and could not help but feel that it was such a shame.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. He could not put a gun to Zhang Heng's head and force him to make him his coach.

After a few more shots, and Zhang Heng got his answers and stopped training.

The morning had classes in store for him. Thank goodness it was at 9.45. Depositing his bow, he promptly returned to school.

The moment his peers spotted him in the classroom, they shot him knowing, sassy smiles. Zhang Heng did not know how to explain himself, so he blurted that he had actually spent a year and a half stranded on a deserted island, before finally finding another man.

The lesson was underway when Wei Jiayang snuck up to the seat next to him and tried to make him confess. In spite of that, Zhang Heng did not appear to be lying, nor did he blush or react suspiciously.

When he finally accepted that nothing of the amorous sort had befallen his friend the night before, Wei Jiayang quickly changed the subject.

"Xiao Xiao and her roommates are thinking of going camping next week, but I'm concerned about their safety. I'm looking for some guys to join. Chen Huadong has already agreed to come. Not so for Ma Wei. How about you?"

Xiao Xiao was Wei Jiayang's girlfriend. If Xiao Xiao wanted to go camping, it was without question that Wei Jiayang would want to join her. One lone male, however, was not strong enough. Also, wherever the couple went, they would always attract flak – his girlfriend's roommate and the other girls would

definitely make fun of them. Instead, Xiao Xiao gave her boyfriend the task of recruiting more people to join them.

Wei Jianguang was not very hopeful. Zhang Heng was the kind of person who stayed away from large groups and rarely joined group activities. This guy had his own rhythm in life.

However, to Wei Jianguang's surprise, Zhang Heng agreed!

Previously, Zhang Heng would never be caught red-handed participating in activities like this. But after spending such a long time away from society, he needed lively environments to 'heal' himself. Although Ma Wei had opted out, he was most likely to spend his entire day in the library, only returning to the room at lights out – like he did every day. So, if Zhang Heng were to stay, he would have to spend the whole weekend alone in the dorm.

"That's great!" Wei Jianguang chirped. "Other than Xiao Xiao, all her other roommates are still single. Don't say I never gave you the heads up. The Shen Xixi performing in this year's welcoming party tonight is also from their dorm. Oh, I forgot you're not going. Anyway, what you need to know is that whenever she sings, the boys would fall head over heels for her. She's the most popular girl in her department."

It was obvious Zhang Heng bore no interest in these departmental celebrities. With so many things happening one after the other, he was not inclined to think about romance. He agreed to the camping purely for the fun of it.

Considering he did not have any classes scheduled on Friday afternoons, Zhang Heng decided to prepare ahead of time for the game next month. Back at the express hotel, he had already completed preliminary planning and made adjustments to his schedule.

After lunch, he found a 24-hour gym nearby, and immediately signed up for a membership card.

On top of that, he had also increased his rock-climbing and running hours. Since he did not know what he would be facing next, the safest option would be to improve his physical fitness.

Also, in every game, he would be using his own body. In other words, different levels of physical fitness could bring completely different gaming experiences.

For example, during the Desert Island Survival game, where the players were given the option to save the people drowning in the ocean, the person with an average fitness would be able to save Ed, whereas those who were stronger could save the guy in shorts and Bell who were further away. Of course, the most pitiful ones were those who did not know how to swim at all. As a result, they could only watch from the safety of the shore.

For the most part, Zhang Heng's fitness was considered average among the students of the university as he had never undergone any targeted science-based training. But he did have his own advantage, having double the preparation time compared to the other players. They only had a month between each game, but he had two.

If the two months were used well, he could improve his fitness by a lot. The thought of joining Taekwondo or boxing classes did cross his mind, but one couldn't rush these kinds of things. He would have to tackle them one by one, starting by working on his foundation first. After all, those skills could be practiced in the game as well.

The following week was spent with a full schedule.

He had begun training the strength of his waist, back, arms, and legs. He even took up flexibility training in the gym. On top of his endurance-training long runs, he included sprints that tested his explosive-force in his training plan.

He also made time to visit the Sex and the City bar during still time¹.

That place was filled with secrets. Having been inside the game himself, Zhang Heng was naturally intrigued and wanted to know more about it. Since he got only scarce information out of the bartender lady, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

He should at least be able to uncover some clues from the furnishing and decoration of the sheet-metal room and the collection behind the bar. Also, he really wanted to find out if the rule about not seeing the other players still applied during still time.

However, when Zhang Heng arrived at the bar, an inexplicable feeling of panic overcame him, which only grew more intense the moment he placed his hand on the handle of the metal door.

Zhang Heng hesitated for a moment when he suddenly decided to let go of the handle.

He did not know where this warning came from, but the message it conveyed was very clear – do not attempt to enter the game venue at siesta.

Even though he was burning with curiosity, Zhang Heng decided to play it safe; after all, whatever he was facing could not be explained with logic.

That was how Zhang Heng's first secret exploration was brought to an end, not managing to gather much useful information.

It was already Monday when during class, his phone suddenly vibrated. Glancing at the message, it turned out to be from customer service.

"Your item has been delivered to your desk in your room. This is a notification message. Please do not reply."

Zhang Heng put his phone under the table and typed as stealthily as he could, "What about my game checkpoint service list?"

He tapped on send and after a while, the bartender replied, "Oops! I forgot. I'll send it to you once I'm done dealing with the matter at hand."

"..."

Chapter 24: Different Person

[Name: Lucky Rabbit's Foot]

[Quality: E]

[Usage: Increases luck for the wearer by a small margin]

Back in the real world, that mysterious voice and the so-called character panel were absent. Zhang Heng stared at the card with the bartender's handwriting, speechless.

Such short and simple words cost him five game-points?

Even though he had a decent amount of points, he could tell that it was not cheap having seen how excited the bartender was when she'd received the points.

Zhang Heng was not the least bit surprised by the results of the identification. A rabbit's foot was an amulet believed to bring good luck in many cultures. This item was probably responsible for how his wound remained uninfected back on the island.

His doubled time aside, this was the first supernatural item he possessed.

Taking into account its positive effects, Zhang Heng decided to wear it as a keychain.

Who would know how much that little bit of luck actually was?

Since he had nothing else to do, Zhang Heng decided to experiment with something. He went to the Wumart next to the library and bought two scratch cards costing him 20 yuan. One of them won him 10 yuan and the other 5 yuan.

After subtracting the principal, he sustained a 5 yuan loss.

After that, Zhang Heng went to another supermarket. Out of the two he bought, one said, 'Thanks for your patronage' and the other one won him 20 yuan.

He had broken-even.

Now, Zhang Heng had now somewhat understood the lucky rabbit's effectiveness. He had initially hoped that his earnings would be higher than average, but alas, he still sustained a loss. Although his luck did improve, it was nothing to rave about. Any intentions of using this little bit of luck to earn money would prove to be quite the challenge.

As he was leaving the supermarket after completing the experiment, Zhang Heng spotted a young couple under a tree nearby. The guy was trying hard to explain something, but the girl kept shaking her head. When the guy reached out to pull the girl in, she sidestepped him instead.

Zhang Heng looked away. He was not about to meddle in other people's business. Things like that practically happened every day in school. The university was the gathering of a cesspool of hormones, where all kinds of drama occurred all the time.

That being said, Zhang Heng did not have to worry about the guy doing anything beyond the pale because it was broad daylight, and they were within school grounds. Any scream whatsoever would draw the scents of overzealous young men, pouncing to save the damsel in distress.

So off to the library, Zhang Heng went.

At noon on Friday, Zhang Heng bought some snacks and outdoor supplies, its contents some mosquito repellent spray, towels, and band-aids. Wei Jiang Heng had already rented the camping gear and car; its

cost split evenly among those who were going. It was 300 yuan a piece. Any overpayment was refunded, and imperfections reimbursed.

Zhang Heng was checking his camera to make sure the batteries were full when Chen Huadong and Wei Jiayang walked into the room carrying large and small bags.

“The girls bought these. It’s tonight’s dinner. Help us load them into the car later.”

“Sure! Thanks,” exclaimed Zhang Heng, who was pretty much all packed up.

Wei Jiayang deposited the bag he was carrying onto the table. He guzzled down the glass of water on the table, then heaved a long sigh. “I’ve been so busy these two days, running around all day working myself to the ground like a horse. You guys are the wiser ones. Come to think of it, being single isn’t all that bad.”

“No, please, Childe Wei. Thanks to you, I am only beginning to see a ray of light. Don’t pour cold water on me so soon.” Chen Huadong said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“You’re going after Shen Xixi?” Wei Jiayang glared at his friend from the corner of his eyes.

“No, no. Brother, I know my limits, alright. She’s like the Public Relations Departments’ number one wholesaler of the ‘good person card¹.’ Just too many guys are falling into unrequited love for her. I’m not going to be part of that madness. I don’t mind give up this treasure that is Shen Xixi for our Childe Zhang to conquer. Personally, I much prefer Xu Jing,” Chen Huadong grinned.

“The hell. I knew you liked that kind, you pervert. Xu Jing is a legit Loli, a popular one at that. The only thing’s that she’s quite poor at managing herself – she only learned how to take the subway when she came to university. In fact, until now, she would at times go in the wrong direction, or even miss a stop. Also, she washes her clothes and socks in a washing machine.”

“That’s not a problem. Not a problem at all. Adorkable-ness is justice¹! You know me, brother. I’ve been a loyal Love Develops² fan for so many years.” Chen Huadong pushed his sparkling glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“How inhumane and immoral! Where is the one-one-zero¹ when you need them?” Wei Jiayang exclaimed in distress before turning to Zhang Heng. “Shen Xixi is pretty good, though. You won’t even consider it? Most girls despise those who are popular with the guys, but Shen Xixi is an exception. In fact, Xiao Xiao said the girl she admires most is Shen Xixi – she’s pretty, is an ace at studies, sings well, and is quite genuine with people. She may have rejected many guys, but she has never kept them as ‘spare tires².’ It’s always a clean rejection.”

“That’s why she’s been given the nickname ‘Kill em’ all¹.” Chen Huadong chuckled.

“...”

“But after getting to know her a little, I find her not too bad. She has been the one among the girls who’s been taking care of the trip. When we went to get the stuff for the camp just now, she tried talking to us, and we even enjoyed a few laughs — not the slightest bit of arrogance. Hmm, I guess you can never completely trust spreading rumors,” added Chen Huadong, plainly singing a different tune this time.

“Are you guys done talking?” Zhang Heng chipped in.

“Almost. Don’t worry. Our relationship has come to an end. I have always known that this day would come,” Chen Huadong stubbornly retorted.

“...”

“Why don’t the both of you spend your free time by paying some attention to current international affairs instead? Why are you always so concerned about my love life?”

Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong looked at each other. They whispered in a grave tone, “Zhang Heng, we’re a little worried for you.”

“Huh?”

“I always thought that you’re the kind of person who plays by his own rhythm, completely unaffected by the outside world. But since last week, we’ve felt this new inexplicable edginess out of you.”

Chen Huadong joined in, “Mm, I know this sounds a little melodramatic, but right now, you give off this vibe of loneliness that seems to come from deep within your bones. Do you know how many recluses there are on Zhongnan Mountains¹? That’s the kind of feeling you’re giving me. Be honest with us, brother. Has something happened to you? Why are you suddenly so withdrawn?”

The words struck a chord in Zhang Heng’s heart. Of course, he knew what had happened to him. No one was as withdrawn from the world as he was. Spending over a year all alone on a deserted island where even his toothbrush was self-made left him with a tremendous feeling of loneliness.

Even though he had returned to the real world, physically unchanged, that period spent in isolation had left him an entirely different person.

Had experience and learning shaped us into who we are today?

Drifting along with his thoughts, Zhang Heng recalled the bartender’s words and was suddenly intrigued. If he continued playing this game for many years to come, what would he be like when it ended?

Would he be a completely different person from who he was today?

Chapter 25: Shen Xixi

The minibus Wei Jiangyang booked had just arrived downstairs. The three boys loaded the vehicle with the camping equipment and food they had prepared.

Zhang Heng checked out his self recurve bow from the shooting range the day before.

After about a week of practice, his skills were almost fully recovered. With the help of modern technology, he was able to hit ring 9 at 50-meters. But Zhang Heng’s specialty was shooting moving targets, although it all depended on the target’s speed and the trajectory.

One particular thing bugged him. He kept feeling that a pair of resentful eyes were gazing at him, which made him a little hesitant to unleash his full potential. By and large, he had to wait for still time to find a place for practice. Now that an opportunity to traverse the wilderness had presented itself, he could find a serene place to practice his archery skills.

“Childe Zhang, if anything dangerous happens, you have to protect me first,” Chen Huadong trilled jokingly. Zhang Heng did not keep his archery lessons a secret from his roommates. All of them knew that he’d just started. In fact, only a week ago and had even searched the net for tutorial videos. How much progress could he have made?

“Alright, don’t forget to fall into my arms when it happens.”

They chatted and laughed as they repeated up and down the stairs. Finally, after loading everything into the back of the van, the three girls made their way to them.

Chen Huadong gave Zhang Heng a nudge with his elbow and said, “The one on the left is Shen Xixi.”

Zhang Heng looked in the direction his friend pointed at and saw a tall girl. Wei Jiangyang sure wasn’t lying when he said that her physical condition was good – she had the body of a model, and was easy on the eyes. Not to mention that, unlike the coquettish superstars on the television and magazines, there was purity in her eyes. There was none of that pretentious, deliberate ‘girl shyness’ on her. It was no wonder that she was the girl of so many boys’ dreams; the Public Relations Departments’ number one ‘good person card’ wholesaler.

Shen Xixi flipped out three bottles of water from her bag and handed them to the three boys. She piped excitedly, “Thank you for the hard work, guys!”

Zhang Heng accepted the bottle and thanked her.

It was the little things that told a lot about a person’s upbringing. It was apparent that Shen Xixi did not consider the three boys as free labor and personal bodyguards, nor did she think that just because she was a girl, letting the boys do the heavy lifting was by default. Such qualities on a woman, especially a beautiful one, was more than hard to come by.

Chen Huadong continued to play the role of an inept, fumbling advisor, He whispered into Zhang Heng’s ear, “It’s been said that Shen Xixi’s father is a university lecturer and her mother is a novel translator. Seems like a good family. So... what do you think? Childe Zhang, I believe your families are well-matched.”

The person that Wei Jiangyang was waiting for was missing. He could not help but ask himself, “Where’s Xiaoxiao? Why isn’t she here yet?”

“Hahaha! Each time we go out, that woman is the most troublesome of all. Putting her makeup on takes forever! Wei Jiangyang, you will suffer when you marry her!” laughed the shortest girl among the three. Standing between the two other girls, she attained a humble 1.5 meters give or take. Needless to say, she was the legal loli, Xu Jing, that Chen Huadong had eyes for.

She had only just finished when someone smacked her over the head.

“Ugh. I’m sorry you had to hear that! I will make sure to discipline this child!” Shen Xixi told Wei Jiangyang, keeping a straight face.

The atmosphere was just starting to feel a little warmer when they suddenly heard a voice call out, “Xixi.”

It was then that the girl’s expressions immediately changed.

“Xixi, are you and your roommates going out to have fun? Why didn’t you tell me? I could send you there.” A flashy chili red BMW 5 Series sports sedan pulled to a stop next to the group.

The guy driving the car pulled the handbrake and stepped out.

Zhang Heng’s eyebrows raised. He was wondering why Shen Xixi looked so familiar – apparently, they had met earlier on when he was leaving the supermarket after buying the scratch cards. Now, he recognized the couple he saw. It was Shen Xixi, and this guy clad in a Supreme t-shirt.

“Cheng Cheng. Why are you here again?! Xixi has already rejected you so many times! Why haven’t you taken a hike already?” Unlike her name, Xu Jing¹ was a straightforward girl who did not keep her thoughts to herself.

This blatant announcement that exposed his rejection had put a dent to Cheng Cheng’s dignity and cut his ‘face’, but because Xu Jing was a girl, it would be embarrassing if he threw any tantrums. Instead, the *fuerdai* swallowed his anger.

“Xixi, can I talk to you for a moment? It’ll just be nearby. I know a coffee shop with excellent Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee,” said Cheng Cheng.

Shen Xixi frowned. Even the ordinarily good-tempered girl was starting to lose her patience. She and Cheng Cheng had been strangers until that welcoming party for freshmen.

That very night, after performing a song, Cheng Cheng approached her and had been coaxing and pestering her for more than half a month since.

From flowers, snacks, and fruits, to an iPhone and concert tickets, Cheng Cheng would entrust some girl to leave them at Shen Xixi’s dormitory door.

But this *modus operandi* that had worked so well on every other girl failed miserably on Shen Xixi.

The gifts that he had given her were always returned to him untouched, and Shen Xixi also made it very clear to him that she was not interested in being in a relationship right now.

This rejection, though, seemed to only fuel Cheng Cheng’s zeal. He even toned down his lordly attitude. Shen Xixi’s parents had always taught her to be polite and respectful. Now, when she found herself in an exasperating situation, she found it difficult to be abrasive, ergo, causing her to continuously be the recipient of Cheng Cheng’s persistent badgering.

There were even rumors about the both of them going around the school, which gave Shen Xixi a massive headache.

What’s more, she seemed to be running into Cheng Cheng a lot recently. How did he find out about their plans to go camping? Was it not too much of a coincidence that he showed up just as they were about to depart?

Shen Xixi glanced at the girl called Wang Huan who was standing behind Xu Jing. The girl shot an embarrassed smile back at her. Wang Huan hailed from a middle-class family but a few days ago, a stick of YSL lipstick magically appeared in her drawer. The aspiring detective of a Xu Jing looked the up the price of the lipstick and found that to own one, a princely sum 700 – 800 yuan would have to be forked out.

Owing to that, everyone jeered at Wang Huan, asking her if she was a mistress to some wealthy merchant. But now, it seems that her lipstick had come from somewhere else.

Against the odds, Shen Xixi had no intention to pursue this issue. When she saw that Xiaoxiao had left the dormitory and was approaching them, she turned to Cheng Cheng and stated sternly, "Cheng Cheng, haven't we already talked on Monday? I don't really drink coffee, and we're leaving right about now."

"Never mind, they can go first. I'll send you there later. Don't worry, I won't take up too much of your time," retorted a relentless Cheng Cheng.

Chen Huadong could not hold it back any longer and was about to speak up when Wei Jiangyang shot him a sharp look.

"Don't provoke this guy," Ao Jiangyang said under his breath.

Chen Huadong pursed his lips. "Why? Isn't he just a *fuerdai*? Look at our Childe Zhang – now that's the model *fuerdai*."

Zhang Heng shook his head. "Nonsense. I'm not a *fuerdai*."

Zhang Heng came from similar financial circumstances as Shen Xixi – both intellectual types, comfortable enough to not worry about what they ate or wore. They were considered pretty well-off compared to the average person, but they were not in the same league as those ultra-rich tycoons.

Wei Jiangyang smiled acridly. "This Cheng Cheng is not an easy person to deal with; he's a troublemaker. He's our senior by a year. When he first came to university, he got into a fight with a senior. His family appears to be in the hotel business. He spends lavishly and has quite a following. The student union is a disorganized mess of a pestilence thanks to him. Xiao Xiao was so averse to his ways that she quit the student union."

Fuerdai is just a label.

On its own, it carried no derogatory connotations. For people who were either good or bad, they were further classified into superior and inferior. Objectively speaking, compared to the average person, these children of the nouveau riche had the privilege of enjoying better educational resources, therefore turning most of them into the superior kind.

But why do *fuerdais* have such a bad reputation?

It was only a simple explanation, though. The average person's vice was smaller, perhaps only affecting those around the individual. By comparison, due to the *fuerdai* having control over more resources, the repercussions would often be more severe once they committed any wrongdoing, descending into an entire series of problems for the society.

Take Cheng Cheng, for example. Although his sins were not that grave, many people in school condemned him. When he joined the student union in his freshman year, he quickly turned the school into his territory. In a matter of months, he had already dominated all elections causing the old council members who disapproved of him to withdraw from the union.

By his sophomore year, he became the president, and all the newly promoted council members were all his people. He basically dictated the entire student union. Birds of a feather flocked together.

When he was recruiting people, he would continuously pay extra attention to the prettier girls. Once they joined the union, he would covertly appoint his subordinates to deliberately make things difficult for the girl. Then, he would use his position in the student union to settle this matter, making him the hero nobody had asked for.

One thing led to another, and many of the innocent freshmen took the bait. Eventually, while they were discussing matters of the school, they would somehow or rather end up in his bed.

There was a rumor going around that by the time Cheng Cheng was in his second year, that more than five girls had undergone abortion because of him.

One even threatened to commit suicide, but the matter was eventually resolved with an undisclosed sum. Of course, it was a sensational amount. At the end of the day, plenty of people disapproved of Cheng Cheng.

After hearing about all these, Chen Huadong, who had initially planned to speak his mind, found himself on the horns of a dilemma. He did not work at Cheng Cheng's family hotel and, it did not matter to him whether or not Cheng Cheng was a *fuerdai*.

However, after finding out about how Cheng Cheng dominated the student union, he could not reconsider his decision. As there was no student league in their school, club funds had to be first approved by the student union before it was reported to the teachers.

On top of that, the student union was also in charge of the periodic assessment of each club.

During their freshman year, Chen Hua Dong and few guys set up an anime club called Tiger Shark, which had been doing pretty well so far.

Although their club had only a few girl members, a group of pansy guys coming together to exchange mysterious codes and indecent material was good fun. If he were to offend Cheng Cheng, Chen Huadong had to think about the problems Tiger Shark would be facing.

To top it all off, the school had a rule that required everyone to participate in morning exercises for a set number of times. No surprises there as the ones in charge of taking attendance was the student union as well.

In summary, the student union was the kind you would usually not notice, but if you rub them the wrong way, it would be problematic, to say the least. Cheng Cheng had quite a substantial number of followers, to begin with.

Chen Huadong finally decided to pursue a relationship with Xu Jing because he did not want to have to walk around on eggshells every day, always on the lookout for anyone who might want to beat him up.

Shen Xixi was looking kind of helpless. She had already said everything she could say. Most people would have given up already, but Cheng Cheng did not have the slightest intention of letting go.

Next to them, it appeared that the Wang Huan girl realized she had done something wrong, and kept her head down saying nothing.

In the end, Zhang Heng broke the awkward silence, "Excuse me, your fly is open."

“...”

Cheng Cheng looked down and saw the gap in his pants on his groin. Even though his underwear was not visible, it was still somewhat indecent.

Zhang Heng would have been better off not mentioning it at all. He could have pretended not to notice it. Now that it was pointed out, he did not know if he should pull up his zip in front of everyone. It was the most awkward of situations.

Cheng Cheng stared at Zhang Heng for a while before telling Shen Xixi, “Xixi, someday I will make you understand how I feel about you.”

At that, he quickly hurried back into the safety of his BMW. If you pay attention to the way he was walking, you could see how unnatural his movement was, as if he dared not stretch his legs.

“Hurry! Hurry! Let’s go!” Xiao Xiao implored. “Once he gets his zipper up, he’ll come back to intrude.”

Like bats scurrying out of hell, everyone piled into the minibus, hastening the driver to scoot as they slammed the door shut.

Xu Jing was in fits of laughter. “Hahaha! Did you see that guy’s face??! Oh, it’s too funny!”

When she finally caught her breath, she imitated Cheng Cheng’s tone, “Xi Xi, someday I will make you understand how I feel about you...”

The legal-loli made sheep’s eyes at Shen Xixi as she spoke.

Everyone exploded into laughter.

Xiao Xiao covered her mouth. “Enough. Stop talking. It’s so disgusting. He’s a bastard who specializes in deceiving freshman girls. What the hell was all that innocent love act.”

Shen Xixi looked at Zhang Heng apologetically. “I’m sorry. You got involved because of me.”

Zhang Heng shook his head. “It’s no problem. I’m not part of any student clubs.”

Because of her boyfriend, out of the four girls, Xiao Xiao was the most familiar with Zhang Heng and the others in her boyfriend’s dorm. Last semester, they even hung out a couple of times over skewered barbeque meat.

Somehow, somehow, she seemed to be influenced by Wei Jiangyang and became very interested in her roommate’s love life. She turned to Shen Xixi and said, “Xixi, didn’t you want a band? You should consider Zhang Heng. He’s really good at the piano. You know Paganini’s La Campanella, right. This guy could play it with his eyes closed.”

Zhang Heng was getting tired of the rumor, having constantly heard it around his extremities.

But before he could deny the gossip, Wei Jiangyang carried on, “Yeah! Yeah! Zhang Heng loves working out. He runs 10 kilometers every morning, and he’s part of the rock-climbing society and is aiming for the K2 ¹peak now. Oh, and he has also learned archery since he was five. The bow never leaves his side. His skills surpass all. People call him the Zhang Sun² from Water Margin³.”

“Ahem, it’s actually Little Li Guang Hua Rong¹!” Xiao Xiao buried her face in her hands.

The legal-loli, another a mischief-maker, chipped in chirping, “I did say that when I first laid eyes on Zhang Heng, I could tell that he’s a gallant and intelligent person. He’s so much better than that Cheng Cheng who can’t even zip his pants.”

Chen Huadong was a little slow on the uptake. Whatever that had to be said had already been said. It took him the better part of the day to come up with something. Eventually, he said, “Zhang Heng loves small animals too. Frequently, after dining in the canteen, he would always keep the fish bones and then bury them in a nice, quiet place.”

“...”

“Hey, that’s enough! If you want to make up stories, you should at least be thoughtful about it!”

Everyone laughed. The glumness accompanying Cheng Cheng’s appearance was suddenly gone, and everyone was in a chatty mood again.

In this age, when guys and girls come together, there was constant teasing and goofing, instinctively unleashing their youthfulness without much care or thought.

After Shen Xixi had heard everyone’s presentation of Zhang Heng, she found herself a little intrigued by him. But that was it. She gave him a friendly nod, and then turned to the despondent Wang Huan and began chatting with her.

Likewise, Zhang Heng thought nothing else of Shen Xixi. She seemed like a pleasant girl who made people feel comfortable around her. He, however, did not harbor any romantic feelings towards her.

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Chapter 26: Journey

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Chapter 27: Camping

At five in the evening, the minibus arrived at the camping destination.

Everyone unloaded their stuff from the trunk and bid the driver a cheerful goodbye.

When these city-bred students saw the foothill nearby covered in lush greenery, sheltered by the blue skies and white clouds, they were ecstatic.

Xu Jing was especially eager. "Wow! This place is not bad at all. We should come here every weekend."

Xiao Xiao retorted, "Does your family's money fall from the skies? 300 yuan?! I can't afford coming here every week!"

"Knock it off! It's going to be dark soon. We need to find a place to set up tents and cook." Shen Xixi chided.

Xu Jing giggled. "I don't know how to cook. I'm only responsible for the eating."

"Fine. Exchange your cuteness for food then!"

The group chatted as the chortling continued; the mood light and cheerful. The girls were the ones who had chosen the camping location – mainly Xiao Xiao idea – situated in a less popular and crowded area.

She had a backpack traveler uncle who enjoyed traveling on foot and was familiar with the uncultivated mountains nearby. The girl had badgered her uncle into providing her a list of unspoilt locations with breathtaking views.

Even better, the visitors there were few and far between; there was none of that hubbub and chaos.

Sad to say, except for Xiao Xiao who had gone camping with her uncle once or twice when she was younger, all the others did not have any camping experience whatsoever. To make matters worse, Xiao Xiao was only occupied with playing at that age; her uncle completely handling the bonfire-building and cooking business.

As a result, even choosing a place to set up the tents proved to be a challenge for the group of coddled university students.

Everyone seemed to be in disagreement – one said that it should be at the top of the mountain, the other that it should be somewhere sheltered from the wind. Then someone also added that they had to watch out for falling rocks.

In the end, Zhang Heng could not stand watching the conversation going nowhere, so he said, “Err... this place nearby is not dangerous. It’s summer now, so we don’t worry about keeping warm. We can choose whichever place to set up camp and it’ll be fine for sure.”

Predictably, everyone ignored him.

...

Immersed in the excitement of playing house in the open air, they found Zhang Heng’s make-do attitude to be unacceptable.

It was almost sundown and after careful and elaborate deliberation, they finally settled for an open space by the foot of the hill.

To say the least, the spot they had chosen was pretty good – it had an expansive view, and other than being a little further from the water, it had no other faults.

However, the problem was that the sky was starting to turn dark, and their tents were still unbuilt.

Such a task must not be undermined. For a novice, setting up a tent was extremely technically challenging: inserting the tent poles into the sleeves, stringing the ropes, staking the pegs into the ground, and then guying out the tent to stabilize it.

Without any experience, it would take the novice a long time to figure out single step.

Fortunately, this did not prove to be a problem for the Zhang Heng, as he had built a house with his bare hands before. He nearly built up the three tents entirely all by himself. Even up to the last one, he was made up the steps as he went along.

Xu Jing clapped her hands. “Alright, Zhang Heng! The next time I’m stranded on a desert island and can only choose one person to come with me, I will choose you!”

“You’re so bad! Even on a deserted island, you’re going to make someone your scapegoat?!” Chen Huadong clicked his tongue.

“I’ve seen a few wilderness survival shows! It would still be useless even if it were the whole group of us on that island.” Wei Jiangyang shook his head.

Zhang Heng merely smiled and said nothing.

No one took this kind of idle chatter to heart.

Just then, an idea popped into Xu Jing’s mind. “It’s already dark now. Let’s have a campfire party!”

It was like this girl never worried a day in her life.

“Campfire, my ass. Let’s eat first. I’m starving to death.” Xiao Xiao grumbled.

Only Shen Xixi was able to lend Zhang Heng some help when he was setting up the tent. As the others simply could not get the mechanics of pitching a tent, they took the initiative to prepare dinner on the other side instead.

In the civilized world, there was no need to start a fire using the bow and drill method, not even in the wilderness. Only a portable cassette furnace for outdoor use would be needed. It was ready for use once the gas cartridge was inserted; a very convenient alternative.

Naturally, Zhang Heng was glad to see that thing. He came to have fun not to show off his skills. Any survival skills he possessed were to be used to protect lives in the event of emergencies. If only he had a lighter on the island, he would not have to chaff off the skin on his hands to get fire.

Dinner that night was hotpot – the most convenient outdoors menu for large, noisy, hormone enraged students. First, the base ingredients. Then chuck in washed vegetables and meat all together. There. Done.

When Zhang Heng had finished building the tent, the group sat around the hotpot in a circle with single-use plastic bowls in their hands, watching and waiting for bubbles to form.

To many of them, it was a refreshing feeling.

In the summer, the temperature in the mountains was just right; not too hot and not too cold. It was much more comfortable than the stuffy, unair-conditioned dorm room. The only thing that seemed to take comfort there were the hordes of blood-sucking vampiric mosquitoes.

Zhang Heng and Shen Xixi took out mosquito repellents from their bags almost simultaneously. Seeing this, they smiled at each other

“Why isn’t the meat done yet?” Xu Jing muttered pitifully. Just a while ago, she was still demanding a campfire party, and now she was more concerned about the meat in the pot than anyone else.

A mischievous Chen Huadong was about to make fun of her when a rustling noise came from the woods nearby.

That alone had pushed timid Xu Jing into a panicked frenzy. “My god!!! Are there wild beasts in these mountains?!”

“No. There are none,” said a startled Xiao Xiao. Although the place was not a tourist attraction, it was close to the city. In the autumn, many photography enthusiasts would come here to visit. They also spotted other campers not far from where they were earlier on. If there were wild beasts here, it made no sense that no one had ever seen them before.

As soon as she had spoken, something scurried out of the woods.

The beast turned out to be not an animal but just a person. However, before they could breathe a sigh of relief, the outward appearance of the trespasser unsettled them.

His was a rowdy-looking youth lined with tattoos on his arm. The young man smiled mischievously at the group and said, “Oh, I knew I smelt something fragrant coming from somewhere. Turns out there’s something tasty here! Count me in! It just so happens that I haven’t had dinner yet.”

When the trespasser had finished talking, Zhang Heng got up, turned around, and went into his tent.

The youth smiled at that. “Okay, okay. Smart. Now that I have a place to sit, I’ll just help myself then.”

Everyone could see that this lad had ill-intentions. Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong shared a look. This was the perfect time for the guys to step-up their game.

Wei Jiangyang spoke first. “Dude, we’re not used to eating with strangers.”

“No problem. I can introduce myself first. We can all be friends. A little chat, and we’ll get to know each other,” the youth grinned as he reached into his pocket and took out a folding knife.

Wei Jiangyang’s and Chen Huadong’s face fell, and Xu Jing looked like she had just seen a ghost. They were all university students. They had never been in a situation like this before. Fights were rare back in campus. Even if a quarrel did get physical, no one had ever used a knife.

Everyone’s heart sank at the next announcement as the young man declared, “I have three other friends who hadn’t eaten too. They’ll be here soon, but it looks like there’s not enough space.” He looked around and then pointed at Wei Jiangyang, Chen Huadong, and Wanghuan. “Why don’t the three of you give up your spots to them eh?”

Chapter 28: Two Arrows

Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong trembled in the presence of the folding knife. It would have been fine if they were just being robbed. At most, they would have to give up their possessions, and no one would be harmed but from the way the young man was acting, they could tell that he had other intentions for the girls.

The girls in Xiao Xiao’s dorm, except for Wang Huan, were not bad looking, not to mention, Shen Xixi who was generally acknowledged as the prettiest girl in the public relations department. Xiao Xiao was in the school’s volleyball team and had always maintained a perfect physique. Needless to say, Xu Jin, the legal-loli, was a magnet for perverts.

Normally, neither of them had to worry about their safety in school. But this was the wilderness, the outward-bounds. Even though there were other campers in the area, they were too far from them. Even if they cried for help, there was a good chance no one would be able to get here in time.

The girls were beginning to regret coming out here. They had already done their research and found that there were villages nearby, leading them to presume that it was quite safe. Why were they so unlucky this time?

Wei Jiangyang could feel his forehead growing damp. His girlfriend was behind him – he could not retreat. But being afraid when in such scary situations like this was a normal reaction. As the youth moved towards him, Wei Jiangyang froze, and his throat went dry.

The very next moment, however, something sliced through the darkness.

The youth paused. In front was an arrow with its tip buried deep into the ground, its fletching still quivering. It was a shot at an ungodly speed.

Zhang Heng was standing in front of the tent with his recurve bow. He did not stop after the first shot. Swiftly, he drew the second arrow. Before Wei Jiangyang and the others could cheer for him, the second arrow overshot by ten thousand meters, hitting a small tree far away.

Zhang Heng's friends were dismayed, thinking to themselves that it was over. They had hoped that the shot would frighten the intruder away. They did not expect Zhang Heng give away the game so quickly.

The young man was also taken aback by the first arrow. The country had strict firearms control, so in the general run of things, bows and crossbows were the most powerful long-range weapons people had access to. He did think there would be a bowman in this group.

But that second shot missed him by at least a few meters.

Was the first one a lucky shot?

The youth subconsciously turned around to see where the last arrow had landed and was immediately alerted because his mates were hiding behind that tree.

"These first two shots are just a warning. If you don't leave, the third arrow will draw blood," Zhang Heng said calmly.

The expression on the youth's face changed. Everyone else was bowled over.

The youth was about 3 – 4 meters away from Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong. He was computing in his head if he could grab either one of them as hostages. He had second thoughts, not sure if Zhang Heng would actually do it.

In the end, he chose to put away his knife and raised his hands. "I apologize for interrupting. It looks like my friends and I will have to go elsewhere to make friends."

He glared at Zhang Heng as he spoke and then slowly backed away until he disappeared between the darkness of the trees.

...

The incident was over, but everyone had lost their appetite. They quickly packed up their things and wanted to leave the place, but there was no taxi in this suburbia. Xiao Xiao was still worried that the strange guy would harass the other campers, so one of them called the police while the others went around to inform other vacationers.

Shen Xixi opened her mouth to say something but decided to keep it to herself.

After the danger was over, the other girls gathered around Zhang Heng.

Xu Jing stuck out her tongue and said, "That's impressive, fellow student Zhang. I thought you ran away because you were scared. Turns out Iron Man was summoning his armor."

Chen Huadong joined the conversation. "Big brother, I must say I'm impressed! The second shot was way off course, yet you could still stand there and threaten him so boldly. Respect, respect."

"Apparently those degenerates are easily frightened. They saw you holding a bow and off they went running for their lives! But, really, thank you for that! I was so scared I almost died," continued a very relieved Xiao Xiao.

“To thank your hero, I have made the executive decision to betroth the prettiest girl in our dorm to you!” Xu Jing concluded. Suddenly, she received another smack across the head! But after that, Shen Xixi also thanked Zhang Heng.

After informing the others scattered all over the campgrounds, the group gathered again, feeling a lot safer by the numbers.

Zhang Heng put down his bow and opened up his backpack, distributing a bunch of snacks that did not require cooking to everyone.

While taking a bite out of her custard pie, Xu Jing mumbled, “What a day full of action! It’s my first time camping, and it may very well be my last!”

With food filling their stomachs, the group was feeling much better, and they began discussing the precarious situation they were in just a while ago.

It was then that out of the blue, Shen Xixi said, “Zhang Heng, can I talk to you?”

“Mmm.”

The pair stepped away from their friends’ bemused gazes.

Shen Xixi thanked Zhang Heng again for the night, saying, “Did you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“That guy didn’t look like he’s from the villages around here. He’s probably from the city like us.”

“You’re saying that the guy came here tonight just to look for women to assault?”

“No, if he was prepared, he wouldn’t be dressed like that. The shoes on his feet were an Adidas Coconut 500. It’s at least 2000 yuan and above for the authentic one! He would not have willingly worn those here and risked having his sneakers scraped by twigs and branches. Also, when he was talking, he kept scratching at his neck. He must have gotten bitten by a lot of mosquitos! If this was premeditated and he did not even prevent that, that would just too careless. So, chances are, he came here at the last minute.”

“That’s a very detailed observation!” Zhang Heng looked surprised. “Most people would not have noticed so many fine details in that situation!”

“Aren’t you the same?” Shen Xixi answered softly.

“I didn’t notice any of that.” Zhang Heng shook his head. “I don’t know much about shoes. I was busy paying attention to his friends in the woods. I didn’t notice his little movements. If you didn’t mention it, I really would not have known.”

Shen Xixi was taken aback slightly. “Then why have you been keeping an eye on Wang Huan?”

“Because when the guy appeared, her reaction was a little too intense. Everyone was paralyzed by shock and fear but she was very, very frightened. After the guy left, everyone was so relieved, but she seemed even more alarmed instead.”

Shen Xixi smiled bitterly. "That is why I didn't agree with them calling the police."

"Even though she put everyone in danger tonight?"

"Wang Huan has her share of problems. Cheng Cheng threatened her, telling her that if she refused to help, he wants her to reimburse him for the lipstick. Her parents were laid off a while ago, and she has a younger brother at home. And just like you said, she didn't expect this to happen. She only sent our location to Cheng Cheng. All she thought was that he wanted to join us. She never expected the person someone like that to pop out. She was terrified... worried that police would find out."

"You decide then." Zhang Heng declined to comment. They were all adults. They have to be responsible for their own actions. Circumstances and her family's situation may have induced her to behave that way, but it's no excuse for her wrongdoing! One straightforward justification: society may not be just to you but you can't go kill people in a kindergarten or set public transportation on fire just like that!

However, Shen Xixi was the target here. Whatever she would decide to do was entirely up to her. Zhang Heng had no opinion on that.

As for Cheng Cheng, he had an idea of what kind of game the guy was playing at, sort of... In light of the declining favorable impression between him and Shen Xixi, he probably wanted to play the hero and save the damsel in distress in this self-directed drama to make up for it. It, however, appeared that this guy had underestimated Shen Xixi's intelligence.

At the moment, it did not look like they were on the same level.

Shen Xixi let out a breath of relief. "I am not a person who keeps forgiving – Wang Huan promised to move out of our dorms when we get back. We won't have any social interactions with each other. So, that's how it's gonna be. You, on the other hand, will have to be very careful. Cheng Cheng wouldn't dare break the law, but he has no problem crossing the line. Mm, it's best if you don't leave the campus for the time being. I'll help you figure a way out of this!"

Chapter 29: Test of Friendship

Patrol cars sent the group back to the city. Their statements were taken down, but unsurprisingly, the police could do very little about it.

That was a small crime that did not result in anything serious, so they merely entertained them and warned other campers. Unless a similar incident were to happen again, they were not going to invest resources in conducting an investigation.

An unavoidable situation, the officers already had plenty of cases piled up. Sorting the cases by priority was an essential skill of every officer.

And just like that, the outing was ruined. By the time the group reached the campus, it was already close to midnight. They bid each other goodbye and returned to their respective rooms.

Chen Huadong was in luck! Thanks to his heroic performance of standing his ground when the trespasser threatened him, he successfully obtained Xu Jing's phone number!

With him setting the ball rolling, everyone else started to exchange contacts with each other. As soon as they returned to their room, the seats on their chairs still cold, the pair had already started hooking up.

Shen Xixi sent Zhang Heng a text to remind him to be extra careful.

Zhang Heng thought about it and then politely replied thanks.

He had only just sent the text when the world around him suddenly went eerily quiet. After more than a month, Zhang Heng was no stranger to this phenomenon.

Setting the alarm on his phone to 7 hours, he climbed into bed.

When he opened his eyes, the world was still steeped in darkness. Zhang Heng turned off his alarm and rolled out of bed. After making himself a cup of oats, he walked down the stairs with the cup.

The caretaker lady arrived a little earlier than usual, already locking the main door the moment the clock struck twelve.

Zhang Heng went straight into the control room and very deftly fished out a set of keys. He proceeded to unlock the door.

He dropped by Wumart first, grabbed a pineapple bun¹ from the rack and then left the change on the cashier. It had actually been a long time since he'd done anything like this. Not since a terrified grandmother ran all the way home with her grandchild after hearing about the 12 o'clock rumor. He switched to stocking up his food before bed.

This time was an exception due to an unforeseen circumstance. If Cheng Cheng had not interfered, he would still be out there camping. After he had finished his oats and bun, he left his cup on the supermarket's rack, then jogged to the 24-hour gym. By that time, the contents in his stomach were almost fully digested.

He began his training with the water resistance rowing machine. Three hours went by quickly. After that, he took a quick shower before checking himself into the rock-climbing club... Finally, he wandered around the city on his daily tour with his camera.

He was passing by a small hotel when a red BMW caught his eye. Zhang Heng stopped cycling as he slowly glanced at the license plate. It was Cheng Cheng's car.

Zhang Heng was for all intents and purposes, not bothered by this son of some wealthy tycoon. Like he had told Shen Xixi, he was not involved in any clubs or group activities and had very little interaction with the student union. If Cheng Cheng wanted to take down Zheng Heng, it would require quite a lot of effort on the former's part.

Cheng Cheng might be famous in school, but he was no fool. It was because of money that they were willing to be his accomplices in tricking naïve young girls. But if they had to give up their certificate of graduation for him, or even break the law, sorry. No one would do it.

Outside school, on the other hand, even though that young man was not a member of any society. After Shen Xixi's cue, however, Zhang Heng realized that he was also another bored fuerdai with nothing to do like Cheng Cheng.

That was just purely asking a friend for a favor, but these people were sometimes even more of a nuisance than thugs. They were willing to do almost anything for their face.

Zhang Heng figured that since he had so fortuitously come upon him, it was best to get rid of this trojan horse once and for all.

He parked the shared bicycle by the building and walked into the hotel. He did not know where Cheng Cheng was, but that was not a problem as he easily accessed all customer information on the computer at the front desk.

He found Cheng Cheng's name quickly, took down the room number and borrowed a set of spare keys. Two minutes later, he pushed opened the door into room 305.

There was steam all over the glass door of the bathroom but there was no sound of water.

Zhang Heng could make out the silhouette of a girl but he was not the kind to take advantage of situations like this. He immediately looked away and then continued into the room. There were clothes strewn everywhere.

There was even a brassiere hanging from the television.

On the bed, Cheng Cheng was naked except for an underwear, smoking while texting on WeChat.

Zhang Heng plucked the phone from his hand and saw that the person he was chatting with was a guy called Wu Fan with a picture of a tattoo as his profile picture. Zhang Heng tried to recall to the intruder's tattoo but failed to realize anything significant. That was alright, though. Zhang Heng clicked on the contacts, scrolled down, and found the same picture.

The owner of the WeChat account had taken a full body picture with his wardrobe, with a caption underneath—Can't put the shoes down. What should I do?

The face on the picture belonged to the guy with the folding knife.

Zhang Heng went back to the conversation page, and then looked through the messages. It was almost exactly as he had guessed. Cheng Cheng was indeed the one who came up with the idea! He was nearby when it happened, ready to show up once he got the signal!

He did not expect his plans to be disrupted by Zhang Heng. Forced home with a belly full of anger he couldn't vent, Cheng Cheng invited a junior he had wooed to go out on a date with him.

Wu Fan asked Cheng Cheng if he wanted to try and push the bowman around for a bit.

Out of caution and not kindness of the heart, Chen Cheng replied that he would have to look into Zhang Heng first.

After that, the conversation grew boring, delving into what club had awesome girls, which limited edition shoes were worth collecting, who managed to get the girl, or whose boobs were bigger—that kind of subject. Other than that, Zhang Heng also found out that Cheng Cheng was dabbling with recreational drugs and had tricked the girls he was with into doing them.

Zhang Heng shook his head reprovably. This guy had caused so much harm to other people. When Zhang Heng was done reading the dialogue, he created a new chat group which included Wu Fan and all the other contacts in the list which looked like fuerdais, and then began typing...

‘Wu Fan that dumb fuck! I just need to bring up our friendship and loyalty to get him to do whatever I want. He will do anything I ask him to do. Now, he’s as obedient as my dog.’

When he was finished composing the text, Zhang Heng even added an emoji with a coquettish smile and shades at the end, then hit the send button.

He could foresee that after zero o’clock tonight, a solid friendship was about to face a brutal test.

This, however, may not humble Cheng Cheng. So, Zhang Heng decided to give him a warning.

He did not do anything too inhumane—he was not a monster. He only gave Cheng Cheng some water to drink.

After forcing down two bottles of water down Cheng Cheng’s esophagus, Zhang Heng was worried that Cheng Cheng would not be satisfied so he took another two from the front desk. Then, to prevent permanent damage to his nervous system from water intoxication, he took another three bottles of Pocari Sweat.

In the end, though there was a bottle, Cheng Cheng’s stomach had already grown a size larger and when shaken, Zheng Heng could hear water slushing inside.

To top it all off, Zhang Heng deleted all the apps in Cheng Cheng’s phone before setting a Bride of Chucky picture as wallpaper. Finally, he left a grave message in the memo—Think about what you’ve done.

When it was all done, Zhang Heng jumped onto his little yellow bike, leaving the hotel behind to continue exploring the artistic path.

Chapter 30: Round 2

Cheng Cheng was absent from school for two days. Word was that he was sent to the emergency ward in an ambulance. The doctor’s final diagnosis was ‘drowning’. The strange thing was that Cheng Cheng claimed that he had been lying in bed in the hotel room and had no contact with any water at all.

What was worse than his physical condition, however, was his mental state. He appeared to be suffering from severe psychological trauma and was advised by the doctor to seek psychiatric help after his treatment. As a result, his parents spent a large sum of money to hire a world-famous expert, and after two sessions, he was finally stabilized.

He was finally able to return to school a month later. A few close acquaintances even arranged a welcome-back reception in his honor. They were going to invite his side-girl, but Cheng Cheng was too terrified after everything that had taken place that night. Although they had proven that he did not have any sexual contact with the girl who was in the shower, Cheng Cheng would rather have a small-time model come over than anyone from that day.

That night, after a couple of beers and the company's admiration, Cheng Cheng's mood improved considerably and was willing to practice what the expert said, which turned out to be convincing himself that that was just a bad dream.

Upon his return to university, he decided to restore his former glory and figure out a way to win Shen Xixi over. Humans were like that. They thought the harder it is to achieve something, the more valuable it must be.

In the beginning, during the welcoming party, he thought that she was good looking single, and had wanted to woo her just for the fun of it. But Shen Xixi would have none of it. She did not even give him a chance, which only made him even more obstinate in going after her.

This matter quickly plagued him. As he was humping the small-time model, Cheng Cheng covered the poor girl's face with a pillow cover and imagined that she was Shen Xixi. This got him even more excited than usual.

He kept at it for another three minutes before laying down, whereupon a rush of exhaustion flooded his head, and the tired Cheng Cheng closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately. He was jolted awake in the middle of the night and he felt something resting on his face.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the Bride of Chucky's face resting against him! Goosebumps sprouted all over his terrified body!

His screams not only waken the model sleeping next to him, but had also startled the guests in the rooms downstairs. Cheng Cheng did not even bother to dress properly and left the room running and screaming for his life in his underwear!

Alas, misery loves company. He was only a short distance away from the hotel when a minivan suddenly screeched to a halt in front of him! The door opened and the tattooed youth grinned at him from the inside. "Brother Cheng, your little pug has come to bring you home!"

Then, the passengers inside the van dragged the horrified Cheng Cheng into the vehicle!

Following this, a 15-minute video of Cheng Cheng in a dog collar barking and scoffing down dog treats appeared on the university forum. Although it was quickly taken down by the school authorities, it had already left its severe, unerasable mark. The whole school was in a frenzy!

Cheng Cheng's reputation was already on eggshells. Pretended indignance from the varmints in the student union aside, the reactions were mostly schadenfreude¹ from the common folk.

A week later, Cheng Cheng's parents came to the school and after applying leave for their son, left in a hurry. A rumor quickly spread around that they had sent their son overseas for treatment.

...

Everything that happened after that no longer concerned Zhang Heng. In fact, after he had taken the time out to leave a warning for Cheng Cheng, he continued with his busy schedule. He simply threw in the doll in-passing to keep Cheng Cheng busy from his boredom! Zhang Heng never in the slightest expected that the outcome would be so severe.

Later on, Zhang Heng did go back, intentionally this time, to stick the haunted doll's face in the dark hotel room. The situation was undeniably quite scary. Cheng Cheng had already been frightened once before, and in his extremely fragile state, all it would take was one more scare and a complete mental breakdown would be no surprise. As for Wu Fan's appearance after that, Zhang Heng knew nothing of that.

In short, this matter was considered closed. Zhang Heng did not actually spend much time and energy on Cheng Cheng. The harassment was done out of convenience. During this period, he had employed a new plan of action—attend classes and prepare for the next round of games.

The results of his workout were a little more evident now. He was not seeking to have one of those muscular bodies, being more concerned about being pliable than being strong. He had now passed a beginner's level in rock climbing as well.

The second game was drawing near. In theory, he could actually wait until the last day to join the game but Zhang Heng did not want to cut it too close. What if he fell sick or sprained his ankle? That was a fun thought.

So, 5 days before the end of November, Zhang Heng returned to the Sex and the City bar.

This time, he did not need to flash the number on his arm for the two burly men guarding the steps to let him pass.

Zhang Heng thanked the gentlemen and pushed the metal door open. The lounge was no different from the last time he visited, except the music had changed to jazz.

The bartender looked to be in a pretty good mood. She was mixing some strange drink when she spotted Zhang Heng and greeted him, "How has this month been? What would you like to drink?"

"Not bad. I won't be having any drinks."

Then as reading his mind, she pushed the freshly-made masterpiece in front of him. "You don't think it's this lemon water that you passed out the last time, do you? Even if you did nothing, you would still enter the game the same way."

"Last time, you said the time was fixed only for the first game. I have the freedom to choose after that, right?"

The bartender pointed at something nearby. "Do you see that booth? Each one of them has an alarm clock. Take a seat at one of them and adjust the time to your liking. When it's time, the game will start."

"Thank you. But I won't need the booze. The game starts soon, so it's better for me to stay sober!"

"This is not a cocktail, just a mix of fruit juices." The bartender raised a brow at him; her patience obviously pushed a notch further.

Zhang Heng had the good sense to pick up the glass filled with the unknown liquid. From its appearance, this thing perfectly replicated Maid café's style. In all honesty, it looked suspicious. Speaking of which, Zhang Heng had visited that coffee shop a couple of times before, but the bartender lady acted as if she did not know him, sticking to that cold, indifferent front.

“Oh, right! You’ve also mentioned last time that the wooden box made of Tulewood that could isolate supernatural powers is sold here. How much is it?” Zhang Heng tasted the drink in his hand. It had a peculiar taste to it, a little like durian and a little like mango. There was probably soursop and avocado in there. It was as strange a mix as it could get. So, Zhang Heng resolved to changing the subject, slowly and stealthily put the drink back down.

From all the previous information he had gathered, there were two precious things in the game. The first one was a very realistic atmosphere and settings that allowed people to gain a lot of experience and skills in a short few hours. The second was the so-called game items.

Needless to say, having a supernatural item that continued to have effects in the real world was very advantageous! The lucky rabbit’s foot had been with Zhang Heng for more than a month now. He even found money on the road twice now, although only 2 yuan. The rabbit’s foot was E-class, indicative that there were also other classes—A, B, C, and D—above it.

But because the game items’ effects were unidentifiable, carrying them around uninformed would be very dangerous. It was possible for him to have such good luck all the time, so he needed a better way to contain it.

The last time, after the bartender told him about the Tule tree, he went back and looked it up on Baidu and discovered that this tree only grew in Mexico’s Oaxaca state, revered dearly by the locals. It was practically impossible to take a piece from the tree to make a box.

That being the case, he had no other choice but to buy it from the bartender. It felt a bit like he was forced to do it even though he knew the outcome was bad.