

## 48 Hours 391

### Chapter 391 CTOS

People often equated geeks to hackers, but there were certain nuances between them.

An American slang, the word geek was originally used to describe people who were passionate about one or specific fields and invested a lot of time in its research—mostly in the electronics field. In the beginning, the word carried a derogatory connotation, and in the early days of the P-revolution, the term was then extended to hackers, also with a negative overtone.

Nowadays, however, especially since the rise of Silicone Valley bigwigs like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, the term ‘geek’ was given a new meaning. It began to be labeled as a person who was free, creative, and breaking stereotypes. Indeed, geeks were such a group of people. They were the adventurers on the Internet, the hardware enthusiasts, hackers, technologists, programmers, engineers...

“Simply put, you can be anyone—you only have to stick to our principle and you can join the 01 guerrillas,” Philip said. “Of course, most of those who join us are from computer-related fields, though we’ve always hoped that some cheerleader girl or dancer would join us.”

“We have a secret forum of our own, with a self-developed instant messaging software. Over there, we usually discuss technical problems. You can also post about problems you encounter and wait for someone to answer it, or simply show off your skills. The people there are all very nice.” “Is Edward part your crew?” Zhang Heng asked.

“No, Edward, he... he’s not one of us,” replied Ponytail.

Zhang Heng raised an eyebrow at the statement.

“About a year ago, Edward hacked into our forum, the website that we built together.”

Waldo still looked surprised at the mention of this incident.

“Was it supposed to be difficult?”

“Erm, not really. It’s a little easier than hacking into the government’s defense systems,” Philip answered, “The most important thing is that he did it without anyone realizing it. If he hadn’t left us a message after the fact, we wouldn’t even have known that he was there.” “What message?”

“Initially, it was just something of a greeting. You know, hackers appear to be low-key, but, the fact is that most of them desire attention—especially when they manage to hack into really difficult places, they tend to leave a little something. For example, I know a guy who snuck into the HR system of the telecom giant Société française du radiotéléphone (SFR) before sending sent a little red flower to all the employees who were working overtime that night.”

“Hah!”

“That guy did exactly the same. He left a pixel map of Pac-Man, but it was very small, located on the lower right corner of the homepage. Unless you paid close attention, you won’t be able to see it. Anyway, that was the first time we met Edward. After that, we built a new firewall and encryption system, but the guy still managed to get in.”

“Were you guys angry?”

The man with the ponytail adjusted his glasses. “Angry? No, no, no. It was like an interesting game for us. We enjoyed the feeling of playing against him. So, we revamped the forum, and you can probably guess already—he beat us again. But throughout the whole process, we were all having fun. And it was from then onwards, that we began to have further communication.

“We always thought that ‘Edward’ was a group like us, but the truth gave us the shock of our lives. He said that he was Edward, and he was the only one in his ‘team.’ He told us that he was hired by a very powerful organization and was doing something very cool, something that could turn the world upside down. Once successful, the project was supposed to radically change the way everyone lived and traveled. Of course, Edward always kept his address and work confidential.

“We didn’t take the matter too seriously at the beginning, because, you know, hackers... Who doesn’t like to brag? People always talk about how great they were in the past, but the fact is, they are not even half as good as what they claim to be. I have to admit that Edward is very good at what he does. Heck, it wouldn’t be hyperbole to say that he is the best I’ve ever seen, but to say that he was going to turn the world upside down was just a little bit too over the top. But that aside, we were happy to make a new friend.

“From then on, Edward would often drop by the forum and blow his own trumpet, occasionally relaying recent happenings. Most of it, though, was just about how short the executives’ skirts were on that day, or how awful lunch was. He was always a very contract-abiding guy and never discussed work to us. Until one month ago, we suddenly received a message from him saying that he didn’t know if he was doing the right thing...”

Philip barged in, “I asked him what happened, and if he’d been under a lot of stress at work lately, but he never replied. About a week later, he suddenly contacted me and told me that he escaped and had a very important thing on him. I asked him what it was, and he sent me a document. I could tell from that document that something might have really gone wrong.” “How so?”

Philip glanced around the room and lowered his voice. “It’s a program called TOS. They are planning to build a powerful central control system that will connect all public facilities in the city to the network. It’s like installing a brain for the city-gaining insight into hidden laws that cannot be seen with the naked eye from the massive amounts of data it collects. This could solve problems that decision-makers have always faced due to limited information, such as coming up with partially optimal strategies and not globally optimal solutions. Through millions of precise and meticulous calculations, the program can intelligently reallocate public resources to avoid waste.

“I’ll give you an analogy—once all traffic lights at all intersections are connected to the network, you can recalculate the optimal time allocation for each individual signal light to save travel time. Should an accident occur on the road, the brain of the city will alert the hospital directly so an ambulance could arrive at the scene in the shortest time possible.”

“Sounds pretty good...”

“Yes, that’s what Edward thought too at first. But later on, he discovered that TOS actually had a secret agenda. Once the system had been set up, not only would information from the public facilities be

automatically gathered, it would also actively gather personal data from every citizen—your phone messages, medical records, medical insurance numbers, criminal records, favorite websites, the friends you chat with, browsing records, chat content, and every bloody time you use a credit card—all of those things would be collected by it.”

“It’s a disaster,” Ponytail lamented.

“Yes. This means that in the future, every move we make will be under surveillance. We will have no privacy at all—even our rooms would be full of cameras,” Waldo became unusually serious, “You won’t know when they are going to hack into your phone, or even your drone...”

“...and if the development of the system continues, things may only get worse. This is only the first stage. In the second stage, TOS will analyze and predict everyone’s tendency to be dangerous. While it’s a great concept, being able to stop a crime before it even happens, we don’t know what algorithms are used to calculate this tendency. Without restraints, we could all end up labeled as dangerous people!”

### **Chapter 392 Sincerity**

“Edward was certainly no low-ranking Black Nest member, having key evidence in his hand that proved CTOS was not only used in public facilities.”

“It’s okay to hand over the evidence to the police just as it is,” Zhang Heng said.

Ponytail and Philip glanced at each other and sighed, “It would be great if it were so simple. Black Nest has very complicated origins. Although they are a relatively new tech company established only ten years ago, their territory has expanded rapidly all over the world. Throughout Europe, hundreds of small technology companies merged with them, but the source of funds behind the organization has always been a mystery. A mega project like this would be impossible without the help of powerful people. The enemy we are about to face is a behemoth of unprecedented proportions!”

“I’m sorry for what we did to you, but this is a special time. At a time like this, we don’t know who else to trust,” Ponytail apologized.

“Then why do you trust me now?”.

“Mainly... it’s because Little Boy is in your hand,” Waldo hesitated.

“We want to help Edward not only out of friendship but also because we don’t want to live in a closely monitored world. We always say that we can’t have both security and privacy at the same time. Sometimes you have to sacrifice some of your privacy to live safely in this world. Since Berners-Lee founded the World Wide Web, it is still a controversial topic and an ongoing debate. This time, whatever Black Nest Company has done obviously crossed the line. The bottom line is, we can’t stand there and watch it happen anymore. We have to do something about it,” Philip, the security consultant, added, “But first, we must ensure the safety of 01 team members.”

The girl in the baseball cap with the username Little Boy on the forum was still rubbing her bruised wrist caused by Zhang Heng. She stared at him with a hostile glare.

Ponytail looked a bit helpless.

“We don’t believe you, but we don’t have many options,” he said, “When we go against the Black Nest, our only advantage is that our enemy doesn’t know about our existence. Otherwise, Black Nest wouldn’t need to come up with strategies to deal with us; they could just control us directly. In other words, it is highly unlikely that you are siding with them.”

“No, there is another possibility. Black Nest wants to use us to find the whereabouts of Edward,” Little Boy said. This was the first time she spoke in front of Zhang Heng. He finally knew why she chose Little Boy as her username. Not only did she dress up like a boy, but her voice also sounded neutral. As she spoke, she continued staring at Zhang Heng

But what surprised her was that the guy in front of her seemed to be distracted at this vital moment.

Zhang Heng had been thinking about another possibility. A quest with such confrontation between factions had apparent loopholes. For example, players could freely change factions according to the development of the situation at a particular stage of the game. Or, everyone could choose not to join sides at first and agree to all join the same side after meeting. This could significantly reduce the difficulty of the game.

This quest was different from the Apollo Program Training Camp, with no limit on how many players could enter. In theory, as long as everyone chose the same side, everyone would be able to complete this quest.

The system, however, obviously took this loophole into consideration. After the members of the 01 guerrillas finished telling the story about Edward, a familiar voice came into Zhang Heng’s ear, asking him to complete the faction selection within five minutes. He was told that once he chose his side, he wouldn’t be to make any more changes.

Generally speaking, two factors had to be taken into account in the selection of the faction. One was the strength of the faction. For now, CTOS was undoubtedly stronger, and the 01 guerrillas were more like an improvised mob.

The thing that Philip did in the casino was indeed impressive, and in all fairness, they did a good job at the mall as well. Putting aside their mediocre acting skills for a moment, the plans that they had come up so far were still very good. If their opponent weren’t Zhang Heng, they would have probably gotten what they wanted by now. However, this did not change the fact they were in an absolutely disadvantageous position. Since this was a game, the player’s choices greatly impacted the story’s development. Nonetheless, Zhang Heng still hadn’t encountered any players so far.

This didn’t make much sense. If the 01 guerrillas were the key to approaching Edward, it would be impossible that Zhang Heng was the only one who found them. He also didn’t think that crossing paths with Phillip and Justina in the casino was out of pure luck—especially after the conflict between the two and the casino staff at that time. Although many people in the casino noticed the incident, he was the only one who caught up with Philip afterward.

Taking into account the two factions given by the system, Zhang Heng could confirm that the players’ starting points significantly differed from each other. And the clues that everyone encountered had to be different as well. Since players were given a limited time to choose a side, it prevented players from selecting the same faction after the discussion.

In other words, it was easy to choose a side, and Zhang Heng did not need to think about other players too much.

“Putting my problem aside, if you can’t just call the police, how do you plan to stop CTOS then?” Zhang Heng asked Ponytail.

“Edward has contacted several prominent media outlets and famous international documentary directors. He wants to disclose the evidence he has on hand, but it will certainly cause him massive problems. The only reason why he hasn’t been found by the Black Nest yet is that he knows them very well... and he’s managed to hide himself well too. For now, the Black Nest still has a gentle attitude towards him, and they hope that he can return to them soon.

“They value Edward’s talents very much, but everything has a limit, and he’s not completely indispensable to them. The successful launch of CTOS will always be their priority. Once they discover what Edward’s true intentions are, they will not hesitate to treat him as a serious threat. Our task is to ensure that the news can be successfully published, and at the same time, help Edward avoid the Black Nest hunters.”

Ponytail hesitated, but since he had revealed so much, it did not make much sense to keep the rest of the information from Zhang Heng. So, he decided that he would tell him everything. After that, though, he looked at Zhang Heng nervously.

“You told me that you have one more friend, not Edward, and he was supposed to be arrested. Is it true, or did you say that just to get rid of me?”

Waldo scratched his head, “It is a half-truth, and we do have a friend who is in trouble. Our next plan is to rescue him. But not in Rodez. We wanted to use fake news to get rid of you.”

Zhang Heng pondered for a while and looked at the people of the 01 guerrillas in front of him, “I know that there’s a lack of trust between us after what happened earlier. But since we will inevitably continue to work together in the future, allow me to show you my sincerity.”

### **Chapter 393 Team Members**

Waldo’s mod was the best on the plane. Usually, he would not step out of his house, spending most of the time nestling in his mother’s attic. What he needed to do in this operation was very simple. As long as he arrived at the casino before Philip and Justina, he would need to use the pinhole camera hidden within a magazine to record how the poker machines worked. After that, he was required to send the footage back to the team for analysis. It should be an easy and straightforward process.

His only regret was that he did not get a female companion like Philip.

In retrospect, he was compensated by getting to fly first-class to Grenoble. While there, Philip had to visit four separate casinos in three days to hit multiple royal flushes. All the previous missions carried out by the 01 guerrillas were all in the name of accumulating enough funds for the next operation.

In addition to cracking slot machines, oi’s members had also considered cracking ATM machines and hacking shopping websites, using security loopholes to copy an unlimited number of coupons, then selling them to consumers to make more money. That said, this could create a lot of unnecessary trouble for them. Once the loophole was discovered, the coupons would be quickly voidedvoiding

coupons was equivalent to cheating consumer's money, which violated O1's principles. In the end, everyone decided that it was best to squeeze money from the casinos.

Of course, the operation was risky, but since they targeted casinos, they weren't too worried. In Waldo's own words, casinos made money by tricking gamblers into playing games that they could never win, and they were hitting these casinos to avenge the gamblers. Moreover, the game was about picking the right cards, and all they did was to bypass the layers of obstacles and pick the right cards. No matter what, they were not at fault.

Even Philip, the most nervous of the lot, had to admit that it gave him a great deal of pleasure when the confident casino staff used a ROM reader to check on the machine, eventually finding nothing wrong with it. At that time, he felt as if he had outsmarted the entire casino.

In fact, everyone in the O1 was experts in their respective fields, but they rarely used their skills to make money through improper channels. This was their first time hitting a casino, and it was all very exciting for the lot. It wasn't the peak tourist season either; hence there weren't many passengers on the plane. They were only six passengers in this flight's first-class zone, making conversations an ease for the group.

Among the five members of the guerrilla team, Philip and Waldo apart, and Little Boy, whom he later met in the mall, Zhang Heng didn't know much about Ponytail and the guy who had been wrapping himself tightly. They had not talked much in the cafe.

"Semiprime, cryptography expert," Ponytail introduced.

"Semiprime?"

"Yes, if you multiply two prime numbers, you can get a semi-prime number. The calculation process is very simple. The computer can solve it within half a second, but it becomes extremely difficult when you calculate it backward. The larger the number, the calculations required to solve the equation will become more complex as well. Hence, it will take a longer time. Perhaps even hundreds of computers won't be able to complete the equation after hundreds of years. Credit cards and online shopping use this kind of encryption method nowadays. Only you and the bank know the two prime numbers that are used for decoding. This is one of the most secure encryption methods known."

"...but?"

Semiprime smiled. Without elaborating further, he shook hands with Zhang Heng and apologized, "I am dressed up like this because I have albinism. I don't want anyone to see me."

Zhang Heng nodded to express his understanding.

According to Ponytail, O1 actually had one more member, but due to personal reasons, he wasn't able to participate in this operation. He would meet up with the team when the matter at hand had been dealt with.

Those were all the members that made up the O1 guerrillas.

Among them, the one most hostile to Zhang Heng was Little Boy, and although Zhang Heng promised to help save people in exchange for O1's trust, Little Boy still did not buy what he said. She looked at him

cautiously, before turning to look at Ponytail, "Must we let this guy with unknown origins join us? He doesn't fit the spirit of O1, right? And Tom, according to our previous agreement, more than two-thirds of the members must agree before a newcomer can join us."

The ponytailed man smiled bitterly, not knowing how to continue.

Considering the current situation, they could not say no to Zhang Heng even if they disagreed with him joining the O1. As for Zhang Heng, he seemed very calm even at a time like this. After hearing that, he said to Little Boy, "I can make up for your shortcomings."

"Shortcomings? We are the best of the best in our field. The O1 guerrillas are the perfect team, and I believe we can overcome whatever difficulty thrown at us," Little Boy adamantly insisted, obviously unconvinced.

"Technically speaking, you may be right, but you have obvious shortcomings. There are no actors in your team. For example, now, the five of you have no chance of winning against me."

Philip was ashamed, knowing that despite how bad it sounded, Zhang Heng was right. The biggest problem of the O1 guerrillas was that every member there was technical personnel; all professionals working in the background. They had caused quite a bit of trouble dealing with the slot machines, and Phillip couldn't imagine what would happen if they went against Black Nest. After all, not everything could be solved by using their skills.

Little Boy hadn't seen what Zhang Heng could do before, and just as she was about to say something, she felt the cold steel of a metal knife placed on her neck.

Ponytail was shocked, "How did you bring this knife onto the plane? Did you hack the airport security system?"

Waldo, on the other hand, was awestruck, "He is a pro! I learned today that Jason Bourne does exist!"

Suddenly, Little Boy's life flashed before her eyes, and goosebumps started sprouting the moment the knife landed on her skin. But unlike what she had imagined, Zhang Heng did not use this opportunity to threaten her with harsh words, not seeming to have any intention to make her suffer. When Zhang Heng shook his fingers, the knife disappeared.

"This is the quintessence of forming a team," he said, "Everyone has their own forte and weakness. I heard Tom say that you are an excellent communications expert, and I look forward to working with you."

Looking at the palm stretched out before her, Little Boy hesitated for a moment, then stretched out her right hand. She touched Zhang Heng's hand for a second, only to quickly draw it back as if she was afraid of being burned.

"OK, since everyone has known each other, we can now start discussing the plan."

Seeing that the most troublesome problem was being solved quickly, Ponytail was impressed by Zhang Heng's skills. He then turned on his laptop and showed Zhang Heng the photos.

"I remember you told me that it was supposed to be a 'he,'" said Zhang Heng as he looked at the smiling female student in the photo.

“Uhh... because I didn’t know whether if you were an enemy or an ally at that time. You can never be too careful,” Ponytail said, pointing to the girl in the photo, “She is Edward’s sister and the person he cares about the most. After Edward escaped, Black Nest started paying attention to her. Edward was worried that if he released the information he has, the people from Black Nest would definitely attack her. So, we must rescue her first.”

### **Chapter 394 Gaspard**

“Leah, a second-year student in the music department of Pierre Mondès University, wasn’t aware of what happened between her brother Edward and Black Nest. Before Edward left Black Nest, he sent her an encrypted email. Black Nest scrambled to scrunch their brains, trying to crack the encrypted email, only to find a 60-second animation of SpongeBob SquarePants in the end.”

“That’s very Edward,” Little Boy praised.

“So, she doesn’t know that he’s in some kind of trouble, right?”

“Yes,” Ponytail answered, “That’s one of the challenges of this rescue mission. We have no idea who the other one is. I was going to contact Leah earlier on to tell her the truth, but Black Nest is keeping a close eye on her right now. They are monitoring her mobile phone, computer, email, and social networks. They haven’t made a move yet because they plan to use her as bait. If we contact her online, they’ll find out for sure.”

“Our initial plan was to paralyze the network that is monitoring her, but we have no idea how to make her believe us and come with us,” Philip scratched his head, “She might even mistake us for human traffickers...”

“Any more detailed information about her?” Zhang Heng asked as he looked at the blue-haired girl on the screen.

Ponytail looked at Waldo.

“Oh, is it my turn?” The latter gleefully rubbed his palms together as a grin formed across his face. He took out a USB flash drive from his pocket, plugged it into the computer, and clicked on a folder. “What is this?”

“It’s all the social information about her that can be found on the Internet, including blogs, Christmas videos on S, the names of the dogs she likes, boys which she had a crush on in junior high, the specific lipstick brand and color that she uses and lots of other things. We may not be able to contact her, but I can still log in to her social accounts and snoop around.”

Instead of accessing the data he was given, Zhang Heng asked Waldo, “Can I learn how to do that too?”

“Of course, I have dozens of ways to hack into social accounts, some of which don’t even require much knowledge about computers,” Waldo said, brimming with confidence when it came to his area of expertise. Little Boy simply snorted. She had just changed her attitude about Zhang Heng because he took the initiative to make peace, but now that she heard he was interested in hacking social accounts, her opinion of him took a sudden plunge.



Fortunately, Ponytail coughed and interrupted the conversation. "Erm... you should discuss this in private later. Let's just focus on what we need to do now."

Zhang Heng did not object to that, himself needing to learn how to hack so he could continue to investigate the matter that had happened seventeen years ago. It was not urgent, though, having only been less than a day since the game started. Zhang Heng spent the remainder of his time on the plane sifting through information he could find about Leah. By the time they landed, he had a general idea of who she was.

"Disguise as Gaspard?!" Ponytail exclaimed.

"Yes, Gaspard is one of Leah's closest acquaintances. The two met in an online music group a year and a half ago and had sent each other thousands of emails and tens of thousands of text messages. Each of them regards the other as their best friend, and most importantly, they have also never met each other. Leah may not believe us, but Gaspard, on the other hand, could coin up a reason, and she would end up leaving with us."

"That's not a bad idea... but it's not going to be easy to execute," Philip said, subconsciously tugging at his hair. He could not imagine how he could disguise himself as Gaspard. Leah would most probably peg him for a sham before he even had a chance to speak. The other members of the 01 guerrillas might be better actors, but they too had their limitations.

Finally, after a long silence, Zhang Heng said, "I'll do it."

The lemonade Waldo was sipping on nearly escaped his mouth. "You'll do it? You're ASIAN! You're the least likely candidate!"

"Has skin color been a topic of discussion in their emails and messages?"

"Hang on..." Waldo typed in the keywords and found that the pair had discussed living conditions of ethnic minorities and their musical styles, but had never talked about their skin color.

"That may be so, but you don't look French at all, and do you know anything about music? If the topic surfaces, your cover will be blown."

"I've played the piano, but I don't know much about French pop music," Zhang Heng replied, "But don't worry, there won't be a problem tomorrow." He then glanced at his watch. Twenty hours had passed since he started the quest, and based on the game's rate of time-flow, he had another ten hours before he had to enter a parallel quest. There, he would have nearly a year-enough time for him to assimilate with the French, and also learn more about pop music. On top of that, there were the 01 guerrillas backing him up in terms of the logistics.

The plane soon landed at Grenoble airport.

Waldo stretched lazily and reluctantly got off from the first-class seat he was in. Once they had disembarked, he and Semiprime went through the formalities of renting a car, while Ponytail went to pick up the luggage. Philip connected to the WiFi to deal with a few days' worth of accumulated work, leaving Little Boy with Zhang Heng. She made it clear that she wanted no conversation with Zhang Heng as she plugged in her earbuds and started up a game on her console.

Surprisingly, she was playing a very old game -in fact, one might even call it antique.

It was Tetris.

The game was invented in 1984 by a Russian named Alexei Pajitnov. Players could shift, rotate, and place various blocks to form a complete line. When that happened, the line would disappear and the player would be granted points. It once took the world by storm and was popular among all ages.

Little Boy had obviously made some changes to the game's program. Typically, the game's difficulty would increase over time, but the one she was playing started at the most difficult level. The blocks fell from the top like a storm-Little Boy was completely focused, her fingers flying all over the screen, dragging, dropping, and shifting the blocks into place in mere microseconds.

This was one level that put the player's eyesight, speed, and thinking to the ultimate test.

Little Boy lasted for about two and a half minutes before eventually losing.

"Can I try?" Zhang Heng asked.

Little Boy hesitated for a minute, tempted tell him off, but remembered the Ponytail's instructions before he left. He had told her specifically not to get into conflict with Zhang Heng. Finally, she reluctantly handed the game console to Zhang Heng.

### **Chapter 395 Easter Egg**

"Oh, you people are playing this game..."

The checked baggage from first-class were the first to come rolling out on the conveyor belt, which was why Ponytail returned to them reasonably quickly. He saw Zhang Heng holding the game console in his hand and smiled. "This is a traditional game of 01. What is our highest score again?" he asked.

"697216 points," Little Boy spelled out the numbers sternly, "Philip won it. This is not fair. He's a piano player, and his fingers can surely move faster than ordinary people. My best score is very close to him, though." "I can't do it anymore. I keep comin in last. The speed of my fingers and eyesight are not my forte," Ponytail said, "My best record is only 200,000 points, but fortunately, I have Semiprime with me. Luke has played piano before as well. He might be able to challenge Philip's score."

Little Boy did not say anything to bring Zhang Heng down this time, afraid that the mysterious knife would find itself under her neck again. Judging by her less-than-satisfied expression, she obviously disagreed with that statement.

To kill time, Zhang Heng had also played Tetris before when he was a kid. During the first round, Zhang Heng lost really fast. Lasting less than ten seconds, he only got himself 100 points.

However, with the help of this losing round, he started to familiarize himself with the buttons and rules. He performed much better in the second round-although lasting only 20 seconds, he got a total of 3,000 points. The score had Little Boy raising her eyebrows. Even though she didn't like Zhang Heng, she had to admit that his results were impressive for a newcomer.

The members of 01 were good enough to compete with each other, and most of them could achieve a high score in the game. When they first started playing it, they were also confused by the game's mechanics.

However, Zhang Heng was not satisfied with this result. His hand-eye coordination was not recognized as a skill by the system—the reason why it was not displayed on the skill panel — but it was thoroughly put through its paces and had improved greatly during the LEGO quest.

During that period, his speed of assembling bricks had reached an astonishing level. He now knew all the LEGO parts by feel, and could assemble simple objects with his eyes closed. The Tetris blocks, on the other hand, began to drop faster as the level increased similar to LEGO, once familiar with the game, mastering it wouldn't be too difficult. So just ten minutes later, Zhang Heng, who had only played only six games of Tetris, had a score tied to Ponytail. Zhang Heng used the most common method employed by Tetris masters

-he first stacked the blocks high enough, before clearing them all in one go. With that, he would be able to garner the highest score possible. This method greatly tested one's speed, eyesight, and mental state.

To make matters worse, Zhang Heng's ears were continually bombarded by system prompts as he was playing.

[Achieved 5000 points on Tetris's highest difficulty: +3 game points. Visit your character panel to learn more...]

[Achieved 10,000 points on Tetris's highest difficulty: +3 game points. Visit your character panel to learn more...]

[Achieved 30,000 points on Tetris's highest difficulty: +3 game points. Visit your character panel to learn more...]

[Achieved 50,000 points on Tetris's highest difficulty: +5 game points. Visit your character panel to learn more...]

(Achieved 600,000 points on Tetris's highest difficulty: +20 game points. Visit your character panel to learn more...]

Zhang Heng did not expect to earn a whopping 143 game points in 20 minutes. It would have taken him at least a year in a quest to earn that many.

The reason why he borrowed the game console from the Little Boy was that his dexterity had reached an impasse when he practiced assembling LEGO. After observing the methods employed by other builders, he wanted to try it to see if it worked. Unexpectedly, he found a hidden Easter egg.

It would be hard for someone to believe that such a huge reward was hidden within a rudimentary Tetris game. This seemed to have once again confirmed the system's peculiar reward system, something that was way beyond what an ordinary person would guess.

Zhang Heng stopped playing as the car arrived. According to his previous points, if he wanted to achieve a new high score, he had to play until he got 8 million points. It wasn't a good time for him to do so, and

he still had a lot of time for breaking records. Zhang Heng intended to practice a little bit more, challenging the highest score with 999999 points to see what kind of reward the winner would receive.

Little Boy took the game console back, but had no idea what to say about it.

After everyone got in the car, she could hold back no more. "You...how did you do it?" she asked softly.

"I practiced with LEGO," replied Zhang Heng, having no intention to hide the method he used.

Little Boy raised her eyebrows. It was no secret that Zhang Heng carried LEGO bricks with him all the time; hence the answer made perfect sense.

Later, Zhang Heng gave her an impressive demonstration of how to assemble a panda in one minute. Of course, he didn't use his Infinite Building Block. Little Boy was greatly moved by Zhang Heng's demonstration, and judging by her fascinated looks; she planned to go to a LEGO store to get her own set of bricks.

"Let's get to the hotel first, and then I will assign tasks to everyone. We need to choose a good time to execute the plan, and we will also evacuate immediately once we got what we came for. When that happens, I will book an air ticket for Leah. We also have to travel on the highway. Lastly, the team funds are now being managed by Semiprime. You can all ask him for the equipment and tools you need."

After that, Ponytail turned to look at Zhang Heng, "Do you need anything else?"

"I can handle myself," Zhang Heng said.

His Infinite Building Block was enough to deal with most situations. Hence, to prevent others from suspecting him, he chose to do the remainder of the preparations by himself.

Ponytail nodded in reply.

As soon as they were done talking, everyone saw a red Ford overtaking them before abruptly slowing down with malicious intent. Semiprime, who was at the wheel, gasped in shock. Subconsciously, he tried to change lanes, only to find the steering being firmly held by someone's hand.

As if that wasn't enough, Semiprime realized a Citroen pulling up to their side at high-speed, drawing very close to their car. If he had changed lanes just now, his Renault would have collided with it.

The sly Ford ahead of them abruptly braked again, its rear lamps lighting up for a split second before it accelerated once more. "What is going on? Are these people from Black Nest? They have found us... how is this possible?!" Philip groaned in horror and distress.

"It's possible that they are Black Nest, but they are not targeting us," said Zhang Heng as he returned control of the steering wheel to Semiprime. While he spoke, the Citroen continued to speed up, chasing the red Ford.

A thrilling pursuit on the highway had begun, courtesy of the two cars.

"It seems that we are not the only ones who are eyeing Leah," Zhang Heng said. He was mentally prepared for a situation like this, playing competitive single-player mode after all. It was about time he ran into other players.

## Chapter 396 Sit Tight

“Is there anyone else targeting Leah?” Ponytail asked in surprise.

“Has Edward contacted anyone else other than you?” asked Zhang Heng.

“About that... Edward only told us that he needed our help,” Philip scratched his head, “but then again, with his character, there’s a possibility that he has prepared alternatives. After all, he has always believed in not putting all the eggs in the same basket. It’s his investment philosophy.”

“However, this is going to be troublesome. No matter who they are, they have obviously alerted Black Nest. They will definitely become more vigilant after this. This will greatly increase the difficulty of our operations in the future, and I’m afraid that the action plan we have just came up with will have to change again.” A wry smile slowly appeared on Ponytail’s face.

“Opportunities are rare, but since we’ve crossed paths, let’s try to find out a little more about them. It would be great if we can collect some useful information,” Zhang Heng said.

“Who? Black Nest or the person in the Ford?”

“We need to know more about both, but we can’t get too close. Otherwise, they might get suspicious.”

“That shouldn’t not a problem. I have a professional ultra-telephoto lens, and the photos can also be post-processed through software. But they’ve been gone for quite a while now, and I am afraid that we can’t catch up with them,” Ponytail said.

“I can still catch up with them at this distance. Let me drive,” replied Zhang Heng.

“Huh?” Semiprime was stunned.

In 01, the only ones who could drive were Ponytail, Philip, and Zhang Heng. Amongst them, Semiprime had the best driving skills, naturally becoming the team’s official driver. Although his driving skills were better than the other two, he was to be considered an average driver at most.

“You can drive?” Philip was also surprised.

After that, he saw that Zhang Heng and Semiprime had changed positions with each other. The moment Zhang Heng held the steering wheel, his entire posture changed as well.

Little Boy was taken aback when she saw this. Before she could even say a word, Zhang Heng had already stepped on the clutch lightly and shifted into gear. “Sit tight,” he muttered.

The engine roared as he stepped on the pedal, lurching the Renault forward like a prancing wild horse, and throwing everyone back to their seats under the powerful inertia.

“Not good! The road ahead is blocked!” exclaimed Waldo, who was in the passenger seat.

Although the Ford did not cause them to collide with the Citroen, the dangerous pursuit between the two cars had affected other vehicles on the highway, causing a series of accidents and making the situation even more chaotic.

The erratic driving from the two vehicles resulted in a rear-end collision involving four cars, blocking three lanes. Other cars had to avoid the pile-up slowly, and the bottleneck was quickly turning into a jam.

It was no wonder Waldo panicked.

A big truck was moving slowly ahead of them, and at their current speed, the space left by the large truck was not enough for them to change lanes after passing where the accident happened.

“Well, should we... slow down?” Waldo nervously asked Zhang Heng in a trembling voice. He could hear his teeth chattering as he spoke.

“No, we can get past it.” Zhang Heng’s expression was still calm. Not only did he have no intention to slow down, he stepped on the gas even harder, putting the pedal to the metal.

“Are you sure about this?! I haven’t hacked into Scarlett Johansson’s account yet!” Seeing the two vehicles getting closer, Waldo could not help but let out a virgin’s yelp.

Seconds later, Zhang Heng pulled the handbrake and turned the steering wheel. The Renault Scenic’s body drew a beautiful arc, sliding it into the left lane right into the path of one of the cars involved in the accident. Both vehicles got so close that Waldo could actually touch the car’s hood.

At the same time, thanks to Zhang Heng’s lightning fast reactions, he managed to squeeze into the gap between the rear of the truck and the front of the car that was involved in the accident with a perfect estimation of time and angle. If he reacted a second later, everyone would have died in a fatal car crash.

Before the 01 guerrilla team could even catch their breath, they saw Zhang Heng pummeling the Renault into the traffic ahead again.

Ponytail, Philip, and others hurriedly fastened their seat belts for the first time. On the other hand, Waldo, sitting in the front passenger seat, had closed his eyes in despair.

The next five minutes would prove extremely tormenting for Waldo. It wasn’t until he noticed that the car had slowed did he open his eyes. “Is it done? Can I go to the toilet and throw up now?” he asked with a greenish face.

“I just caught up to them, but I can’t go any further. If I get closer, Black Nest’s people will notice us.” Zhang Heng said.

“Enough.”

It happened that the section of the road they were on now wasn’t too congested. Ponytail unbuckled his seat belt, stood up, and poked a camera out of the panoramic sunroof. When he pinpointed the target, he adjusted the focal point and pressed the shutter button.

Not to be outdone, the people from Black Nest were also very cautious. Although they were focusing on the Ford in front of them, the driver could still see some flashes behind him. The moment they turned their heads, Zhang Heng instantly moved the Renault behind a pickup truck.

Ponytail ducked nervously. He couldn’t wait to check the photos he had just captured.

“How did it turn out?” asked the Semiprime on the side.

“We are in luck. I managed to take a picture of the Citroen driver, but I only managed to capture a quarter of the Ford driver’s face,” Ponytail said, before preparing to stand up for a better shot.

Suddenly the red Ford in front of them pulled to the side of the road without any warning. After that, the driver came down from the car and ignoring the surrounding vehicles, he climbed over the fence that was lining the roadside.

It turned out that he had parked beside a bridge that was over a hundred meters above a raging river below it. At such a height, jumping off a bridge was no different than jumping off a tall building. At the same time, the Citroen in pursuit came to a stop as well. Four men with guns subsequently alighted the car and started shouting.

With no hesitation whatsoever, the driver of the red Ford suddenly jumped off the bridge.

The members of O1 were completely stunned. “He... did he just kill himself?” Little Boy asked after a short moment of silence.

“Theoretically, yes.” Zhang Heng said.

Unless he were Captain America, he would have surely been killed by the impact of landing on the water. However, if the driver was a player, he might survive the jump with the help of game items. Naturally, players could achieve wondrous miracles with them.

If the driver of the red Ford really intended to commit suicide, there were many more ways to do it. The easiest way was to ram the Citroen at full force, causing a collision bad enough to kill the occupants of both cars.

Nonetheless, seeing how he chose to abandon the car and jump down from the bridge, there was a low possibility that he was attempting suicide.

### **Chapter 397 La Grenouille Verte**

The “suicide” of the Ford driver impacted the O1 guerillas significantly. To help Edward, they had voluntarily stepped forward, attacking Black Nest’s CTOS Project to uphold justice and protect internet freedom. They were certainly not inspired by superheroes and were simply an ordinary group of people at best. Reality was way crueler than they had thought, especially after seeing four gunned men exiting the Citroen. They finally realized how dangerous this whole thing was, and whether they wanted it or not, they were now involved in it.

All five attempted to put themselves in the shoes of the driver of the red Ford, deducing that he must have had no other option but to kill himself. It appeared he would rather do that than to beg Black Nest to spare his life.

Everyone in the Renault fell silent.

“Whoever here that’s starting to regret; it’s not too late to quit now.”

Zhang Heng was the one who spoke up, leaving Little Boy clueless as to how someone could still remain so calm at a time like this.

He drove past the accident site at a steady speed, as if nothing had happened.

The members of the O1 guerrillas were undoubtedly excellent in their respective fields. As long as they were assigned to the right task appropriately, they could provide unparalleled technical support. However, Zhang Heng could not force them to participate in something so dangerous. It was better to give them an option to leave now rather than allowing an unsuspecting member to suffer extended psychological damage later on. "Are you kidding me? Do you think such things scare us?" Little Boy was the first to speak up.

Zhang Heng was mindful of not embarrassing her in front of the team. When the Ford driver jumped off the bridge, her body had started shaking. It was probably her first time witnessing somebody 'dying' at such close proximity, and besides, there was a possibility that they too would end up like him. Philip wanted to say something, and even though he had opened his mouth, he decided to keep mum. Nevertheless, the calmest person among the five turned out to be Semiprime, only speaking when necessary. "We already know that this is a dangerous journey, don't we? The right choice is always the hardest choice to make. Think of Assange, Aaron Swartz..."

"No offense, I like Aaron too, but I don't think it's a good time to mention his name," Waldo said, "But I don't plan to leave. I once got into big trouble. Edward helped me settle it, so, for me, this operation is more than simply upholding justice." Philip sighed again. "I can't imagine what my future daughter's life would be like if she lived in a world ruled by CTOS."

"Wait... so, it'll be okay if you get a son?"

"Yes."

Philip thought on it for a while, then affirmed, "Yup... if it is a son, he will be fine."

"I'm glad we have once again reached a consensus," Ponytail said with clasped hands. Amid the group's discussion, he had been working on completing the photo's processing. The man in the picture had a pair of blue eyes and a hooked nose, looking somewhat like a vulture. Ponytail then sent the photo to Waldo.

"Leave it to me," Waldo nodded.

It took him only two minutes before he found the online account of the hooked nosed man, but it took almost twenty to hack into his account. "Are you in trouble?"

"Give me five more minutes," replied Waldo. He didn't look up, eyes focussed on the screen and his fingers busily tapping away on the keyboard.

"Okay!"

Five minutes later, Waldo finally let out a sigh of relief. "Vincent Naceri. This guy is ruthless. His parents are not French. He grew up in Belgium and joined the foreign mercenary army when he was 19, stayed there for five years, before disappearing for three years. There were rumors that he was doing the Seventh Division's bidding, dealing with things the government didn't want to get their hands dirty with.

"I just hacked into the Seventh Division's system, and the rumors are true. This guy killed an entire village, including women and children, in a certain operation in Africa. The government was supposed to



eliminate him in that village, but someone saved him, gave him French citizenship, and asked him to join Black Nest. He is now the leader of Black Nest Secret Operations' second squadron."

"Wait, you hacked into the Seventh Division's system in only twenty-five minutes? Since when you became this good?" Philip frowned.

"Can't you let me brag for a minute? Well, it's actually not that exaggerated. Remember how I kept asking you questions about security last year? I sneaked in during that time, and they didn't find out. It's still there, but I rarely go in for a stroll."

"How about the Ford driver?" Zhang Heng asked, caring more about the person he suspected was a player.

"He covered his face when he abandoned the car, and I only managed to recover a quarter of his face from the side. It wasn't easy to look him up in the system, but it doesn't matter anymore. He's dead," sighed Waldo with outspread hands.

"Black Nest and their goons will find a way to salvage his body and figure his identity," said Ponytail. He had noticed Zhang Heng's particular interest in the driver of the Ford. After thinking for a moment, he said to Little Boy, "We have Vincent's cellphone number. Can you monitor and locate him?"

Little Boy nodded. "He is not a technician," she added, "which means he is not as cautious as us. I can locate and monitor him through an application that has location and voice permissions. Leave it to me; I'll deal with him."

"Is there anything else we need to do?" Ponytail turned to look at Zhang Heng again.

"Thanks, but that would be all for the time being. Let's discuss the rest of the matter after I study to what extent Black Nest controls Leah."

At the same time, the Renault Scenic also drove off the highway, pulling up to the hotel they had booked earlier.

After dinner, the five members of the 01 guerrillas went on to purchase the equipment they needed. Zhang Heng chose to act alone. Since the enemies were extremely powerful, he had to tread lightly. Instead of driving a rented car, he got himself a cab and went to a bar called La Grenouille Verte.

It was 11:54 at night when Zhang Heng entered the bar. Having done his research before he came here, he knew that this is Grenoble's famous gay bar. It was also an extremely rare gay bar with mixed genders as patrons.

Zhang Heng took a seat and ordered a beer. That was when a man with a cowboy hat came to him. He declined the man's request to have a drink together, secretly observing his surroundings.

At 00:32, Leah and her Choking to Death band arrived. According to information collected by Waldo, the band would perform at La Grenouille Verte every Wednesday and Saturday night. As compared to the school, the complicated environment here was more suitable for Zhang Heng to hide.

After a simple warm-up, Leah hugged her bass guitar, and amid cheers from the crowd, she walked up to the microphone. Instead of saying anything, she turned around to the drummer behind her before hugging and kissing the blond girl.

## Chapter 398 Split the Work

Zhang Heng wasn't startled by Leah and the drummer's passionate kiss.

Based on the data Waldo collected, Zhang Heng got to know that Leah was bisexual, meaning she was attracted to both men and women. In junior high, she had a boyfriend who was the captain of the football team. He was her first love. Two months later, however, she found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her with a girl from the cheerleading team. Amid the tumultuous heartbreak, she gradually realized that she was also attracted to girls.

Following that, she had three girlfriends, the blonde drummer being the third. They got together six months ago, and from her correspondence with Gaspard, Zhang Heng could tell that she was also interested in him.

In general, most people looked better in pictures than in person.

Leah was an exception, though, even more beautiful in person. With her iconic short blue hair and piercing eyes as clear as Lake Tignes, she dazzled on the stage, like an ice cube falling into a whisky glass.

But Zhang Heng only looked at her twice before withdrawing his gaze. His focus tonight wouldn't be on her.

Through observation, Zhang Heng was able to determine that Black Nest had sent two of their people to La Grenouille Verte and also controlled the CCTV in the bar. On top of that, there were three other suspicious individuals Zhang Heng was unable to identify.

This was just the set up inside the bar—there would be even more of Black Nest's people stationed outside. Black Nest had obviously invested a lot of resources on Leah. All that was left for them to do was wait for their prey to take the bait.

It had been less than forty minutes since Zhang Heng entered the bar, and he had already rejected three people who attempted to strike a conversation with him. He clearly stuck out like a sore thumb, and if this went on, it would undoubtedly raise Black Nest's suspicions. Knowing that he had been noticed, Zhang Heng paid for his drinks and prepared to make a move.

As he proceeded to the entrance, something stopped him in his tracks. A man with piercings on his right ear caught his eye.

The man was sitting in a three-person booth. His companion opposite him was chatting away, but the man appeared distracted. His eyes would periodically dart to Leah who was on the stage—his surreptitious glances toward the stunning woman told of his attractions.

Zhang Heng only noticed it after watching him for a while.

The man's appeared to be growing more and more annoyed by the minute—not only because the translator he hired for two hundred euros wouldn't stop talking, but more importantly, he had no idea how to take Leah away from Black Nest's watchful eyes.

Just about then, a person abruptly sat down on the empty seat in his booth, not even bothered to say hi.

Before the man with the ear-piercing could say anything, his companion hissed at the newcomer, "What the hell are you doing? Can't you see we're on a date?!"

"I just need a few minutes of your time. I'd like to speak to him," Zhang Heng pointed at the man with the ear-piercing.

"Tell him that he'd better get out of my sight before my fist ends up on his face," the man told his companion in English. He was obviously in a foul mood.

"Your fists better be better than your driving skills," Zhang Heng replied directly to him in English as well.

The man with ear-piercing seemed taken aback. He reached down for something at his waist, but Zhang Heng noticed it and instantly stopped him.

"Do you really want to fight?" the translator growled as he rolled up his sleeves. Unfortunately, his beer belly could have been a little smaller, and his movements a little more subtle.

But the man with ear-piercing said, "That's enough. You can leave now."

"Did you hear that, kid?" Beer Belly hissed at Zhang Heng, trying to look threatening but failing miserably.

"I meant you."

The man with ear-piercing took out 100 euros from his wallet and handed it to the translator. "You did very well. This is the remaining payment. That's all for today."

"Really?" Beer Belly was confounded, glancing back at forth at his client and Zhang Heng. Then, as if something clicked, he smiled meaningfully at the pair, took the cash without protest, and said, "I'll get going then. You guys have fun. You have my number. Call me if you need a translator again."

The man with the ear-piercing waited until the translator left before he continued. "How did you recognize me?"

He spoke in Mandarin, but with the mini rock concert blaring in the background, there was no need to worry about anyone overhearing their conversation.

Zhang Heng pointed at the mole at the man's neck. "I was following you when you were racing with the Black Nest people. It was then that I managed to capture a quarter of your face on the camera. I didn't think I would be able to find you with the photo."

The man with ear-piercing cursed under his breath. Instead of warming up, he glared at Zhang Heng renewed hostility. "Which side are you on?" he asked.

"If I'm standing on Black Nest's side, do you think you'd still be able to walk out of this bar?" Zhang Heng retorted, "Oh, by the way, the whole jumping into the water thing was done beautifully."

"Damn, I didn't expect those guys to be that ruthless! I was only going to kidnap someone to get a picture of the situation, but their backup arrived in ten minutes and killed my friend!"

"Your friend?"

“A police officer who had been investigating online fraud... he got dismissed. He discovered Black Nest through a hacker and found something fishy about CTOS. A guy claiming himself to be Edward contacted him and told him that if he wanted to know the truth, he would have to save L from Black Nest.”

“It looks like we have the same target then,” Zhang Heng nodded. “So, what’s your plan?”

A look of wariness reappeared on the man’s face. “Why don’t you tell me about your plan first?”

“At the moment, it’s going to really difficult for any of us to take Leah under Black Nest’s nose, so the only way around it is for us to work together.”

The situation had now changed. Since the man with the ear-piercing had raised the alarm, Black Nest had increased surveillance and the number of goons around Leah. Zhang Heng really didn’t know what to do in a situation like this, but since he had found a new helper, he might as well seize the chance.

The man thought about it for a while before saying, “Alright, but I’m used to working on my own; I don’t like having someone to slow me down.”

“We can split the work. Each of us will be in charge of one part. That shouldn’t be a problem, right?” Zhang Heng replied.

The man was very cautious, wanting to leave no stone unturned. “So, who’s going to decide how the tasks are divided?” he questioned rhetorically.

“We’ll decide the tasks first, and then you choose.”

The man felt a bit embarrassed when he heard the answer. “Actually... We can throw a dice to make sure it’s fair,” he went on to suggest.

“There’s no need for that. You can go ahead and decide,” Zhang Heng shook his head, “Also, we can use this opportunity to exchange intel. You ask one question, and I’ll ask one.”

Perhaps it was Zhang Heng’s generosity that won the man over. He answered readily, “Fine. Then you ask first.”

### **Chapter 399 I Have Bad News**

“Where did you meet that cyber enforcer?” “On the travel bus, from Toulon to Marseille. He was holding a laptop, and he was the only person on board who could speak English. I had no other choice. How about you?” “Monaco, casino, I met a young couple that hacked poker machines.”

“Do you speak French?”

“Yes.”

“You’re so lucky. It’s nice to enter a quest with no communication barriers,” the man with piercings sounded envious.

Zhang Heng simply smiled.

“Sorry, I just asked two questions. You can

man with piercings was very cautious, he was also very upright and insisted on not taking any advantage.

He was also a relatively alert person. Those who were not cautious wouldn't be able to survive a competitive mode quest. This made Zhang Heng regret his previous proposal about the division of labor.

"Have you met other players?"

"No, I came here from Marseille. You are the first player I met."

The answer of the pierced man also confirmed Zhang Heng's conjecture that each player would be placed far apart from each other. It basically eliminated the possibility of them meeting before the faction selection process. The skin color of every player in this quest was also different. 'Piercings' was a typical white man, and it was only by coincidence that Zhang Heng got to keep his original skin color. Hence, it wasn't realistic to recognize a player by skin color. "You said you kidnapped someone from the Black Nest. What did you ask him?".

"I wanted to know how many people from Black Nest were assigned to capture Leah and how powerful Black Nest's forces in Grenoble are. For the first question, the person that I captured didn't have clearance to know about it. He only told me that those secrets were in the hands of a man named Vincent Naceri. As for the second question, Black Nest's armed forces in Grenoble are not as powerful as I thought they would be. However, they can ask the police to help them when it is necessary. I abandoned the car on the bridge because I was worried that they might notify the police to set up a roadblock."

Then he thought for a while and asked, "How much do you know about Edward?"

"Not much, I only know that he is an important R&D staff member of CTOS. He is supposed to be very skillful, but no one has seen him before, and there are no photos of him either. He said that he would contact us after we rescue Leah."

"My situation is similar," Piercings concurred, "If you know where this guy is, force him to hand over the evidence to you. After that, you can tie him up and bring him away to complete the main quest. We don't need to go through so much trouble." "I have no further questions. Do you have anything else to ask?" Zhang Heng said. "How do I contact you?" Piercings asked.

"Oh, my phone..." before Zhang Heng could finish, his phone screen suddenly lit up, and he received a message.

"I am Little Boy. Please tell me you are not with the man in the picture."

Zhang Heng looked down and saw the Piercing's somewhat blurry face in the attachment. In the photo, he was holding the steering wheel with both hands. "There's bad news," Zhang Heng said. "What's wrong?" Piercings frowned. "Your face was indeed blocked when you jumped off the bridge, but remember how you said that Black Nest could make use of Grenoble's police force? Your face was captured by a high-speed camera."

"Damn!" Piercings was shocked.

By then, Zhang Heng had already sent out a text message— 'hold Vincent off a little longer.'

Three seconds later, Zhang Heng received a reply from the Little Boy, "I turned off his cell phone and blocked the call, but there are other people around him. You can use another phone to request the photo from the police station and send it to his subordinates. Optimistically, you still have 20 seconds to leave the bar."

"We have to go," Zhang Heng put away the phone and said.

The two got up one after the other, attempting to slip out of the bar unnoticed. Moments later, all the bar's patrons suddenly stood up.

Leah said over the microphone, "OK, it's tonight's bonus event! Please hold the hands of the people around you. Don't be shy... it's okay if you don't know each other. We are a family! Let's sing together!" Piercings fiercely glared at a random man in the bar who tried to grab his hand.

However, amid the obstruction by the flow of people, Zhang Heng noticed that the screens of several mobile phones flickered almost simultaneously. Two men were standing near the door, and they reached out and took out their phones from their pockets.

"It's too late," Zhang Heng said. Glancing around him, he spotted a toilet sign. "Go over there!"

Black Nest's goons in the bar had received a photo from Vincent. The person in it looked familiar.

They had been observing every single customer in the bar and had already spotted the man with piercings for a long time now. When they saw the photo, they immediately remembered who the person was. However, when they turned around, the man with piercings had disappeared. The Asian who was with him was gone as well.

The bar was not that big. They had appointed someone to guard the door, and if they failed to locate them after looking around, they would know that they must be in the toilet. Zhang Heng and Piercings were now in the men's toilet. It had no windows; there was an exhaust fan in the southwest corner.

Piercings stepped on the urinal with one foot and placed the other on the wall to remove the exhaust fan mounted around eight feet. He did not expect it to be so firmly installed. As he was just beginning to break a sweat, Zhang Heng tossed a screwdriver to him.

"Really?! The world has people who come to the bar with this kind of stuff on them?"

Piercings were shocked.

"Stop talking nonsense and quickly disassemble it." Zhang Heng had temporarily assembled a screwdriver with the Infinite Building Block. He had tested it before, where if the item was just an ordinary object, the system wouldn't notify players that it was a game item.

In contrast to Piercings, Zhang Heng wasn't that worried if they could leave the bar safely because he still had the Evil Wall with him. If the current method failed, he could melt the wall in front of him right away. The Evil Wall had a limited number of uses, though, so he was reluctant to use it unless it was his last resort. His relationship with Piercings was also limited to this cooperation, and Zhang Heng surely didn't want to expose his trump card so quickly.

As Piercings frantically unscrewed the mountings of the ventilator, Zhang Heng looked for something to block the toilet door. After a while, they heard someone kicking on the door. Fortunately, Piercings had

managed to remove all the screws in time. Seeing that the exhaust fan was now loose, he tossed the screwdriver away and pulled it out with force.

After a short hesitation, he looked at Zhang Heng said, "You go first!" before drawing the pistol from his waist. He then crouched down, aiming in the direction of the toilet's door.

There was no time for niceties. Zhang Heng picked up the screwdriver on the ground, stepped onto Piercings back, and pulled himself into the hole of the vent.

#### **Chapter 400 Homeground**

Zhang Heng climbed out the other side of the vent. In the toilet, the door shook violently, threatening to come apart at any moment. For good measure, Piercings fired two shots to keep the people outside from kicking the door down. Having no desire to fight whoever was on the other side of the door, he quickly climbed up the vent.

Zhang Heng reached out to pull the man out of the vent. When the two of them were clear of the bar, Little Boy sent a third message.

"Vincent will be there in about five minutes, but Black Nest's men have the bar surrounded."

"I see them."

Zhang Heng saw some figures appearing at the entrance of the alley behind the bar. At the same time, the other party spotted Zhang Heng and Piercings as well. One of them immediately pointed his gun and shouted, "Don't move!"

Before he could pull the trigger, the two were already on the other side of the alley, crossing it and turning to the road. This, however, did not mean that they were safe. Other than the ones in the alley, Black Nest's personnel who stood guard outside the bar were now rushing over from the street next door.

"Any plans in mind?" Piercings asked as they ran.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to find a river."

The man clearly had some kind of item that allowed him to jump safely into a river. It caused him to develop the habit of looking for it whenever he was in danger.

"...then we'll probably have to split up," replied Zhang Heng. "Alright. You can go ahead. I can buy you a few more minutes, depending on the situation, though, I cannot guarantee for sure if I'm going to stay. If there is actual danger, I'll have to split first." Piercings handled the gun skillfully, leaving Zhang Heng wondering if the man had got his training in quests or real life.

Zhang Heng preferred the latter because the man had a proper aim. He had probably invested a lot of time and effort honing his skills, not to mention how sharp he was at countersurveillance. Had it not been for the mole on his neck, Zhang Heng would have never recognized the man in the bar. Based on these things, Zhang Heng concluded that the man was very likely a police officer in real life.

The two exchanged numbers. Then, without warning, Piercings suddenly raised his gun and fired a shot at a head that suddenly popped up from behind the alley.

“This is it. Let’s split up now!” As soon as he said that, Piecings ran toward the other side of the street. When he took off, he glanced at where Zhang Heng was standing from the corner of his eyes and saw that he had disappeared.

Piecings blinked. Game item?

He then saw Zhang Heng’s figure above a post office that was closed.

Zhang Heng had already climbed up the metal shelf outside the building and jumped onto the canopy when Piercings raised his gun. The unplastered retro-styled brick wall provided him good grooves and traction, and he took only five seconds to scale to the window sill on the second floor. He proceeded to climb to the top of the building.

The gunshots behind Piercings reminded him that his pursuers were closing in on him. “Seriously?!” he exclaimed with a grunt.

A Dacia Sandero had joined the men in the alley in pursuit of him. Piercings ducked behind a trash can. He could hear the engine drawing closer and closer. He knew that if he were surrounded, he could be in real trouble. He found himself regretting that he tried to be a hero. If he had known that Zhang Heng could climb the wall so quickly, he would have left the responsibility of drawing away their pursuers to him.

It was too late now, though. Piercings raised his weapon again and fired five shots at the window of the café across the street, leaving spiderwebs of cracks on the large glass pane. Then, with gritted teeth, he shielded his head with his leather jacket and rammed the glass window, sending a shower of broken glass on himself and into the coffee shop as he fell in. Ignoring cuts and bruises, he rolled off the ground and sprinted toward the back door.

Zhang Heng looked at the city map on his phone. The Isère river was only one kilometer away-Piecings should be able to make it there without a problem. As Zhang Heng looked on, someone spotted him.

Zhang Heng started running, and it wasn’t until the people chasing him were out of sight that he stopped to catch his breath. He looked around, and a subway station nearby caught his attention. Without thinking twice, he jumped off the roof of a pet shop and bought a hat from the homeless man at the entrance of the subway for ten euros. Putting it on to cover his face, he rushed into a train before its doors closed.

During the train ride, Little Boy sent him a video.

Piecings looked like a mess as he retreated and fought all the way to Isère. He was about to be captured by the enemy when the highway incident reoccurred-he had jumped into the river.

“Your cover was blown, but Waldo hacked into the bar’s system and replaced all your photos and personal information.” “Thank you,” Zhang Heng said, “I’m coming back.”

Ten seconds later, Little Boy sent him the subway map with the route back to the hotel marked out for him.



One hour later, Zhang Heng returned to the hideout.

Ponytail cautiously peeked around at the corridor to ensure that Zhang Heng wasn't followed before closing the door behind him.

"What should we do? The surveillance cameras at the bar aren't connected to the web, and I can't do anything. They managed to capture you, so you can't show your face to Black Nest's people. How should we proceed with the next part of the mission?" he asked.

"On top of that, after two incidents, Black Nest will surely increase surveillance in places Leah frequents. They'll be able to spot suspicious individuals right away," said Phillip, "We have no way of getting close to her."

"Then, we'll make her come to us," Zhang Heng said.

"Huh?"

"We'll make her come to us. You guys are right. If we allow Black Nest to be always a step ahead of us, there's no way we can win," Zhang Heng said. "So, we need to set the operation in our own hunting grounds."

"I get it now." Waldo nodded. But after a while, he scratched his head and continued, "That, uhh... I understand what you mean, but could you explain it to the others?"

Zhang Heng pulled up the map of the city on his phone and pointed at a place in the north. "There's a ski resort here, about an hour's drive from Grenoble. After what happened, they will be sweeping the city for the guy who jumped into the river and me. We don't have to face them head-on and avoid them by hiding out there. At the same time, we can do the right preparations—turning the ski resort into our home ground."

"You're right... but you've overlooked one problem. All of Leah's communication devices are under Black Nest's surveillance. They are just waiting for us to contact her. The moment we do that, the first people you'll see here will be Black Nest's secret task force. If we don't contact her, though, she will never come to this ski resort. You see, it's like a paradox."

"It's skiing season now, but Leah is no ski-enthusiast. You can count on both hands the number of times she went skiing," Waldo said, "If we wait for her at the ski resort, we might not even see her after two years."