

48 Hours 331

Chapter 331 Heart-throbbing First Love

Zhang Heng always partook his new quests at Sex and the City. This was his first time visiting another game checkpoint. Only then did he notice that each checkpoint was styled very differently.

When it came to the atmosphere, the bartender lady's checkpoint looked like a VIP lounge at an airport. It had a particularly seductive ambiance, and there were even scantily dressed women sitting on each deck. It's decor also closely resembled a Japanese brothel, with dim lighting and psychedelic music.

"I have never seen you around, but you don't look like a newcomer. You're home for Chinese New Year, right? Can I help you with anything?" An uncle in beach pants stood up from behind the cash register, speaking to Zhang Heng with a cigarette in mouth. He seemed to be the only person in charge of this checkpoint. Zhang Heng could clearly see his face and the girls on the deck.

Worlds apart the bartender's icy countenance, the uncle at this checkpoint was warm and friendly. He walked over, put his hand over Zhang Heng's shoulder, and told solemnly, "Since it's your first time here, allow me to introduce you to our special player care service – Heartthrobbing First Love."

"This is an exclusive service that only our checkpoint offers. All you need to do is pay one game point for the service. You can see the beauties over there... extend your hand and say hello to them."

The uncle gave Zhang Heng an encouraging stare, only to get no response. Not to be discouraged by his lack of interest, he patted Zhang Heng's shoulder once again. The man's enthusiastic taps caused his cigarette ash to fall on Zhang Heng's shoulder.

"That's right. I know there are certain things you can't let go of. A lot of young people miss out on finding true love because of that. This is a game for the brave. Every round of the game, each quest you participate in, is filled with crises. As a player, you should enjoy it while you still can. When you're about to kick the bucket, knowing that you haven't even touched a girl's hand is the last thing you want to think about, right? You also don't want to die regretting you didn't get to confess your love to the girl you liked. Perhaps then, you might just die a painful death with all that regret in your heart."

The uncle was fully committed to his job, and it seemed whatever he said touched the softer parts of his heart. His eyes began to glisten with tears.

"The service we provide at our checkpoint is to help players solve this kind of frustration. You can see many ladies in front of you. You can choose your first love here. This is Cindy, and she is very mature."

Soon after that, the girl named Cindy waved her hands at Zhang Heng.

"Bei Bei, your girl next door. Can you feel the sun shining on you?" The girl named Bei Bei popped the bubblegum in her mouth.

"Jia Jia... a true wildcat! She's famous for her twerking. She's my personal favorite. This one will definitely be your most memorable first love."

"Before you say anything, I know what you're thinking. Even if you're an experienced lover and you have no regrets about your first love, our ladies can chat with you before you start your game. They will be

with you through your most tormenting moments and help you adjust your mental state so you can cope with the next challenge. Trust me. Your one game point will definitely not be wasted.”

Zhang Heng finally found the opportunity to speak, “...actually, I am not here to play the game tonight.”

The uncle nodded, his face displaying an I-understand-you-expression.

“Since when did our place become so famous? Of course, you are most welcome to come and have fun with the ladies. It is impossible to take them out for the night, but our prices are...”

Zhang Heng had to interrupt the uncle to avoid the topic from going in a strange direction. “I’m here to trouble you to identify something for me.” He then took out the eye jewelry wrapped in two pieces of paper from his pocket.

“Identification. Oh, oh, oh... wait a minute!” The uncle returned to the cashier and squatted for a while. He then started to mutter, “Where’s that batch of tullewood boxes I just bought?”

The girl named Jia Jia took out a women’s cigarette and put it in her mouth. She then left the deck, walked to the cashier, and lit it up with a lighter. She paused for a while before talking to the uncle.

“Didn’t you throw those broken boxes of yours under the fourth deck?”

Blowing a puff of smoke at Zhang Heng, she looked toward him. “I like your watch. Here’s my number. You can ignore that idiot and contact me directly.”

“Hey, I heard that! What you are doing goes against our original agreement.” “Don’t be silly. We aren’t partners of any sort. You have to rely on my sisters to help you earn game points. They can live very well without you in an era where entertainment is everything.” The uncle with beach pants did not look very good after hearing what she said.

“You are so mean,” he muttered.

After that, he walked to Zhang Heng with a bag of tullewood boxes and took the gem from Zhang Heng.

“I have to deal with some things during the Spring Festival. You will only get the identification results after five days. Is that okay with you? Of course, you can pay double the game points and opt for the express service. If you go for that option, you can get it as soon as tomorrow night, but you will have to come and get it yourself.”

Zhang Heng’s lack of interest in the service seemed to disappoint the uncle. However, he handled his client’s request professionally as he saw a different opportunity presenting itself.

“The regular service is fine,” said Zhang Heng

Now that Tian Tian’s family’s problem was solved, this item was like a bonus to him. Since the matter was basically over now, there was no need to rush it.

“Okay, here’s my business card. If you need any services in this city, you can always call me.” After that, the uncle winked at Zhang Heng again. “Of course, you can contact me too if you change your mind.”

“That will not happen, I’m afraid.”

Zhang Heng accepted the card and left the game checkpoint.

After walking around for a while, making sure that no one was tailing him, Zhang Heng turned in the right direction and returned home. He gingerly opened the door and went straight to bed. The next morning, Zhang Heng was awoken by the buzzing of the soymilk machine. He washed his face and came out with a toothbrush in his mouth. Grandpa had already set the fried sugar cakes and Youtiao on the table. At the same time, a steaming batch of soy milk was ready as well.

“Your parents will be home tonight. After we finish putting up the Spring Festival couplets this morning, we can go pay the supermarket a visit in the afternoon. Is there anything we need at home?”

“It’s okay. I think you have prepared enough. In fact, our fridge is packed to the brim. Even if the world ends now, the food in there is enough to last all four of us a month,” Zhang Heng said while brushing his teeth.

“Your grandmother’s always said that it’s better to be safe than sorry. Oh yeah... I almost forgot. M beans, your mother’s loved them since she was a kid. She could eat at least three packs every Chinese New Year. I will buy some later.”

“Grandpa... she is 44.”

“So what, in my eyes, she’ll always be a child.”

Chapter 332 Redundant

Zhang Heng pasted the Spring Festival couplets and the word ‘Fu’ (prosperity in mandarin) on the front of each door, taking a step back to make sure they were aligned correctly.

One thing he just couldn’t understand was that with the continuous economic boom, consumer products were continuously improved, not only in terms of function but also in design. This part had been given more importance as the years went by. Yet, the Spring Festival couplets were forever so gaudy. Since it was going to be the Year of the Dog, malls and roadside stalls had incorporated elements of dogs to their Spring Festival couplets. Their designs, however, were somewhat questionable. The cartoonish images looked almost exactly as they did ten years ago, and everyone seemed to have gotten used to this gaudy style.

It was generally accepted that if the couplets weren’t gaudy and garish, they wouldn’t be traditional enough. In actual fact, the traditional Spring Festival couplets centuries ago didn’t feature these messy cartoonish elements.

A little girl ran into Zhang Heng as he was pasting the couplets. She knocked on Tian Tian’s house, located opposite his grandfather’s place. She looked to be a classmate of hers and was warmly welcomed into the home by Tian Tian’s mum. This seemed to confirm that Tian Tian was indeed very popular in school.

When Tian Tian’s classmates heard about the misfortunes befalling her family from her mother, many of them came by to visit. They gave her some much-needed encouragement and wished her a speedy recovery, also reassuring her that she would be out of the woods soon. On top of that, her relatives had also been by her side, eagerly searching for a cure.

Now that Zhang Heng had found and eliminated the source of Tian Tian's anti-social behavior, her family should be able to enjoy a peaceful and happy Spring Festival.

Zhang Heng's parents were expected to land at seven twenty in the evening. As the Spring Festival approached, a massive influx of people was on the move. To avoid getting stuck in a traffic jam and the ensuing lack of parking, Zhang Heng left home with his grandfather an hour and a half ahead of time.

Despite that, when they finally arrived at the airport, a long pile-up was blocking the road, with a few cars rear-ending each other like dominoes. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and by the time traffic police were done dealing with the accident, there wasn't much time left. Coincidentally, the flight had been delayed too. Thus, even after grandparent and grandson circled the airport's parking lot twice, the plane still hadn't landed yet.

Grandfather's wore a very formal outfit tonight, donning a 20-year-old French leather suit with meticulously combed hair. Although he had often expressed his dissatisfaction with his daughter and son-in-law, this was the first time in three years that they saw each other. This reunion was clearly very important to him.

The two squeezed their way through the crowd, and when they finally arrived at the pick-up gate, it was crowded as hell. Like Zhang Heng and his grandfather, most of them waiting for their relatives. Some even held up signs.

There were no more seats left at the pick-up gate. Zhang Heng looked at the watch on his wrist. Although there had been a traffic delay, the flight was also delayed by 30 minutes. Including the time needed for baggage collection, it meant Zhang Heng and his grandfather would have to wait here for at least forty minutes.

Sensing that the long wait might be taxing for the elderly man, Zhang Heng said, "Why don't you go back to the car? I'll stay here and wait."

"Don't worry about me, I'm not that old yet. I didn't dress like this so I could sit in the car," said Grandfather as he shook his head.

"Alright. I'll get us some drinks then. What would you like?"

"Water will do."

Zhang Heng nudged his way through the massive crowd again to reach the convenience store. He grabbed two bottles of Ganten* off the shelf, and at checkout, the cashier swiped away 24 yuan from his Alipay*.

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Selling mineral water at the airport was probably more profitable than pushing drugs.

As soon as Zhang Heng paid for the water, a commotion started at the pick-up gate.

During the holidays, the flow of people at the airport skyrocketed. Because of how crowded it was, it was almost impossible to avoid physical contact with another person. It turned out that a man had seized the opportunity to lean his body against a young woman. He held a magazine in one hand, preventing anyone from seeing what was he doing with the other.

The young woman noticed it and quickly shifted away, but soon after, the man leaned against her again. The woman was obviously a little uneasy, but since she was too embarrassed to speak up or was unsure if it was accidental, she simply shuffled a little further again. The man, however, was smart enough not to step on the same rake twice. Seeing that the woman had been alerted, he quickly changed targets.

As soon as he drew near to his next victim, a solemn voice came from behind him. "Young man, how could you be so despicable at such a young age? Does your family know about this?"

The man turned around and saw an elderly grey-haired man in his sixties. He wore a gray old-school windbreaker with a woolen sweater underneath. His shoes were well-polished as well.

"Lunatic!" the lewd man cursed. When he saw people staring at him, especially the girl he 'accidentally' touched earlier, he glared at the nosy man with suspicion before turning around to leave.

Someone, however, stepped in front of him. It was a young man who looked like a student and was holding two bottles of water.

The man was already in a fit of anger and in a hurry to leave. When this happened, his shame suddenly turned into rage. He was about to tell the young man to piss off, but when their eyes met, he felt this strange chill in his heart, and he could not seem to get the words out.

Just then, he saw two stern-looking security guards coming in their direction. "What are you doing?!" they shouted.

Panic quickly spread across the man's face.

The nosy old man was already walking towards the guard. "Comrade, he groped a woman. I saw it."

The guards nodded. "Leave it to us, sir." They then walked up to the man and said, "Please take a walk with us, sir."

"Why? I didn't do anything! Don't listen to his nonsense. Look at him, he's an old man. He can't even see properly," the man hissed.

"My vision is still 1.0. I don't even need reading glasses to read newspapers," retorted the elderly man.

"Please come with us. If you really haven't done anything, the surveillance cameras will prove your innocence," the guard insisted politely.

The man looked at his belly and realizing he couldn't outrun the sturdy guards, he reluctantly left with them.

Zhang Heng nodded at a girl who was at a distance. She was standing in front of him at the checkout queue earlier, and when Zhang Heng saw the commotion, he had asked her to call for assistance. Worried that his grandfather might be bullied, he hurried over to the scene. Now that the matter was resolved, he went over to thank the girl. Then, he walked up to the elderly man. "Not bad, a good sword always stays sharp."

"If something like that happened back in the day, he would have been paraded on the streets!" his grandfather said in a grim tone. "I am an old man. Even if he challenged me, he wouldn't have dared to do anything. Why did you stand in his way? That was redundant."

“There won’t be a next time,” Zhang Heng smiled, not offering any explanation.

Footnote:

Ganten: a.k.a Baishuishan in mandarin, a premium Chinese brand of bottled water.

Alipay: third-party mobile and online payment platform.

Chapter 333 Gifts

Flight CZ5376 finally jumped to arrival status on the electronic board.

Ten minutes later, passengers began pouring out of the exit. Zhang Heng and his grandfather were standing in front of the waiting crowd. They watched as people passed by, but saw no familiar faces.

Zhang Heng’s phone rang – it was his mother.

“I’m sorry. So sorry. Sorry. You must have waited a long time. We didn’t expect our flight to be delayed. We still haven’t located one more luggage. Your gifts are inside. Please wait for us... just a little while more.” “No problem. Don’t worry about it. Take your time,” Zhang Heng assured. Ten minutes after they hung up, and after everyone had left, Zhang Heng finally saw the two hurrying out of the arrival hall.

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“Dad!” A woman with healthy-looking skin, looking no older than thirty, dropped the small luggage in her hand and began running. When she accidentally kicked the plastic leg of the queue barrier, she stopped to rub it, gritted her teeth, and continued running

“Hey, slow down! Don’t fall over.” The man walking behind her carrying an oversized suitcase seemed a little flustered.

He was in a black Calvin Klein down jacket with a brown scarf around his neck. There was a pair of sunglasses in his chest pocket and looked to have sprayed on a healthy amount of cologne. He was good-looking, but his hairline was receding and a small belly had developed.

When he saw Zhang Heng, he looked taken aback. “Who are you?” A second later, he smiled broadly. “I’m kidding. So, did you miss us, handsome young man?”

Zhang Heng took the oversized luggage from the man. “I’m all grown up now. Can we be a little more mature?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. I really miss the time when you were young. Whenever I went downstairs to buy a bottle of soy sauce, you would cry and shout, Daddy! I want daddy! Where are you, dad... You were so cute back then.”

“No such thing happened. Now, don’t go around making up stories anymore,” Zhang Heng grunted. “Last time, you told me that you pulled me out of a frozen lake during winter. When I asked grandfather, he told me that it was all made up. If you have Alzheimer’s, treat it as soon as you can and don’t delay it.”

“This one is true. You were very attached to me when you were a kid.” Zhang Heng’s father scratched his head and looked around the airport. “Where’s your girlfriend? Didn’t she come with you?”

“If I have a girlfriend, the first thing I’d do is to keep her away from you.”

“That’s a pity, your mother and I also prepared a gift for her. She will definitely like it.”

As they spoke, a red figure suddenly pounced on Zhang Heng from the back.

“Hahaha. I feel like you’ve grown much taller since we last met – it wasn’t noticeable on video. Oh, there are muscles too! Not bad... not bad at all! Looks like someone listened to his mum. Train hard now... it may be difficult, but you must maintain your physique until you finally trick someone into becoming your wife. Then you can let loose and eat anything you want.” “Ah... I didn’t let loose, alright. It’s because you never finish the food you order, and we shouldn’t waste food anyway. So, I ended up eating non-stop,” Zhang Heng’s father defended himself.

Although Zhang Heng was mentally prepared, he had to admit that he still underestimated their real stamina. They didn’t stop talking for one moment, from the airport arrival gate all the way to the underground parking lot. The conversation did not stop even after they got into the car. As they drove through the city, they pointed out the changes it underwent, very much like the pair of returning overseas Chinese they were. Halfway through the journey, however, the two became a little quieter.

It wasn’t because they had nothing to say, but because they were hungry.

“I’ve prepared all the ingredients. Just hang on a little longer. Once we get home, we can eat hot pot,” grandpa said to Zhang Heng’s mother.

The latter gave her father a thumbs up, an excited smile breaking over her face. “You’re the best dad in the world! No doubt about it.”

Zhang Heng’s father turned to look at his son sitting next to him. “Shouldn’t you be saying something?”

“I think you are still a long way from that.”

“Ah, see, that’s why I really wanted a daughter. Girls are more loving. They are the apple of every father’s eye,” Zhang Heng’s father sighed.

When the four finally reached home, Zhang Heng’s grandfather took out some sliced beef, tripe, and cut vegetables from the refrigerator, then added the boiled bone broth to the copper pot.

While they waited, Zhang Heng’s mum opened the oversized luggage, took out something wrapped in bubble wrap and newspaper, and handed it to the old man, “Dad, Guojian picked this piece of British bone china* for you.”

“Thank you.” Although grandfather’s expression remained solemn, it was obvious that he was pleased with the gift. Since retirement, his three major hobbies had been playing chess, drinking tea, and tending to the garden in the backyard. Upon receiving the porcelain tea set, he seemed to ease his looks upon Zhang Heng’s father, becoming more affable.

Zhang Heng’s father made an OK gesture to his wife who was under the table, indicating a smooth pass.

Then Mother Zhang took out another box. Compared to the previous tea set, the box was tiny, about the size of a jewelry box. Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows, "What?" "I'm sorry I haven't been around all these years. I've been absent throughout your adolescence. This has always been our shortcoming as parents." Zhang Heng's father looked atypically serious, no longer as cheeky as before. "Moreover, we couldn't return for the New Year for two consecutive years. We owe you two New Year gifts. We're going to make up for all of that," Zhang Heng's mum continued, then handed the box to her son. She encouraged him to open it up and look inside.

"Err..." Zhang Heng opened the box, revealing a car key inside. "Congratulations, son. This is your first car!" Zhang Heng's parents shared a look. "You should get your driver's license. It's only a polo, but I hope it could at least help you get a girlfriend."

"Don't worry about the license – I've put it under a classmate's name," Zhang Heng's mother said. "You can go get your plate number, and the car will be yours when it's your turn. We've already paid for a year's insurance. Of course, you have to find your own way for the gas, parking, and the next year's insurance. We won't be increasing your pocket money. It may be a little early, but you need to prepare to be part of society..."

"Thank you." Zhang Heng put the key away and thanked his parents.

He had actually been considering on purchasing a car. During his extra 24 hours every day, all public transportation would stop functioning. Although there was always the shared bicycle, it was a rather slow way to travel, and it severely limited the scope of his activities.

Things would be much better if he had his own car. To him, money was not a problem, where after all, one game point could be exchanged for 30,000 or 40,000 yuan. License plate numbers were difficult to obtain in Beijing. If it weren't possible, Zhang Heng would have to consider renting a license plate. But now, the problem seemed to have solved itself.

The Polo was actually enough for him. If it was not up to par, he could always modify it himself. After all, his car tuning and maintenance skills were at Level 2.

Footnote:

Bone china: a type of porcelain that is composed of bone ash, feldspathic material, and kaolin

Chapter 334 Eighteen Years of Waiting

"So, you want to know more about mythology now, huh?" Father Zhang was a little surprised, "I thought you lost interest in such things after you graduated from sixth grade?"

The four had finished their dinner, and after cleaning up the tableware, Mother Zhang and her father were going through some old photos in the study room. Outside, Zhang Heng and his dad were in the living room, eating fruit while watching TV.

"Okay, what do you want to know? I will try my best to tell you everything I know. Just go ahead and ask me questions," said Father Zhang after picking up an apple and taking a bite.

Zhang Heng silently pondered for a moment.

"Is there really a god in the world we live in?"

“Hack!”

Father Zhang almost choked on the apple he just swallowed. He coughed twice and asked, “What’s the matter, do we really have to pretend that you are still a sixth-grader?”

He took a sip of water to soothe his throat.

“I remember us discussing this a long time ago. Although your mother and I are theology majors, we do not have any beliefs. In fact, I am interested in mythology, but only the history and humanity parts of it. Your mother... well, she is just interested in all the weird stories. She likes to travel around, take pictures, and taste food in the name of the archaeology of religion and cults. If I remember correctly, her master’s thesis was about the diet of medieval believers.

“From my point of view, the so-called myths are just stories written by mortals, just like fairy tales, but myths are for the adults. For example, ‘Odyssey’ was said to be written by Homer, a blind poet in ancient Greece. And we all know that the book’s theme was about the Trojan War. There weren’t only mortals, but there was also the demigod, Achilles, the Sun God Apollo, and Poseidon, God of the sea.

“But in reality, the Trojan War was the only actual historical event. The rest are Homer’s artistic add-ons. Academicians generally believe that even if Homer was real, there were no proper historians in the era he lived in, which was in the ninth century BC. At that time, no one paid too much attention to history’s authenticity. Thanks to that, people concocted their versions of history and incorporated real events with myths and legends. Hence the birth of Odyssey.”

Father Zhang paused, “In fact, if you properly study the system of myths and legends, you will find that they all have their origins. Usually, these tales are passed down verbally, constantly evolving based on the society they originated from. For example, Celtic mythology originated from Celtic folklore and was influenced by ancient Rome and Christianity. If the stories in it were real, why then would they be influenced by the civilization of the time? Greek and Roman mythology are typical examples.”

Father Zhang continued while gnawing at the apple. “Roman mythology was completely born out of Greek mythology. Many gods have different names because of different pronunciations. As for their legendary tales, they are all the same. How could this stuff be true?”

Zhang Heng was silent. Whatever his father told him matched what he thought about mythology. But then again, where did those so-called gods come from? He met an ancient Celtic god in his Black Sail quest. Other than that, there were also the supernatural creatures he encountered in the real world. If the legends about them were all made up, how on earth did they exist in the real world?

Zhang Heng remembered the man named Einstein he had met at the Apollo Training Camp quest. Judging by what he said, it seemed that he was on the same level as the man in the Tang suit. However, he didn’t feel that he was connected in any way to the myths and legends. As for the game items he saw at auction, some of which obviously products of modern society... Zhang Heng decided to put this question aside for now and asked one of the most pressing issues in his mind. “How about gods that have something to do with time?”

Father Zhang raised his eyebrows, “The god of time? Indeed, there are gods related to time in many mythological systems, but the most famous is the protogenoi in ancient Greek mythology, Chronos. He is the supreme god worshipped by Orphism. It symbolizes the first cause that transcends everything. He

existed before everything began, and is the supreme god in the 'Twenty-Four Sacred Narratives.' He also possesses power above all things. He doesn't have a physical form, but he sometimes appears in the image of a snake, a three-headed man, a cow, or a lion. He is, however, better known as the image of an old man, usually described in modern artworks as an old man holding a sickle."

"Old man, does the old man look like this?"

Zhang Heng took out an old photo from his pocket that he picked up after cleaning the study and put it on the coffee table in front of his father.

Father Zhang was taken aback when he saw the photo, quickly picking it up.

"Huh... Where did you find this photo?"

"You have participated in many research projects, and mom takes lots of pictures all the time. Why did I only find this after I searched the entire room? Where are the others?"

"That's because we lost a sled and four sled dogs at the end of the research. They fell into a hole on the ice along with all the things on the sled. That included our Kodak. We tried our best, and in the end, we still failed to rescue the four poor little guys, let alone the things on the sled. As for Mr. Time, he was the sponsor of the expedition, but we haven't seen him for more than ten years since it ended."

Although his dad tried his best to maintain a relaxed tone, Zhang Heng could sense that his heart wasn't as calm, especially after he saw the photo. His pupils were contracted, and clearly, he was hiding something. However, what surprised Zhang Heng the most was that the incident didn't seem to involve Mr. Time.

Later, when Zhang Heng's father talked about Mr. Time again, he had relaxed and had settled into a more comfortable position. Zhang Heng didn't quite understand why his father would lie about the film. Even grandpa knew about this expedition. In other words, he was the only one in the whole family who had been kept entirely in the dark from the project. The question was, why did his parents get rid of the photos, and at the same time, reluctant to talk about the expedition to Greenland 18 years ago?

What happened on that island in the Arctic Circle, and what did it have to do with him? He was only a year old at that time. If the strange man in the Tang suit had met his parents 18 years ago, he obviously didn't choose Zhang Heng 18 years later based on appreciation and coincidence.

Instead of seeing it as a random encounter, it looked more like a meeting that the mysterious man had been waiting for 18 years.

Chapter 335 Meeting At Silicon Valley

At San Jose Airport, the old man was no longer wearing the strange-looking Tang suit.

He was dressed like a tourist and appeared to have just disembarked the plane. He was also carrying a small suitcase with him; its gilded handle was engraved with a magical creature. It had a snake-like body and the heads of a lion, bull, and human. He walked out of the airport gate, reached his hands out and hailed a cab.

"Excuse me, please take me to The Westin Palo Alto."

After shutting the car door, he took out a travel brochure from his pocket and read it.

“Okay, sir.”

The black driver glanced at the old man through the rearview mirror.

“Oh, by the way, I want to listen to hip hop. Don’t you like hip hop too?” The old man put his suitcase aside.

“I’m afraid I do anything about it. You know, it all depends on what’s on the radio.”

“Hey, is that how your boss teaches you to entertain your customer? Can’t even fulfill such a small request?” the old man leisurely replied. The driver got annoyed when he heard that. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t waste your time. Believe me, boy. No one in this world can spend more time than me. You don’t want to waste your time on me.”

The old man then opened a box of gum and poured ten pieces into his mouth in one go. After a short moment of silence, the driver finally started the car. “Good lad, now you can play me some hip hop.”

The driver pulled an iPod from his pocket and handed it with a pair of headphones to the old man behind him. “It’s got Nicki Minaj, Post Malone, and Jay-Z...” “Oh, Nicki Minaj? Just my favorite. Great! You’ve got to admit that technology has indeed made life more comfortable,” said the old man as he placed the headphones across his ears.

Half an hour later, the car arrived at Silicon Valley. This wasn’t an administrative division. Initially, the term only referred to the areas surrounding Santa Clara Valley. It gradually expanded to areas that included Santa Clara County and San Mateo County in the southwest, and San Francisco Bay and parts of Alameda County to its east.

Silicon Valley was the melting pot of all American tech industries, also famous worldwide for its forefront in electronic technological innovation. A series of internationally renowned tech conglomerates such as Apple, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, and Oracle made it their home. It is also a tech geek paradise.

The cab finally stopped at the gate of a startup corporation. Compared to big companies like Intel and Tesla, this company was negligibly small. Its main business was developing online photo albums, and there were less than ten employees in the entire company.

The old man carried the box and came to the door of the office of the CTO, who was also the CEO and the boss of the company. Seconds later, the door opened automatically.

“Cool,” the old man exclaimed and walked in.

The door closed automatically behind him, and the lights in the room were dimmed to sufficient brightness. The old man saw that the entire floor he was standing on happened to be a massive display screen, but it felt like a carpet, and there were even electronic water ripples displayed beneath his feet.

When a mechanical dog saw a stranger coming in, it got up from its and started to bark at the old man. A circuit board was thrown to it, to which it laid down obediently and started to lick it.

The man named Einstein that Zhang Heng saw in the quest was sitting behind his desk. At its corner was a model of a Saturn V rocket. He then stretched out his hand and made a welcome gesture. With his eyebrows raised, the old man walked to where he pointed. Immediately, the wall in front of him folded and turned into a couch.

“Impressive.” The old man sat down, deliberately plopping down with force. He could feel his butt touching the surface of an unknown material. Somehow, it felt unexpectedly soft and plush.

“Your arrival today made me realize that I have wasted my life.”

The man named Einstein was watching a technology conference. He swiped the screen with his finger and silenced the video, his face expressionless as he spoke to the old man.

“So, what brings you here?” “You know the reason, don’t you? Otherwise, you wouldn’t have sent your people to the airport’s gate to block me. Right?”

The old man spat out a piece of now tasteless chewing gum to the ground. Immediately, the mechanical dog, still licking the circuit board, suddenly alerted its ears. Its eyes scanned the gum on the ground. It let go of the circuit board and rushed toward its discovery. In less than five seconds, the floor was cleaned without a trace of messy gum.

After that, it returned to its kennel obediently.

The old man then poured out another ten pieces of colorful gum onto his hand. “Why did you modify the number of players allowed to complete the quest? It made it a lot more difficult for my people to complete it. Whatever you did violated the rules of the game, right?”

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, talking to me about these things? You really thought I wouldn’t notice his abnormal rate of development? No ordinary person could achieve what he achieved in such a short period of time. This is clearly your doing. You and your tricks that allow you to mess with time. You really thought you could hide it?”

“Well... fortunately, I’ve always had good connections. Now, I’ll just have to pray harder that everyone turns a blind eye to what I did.”

The old man continued on his road to diabetes by eating an entire lot of gum in his hands.

Einstein frowned. “What are you planning to do with your disciple? I don’t believe you’ll spend more than 80% of your power on him. Such a price is too hefty for you. You’re different from some frail idiots who are about to be buried into the ground. Although your strength has been weakening over the years, you’re still a long way from leaving this world, right? Why choose to make such a desperate move at such times? From what I know about you, you expect a greater return after investing so much in him.”

The old man shrugged. “I told you the truth a long time ago, but why can’t you believe that I just want to win this game and take a share of the new market. I want to revive my past glory and make myself famous again.”

“Do you really think those ridiculous clothes will allow you to integrate into a completely different society?”

“Why not give it a try? After all, KFC introduced Beijing chicken rolls in China.” The old man blinked, “survival of the fittest, that’s what you’ve always been talking about, right? Although I prefer you as Jordan Bruno and being tied at the stake, we can never go back to those good times, right?”

“Be careful, Cronus, don’t set yourself on fire.”

“I will try to keep this advice in mind, Sainz.”

Chapter 336 Accidents Happening Again

Someone knocked on Zhang Heng’s window at dawn. When he opened it, the person had already left, and there was only a black package under the window sill.

Zhang Heng put on his clothes, walked to the door, and retrieved the package. When he unpacked it, he found the game items he passed to the bartender lady a while ago. It seemed the identification process for them had been completed.

It was Zhang Heng’s first time encountering other players in his last game. Not only did he have to find a way to complete the main storyline, but he also had to compete with opponents, where only one out of the seven-person-group was allowed to complete the quest. However, Zhang Heng gained a total of five game items after completing it. He first took a look at the fork and teeth which he found on Bruno.

[Name: Water-Soluble Metal]

(Grade: F)

[Effect: Melts when it comes in contact with water. Metal returns to its original form after 120 minutes. User is allowed to control the number of uses. Water-Soluble Metal cannot be reused.”

After seeing this game item, Zhang Heng finally understood why the ejection devices of the previous training aircraft and fighter jets encountered the same problem.

Bruno messed with them before they were put in use. First, he melted a small section of the fork with water and poured it into the ejection device. After 120 minutes, the metal would return to its original form and weld the machinery together. He killed Anthony with this method and worked with Zhen Xiong, manipulating animals to eliminate Zhang Heng.

Bruno didn’t expect Zhang Heng to overcome the dangerous situation, though. Left with no other choice, he concocted a plan, turning everyone’s attention to him by using LSD.

Zhang Heng then picked up the card next to the tooth.

[Name: Portable Mighty River Crab]

(Grade: E)

[Effect: Don’t be fooled by its appearance. The way it looks ensures that you can carry it in any situation. Even the most experienced police dog will be unable to discover it. Transforms into your favorite river crab. Just eat it to trigger its effect.

It was an item perfect for Bruno and was probably the dream item of all drug addicts. Combined with his inexplicable ability, he could get high anytime, anywhere with no ramifications whatsoever. On the other hand, an item like this would be useless to Zhang Heng. After checking out Bruno's game items, Zhang Heng turned his attention to the three items Jia Lai once possessed. Jia Lai had already completed eleven games, and it came as no surprise that he was the most experienced player among the seven. If not for Zhang Heng, there was a high probability he would be the one to complete the Apollo Training Camp quest.

As compared to Bruno, his game items were of way better quality, it's lowest being D-grade. Among them, there were two C-grades, but unfortunately, one had reached its maximum number of uses. The wooden whistle that allowed its user to communicate with animals had reached its maximum uses. This item had been snatched from Zhen Xiong and was Jia Lai's trump card in his final duel with Zhang Heng amid the sandstorm. That was the last time this game item was used, and now, its status was similar to Shadow Moment. Both items were technically useless right now.

Nonetheless, another grade C-game item was still usable. Zhang Heng, however, was more interested in that grade D-game item.

[Name: Filter Lens]

(Grade: D)

[Effect: Field of vision within 300 meters will remain unaffected by light and environmental factors.]

In other words, the item granted its user a completely unobstructed view. Not only would the player see clearly in extreme environments, but it doubled as night vision goggles. In fact, it had a more potent effect, allowing the user to see in color instead of the monochrome green. Although it had a range of only 300 meters, it was more than enough to handle most situations. Most importantly, it would pair well with Zhang Heng's shooting and archery, especially when using his Paris Arrow. In other words, he would almost never miss any target within a range of 300 meters.

As for the last grade-C item, it was similar to what Zhang Heng previously expected. An item used to predict the weather, it gave its user an accurate weather report for the next seven days. But the best part about it was that it allowed its holder to choose two out of seven days and exchanged their weather. This one had three more uses in it.

Those were all the game items Zhang Heng acquired from his previous quest, and if they were sold for game points, he could at least gain a thousand points. It was by far his most profitable yield.

Not planning to wait until the auction at the end year, he contacted Ding Si right away, asking Fulou to help sell the Portable Mighty River Crab he would never use. The rest of the game items were temporarily placed in a cardboard box under his bed.

After dealing with the package, Zhang Heng changed into sportswear. He was about to go out for a morning run when he ran into Tian Tian's father in the aisle. He had just returned home, looking weary and exhausted. Seeming as if he had spent the entire night awake, he forced out half a smile when he saw Zhang Heng.

Zhang Heng stopped and asked, "Uncle Chen, you just came back?"

“Auntie Han’s finger was accidentally cut off by a meat grinder last night. I took her to the hospital, and the surgery has just finished.”

Tian Tian’s father sighed. Chinese New Year’s Eve was tomorrow, and everyone a happy family reunion was happening everywhere. Their family, on the other hand, had only encountered one accident after another. Before his daughter’s sudden depression was cured, his father hurt his leg, and now his wife’s finger was broken. Although the doctor managed to reattach the finger, full recovery wasn’t certain, certainly not in the near future, at least.

He took a leave of absence from his workplace to take care of his wife, and having just returned from the hospital after an entire day, he now had to prepare breakfast for his daughter. He was in no mood to elaborate more. As the man sighed, he unlocked the door and entered his house silently.

Zhang Heng frowned. The cursed object responsible for the misfortunate accidents in Tian Tian’s family had been removed. Logically, all accidents should have stopped happening altogether. Now it seemed like it wasn’t the case. Last night happened to be the time for a new round of accidents, and judging by their pattern, they were becoming ever bloodier as well.

The first accident involved slicing through the skin while cutting vegetables. After that, their puppy fell into the water, before Tian Tian’s grandpa broke his leg. Now her mother severed her finger. If this problem failed to be resolved in time, the situation might simply become uncontrollable. Zhang Heng realized that there might be a problem with how he approached the matter, taking out the business card given by the uncle with beach pants. He called the phone number on it and told him he was willing to pay double the fee to speed up the identification process. That same afternoon, the uncle informed him that he would pick up the game item.

Two days later, Zhang Heng returned to the Private Room 2306 of the KTV.

The uncle with beach pants held the eye accessory in one hand and scratched his inner thigh with the other.

“Well, let me put it in this way. This thing might have once been useful, but it can now no longer be considered a game item. I detected some energy residue inside it, but it’s very weak. In fact, it should have lost its effectiveness for quite some time.”

“I know this thing. This is a guardian talisman of the Yasimba tribe in Namibia,” said Jia Jia who was smoking at the side. “It was made by tribe elders and given to children. Its psychic abilities can warn the children of impending danger. However, it would be useless to anyone over eight years *old*.”

Chapter 337 Orange Ice Cream

The evil-looking piece of jewelry turned out to be a protection amulet. The matter had now taken in a completely different path, way beyond what Zhang Heng initially expected.

He thought all along that the series of mishaps befalling Tian Tian’s household were related to her paintings, where they seemed to serve as warnings. By using this method, she intended to tell those around her about the impending threats. Unfortunately, no one noticed it. Perhaps, she attempted to tell the people around her, but no one believed her, thinking that these were all mere coincidences.

After therapy, she stopped sharing these paintings until Zhang Heng accidentally discovered them. As for the last picture of her hiding under the bed, the evil eye must have been referring to Zhang Heng, the intruder, and not the guardian talisman. When Zhang Heng bent down and looked under the bed, his eyes appeared before Tian Tian, automatically fulfilling the painting's prophecy.

As a result, Zhang Heng's previous investigation strayed in the wrong direction. Tian Tian appeared to have nothing to do with the awful string of mishaps. No, that couldn't be right. She was undoubtedly related to this matter, but despite that, she was also the only one in her family that remained unharmed. Why?

Whoever or whatever that had been attacking Tian Tian's family clearly harbored a great deal of malice toward them. But why then was Tian Tian unhurt? Was it because she was still young? Zhang Heng did not think so. How could someone cruel be enough to hurt a pet dog but spare someone's life because of age?

He must be missing something important. While thinking about this issue, Zhang Heng walked home, and on the way, he received a phone call from his mother. She was craving ice cream and specified that it had to be an orange flavor. So, he detoured to a nearby Wal-Mart and tried to look for the orange-flavored ice cream in the freezer. Alas, there wasn't any, and in the end, he bought her a box of original-flavored ice cream and a bag of oranges.

When returning home, Zhang Heng met the little girl who visited Tian Tian. She stood by her window and was peering into the room with its curtains drawn. Suddenly, the girl sensed someone approaching her from behind. She quickly turned around to leave, only to be stopped by Zhang Heng. "Are you a friend from Tian Tian's homeroom? What's your name, and do you also live in this community?"

The little girl took two cautious steps back and ran away without saying anything. Zhang Heng didn't go after her. He just stood there and watched the little girl get further and further away from him. Parents would usually instruct girls her age to never talk to strangers under any circumstances, and was hence unsurprised by her reaction. Although she disclosed nothing to Zhang Heng, he was now sure that she lived around this area.

Kids her age were typically only allowed to move around in the courtyard of the same building since most residents knew each other, and it was considered as a safe and familiar environment.

In fact, this was the third time Zhang Heng saw her in less than a week. The first time she was there, she had entered Tian Tian's house to visit her, but in her last two visits, she just stood outside the house and looked through the window. Judging by how comfortable she was around the house, she must be in good terms with Tian Tian.

A close mate? Zhang Heng stopped staring at the little girl. He took the ice cream and oranges with him and headed home first. When he opened the door, he saw his mother sitting on the couch barefoot with her legs crossed. The controller in her hand made clicked noisily as she played King of Fighters with his dad. However, the Kyo Kusanagi she controlled was crushed by Athena Asamiya, no thanks to his father, and she was clearly losing the game. When she saw Zhang Heng coming in, she immediately tossed the controller away and yelled, "Yay! My ice cream is here! You're lucky this round... we'll fight again after

eating.” However, after unwrapping the ice cream enthusiastically, she was disappointed when she discovered it was original-flavored.

“Where is my orange-flavored ice cream?!”

Zhang Heng then threw an orange at her.

“Here, just eat this orange. There was no orange-flavored ice cream in the supermarket.”

Zhang Heng’s mother held the orange in her hand and became lost in thought.

“Aren’t you a little too cruel to your mother?”

Zhang Heng’s father attempted to uphold justice for his wife.

“Why not go out again and find her orange ice cream this time?” he said.

Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

“Forget it. This looks pretty good. It’s natural, no additives or artificial flavoring.”

“By the way, tell grandpa not to cook my share of food when he comes back later tonight.”

“Ah... we finally returned to China, and we haven’t spent much time together. Why are you going out every day?” Zhang Heng’s mother seemed to have a hard time accepting the new reality. While peeling her orange, she continued to complain about how he was always missing from the house. “Don’t youngsters these days prefer to stay home alone instead of socializing?” she sighed.

“I have something to do, and I’ll be home once it’s settled. Also, your stomach is not built to handle too much ice cream. Control yourself,” Zhang Heng warned.

“Hehe... you still remember that, huh, my son?”

Zhang Heng’s mother smiled, now appearing to be a little happier after not getting the flavor she wanted.

It was now daytime, and Zhang Heng headed the game’s checkpoint. It was inevitable that he was spotted by many, and so, took the long road back home. To be safe, he had changed into a new set of clothes. He then called Qin Zhen, a good friend of his since childhood. Having studied in the same junior high school, their friendship was still strong up to this day. On the other end of the phone, Qin Zhen gasped. “You’re thinking of asking Liu Ming to meet us? And you are asking him to bring his sister with him?! Hold on. I’m a little confused. Are you asking for Liu Ming or his sister? She’s just enrolled in elementary school! Dude, you sure are desperate for a girlfriend, aren’t you?”

“What the hell are you thinking? I just need to ask her some questions!”

Before this, Zhang Heng found out about Tian Tian’s school and class through her workbook, discovering that the little girl who visited her looked exactly like the person in the photo he saw on social media. This was no coincidence since all the kids in the area would attend the nearest elementary school. Many of Zhang Heng’s previous friends were living nearby as well. However, he did not know Liu Ming too well. They walked home together a few times when they were in the same junior high school, but that was about it.

On the other hand, Qin Zhen and Liu Ming often played basketball together. Liu Ming was the one who uploaded the photo on social media. In the picture, he was helping his sister complete some homework.

The caption of the photo was – What sort of elementary school question is this?! Even I can't solve this. I feel my intelligence getting lower.

Zhang Heng wanted to learn more about Tian Tian's situation at school. Her parents had previously investigated the matter and ruled out the possibility of bullying. Their investigation, however, was focussed solely on ordinary human beings. Even if they found something they couldn't explain, they would have just forgotten about it. So Zhang Heng decided to recollect all the information to see if they missed anything.

The fact that Liu Ming's sister was in the same class as Tian Tian saved him a lot of trouble.

"Help me make an appointment with Liu Ming for dinner. Ask him to bring his sister with him. I'll foot the bill," Zhang Heng said.

"Okay... but if you dare mess with his sister, don't blame me if I hunt you down."

Chapter 338 Center of the World

Late that night, while taking out the garbage, Peng Jiating couldn't help but walk up to Tian Tian's window again. She had passed the same window countless times, and each time, she would stop in front of it.

Before Tian Tian's existence, she was the girl that everyone envied.

She hailed from a happy and wholesome family. Her father, a senior engineer, often went abroad for work, and whenever he came back, he would have the latest gadgets that enabled her to brag in front of her friends. Coupled with her sweet appearance and excellent grades, she had always been the little princess everyone aspired to be.

Until one day, the girl named Tian Tian appeared out of nowhere. She dazzled with a sparkle from the get-go, and like the brightest star in the room, she subconsciously stole the light away. Peng Jiating discovered that Tian Tian had everything that she had, where in some cases, her belongings were even better than what she owned. Tian Tian's father had a better job than her dad as well. Being in a higher position, he got to travel abroad more frequently. Tian Tian was also prettier than her, and she performed better academically too, not to mention how her classmates decisively elected her as the class monitor as soon as she enrolled in the school.

Besides, the things she did not have, Tian Tian had all it all. Peng Jiating's parents divorced when she was only a toddler. Her father took custody of her and subsequently married another woman. Soon after that, she was granted with a half-brother. Her grandparents, on the other hand, seemed to have their favor upon the little boy, preferring to devote their time to him instead. Of course, the treatment from her stepmother was in no way awful, but it was only because she didn't want the infamous reputation of a 'vicious stepmother.' The sad truth was, she did not show her stepdaughter much love. Her father was the only one who truly cared about her, but unfortunately, he was rarely home.

No one knew that the little princess whom everyone adored at school had actually been sorely neglected at home. Nonetheless, Peng Jiating chose to bear the pain for the sole reason that school was her last piece of haven.

There, she could become a little princess again, and just like Cinderella and her crystal shoes, she could enjoy the envy and praises of others, becoming the focal point of everyone around her. This rare sensation of being wanted, this attention she longed for, meant everything to her.

However, Tian Tian's arrival seemed to have blocked out whatever attention she so desperately needed. Whether deliberate or not, Tian Tian ruthlessly sucked away the light and warmth that used to be hers. She was now the model student in the eyes of the teachers and the personality her classmates vied for. Every single thing she did, every move she made, never failed to attract interest, even imitation, in some cases.

"Tian Tian wore new shoes today. They look so good; I want them too!"

"Tian Tian having double ponytails is as cute as an angel!" "Tian Tian was almost late today. She ran into the classroom while panting. That flush on her face was so beautiful, so rosy!"

"Tian Tian, what's today's homework?"

"Tian Tian, mind if I borrow your eraser?"

"Tian Tian, can you speak with the Chinese teacher and get her to give us less homework? They always listen to what you say..."

"Tian Tian... Tian Tian... Tian Tian..."

Why was this god-forsaken name everywhere? Even students with the most miserable results were deliberately mischievous just to attract Tian Tian's attention, those stupid and silly actions all for a reprimand by Tian Tian. She would ask them sternly to pay attention in class, and the boys would smile stupidly for the rest of the day. Apparently, a scolding could be a reward to some.

Peng Jiating went as far as distributing Belgian chocolates her father had bought her among her classmates. In the past, everyone would be grateful for what she did. They would praise her for having such a good and generous father. This time, however, she received a very different response.

"What... it tastes pretty normal, nowhere near as good as the ones Tian Tian brought us. Did your father buy fake Belgian chocolates?"

Peng Jiating grasped the pencil so hard her fingers turned a deathly white. She hated her younger brother, hated her grandfather and her grandmother for always loving him more. She hated her father, who was never home and hated her mother who left her. Despite all of that, she had never loathed another person so badly, not until now at least.

The hatred she harbored toward Tian Tian overflowed from her every vein, dying to burst out of her body at any given moment.

Why?! Why were some born to this world with everything given to them?

It was as if all the happiness in the entire universe had been collected and dumped on Tian Tian alone. How could the world be this unfair? Just thinking about it almost drove her to insanity.

“So, is this the outcome you wanted?”

Peng Jiating suddenly heard a voice could be heard a voice coming from behind. She turned around to find the young man that she had met in the afternoon. Peng Jiating did not like him, especially his eyes. It was as he could see right through her as if he knew what she was thinking. Once again, she rapidly shifted away and attempted to leave like the last time.

“You know what will happen next. Her parents, grandpa, grandma... they will die one by one, and she will live a miserable life as you wish. She will then be adopted by other relatives, and you’ll be left alone. She may transfer to another school, or worse, can no longer adapt to life at school. But I guess you don’t care about these things, eh? Unfortunately, after spending so much effort and energy into destroying her life, you still won’t get what you want,” said Zhang Heng.

Peng Jiating stopped. Obviously, Zhang Heng’s words had caught her attention.

“You don’t know what you look like in the eyes of others, right?” Zhang Heng went on, his voice extraordinarily icy in the quiet night’s breeze. “In fact, no one has ever liked you before. The reason why your classmates even complimented you was because of all the imported snacks they got from you. To them, you no more but a clown. Each day after school, you’ll be last in your entire class to be picked up. Nobody ever sits with you at lunch in the cafeteria. You thought you hid it well, but everyone actually knows your family’s real situation. They know your dad and mom are divorced, and that your grandparents shower your brother with all the love they could give.

“No one cares about your existence. Even if Tian Tian didn’t exist, there would be Lily and Nan Nan. There will always be more popular people than you...” Zhang Heng paused. “Don’t believe me? Think I’m just trying to scare you? Is it because I am not your classmate? Think I really don’t know you and the people around you? That’s okay. You know what? I found someone who actually knows you.”

The moment Zhang Heng was done talking, a small kid came out from behind him, a tangled expression on her face. She was Liu Ming’s younger sister, Liu Yuwei, and she was in the same class as Peng Jiating and Tian Tian. After Peng Jiating saw her, her breathing gradually sped up.

Liu Yuwei then opened her mouth, “I... I’m actually a little afraid of you.”

This sentence alone seemed to have sucked all the energy out of her, the girl quickly disappearing behind Zhang Heng once she was done talking.

Peng Jiating’s face became pale. Zhang Heng was right about her. Peng Jiating did not quite believe what he said earlier, and the inconvenient truths rattled her to the core. Rage began boiling in her blood, and it wasn’t until Liu Yuwei showed up that she started to awaken from her dream.

She had to now face reality, one that would graze the very depths of her soul. It was one she had been trying to avoid for the longest time. Now being forced to face her inner demons, the reality that no one in this world liked her finally sank in.

Chapter 339 Come Along If You Can Keep Up

“Are you sure... it’s okay?” Liu Meng asked as he watched Peng Jiating running away, a worried look on his face.

Qin Zhen, who had been watching on the side, was also gaping. “I have to do this. The only way to find out what she’s been hiding is to drive her into a corner,” Zhang Heng vaguely replied, not explaining any further. He turned to Liu Yuwei and said, “Thank you for your cooperation. You can all go home now. I’ll take care of the rest.” “Will she be okay?” Liu Yuwei looked concerned. “Who? Tian Tian or Peng Jiating?”

“Both of them.”

“I don’t know. I’ll try my best,” Zhang Heng answered.

Liu Yuwei plucked up the courage to speak again. “Before this, I’ve never... told anyone in school about Peng Jiating’s family,” she blurted.

“I know.” Zhang Heng patted her on the head and told Liu Meng, “It’s late. Bring your sister home.”

“What about me? Can I stay and help?” Qin Zhen volunteered.

“Go home. You’ve already done your part. I’ll handle the next part myself.”

“One extra person, one more helper for you,” Qin Zhen brazenly replied. He saw how foggy tonight’s incident was, and until he really understood it, it would be like that itch he could not scratch. Until now, all he saw was Zhang Heng coming up with whatever he had to criticize a primary school student, and Zhang Heng had made it clear that he did not intend to explain why.

It was like watching a TV series or reading a really good book halfway before the director or author decided to cut it short and discontinue it without warning.

Zhang Heng glanced at Qin Zhen. “Whatever, come along if you think you can keep up.” “Alright.” Qin Zhen couldn’t help but get excited the moment he heard the word ‘whatever,’ completely ignoring the rest of the sentence. He had always been physically fit – part of his school’s basketball team in high school and in college. Weekly training was compulsory, and as a result, he was much fitter than Zhang Heng before he even graduated high school.

With that, Qin Zhen confidently believed that it shouldn’t be a problem for him to keep up with Zhang Heng. In fact, Zhang Heng wasn’t that fast and didn’t seem to be in a hurry. He kept a normal pace until they reached Peng Jiating’s house.

“So, what next? What should we do?” Qin Zhen was curious.

Unlike Tian Tian, Peng Jiating’s house was on the fifth floor, the highest level of the micro-district.

Zhang Heng emphasized that he wasn’t about to make contact with Peng Jiating’s family. Puzzled, Qin Zhen instantly asked how he planned to get to her.

Zhang Heng did not answer. Instead, he walked to the north side of the building that faced a dry pond. Street lamps around the area were no longer turned on to save on electricity, making the entire place pitch black at night. This would be the perfect hideout for someone who really didn’t want to be seen.

While keeping his eyes peeled on the top of the building, Zhang Heng placed a foot on an air conditioner compressor and pushed himself up with the other, eventually managing to grab onto the eaves of the second floor.

“Hey, are you serious?” Qin Zhen was taken aback. It was now clear that Zhang Heng planned to climb all the way to the top of the building. But then again, it was way too dangerous – to the average Joe, it looked no different from climbing the Stawamus Chieftain Rock.

Zhang Heng answered, “Really? You had to shout that loud? You’re attracting everyone’s attention!” As he talked, his hands and feet did not stop, and before long, he had already reached the third floor.

Qin Zhen finally understood why Zhang Heng said ‘if you could keep up.’ He looked up the building, feeling as if he was watching Spiderman scale a wall.

Zhang Heng left Qin Zhen downstairs. His Level 1 climbing skills were enough for him to cope with the situation. Quickly, he arrived on the fifth floor without much effort. The entire process took him only less than ninety seconds.

To Zhang Heng, getting to Peng Jiating’s house on the top floor was a lot easier than getting into Tian Tian’s place since the latter’s windows were welded with security grills. Considering how high Peng Jiating’s house was above the ground, such preventive measures weren’t necessary.

Zhang Heng changed position and moved his left foot from the air-conditioner compressor to the window sill. He then swung his body over. Qin Feng, nervously watching from below, nearly bit his tongue off.

Zhang Heng had never been to Peng Jiating’s house, and he didn’t know the exact location of her unit. His only option was to search through all of them. Thankfully, it shouldn’t take much time. Even though there were curtains blocking his view, all he had to do was press his ears against the glass to find out whose unit it belonged to.

Finally, Zhang Heng stopped at the window of a quiet, unlit unit.

The window was locked by a very common crescent lock, which wasn’t very secure at all. All one had to do was push the window hard enough from the outside. Once a gap was created between the two panes, the lock would loosen.

Zhang Heng tried to do it as quietly as possible, but thanks to the old rusted bolts and nuts, they began creaking loudly. Fortunately, whoever that was inside the house seemed oblivious to the noise.

Zhang Heng sneaked in through the window. Just like what he told Liu Meng and Qin Zhen, he had deliberately provoked Peng Jiating, letting her believe that no one in the world cared about her so he could see what she had been hiding. After all, Peng Jiating was just a normal kid. Even if she hated Tian Tian to the core, it was impossible that she caused all the mishaps in Tian Tian’s family.

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To do that, she obviously got ‘help’ from an external source. Of course, Zhang Heng could always choose to search Peng Jiating’s room during his Still Hours, but with the protection of the talisman, he wasn’t sure if whatever he found was the root cause of the accidents. Only when Peng Jiating genuinely felt abandoned by the whole world would she seek the thing out.

Like a drowning person grasping at the last straw in front of them, this anomaly was the only kind thing left in the world to her.

Even though he had come somewhat prepared, the scene behind the curtain still took Zhang Heng by surprise.

Peng Jiating was lying on her bed, eyes closed and completely naked except for tiny scales that covered her entire body like crocodile skin. There were even two sharp spikes under her lower abdomen.

This extremely peculiar sight had Zhang Heng wondering if Peng Jiating was a human or a mutant.

He took two steps forward and approached the bed. Peng Jiating's eyes suddenly popped open, and she pounced at him!

Zhang Heng calmly but swiftly stretched out his right hand from his pocket. Something flashed, and he struck Peng Jiating's forehead with the handle of the knife. At the same time, to avoid the ineffectiveness of conventional physical attacks, Zhang Heng deliberately took half a step backward.

However, it turned out that he overthought things. Although Peng Jiating's physical appearance had changed drastically, other than being a little more agile than the average person, her human weaknesses still remained. She immediately passed out after Zhang Heng attacked her.

Chapter 340 You Need To Do Better

"Thank you so much. It's a total of 100 game points."

In the hotel room, the uncle with beach pants threw a candy that was smothered with gastric acid into the soapbox beside him. He then pulled off his medical gloves and walked out of the bathroom.

"She should be fine for now. The wound on her stomach won't affect her movement, and the scar will disappear after three days."

"Will she return to her old self?" Zhang Heng asked as he looked at Peng Jiating, still lying unconscious in the bathtub. She was already dressed, and he had no idea how the uncle performed the surgery on her. Her abdomen had been cut open, but there was almost no blood on her, not to mention that it only took him fifteen minutes to stitch her back up.

One hundred game points was a tall order for most players, about four million yuan if converted into RMB. Zhang Heng thought the price was acceptable. After bringing Peng Jiating out of the room, Zhang Heng contacted the uncle. The two had agreed to meet at a hotel, where the uncle would deal with Peng Jiating's condition.

"Don't worry. Since I have collected your game points, I will make sure that makes a 100% recovery."

The uncle wiped off the blood from his hands using a towel and pointed at the candy in the soapbox. "The reason why she was like that was because of this thing."

"What is this?"

“Well, under normal circumstances, I should charge you another identification fee, but since we just made a transaction, and as it’s not the first time I have seen this item, I’ll give this information to you for free.”

The uncle with beach pants threw away the towel, opened a bottle of mineral water. He took a big gulp, sighing in satisfaction before speaking to Zhang Heng again.

“About that... have you heard of Leviathan?”

“Leviathan, the monster recorded in the Hebrew Bible?” Zhang Heng frowned.

“Yes. There is a description of it in the Book of Job. It is some kind of sea monster, and it looks like a crocodile. It had hard scales, sharp teeth, spikes on its abdomen, and can also spit fire from its nostrils. Something like that...”

“So she was targeted by Leviathan? Why?” Zhang Heng asked.

He still remembered what he saw in that room. Peng Jiating did look very similar to a Leviathan, except for her neck. Her face hadn’t changed; she couldn’t breathe fire and didn’t possess any pointy teeth as well.

“Because the Leviathan needs her to carry its next generation. Fortunately, you found out about just in time. If the hatching process went to her brain, I wouldn’t have been able to help her then.”

“Hatching?”

The uncle with beach pants scratched his inner thigh again.

“Leviathan is not only recorded in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, it’s now better known by another name.”

“What is it?”

“Envy.”

“You’re talking about the seven deadly sins?” Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, the envy that ranks second among the seven deadly sins from the Catholic religion... the demon that represents it is Leviathan. I don’t know who the kid in the bathtub is or what she has to do with you, but her recent jealousy must have been very severe. Otherwise, the Leviathan wouldn’t have targeted her. During the whole incubation process, the best nourishment for the hatchlings is jealousy. Each and every one of us is jealous of something. Just like when Jia Jia gave you her phone number, I envied your youth, strong body and handsome face ...”

Suddenly, the uncle with beach pants lowered his head, staring at the fat that was surrounding his waist.

“...but such jealousy lasts only a short time. For the average person, it wouldn’t last more than a day or two, far from the amount required for incubation. So, Leviathan wouldn’t choose us as a vessel to hatch its eggs. The incubation process will not be completed if we are dead. Normally, it will only choose those who can complete the incubation process within three to five months.”

“Is the candy over there Leviathan’s egg?”

“Yes, not just candy, but technically anything as long as it could be swallowed into the stomach. Theoretically speaking, even a coin is fine, but more often, it appears in the form of food. Unfortunately, we didn’t get to 315 to report it,” the uncle shrugged. “The Leviathan was attracted to the host’s jealousy. When the egg is deposited into the host, it will further enhance their jealousy.”

“Thank you,” Zhang Heng said.

“You’re welcome. After all, you paid for the service.” The uncle with beach pants was unwilling to give in after knowing that Zhang Heng was rich in-game points. He then switched to another topic, his instincts as a merchant kicking in.

“Since you have so many points, why not consider our exclusive service? Before you say anything, I solemnly guarantee that you won’t regret trying it. What I’m about to propose is completely different from whatever you have experienced before. It is like a brand new adventure, and it is rare that Jia Jia is so interested in you. The last time I saw her so interested in someone was probably more than 20 years ago. Besides, let me tell you a secret...”

The uncle lowered his voice, looking around him at the same time. “Don’t tell anyone, but the player who brought Jia Jia out of the game didn’t get to sleep with her! Of course, everyone thought they both did it, but that’s just not true. The players aren’t the ones who get to choose. Jia Jia only sleeps with those she is interested in! You get what I mean, right? This is a very, very rare opportunity. I would say it’s easily more difficult than running for the president. Now, the president of the United States changes every four years. It took 20 years for Jia Jia to find someone she is interested in!”

“Uh... I am very grateful and honored that she is interested in me, but I think I am good for now,” Zhang Heng said.

After sending off the uncle with beach pants, Zhang Heng glanced at the watch on his wrist. There were only a few minutes left before the stroke of midnight. So, he stood there and waited until the world came to a pause before carrying Peng Jiating back to her residence. Zhang Heng put her on her bed after he entered her room.

Before he left, he walked to the desk and picked up a pencil.

“If you really care about your daughter, you should have noticed how neglected she has been. Love and care are not something that could be replaced with gifts each time you return from abroad. She’s unhappy when you’re away. I know that life is not easy. We all face our own challenges, but as a father, you need to do better. It’s your responsibility – from a friendly onlooker.”

After that, Zhang Heng slit the note in Peng Jiating’s father’s wallet. He turned off the lights, then left the house.