

48 Hours 411

Chapter 411 Compensation

"No. I came to this city not long ago, and we probably haven't met each other before," Zhang Heng said.

Even though the person in charge had appeared in front of him, Zhang Heng was still grabbing the tattooed man's head.

"That's interesting. We haven't met each other before, and I'm pretty sure that we don't have any disagreements as well. My friend, why are you doing such a terrible thing to me?" The old man looked around. He saw his men on the ground, immobile and severely wounded. He then wiped his hands with his handkerchief and handed it to the person behind him before taking off his leather apron.

"I don't think I know your name."

"I'm just an insignificant nameless man. My name is not important. I do my job, and I get paid. But I think you should know about my employer. He is supposed to do business with someone here tonight. My job is to make sure that the transaction proceeds without any hiccups," Zhang Heng said. "Oh, Mr. Jonathan, I like him. Is he in the car behind you? If only he got down earlier, I don't think such a regrettable tragedy would have happened."

"My employer hopes to see your sincerity when he gets off the car."

"Do not take advantage of my good nature, my child. This is not how business is supposed to be done," the old man was shaking his head, "We haven't even laid our eyes on the goods, and you want us to show you the money first? That doesn't make sense at all. Am I right?"

Zhang Heng tapped on the tattooed man's cheek with the back of a knife. "Mr. Jonathan has done business with others, and they usually don't use people like him as a welcome." The people behind the old man were ready to draw their weapons. However, they were stopped by their boss.

"Interesting, it's been a long time since I met someone as interesting as you."

"...but I often encounter people like him," Zhang Heng snapped, planting the tattooed man's head on the table harder.

The tip of the knife had been dangling in front of the tattooed man's face for a while. He was so afraid that he peed himself. A slight frown appeared on the old man's forehead when he saw the cowardice of his man. Immediately, he stopped talking and turned to the man behind him.

"Get the money out."

Zhang Heng finally let go of his palm when he heard the words. He then put the knife back on the table. A look of surprise flashed in the old man's eyes. He wasn't surprised when Zhang Heng defeated all four of his men in one go, but when Zhang Heng took a step back, he felt like he could never truly figure him out.

He then coughed, "Well, when are you guys going to stop embarrassing me?" After what the old man said, the few men lying on the ground mustered their final straw of strength to stand up. They limped to the slaughterhouse with their heads hung low.

“Wait.” Zhang Heng said, pointing to the guy who was stabbed in the wrist before, “He has to be sent to the hospital quickly.” “This little injury is nothing to me. I won’t make a fuss like a woman. I will just wrap it with something later,” the man replied with the pride of a fighter burning in his heart. His tough-guy statement had also won the approval of his companions.

“I hope you will not regret what you said tonight the day you realize you can no longer hold a folk,” Zhang Heng said indifferently. Never one to be nosy, he would not repeat the same thing three times. Everyone was responsible for the choices that they made, whether it was the chemistry teacher or an Albanian kid who was trying to prove that he was a real man.

Defeated, the old man’s goons finally brought out a leather bag.

Zhang Heng then signaled the chemistry teacher in the car to come out, who then took two deep breaths before opening the car door.

Just as he got out of the car, he tripped on the scuff plate. He managed to stabilize himself quickly and walked over with the carton in his arms.

“Jonathan, I thought that there is a good level of trust between us. It would be best if you weren’t so wary of me. I can’t believe that you hired someone to protect you. Don’t you trust me?”

The teacher grabbed onto the leather bag with an embarrassed expression on his face. He opened his mouth and tried to explain to the old man, but no words left it when he remembered what Zhang Heng told him.

“Count it,” Zhang Heng said. The teacher nodded and quickly counted the cash in the leather bag. “All good,” he nodded vigorously.

“Just as agreed...” the old man raised his eyebrows, “can we inspect the goods then?”

The teacher finally handed the cardboard box to the old man.

The old man wasn’t idle when he inspected the goods. He constantly glanced at Zhang Heng, but he did not speak again. Not until his men came back and said something to him.

The teacher became very nervous suddenly, “I’ve checked the things that I made, and the quality is excellent. I’m pretty sure it exceeds your standards.”

“Relax, relax, there is nothing wrong with the goods. I am very satisfied with them,” the old man reassured.

His words allowed the edgy teacher to let out a sigh of relief, but in a split second, the old man suddenly changed his words, “Then, it’s time to talk about compensation.”

“Compensation, what compensation?” the teacher’s heart skipped a beat.

“Your man hurt my man. Are you planning to leave this place just like that?” the old man smiled, “I am a reasonable person, but the people above me are not as kind as me. You know, we are a complicated... big family. So, we must consider all of the aspects when doing things.”

The chemistry teacher was a little overwhelmed when he heard what the old man said. He stood there with his mind blank while holding the paper bag. At that moment, he began cursing in his heart on how Zhang Heng had overdone it. If only the young man hadn't kicked up a fuss unprovoked, they should have all returned to their cars safely by now.

Zhang Heng, however, was utterly unfazed. He knew very well that if he had not hurt those thugs, the old man would have never treated them as politely as he did. Zhang Heng then asked the old man in front of him, "What do you want?"

Unexpectedly, the old man's target wasn't the chemistry teacher but him. "As compensation, how about you work for me for a month," the old man directly spoke in Zhang Heng's direction. "That's impossible," Zhang Heng refused without hesitation, "I have no interest in getting involved in trouble."

"But you are already in trouble now."

"Who can cause me trouble? You?" Just as Zhang Heng was done talking, the subordinates behind the old man pulled out their guns from their waist suddenly. What they did not expect was Zhang Heng reacted faster than them.

Then, right before they could aim, a Beretta 92F was pointed at the old man.

The crisis had caused the chemistry teacher's heart to sink to the bottom of the ocean. He did not expect that the crowd that acted so politely a second ago would go against them the next second.

"It's useless. Like I said, we are one big family," the old man smirked. Looking as calm as a dove even with a gun pointed to his head, he went on, "A big family means everyone can be sacrificed. If you kill me, someone will soon take my place. Not only will you die, but your companions in the car won't escape us as well. Some of our stores happen to be short of staff recently. I believe she can help us to solve this problem."

"Is that so? Then, I will kill him." Zhang Heng turned his gun to the stunned teacher. "If I kill the hen that lays golden eggs for your family, I'm not sure what the other members would think."

Chapter 412 Of Midnight Chats And Black Tea

"Thank you, thank you, thank you so much for helping me!"

The chemistry teacher wouldn't stop thanking the two under the bridge. As per the agreement, he took a wad of money from the leather bag and handed it to Zhang Heng. Obviously relieved and satisfied, he looked forward to another encounter in the future.

"Any chance of employing your help again for the next transaction?"

Zhang Heng looked toward Little Boy in the back row, raising his eyebrows as a gesture.

Little Boy pondered for a while before speaking. "Call this number. Whether someone answers or not, hang up immediately after hearing the dialing tone. Call again in half an hour. Don't do anything unnecessary. Don't reveal your identity. This spot will be our meeting place, and all you need to say is the time to meet."

“Okay, okay,” repeated the teacher. He then stuffed the leather bag into the innermost part of his jacket.

“Good luck to you,” said Zhang Heng as he started up the car.

The silhouette of the chemistry teacher grew smaller in the rearview mirror until he completely disappeared in the darkness.

“I’m in luck today. I just made 4,000 euros in one night,” Zhang Heng said. He drew ten 200 euro banknotes from the stack of cash and passed it to Little Boy.

Little Boy frowned when she saw how much she’d been given.

“You don’t owe me that much,” she said.

“This is not what I owe you, but your share of the reward for the work we completed together.”

“I don’t want it. You did it all yourself. I didn’t even get off the car,” Little Boy said.

“The knowledge that you shared about using modern information systems to track someone down is definitely worth this much.”

“But, I’m starting to regret...”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t seem like a good person, after all. Why were you so good at dealing with those Albanians? Is there no fear in your heart? How did you bring down four people all by yourself? Where did the gun come from? How did you know that they would let us go by threatening them with Jonathan? Have you done something similar before? Did you really lose your ID, or is it really because you are a wanted man?”

“It seems that you have lots of questions about me. If I can’t give you a satisfactory explanation, what would you do? Call the police, or just ask me to stay away from you?”

Little Boy snorted, “If I make you stay away, you’d just join the Albanians and become a real criminal. Don’t even think about it. I’d prefer to keep my eye on you.” “Yes.”

Zhang Heng took out another thousand euros from the two thousand euro stack. “This is for this month’s rental and whatever I owe you.”

Little Boy willingly took the money this time. “There are still food expenses, and I will come up with a number at the end of the month,” she didn’t forget to add. “Okay.”

After returning the car at the parking lot, Zhang Heng rode the bus home with Little Boy. However, it started to rain halfway, and both of them did not have an umbrella. Cold and drenched, it was almost midnight when they finally returned home.

They took turns to shower and changed into a clean set of clothes. The cold rain and warm shower seemed to have awakened the two, and since nobody was sleepy, Little Boy went ahead to prepare a pot of black tea.

“Want a cup of tea?” she asked Zhang Heng.

“And how much would that cost me?”

“Do I look that miserly to you?”

“I don’t know, are you?”

Little Boy rolled her eyes as she passed the cup of black tea to Zhang Heng.

“Sorry, the time I spent with you was not too long, I haven’t had time to get to know you.”

As the tea cooled down a little, Zhang Heng took a sip. It was bland and unremarkable, where its sweetness after the bitterness wasn’t very prominent. It tasted like something from the budget bin of the supermarket.

Little Boy poured herself another cup of tea, took a cushion, and put it under the window. After that, she took her slippers off and sat down with her legs crossed, rubbing Baby Croc with one hand while holding the teacup in the other.

She let out a satisfied sigh after taking a sip of the warm brew.

The rain pattered the glass with a pleasant ticking, and streams of rainwater flowed down the window carving along with it a network of estuaries and arteries. The two didn’t speak for a long while, sipping on their tea while enjoying the hypnotizing rain in silence.

Zhang Heng’s voice suddenly pierced the surroundings. “You persuaded Jonathan to give up and accept reality. Why don’t you accept it yourself.”

“Huh?”

“You said that you’re fighting an unwinnable battle. So, why fight?”

Little Boy squinted. “Why should I answer your question?” she asked. She shifted a little, changed her sitting position, and stretched her legs twice.

“Anyway, I’m always available.”

“Ha! Don’t try to extract information from me. The 01 has trained me well in this area. I got A+ for this skill. Why don’t you answer me first? Why did you spy for Black Nest?”

“Because... they look more like the winners at the end of it all?” Zhang Heng replied.

“Yeah, if you only work for the winner, you can never lose. Hence, the ‘logic’ of smart people,” Little Boy sneered, “But do you know the problem with smart people? They are sometimes too smart for their own good. Forget it. Let’s not talk about me. Let’s talk about you. You can try to make up for your parallel universe story. I almost forgot what the world was like twelve years ago. Come on, let’s see how many memories you can bring back to me.”

“Uhh, it’s actually not much different from the way it is now. You know, it’s still a cesspool, and people are still incredibly selfish. Compared to real problems with politics and the economy, everyone cares

more about their wallets than anything else. Some brave souls took to the internet to speak up for the weak and to uphold justice. That's all. On the contrary, you have changed a lot after twelve years."

"Really, what's changed?"

"At that time, you lived up to your reputation as a tomboy. You were very uptight, and you couldn't stop trying to prove yourself. I simply can't imagine how you lived your life."

"Hmph," Little Boy grunted and took another sip of her tea.

"...but I'm glad that you haven't changed much. You still hide your kindness and sense of justice under all that coldness."

"You do know that even if you say nice things about me, I won't lower your rent, right?" Little Boy said sternly.

"You brought me black tea. I had to do something nice for you too."

"Well, you didn't pass the test. Your story is filled with loopholes. I can't bear hearing any more of your high tales..." Little Boy paused, put her empty teacup on the window sill. She picked up Baby Croc and laid it on her lap.

"I guess I can tell you that... you had a lot of dreams as a kid, and you were ambitious. Then as a teenager, you felt like the master of the world. Whenever you saw something wrong, you would want to fix it, to fit all the blocks into their right places again. You were compelled to clean up the dust on the table. At that time, you really wanted to make the world a better place. When you got older, however, you found that it wasn't what you thought it was, and people really didn't care about right or wrong... "...the adult world only cared about benefits and profits. You could see the injustice and saw how badly everything needed to be corrected, but everyone remained silent. Nobody resisted, with everyone convincing themselves that this is what the world is like. They were like sheep, blindly following the rules, and enduring injustice just because the cost of change was simply too great. You thought I can't do it alone, and my voice is too small... and that's why at times, the world seems to be a whole big ball of a black comedy..."

"I mean, I understand how the world works. I understand that everything is about profit, but it certainly doesn't mean that right and wrong do not exist outside it. What is right is right, and what is wrong will remain wrong

—this is not philosophical relational dialectics. I think Black Nest made a mistake. I have to admit that they may be the winners in the end, but unfortunately, victory does not mean justice. I know what they are doing is wrong, and as long as I can, I will continue to fight, 01 will continue to fight, even if no one is on our side," Little Boy proclaimed with an unwavering and resolute tone.

Chapter 413 I'm Honored

In all fairness, life in this parallel quest was a relatively easy one for Zhang Heng, perhaps second only to that time he spent in Legoland.

During the day, Little Boy would work at the pizza shop, while he would be at home cuddling the cat and learning theoretical knowledge independently. Whenever he came across something he did not understand, he would jot them down and ask Little Boy when she returned from work.

Then, when evening came, it was his turn to work. The chemistry teacher and the Albanians had dealings about once every two weeks. On top of that, Zhang Heng would also ask Fox for other jobs.

Despite Zhang Heng's efforts to keep a low profile, his fame grew in the underworld thanks to his perfect record of guiding successful transactions time and time again. It was also during this period that he participated in an underground drag race, winning himself a sports car.

His opponent happened to be the rich kid who flirted with Little Boy the other time.

His attempts at wooing girls had probably gone so well that he had never been rejected before. So, instead of giving up, he kept thinking about Little Boy despite being scolded by her. Then about a month and a half after that, he ran into Little Boy and Zhang Heng again. He challenged Zhang Heng to a race. Should he win, Zhang Heng would have to leave Little Boy, but if Zhang Heng won, he would obtain his car for the keeping.

It was a very romantic and masculine thing to do, except for the part where he lost his sports car when the race was over. This act of love was one close to perfection.

The rich kid did not understand how he could have possibly lost—he had one of the best-performing cars, and he was also a celebrity in the underground racing circle. Even if he wasn't the best of the best street racer, he was definitely above an ordinary driver. Moreover, Zhang Heng was driving a Talbot, a bread and butter everyday-runner that could be seen everywhere on the street. He should have never have lost.

If the race had been on the open road, the chances of Zhang Heng beating the rich kid were slim, considering how different the specs of the cars were. Thanks to CTOS, street-racing teams were forced to compete in the parking lot to avoid being caught on surveillance cameras. The location was practically tailor-made for drifting.

The rich boy's inferior driving skills weren't something that could be made up for with horsepower, which was why he did not only lose but was completely obliterated.

...

As Zhang Heng grew familiar with the positions of the surveillance cameras and communication tracking devices in the city, Little Boy wasn't going to waste time chaperoning Zhang Heng at work. After being with him on several occasions, she finally understood that even if Zhang Heng were to be locked up in a cage with a group of the worst criminals, the only person to survive in the end would be him. So, instead of worrying about his safety, it was simply better to be praying for his opponent.

Because he lacked any identification whatsoever, Little Boy had no idea how old Zhang Heng really was, but from his appearance, he was probably a few years younger than her. Yet, when he stood face to face with those gangsters, it was difficult to distinguish who was older based on their looks alone.

And as his reputation grew, Zhang Heng was even invited to act as an arbitrator to mediate conflicts that had broken out between several gangs.

After about three months, however, the chemistry teacher suddenly stopped calling Little Boy's number.

Worried that something might have happened to him, Little Boy searched the address of his daughter's hospital and found that the treatments had been paid two months in advance, and the teacher had just visited his daughter in the ward yesterday.

"What do you think?" Little Boy asked Zhang Heng who was messing with Lego bricks on the couch,

"What do you mean by what do I think?"

"Why did he stop hiring you as his bodyguard?"

"Oh, that... after so many transactions, he probably feels that he has already established a stable partnership with the Albanians. On top of that, my fees happen to be very expensive, so..." "So, he kicked you out?"

"Most probably. But it doesn't matter. I have other jobs," Zhang Heng answered, inserting the last brick onto the Empire State Building before removing his blindfold. He checked the time to see how much his Lego assembly skills had improved.

"What's going to happen next?"

"There is a high probability that the Albanians will detain him-probably for a month. It won't be life-threatening, though. They will just make him churn wealth out for them day and night. But to let him work in ease, they wouldn't touch his daughter. In fact, they'll continue footing her medical bills. If he is smart enough, he best keep the manufacturing process close to the chest."

"What if he's not?"

"Only hens that lay eggs are valuable," Zhang Heng answered, "I've warned him before, that the Albanians didn't touch him only because I was there. Unfortunately, it seems he didn't listen. He might have even believed that I said that so that I could continue sucking out easy money from him. Especially since he's become even more familiar with the Albanians, he probably thinks they regard him as a friend. But people like that don't have the word 'friend' in their dictionaries."

"Can't you reduce your fee a little and continue to work with him?" Little Boy's brows furrowed.

"You probably don't know the rate I'm charging him now," Zhang Heng said, "I'm already giving him the friends-and-family rate."

Little Boy took out two oranges from the fridge and threw one to Zhang Heng. "I don't know why, but I keep feeling like you need a good beating," she lamented.

Zhang Heng caught the fruit. "Everyone has to be responsible for their own choices, especially those who live in the underworld. I'm not his babysitter. I can't protect him for the rest of my life. Initially, my job was only to chauffeur him to the business deal. Giving suggestions should be considered an additional service."

"Even so, ordinary people can't possibly learn so quickly."

"I beg to differ. I knew... a girl. She learned the ropes so quickly she even surpassed my expectations."

Zhang Heng paused for a moment and thought about that black-market merchant who came to the island empty-handed but eventually became the biggest trade leader in Nassau.

He did play a role in providing guidance, but at the end of the day, Carina's achievements were due to her own efforts. That woman possessed a force that did not match her looks, and to others and herself, she was born for this kind of cruel and dark territory.

For a brief moment, Zhang Heng was lost in thought. Everything that happened in the Black Sail quest was now but a distant memory. Although occasionally dreaming of the redhead, she seemed to always disappear along with the beach and seashells at the break of dawn.

"I've decided," Little Boy said as she peeled the orange in her hand. Her voice snapped Zhang Heng back into reality.

"Decided what?"

"To bring you to meet the other members of 01. Didn't you always say that you wanted to learn other internet skills and not just communication?"

Zhang Heng raised an eyebrow at her.

"Aren't you worried that I'm a spy for Black Nest?"

"We need to remain vigilant, but at the same time, we must not lose the courage to trust."

"Who said that?"

"I did. Why?" Little Boy asked. "After three months of observation, I feel that despite your numerous shortcomings, you can be trusted... a little. So tonight, you and I will be joining oi's routine meeting. What do you think?" she continued.

"I'm honored."

Chapter 414 Say Hello To My 17-Year-Old Self

Eleven months was a long time in the game, but it passed very quickly in real life.

In that tiny apartment that had a space of less than 60 square meters, Zhang Heng had experienced the four seasons. He was familiar with it's every corner, knowing the position of each piece of furniture, knowing where to store the milk and eggs in the refrigerator, and knowing which cat food Baby Croc liked the most. He also knew how the old TV in front of the sofa would shut off automatically when a football match was shown...

Zhang Heng proposed to buy a new television since he made lots of money from Fox. Besides, it was not like he could take the money out of the quest anyway. As a person without identity, he could not spend the money that he earned as he wished. However, Little Boy rejected the suggestion without any hesitation. The reason was that the newly produced televisions had microcomputers that could connect to the Internet.

This meant that the CTOS could trace them.

Speaking of which, this was the strangest quest that Zhang Heng had ever participated in. It was supposed to be the future. However, besides learning new skills, he rarely came into contact with electronic products in his daily life. Instead, Little Boy chose to go far away from her apartment to teach Zhang Heng how to make use of the new skill that he learned.

Therefore, other than watching boring TV shows, old movies, and playing Tetris together, the usual entertainment for the two was the endless small talk. Little Boy liked it a lot when it rained. Whenever the sky darkened, she'd prepare drinks. Occasionally, cookies would be baked as well if she had the time. She loved eating cookies while watching the rainfall outside the window.

Zhang Heng had no idea how many cookies Little Boy had eaten in the same position and the same posture before he arrived.

It was similar to the fact that only a handful of people knew how there was still a group of people in this city fighting for justice. Fewer and fewer O1 members remained in the team, where some chose to quit, unable to handle the enormous pressure that came along with it. Some had their enthusiasm erased since they had been fighting for a long time but still failed to glimpse the victory they longed for. People like them would quit silently in the end. Besides pursuing justice and axioms, there were still countless things in their lives that required their concern.

Parents, partners, children, friends... these were people in their lives that they needed to spend time with to build better relationships. When dreams began to fade, everyone had to learn how to face reality. . At this point, the Black Nest's victory was set in stone. The people around them had become more and more accustomed to the existence of CTOS to the point that they couldn't live without it.

Not everyone was as obsessed as Little Boy in making things right again. With the departure of the original members, coupled with the lack of fresh blood, the demise of O1 now seemed only a matter of time. Perhaps when the veterans like Leah, Little Boy, and Semiprime became older, no one would remember that they ever fought for justice.

During this period, Zhang Heng participated in oi's operations as foreign aid, but even with his abilities, there wasn't much he could do. After over ten years of crazy expansion, Black Nest was now a behemoth. A complicated relationship of benefiting each other had been formed, where even CTOS' creator lost control over it. It was no longer under the control of one or several people. In other words, no one would be able to stop it.

However, Zhang Heng's information technology, internet intrusion and defense, modification of electronic equipment, and anti-tracking skills had all improved to a certain degree. The combination of all these skills turned him into a Level 2 geek. It was also his most significant achievement in this parallel quest.

There was one month left, and this parallel quest was about to come to an end. It was finally time to say goodbye to Little Boy.

"Are you leaving?" Little Boy leaned against the kitchen counter, holding a cup of coffee. "Yes, thank you for taking me in and for teaching me so many things. It's almost time for me to return to my parallel universe," Zhang Heng said. He had already bought a suitcase and everything he needed from the department store.

“How long till you leave?” “In less than a month, but I have some things to do before I leave,” Zhang Heng said. He planned to spend his remaining time traveling to Grenoble, intending to explore the ski resort in advance and improve on the Leah rescue-plan. On top of that, he would also sneak into Black Nest to learn more about them.

Of course, considering the risks of infiltrating Black Nest, he allotted this operation to be done at the end of his trip.

“You said Edward was still alive when you came, and Black Nest hadn’t killed him yet. Although I still don’t believe your parallel universe nonsense, if 01 hypothetically stopped CTOS 13 years ago, what will happen to my world?”

“I don’t know,” Zhang Heng said, “I only traveled back to the past before this, but never to the future. This is my first time, but...” Zhang Heng paused, “but I guess, whether I succeed or not, we probably won’t meet again.”

This parallel quest was based on a future unaffected by players from the real world. In other words, even after this round was over, Zhang Heng had no right to play an extra round. It meant he would never see the future Little Boy again.

Hence, Zhang Heng wondered what the point of his 11-month stay was. Was it all an illusion? But he remembered everything clearly. The 29-year-old Little Boy standing before him at the moment was so real. Every frown and move from Little Girl told him that this was an authentic experience.

“I understand,” Little Boy took a sip of coffee, expressions unchanged, “Go to bed early after you are done packing. You will be on the road early tomorrow.”

“Ok.”

Little Boy seemed calmer than Zhang Heng had imagined. She even calculated tomorrow’s breakfast expenses in advance and settled the rent, water, and electricity with Zhang Heng. The weather report on the TV forecasted heavy rain in the city after midnight, reminding the public to close the doors and windows. Leaving Zhang Heng undisturbed, Little Boy did not sit under the window and listen to the rain as usual.

After the two bid each other good night, Little Boy returned to her bedroom.

The living room was filled with darkness once again. Zhang Heng divided half of the money he had made during this period and placed it under Baby Croc’s bed. After that, he got onto the couch and closed his eyes.

As he slept, he vaguely felt something warm climbing on him, softly settling on his hips. He thought it was Baby Croc, but when he opened his eyes, he saw Little Boy’s face.

Her pajamas were undone, and she began riding him while covering his mouth with her hand.

“Shhh, say hello to my 17-year-old self,” Little Boy whispered as she bent down.

The torrential downpour came as promised. The wind made the leaves rustle, casting with it shadows of trees shaking in the gusts. The storm caused the signboard of the convenience store opposite of their apartment to be blown away, its blue light piercing the night and disappearing into the darkness.

The whole world seemed as if it was about to be devoured by a massive flood.

Chapter 415 You Choose First

It was morning, and Zhang Heng had breakfast at the hotel with the rest of the 01.

“Why are you looking at me? Is there something on my face?” Little Boy asked as she picked up a plate. “Nothing,” Zhang Heng answered, averting his gaze. Despite having similar faces and precisely the same childhood... the Little Boy in front of him right now and the twelve-years-older Little Boy whom he had lived with for the past few months were not the same people.

What determined a person’s identity wasn’t DNA or other biological characteristics, but experiences and memories. Up until now, Zhang Heng was still uncertain as to what happened to Little Boy in the twelve years. Other than that same rock-head stubbornness, there was an unmistakable look of exhaustion in her eyes. Nevertheless, despite the same soul, Zhang Heng knew that the woman who leaned against the window listening to the rain pattering had disappeared entirely from his world—just like the storm that night. The group of six parted ways in the parking lot, and Zhang Heng stopped to buy a few bottles of black tea from the vending machine next door to drink on the road. Two hours later, the remaining three drove a rented car to the ski resort.

Philip parked in the open-air parking lot, opened the door, and took in a deep breath of the frigid but fresh mountain air of the Alps. On the other side of the car, Zhang Heng and Ponytail were already on the snow, their boots crunching loudly on the ice.

Since it was the peak season, the ski resort was swarming with tourists.

Most of them were residents from Grenoble and other neighboring towns. There were also a handful of foreigners, so Zhang Heng’s presence did not attract too much attention.

“Have you been here before?” Ponytail asked

Philip.

“Nah, you know me, never one for physical sports. E-sports is an exception, of course. What about you?”

“My wife and I came to this place when we were on our honeymoon. We only stopped by a bar on the mountainside for a couple of beers, and we didn’t ski. Man, that was a long time ago...” Ponytail sighed and looked up at the snow, “It looks like we have a lot of work to do.”

The ski resort southeast of Grenoble was built on a considerably vast area. The ski trails on the mountain alone were more than 300 kilometers long, ranging from simple to professional trails. On top of that, a neverending stream of tourists continuously poured into the area. The good news was that if Black Nest followed Leah here, it would be virtually impossible for them to screen every single person. Also, in the case of an emergency, they would not respond as quickly as they did in an urban area.

That was half of Zhang Heng’s plan completed. On the other hand, it also meant long and tedious preparation work.

“Should we ask the others to delay the operation?” Phillip asked.

"I'm afraid the situation might change for Edward. After all, most of Black Nest's resources have gone into locating him. I don't know how long he'll last. The faster we do what we need to do here, the better," said the ponytail man.

"Don't worry, I've already got a rough plan, and all it needs is a little refining. If all goes well, the preparations should be completed in two days. Best have Little Boy bring Leah to the ski resort as soon as possible," said Zhang Heng, "so that Black Nest won't have enough time to develop a complete surveillance plan."

Ponytail and Phillip looked at each other, stunned.

"You took only one look at the mountain, and you already have a plan?"

"That's because this isn't my first time here."

Zhang Heng took out his phone. "Now, we can start allocating the work."

He dialed the number of the man with piercings. About seven seconds later, Piercings answered in a hushed voice, "Hey, unless it's an emergency, I'll call you back in half an hour."

Before Zhang Heng could reply, the man hung up.

About twenty-five minutes later, he called again. This time, he spoke in a normal tone.

"What is it?"

"Are you busy?"

"Ah, since that night, the police had been on a lookout for me. I can't go back to where I stayed. My bags and luggage are all there, and I now have less than 400 euros on me. On top of that, I don't speak French. When you called me earlier, I was spotted by some police officers on patrol. I've only just escaped," he complained. "What about you? Your face got captured by the surveillance camera that night when we were in the bar, right?"

"I have some very talented technical support. They changed my identity in the database of the hotel I checked into," Zhang Heng grinned.

Piercings started sobbing. If only his technical support hadn't died so soon, he wouldn't have had to suffer like this, doing everything solo with a serious language barrier to add.

"If you can't stay in the city anymore, how about getting out of it?" "Get out? I still have to figure out how to get Leah away from those Black Nest goons.

"Yes, as previously agreed, we will act separately. Each of us will be responsible for a part of the work. You can choose first."

"Tell me about your plan first."

"Give me a mailing address, and I'll send you an encrypted email."

Fifteen minutes later, Piercings typed in the code, anxious and excited. He opened the email Zhang Heng sent him and scrolled to the bottom of the page. All of a sudden, he became overwhelmingly outraged.

He dialed Zhang Heng's number and practically shouted, "You're setting me up! You want to use me as bait?!"

"Well, if that's how you feel about it, you can take the other job. Leave the baiting to me then," Zhang Heng said calmly.

"The other one needs a full team, and the core requirements are too ridiculous! No one can do it!"

"Oh, there is, and I can."

"Then you're not actually giving me a choice at all!" Piercings snapped. Back in the bar, he thought that Zhang Heng must be a kind person since he promised to let him make the first choice.

"I'm sorry. This is the most suitable plan I can think of. And frankly, my job is even more dangerous," said Zhang Heng.

That Piercings couldn't deny. Although he might have to play the role of bait in this plan, Zhang Heng's job, which included coming face to face with Black Nest, was actually a lot riskier.

So, after a moment of silence, Piercings asked, "Are you confident we'll be able to get Leah away from Black Nest?"

"Eighty-percent certain," Zhang Heng answered, "If all fails, we'll go directly to Edward."

"Oh, don't bullshit me. If we can't save Leah, we will never know where Edward is," Piercings sneered, "But since I don't have a better idea, we'll give your plan a try."

Chapter 416 Decoy

Leah could vaguely recall the last time she went skiing. It was a good eight years ago or so.

She was still in junior high then. The whole family had gone to the ski resort together, and in the end, they almost left her behind in the bathroom. It was already dark, the staff had already gone home, and there was no one around. It surely wasn't a very happy memory at all.

However, when Adele told her that she wanted to go skiing, Leah agreed right away. There was nothing she could do to stop herself from saying yes. It happened to be really difficult to refuse a real cute girl's request. Especially when she had just come out of the shower, with droplets of water still clinging on her wet skin. And that was how Leah ended up here in the reception hall of the ski resort with Adele.

The two had already changed into their ski suits. Armed with thick gloves and sunglasses, they rented skis and poles and helped each other put on their helmets. What the couple did not know was that not far behind them, two teams were disguised as tourists. There were twelve in total, monitoring them from among the crowd.

"Nothing unusual yet," reported one of them after looking around.

Right now, Vincent and the third team were disguised as a documentary filming team, camping out at the mountainside's observation point, and setting up high-powered telescopes. A female technician monitored Leah's mobile phone.

Vincent responded, "Keep your eyes on the target. Keep her within thirty meters."

Next to him, his assistant, a young man chewing gum, commented disapprovingly, "Is this even necessary? We've checked all the guests at the hotel and didn't find anyone suspicious. Also, we've been monitoring Leah, and no one has contacted her. It was entirely her decision to come to the ski resort. She and that little girlfriend of hers... what's her name... Adele?—I've got to admit, she's pretty hot. Speaking of which, can you send me a copy of last night's video? I'd like to review it again," the young man rubbed his hands gleefully.

Vincent stared at his assistant from the corner of his eye. "It's always better to be safe than sorry. This is the main reason why I've been able to survive so many battles. We've combed through the entire city but still couldn't find the two guys at the bar that night. They seemed to have just vanished. They've either given up or are preparing something even more dangerous. Our focus has always been on the urban area, especially the places Leah frequents, but here... we've rarely been here. Due to limited workforce, and the fact that we still need to keep an eye on Leah, we weren't able to do much in terms of preparation though we had two days to prepare."

"Do you think they plan to grab Leah here?"

"This would be their best chance."

"Then why did we still allow her to come here? Why didn't we just coin something up like a car crash or something to make her stay? Wouldn't that be less risky?"

"Don't you know that mosquitos, the pesky little things they are, can't actually cause you any real danger? That said, they constantly buzz in your ears, and it's very annoying. So the best way to deal with it is to find the best window of opportunity and kill it. This is their chance to act, but it is also ours as well."

Vincent waved his hand, and an unassuming camera was brought to him. "You're a blabbermouth, yet I still put you in my team. Do you know why?"

"Huh?"

"Give it a try."

The young man put his eyes to the viewfinder, looking uncertain. After a while, he gasped, "Oh, military scopes?" "Your favorite TAC-50 sniper rifle is camouflaged as a camera so we won't frighten away the tourists. I remember your longest sniping range was three kilometers."

"3659 meters, to be precise," the young man grinned, flashing two rows of pearly whites.

"...unfortunately, it couldn't be made public. Otherwise, I would have been dubbed the world's number one sniper."

"I hope you're half as good as you claim to be," Vincent said, "Anyway, your assignment is simple. If the two men from the bar show up, kill them."

"Wow, simple, and straightforward. I like it."

Leah and Adele finally had all their equipment and protective gear ready and were now lining up for the cable car. From here, the cable car would take them directly to the mountainside or the peak of the

mountain. The beginner and intermediate slopes were located halfway up, whereas the summit was reserved for the advanced and extreme ski trails.

With the assistance of a resort employee, the couple got onto a cable car. Adele went first, followed by Leah, who needed some help from the staff.

It was then that Leah noticed something strange. When the employee with the piercings helped her get into the capsule, he slipped a piece of paper into her palm and whispered something in her ear. When Leah turned to look at him, he winked.

The technician monitoring Leah's phone took off his headset and ran to Vincent. "Something happened! Someone's blocked the cell phone signal!" he exclaimed urgently.

At precisely the same moment, the person in charge of looking out for suspicious individuals shouted, "It's the guy who jumped off the bridge!"

Without any warning, the young man who was playing dead on the chair jumped out of his seat, tossed away the hot-water bag in his hands, and exclaimed, "It's here! It's here! It's finally my turn!"

He ran to the disguised TAC-50 camera, and as soon as his fingers found the trigger, his entire demeanor changed. He no longer looked weak and hungry but transformed into a formidable killing machine with a weapon to match.

But almost immediately, his brows furrowed. "How cunning. He keeps going to crowded places."

"Do we need to intercept the target?" someone asked through the radio.

Vincent thought about it for a moment before answering. "Let's split up," he said, "The rest of you continue following Leah. Make sure at least two pairs of eyes on her at all times." "Is this a decoy?" The young man pushed another stick of gum into his mouth, "In that case, let's swallow the bait."

Piercings knew that his cover was blown the moment he used the shielding device to block the boy's mobile phone. After running for a while, he saw the people who had taken his bait tailing him. The plan was going well so far, and all he had to do now was to lure this group into a game of cat-and-mouse, shake them loose, and his task would be complete.

Considering the current distance between him and his pursuers, it did not seem too difficult a task, but for some reason, he felt an ominous premonition deep down inside of him.

Chapter 417 Off-Track Skiing Path

Piercings was already very close to the vehicle's parking spot. However, fewer visitors available for cover at a time like this, and fortunately, the enemies realized the consequences of shooting at a ski resort, which was why the enemies didn't draw their guns. Hence, Piercings became a little careless after running away from his enemies for a while.

Seconds later, a bullet from nowhere whizzed past his scalp and hit a sign that not far away from him. He was so scared that cold sweat started pouring out of his forehead.

“Ah, I missed the target!” the young man was disappointed by his aim. At the same time, he did not forget to find an excuse for the mistake that he made, complaining to Vincent. “Your camera shell is kind of heavy. I won’t miss my target again,” he lamented.

However, when he readjusted his sights, he could no longer find the target.

Piercings had experience fighting in an open space. After knowing that he almost met the grim reaper, he immediately knew that a sniper was targeting him nearby. Without any hesitation, he quickly dropped on the ground and rolled behind a snowdrift next to him.

However, the threat was still present. He knew that the sniper was still aiming at him from somewhere. Once he stood up, there would be no dodging the bullet the second time. The worst thing was, he suddenly remembered that there was a team of enemies pursuing him.

Only around two hundred meters separated Piercings and his enemies. One of them quickly flipped out a police ID to calm the nearby tourists who were still in shock, while the other five surrounded the snowdrifts. For Piercings, the situation had just become increasingly unfavorable for him.

He was only less than fifty meters away from the vehicle. In a moment like this, however, fifty meters was like a ravine hidden with an insurmountable threat.

Just when Piercings thought this was where he would meet his maker, the snowmobile quietly parked on the side of the road, suddenly started up its engine on its own, and rushed toward the snowdrift uncontrolled.

Piercings was overjoyed when he saw it. “Thanks!” he exclaimed under his breath.

Zhang Heng’s voice came from the headset, “Don’t thank me, but thank the magician if you really need to thank someone. He modified the snowmobile.”

The young man holding the TAC-50 was confused and puzzled when he saw the snowmobile with no one on it rushing out from behind the snowdrift. To avoid being shot by the sniper, Piercings stayed on the other side of the snowmobile.

“This is so cunning, right? It’s not fair,” the young man scratched his head.

Vincent frowned, but he also knew that it was impossible getting the young man to land an accurate shot from this distance. In fact, he had done all he could to force the target into a dead-end. They did not expect that someone could remotely control the snowmobile. Seeing How Piercings was getting further and further away, Vincent finally made up his mind, “Tell the fourth group that they can attack as well. If they can’t catch the guy, they have to kill him.”

Just as Piercings got away, Leah and Adele also hopped onto the cable car and were now at the mountainside. They were initially supposed to get off here. Without warning, Leah gave Adele’s cheek a kiss and asked her to jump off the cable car first. “Sorry, I like sharing my secrets with you, but not this one. The more you know, the more dangerous it will be. If you are willing to trust me, go back by yourself after you have fun. Don’t worry about me,” she told Adele.

Leah buckled up her seatbelt again. She did not jump down from the cable car, determined to ascend to the peak of the mountain.

Vincent realized what was going on. He knew that when his cell phone signal was blocked, Piercing must have said something to Leah, but he did not understand why she trusted him just like that without hesitation. Based on what they know about Leah, she wasn't the kind of person who trusted easily.

However, Vincent was no longer willing to take any more risks. Immediately, he ordered the team who followed Leah to capture her when she reached the top of the mountain to avoid any unwanted surprises.

In fact, not only Vincent but even Piercing himself and the members of the 01 couldn't figure out what was so special about those ordinary words. Why was Leah willing to believe them and so readily followed the instructions on the note to ascend the mountain?

Waldo rummaged through the chat records of Leah and Gaspard, but he could not find the source of that sentence. It was why he expressed his doubts about the feasibility of this plan. However, Zhang Heng insisted on using this sentence as proof of identity.

The reason was straightforward. This sentence was given to her by herself. It was from Leah twelve years in the future, the person who knew her best in the world.

As soon as the cable car arrived at the platform, Leah immediately unfastened her seat belt and jumped off. She then threw away her mobile phone and other electronic devices as instructed in the note, then rushed out of the station. The enemies were also ready to pursue her. After a while, the cable car stopped in mid-air and then began to operate backward amidst the crowd that was left in shock.

Some of them managed to react to the crisis quickly enough. When they saw that they weren't too high from the ground, they unfastened their seat belts and jumped off the cable car as well. Unfortunately, those who were at the back didn't have such good luck. At this height, their legs would probably be broken if they jumped down. As they hesitated, the cable car had led them to slide back.

Fortunately, four out of six people from the Black Nest managed to make a jump.

Immediately, Leah ran across the advance ski trail with her sled and ran toward the extreme ski trail.

"That woman is crazy!" the young man said while looking through the scope.

She was now too far away for him to land a good shot. Even with his extraordinary marksmanship, he couldn't hit the target. So, he just stood still and watched her. No matter which trail she chose, Leah would have to go down the mountain eventually.

After a while, what he saw shocked him so much that he forgot to chew the chewing gum in his mouth. Not only had Leah run over the advance ski trails, but she also ran past the extreme ski trails, heading directly to a spot where no trails were marked out.

Off-track skiing was the most dangerous skiing method. Since there were no preset trails for one to follow, it meant that the terrain's difficulty and unpredictability would be significantly increased. At the same time, obstacles on such trails were way more than the regular routes. One small mistake, and the unsuspecting skier would suffer from fractures, become paralyzed, frostbitten, or even face certain death.

This was especially true for beginners like Leah, where choosing to ski off-track between the mountains was equivalent to committing suicide.

Leah took a quick look at the woods and the warning signs on the side of the road. She too, knew the consequences of her dangerous option. She stopped and staggered for a while, but soon, Black Nest's goons had almost caught up to her, and she had no choice but to soldier on.

The skis continued accelerating under the influence of gravity. Leah felt increasingly nervous as the wind whooshed by her ears. As she descended the mountain through the thick forest, she repeatedly avoided small shrubs and trees in her way, and barely missing a small tree. Before she had time to catch a breath, though, a big rock appeared in front of her suddenly.

Leah desperately attempted to slow down, but it was too late.

Seeing that she was about to clash with the rock, the familiar zing of a snowmobile's engine emerged from behind her, its rider picking her up as it zoomed beside the stricken girl.

Chapter 418 Escaped

Zhang Heng scooped Leah up in one hand, put her in the back seat, and used his other hand to ride the snowmobile. He managed to calmly avoid all the stones as he carved a path through the thick woods. At the same time, he said, "Snowboard."

When he said that, Leah understood immediately. "Who are those people that are chasing me?" she asked.

"They are from Black Nest. Your brother Edward has key evidence that Black Nest is using CTOS to collect data and violate the privacy of citizens. Once the situation deteriorates to a certain extent, they will use you to blackmail your brother."

"Black Nest? That technology company?! Many people around me are using their devices. According to what I heard, they come up with pretty high-quality products." Zhang Heng swiftly maneuvered the snowmobile along the unmarked track, dodging trees along his way like he would bullets. "Black Nest isn't your regular tech corporation. They have other motives hidden in the dark. In other words, we are in a perilous situation. They will use every means available to them to prevent the disclosure of their secrets."

"Dangerous? How dangerous?"

"Just now, one of our people responsible for leading the pursuer away was almost sniped by their assassin." "Here? At the ski resort? In broad daylight?!" "Yes, and they have a dirty relationship with the police. It means they can get police support whenever they want."

"Does that mean we are on our own now?"

"Hold on tight," Zhang Heng replied, not answering Leah's question this time.

He then turned abruptly, and the snowmobile drew an arc. Despite being reminded in advance, Leah was almost thrown off, and she subconsciously reached out to grab Zhang Heng's waist.

"Why stop?"

Leah's question was automatically answered after a few seconds. The snowmobile had stopped on the edge of the cliff. Initial visual observation confirmed that they were a good 20 meters above the ground below. Zhang Heng got off and took out the snowboard that he tucked behind the snowmobile, and quickly put it on the ground. "This is as far as the snowmobile goes. There is a way around the cliff, but the forest is simply too dense for the snowmobile to pass through. We'll have to snowboard from now."

"Ugh... but I just threw away my snowboard since you asked me to..."

"It doesn't matter, just cling to my back and hug me tightly. Even if you have your board with you, you can't cross this path seeing how bad you are at skiing."

"That's true..."

Leah was not as hypocritical as other girls, not hesitating to jump on Zhang Heng's back after she heard what he said.

Zhang Heng paused. "...you are too fast. I haven't even strapped on my snowboard properly."

"Oh! Sorry... should I get down then?"

"No need." Zhang Heng had properly clamped his ski shoes to the snowboard. "Make sure you hold on to me tightly. I can't take care of you when we begin our descent," he said.

"Okay," Leah nodded. To lose all the extra weight on her, she took off the ski shoes on her feet.

As the snowboard started moving, they steadily increased speed, and the sound of wind whooshing past their ears could be soon heard. Zhang Heng wasn't too worried about the four enemies behind him. Even if they somehow managed to catch up to him, Zhang Heng was confident that he could get rid of them. Hence, he raced against time and risked a safe descent to prevent Black Nest from using the same trail he had carved to get down the mountain.

The good news was that Piercings had not only led the enemies away from Leah but even the squad that Vincent had placed along the foot of the mountain. That way, even if Vincent realized what was going on, it would be difficult for him to go all the way to the other side of the mountain in the shortest time possible.

In fact, Vincent wasn't really too happy right now. He had done everything that he could do, but the other party was always one step ahead of him. Whether it was Piercings who acted as bait or Leah who chose to ski off the beaten path, he had been caught off guard each time his enemies made a move.

Such an elaborate plan couldn't have just materialized overnight. The other party had obviously done a great deal of preparation, and they were only waiting for Leah to show up at the ski resort. The two people involved in the operation were also extremely good at what they did, definitely not ordinary folk. This was the worst outcome for Black Nest. It meant an unknown force had interfered in Edward's business, undoubtedly a situation Black Nest hoped not to encounter.

"What should I do now?" the young man asked with innocent eyes.

"Notify the fourth team, ask them to give up pursuing the target, and intercept Leah instead. At the same time, we will head down the mountain as well," Vincent said. Still, he knew that this was just a

temporary solution, and it wasn't going to help much with their plan. It appeared Piercings had led the fourth team to a random ravine. It was now impossible for them to catch up with Vincent.

Besides, they were still at the mountainside, and even if they threw away all the equipment, it would still take a considerably long time before they could get to the foot. Vincent regretted the decision he made—the group of people Black Nest assigned to monitor Leah weren't too good at skiing. From the very beginning, he should have never allowed Leah to head to the ski resort and take the risk.

It was now too late for any sort of remorse. Now, Vincent needed to think about how to deal with the aftermath of the whole situation.

Sure enough, when they finally got to the other side of the mountain, they only saw discarded snowboards. Leah and the snowmobile rider were gone. Then, another piece of bad news came along right after this one. Piercings managed to ditch his pursuers behind him and disappeared in the snow.

Not only did Black Nest lose Leah, but they also failed to capture anyone on their list. The mission was a complete failure.

Vincent kicked a trash can next to him out of frustration. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, took out his newly purchased phone, and dialed a number.

"We lost Leah..." "Yes... We have no options left. Edward has lost control. It's time to implement the cleanup plan to stop him... I'm pretty sure they have professionals helping them. Otherwise, rescuing Leah wouldn't have been so easy. It appears that other parties may be interested in her as well. We need to speed up the plan. Right, I understand, I won't let this happen again."

The young man raised his eyebrows. "Did they call us trash?" he asked.

Vincent hung up the call. "No, you have watched too many movies," he said, "but headquarters realized we must be short-staffed and they are sending new people to support us."

"Oh, you mean the new people that are going to strip you off of your hold on the operation?"

Vincent frowned, "This isn't the time for internal conflict. We must put our prejudice aside, work together, locate Edward as quickly as possible, and neutralize the threat once and for all."

"Ah, has headquarters finally made up their mind?"

Vincent turned to look at the young man with sharp eyes. "You seem to share a good relationship with Edward. You are in charge of the safety of his area before. You've also apparently played chess with him before," he replied with a cold tone.

"Do you have a problem with executing him?"

"I have always had a clear distinction between work and life. I even killed my brother-in-law back then. He is just an ordinary friend to me. I have no problem with killing him," the young man shrugged, "not to mention that my rankings in chess will improve if I kill Edward. I don't see a reason why I should reject this job."

Chapter 419 Joint Operation

“Then... should we introduce ourselves?” Waldo stammered, sounding much less confident he usually did on Facebook and Instagram.

This was mainly due to Leah being extremely attractive, even more so than certain female celebrities and hosts whose pictures he used to browse on the internet. In fact, most of the photos the celebrities took in private weren't nearly as good as those posted on the internet

—some even looked like entirely different people.

Leah was one of those hailing from the rarer breed. She looked even prettier in person.

This was the first time Waldo had ever been in such proximity to such a beautiful girl. He was a nervous wreck. Stretching his hand, he spluttered, “I... my name is Waldo. Erm... I'm twenty-four and single. I like Gundam and DOTA2... Oh, and I'm Gaspard's friend too.”

“Oh? The two of you know Gaspard?” Leah looked at Waldo, eyes wide. “Huh?” Waldo nearly choked at her response. He turned to look at Zhang Heng with a panicked look on his face, “Didn't you... didn't you use Gaspard's identity to get in touch with her?”

“No, I told her we're Edward's friends,” Zhang Heng answered.

The whole 01 team was flabbergasted. “Huh?!”

Little Boy cocked her head. “Why did she believe you then?” she asked.

“Rocky is a stray puppy that my brother and I picked up. At that time, my mother didn't allow us to keep any pets. So, we found a cardboard box and built a home for him in the yard and brought him food every day. But a week later, Rocky disappeared. We searched everywhere for him but to no avail. He just disappeared so suddenly. We haven't seen him since. This is a secret between my brother and me. No one else knows about it,” Leah explained.

It all suddenly dawned on Philip. “No wonder you told Leo to write down ‘Rocky will be back next week.’ Wait a minute,” He looked at Zhang Heng, “How did you know that?”

Leah suddenly turned wary. “Didn't my brother send you guys? Who are you?”

“We are Edward's friends, and he did send us to save you. As for Rocky, I will explain everything to you when this is all over,” Zhang Heng said, not even flinching, although he made a promise that he knew would never be fulfilled.

By the time everything ended, all the players, including him, would have to leave the quest. There was no need for him to explain anything Ponytail had the Digital Video ready. He said to Leah, “Do you have anything you want to say to your brother?”

“Is this some kind of prank show?” Leah raised her eyebrows.

“No, we have to send evidence to Edward to prove that we've saved you from Black Nest so that he will reveal the next phase of the operation to us.”

“And... What is the next phase of the operation?” Leah inquired as she accepted the camcorder.

“Edward will leak the evidence the press exposing Black Nest’s misdeeds by using CTOS to collect private data from citizens.”

“Then?”

“Err... then the CTOS project will most probably die under public pressure, or its launching will be put on hold until they can protect the privacy of people effectively.”

un

“I was asking about my brother.”

“Uhh... I... I don’t know.” Philip cast a helpless look at Zhang Heng.

“We will protect Edward from Black Nest until the whole thing is made public,” Zhang Heng replied.

“And then? What happens after that?” Leah asked, adamant about getting an answer.

“Then, there would be no reason for Black Nest to go after your brother. After all, this has nothing to do with personal grievances. Black Nest is only hunting Edward to prevent him from exposing evidence. Once it is out in the open, Black Nest probably wouldn’t bother your brother anymore, because if something did happen to him, the public would view Black Nest in an even worse light than before,” said Zhang Heng, “Of course, anything can happen, but as long as I’m here, I will keep your brother safe.”

Leah did not know if she should believe him or not. “One last question: if you have to choose between my brother’s life and exposing Black Nest, which would you choose?”

“Edward,” Zhang Heng answered without hesitation. Even though exposing Black Nest seemed to be more important, his main mission was to help Edward escape. If Edward died, it would mean nothing to the players who chose this side even if he could expose Black Nest.

Of course, Zhang Heng still supported the idea of exposing the tech company. As he said, once their secrets were leaked, Black Nest would have no reason to continue chasing Edward. After all, they were not a gang but an advocacy group. Advocacy groups were generally sensible and rarely worked themselves up over personal grievances.

The 01 Guerillas had also chosen Edward, but their reasoning was simpler—they did not want anyone to sacrifice their lives.

Leah rested her chin in her hands and contemplated their words. Waldo and the others waited nervously until she lifted her head.

“Why are you all looking at me?” Leah asked.

“We’re waiting for you to make a decision.”

“What decision? I’m already in your car, and there are so many of you. I can’t fight you. What else can I do besides going along with your plan?” Leah said.

“What she says makes sense,” Waldo shook his head, “No, we’re not the bad guys. Whatever it is, we are helping your brother. You have to do this voluntarily.”

“Alright, I never said you guys are bad,” Leah said, “At least you won’t be monitoring me twenty-four-seven like those Black Nest people. It’s what I loathe the most. When I think about how somebody is constantly scrutinizing every single thing I do or say, I get goosebumps all over. If what you’re saying is true, I don’t want CTOS to go online either. After all, all of us have secrets we don’t want anyone else to know, right?”

“I think she thinks like us hackers,” Waldo’s eyes brightened, “Can we recruit her into the O1 Guerrillas?”

“Dream on, buddy. You guys are galaxies apart,” Little Boy answered, “Just give up already. There’s no hope for you. Ask her if you don’t believe me.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re not my type. It might be hurtful to hear such harsh words, but I don’t want to raise your hopes, then disappoint you later on,” said Leah, “...but you are quite cute. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of girls wanting you.” Waldo’s face turned pink. He did not expect his love to come and go quickly. The whole thing only lasted less than three minutes.

Leah returned the video recording to Ponytail, and Zhang Heng handed his mobile phone to her.

“Take another one. I have a friend who prefers to work alone. He participated in this rescue, so he’ll need the video to prove to Edward.”

“Hah, so this is a joint operation?”

Chapter 420 Do You Hate The Rain?

The O1 Guerillas went on a month-and-a-half-long vacation after rescuing Leah. Semiprime sent the video recording in an encrypted email to Edward, but eventually, it came to nothing. Edward never responded.

To avoid Black Nest’s hounding, the group came to a little town in southwestern France. Waldo had an uncle who lived here. With no heirs, he left the house to his nephew.

Waldo had mentioned this before, but no one took him seriously. It all changed when they arrived at the place, amazed by just how massive the house really was. For the guest rooms alone, there were six of them! The fine palace could easily accommodate all of them and then some more. There was also a huge courtyard planted with a variety of flowers and plants, complemented by a small sparkling pond at the back.

Philip pushed open the windows and admired the picturesque view. “Why would you live in your mother’s attic when you have a place like this?” he asked.

“Erm... that’s because there’s no one here to cook for me, and there are no takeaway services either...” Waldo answered candidly.

“That’s true.”

“I mean, the taxes for houses like this are over the top... SO, I rent it out for half of the year during the peak seasons, but the money is barely enough to pay for the taxes and maintenance. It just makes me want to sell it,” Waldo grumbled.

“Don’t be in such a hurry to sell it. I’ve always wanted to own a place with a view like this, a little piece of heaven I can retire to when I’m old. After I’ve saved enough money and my daughter’s gone to college, you can sell it to me,” Ponytail said.

“Ugh... I don’t know if I can wait until then. There’s a whole lot of games on Steam just waiting for me to buy,” Waldo answered nonchalantly.

“Anyway, make yourself at home, but leave the room with the best WIFI signal to me,” Waldo said as he threw himself onto the couch and ripped into a bag of chips.

“This guy is hopeless...”

The 01 team did a quick cleaning around the house; then, Semiprime drove to a supermarket at the town center to stock up on some food and daily necessities. They did not spend much of the money they earned from the casino, only using enough for their expenses and saving the rest for the operation. Initially, the group only planned to stay here for a few days, hoping that Edward would reply within that time. They would then hurry over to rescue him. Nobody would expect that they would be here a lot longer than initially planned.

As was his habit, Zhang Heng did not waste whatever time he had, learning electronic control systems from Ponytail. He even had Waldo and Philip teach him how to hack into an account and bypass the network’s security defense systems.

Zhang Heng didn’t come into contact with either of the three men in the parallel quest.

At that time, Ponytail and Edward died, Philip emigrated to Hong Kong, whereas Waldo had taken refuge within Black Nest.

It was actually difficult to blame the latter two. Aside from Philip, who had gotten tired of fighting, Waldo also sent 01 a great deal of secret information while working for Black Nest, greatly helping 01 avoid a ton of unwanted trouble. When Black Nest came to know about it, they let the matter slide, seeing how skilled he was and all. However, he was no longer allowed access to classified information and was only allowed to provide technical advice.

Including Leah, there were a total of six people in the building. If the mission failed, it would be really hard to imagine how drastically different the direction each would take in twelve years.

Leah found an old guitar lying about in the yard’s storage room. It had a missing string, though. She wiped the instrument clean and carried it in her arms. “Is there anything you’d like to hear?” she asked the lot.

“I don’t know... what about ‘La Marseillaise’?” Waldo suggested. Philip frowned. “Why would anyone want to listen to the national anthem after dinner?”

“Because I can’t think of anything else, and everyone has heard it before. It’s really popular, you know?”

“So, she’ll be playing the guitar, and we’ll all have to stand upright and put on a solemn face?”

“How about Joe Dassin’s Les Champs-Élysées? I’m sure everyone’s heard of it too,” Leah plucked the strings twice, “It’s one of my favorites, and there are only five strings left. Just enjoy the music. Alright, enough talk. Let’s begin...”

She cleared her throat and began:

“I was walking down the avenue; my heart opened to strangers,

I wanted to say hello to anyone at all, anyone, maybe you,

Whatever it is we would talk about,

It was enough just to speak to you, to be close to you, On the Champs-Élysées, on the Champs-Élysées!

Whether in the sun or in the rain, at noon or midnight

Everything you could want is on the Champs-Élysées!

Leah, having come from a professional music background, also happened to be a talented singer. Coupled with experience as the lead singer of Suffocated to Death, she actually sang a lot better than many famous singers. Her jazzy, melodic voice gave the classic French pop song a very different flavor.

If it had not been for her brother’s tragic death, she might have perhaps become a famous superstar twelve years later, taking into account her irresistible charm and how stunning she looked.

When the song was over, Philip and the others erupted into applause as patrons at La Grenouille Verte would.

Leah did a little curtsy. “Thank you, thank you. Your enthusiasm will only cause me to puff up. Hahaha!”

“Encore! Encore!” Waldo put down the device in his hand, putting his Legend of Zelda he’d been burying his head in for fifteen months on hold, a rare occurrence for a guy who was that close to becoming one with the gaming device.

“Alright...” Leah accepted the request and began the second song.

It, however, did not escape Little Boy’s observant eyes that Zhang Heng wasn’t in the house with the rest of them. A while later, she found him by the lake. The skies had sprouted a drizzle, and it was cold. Little Boy pulled her coat tighter around herself.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. “Fishing,” Zhang Heng replied, waving a fishing rod.

“Huh? But it’s raining.”

“Do you hate the rain?”

“I wouldn’t say I hate it, but I don’t particularly like it either. It gets so humid when it rains,” said Little Boy, frowning at the thought.

“Mm, that’s true.”

Suddenly, the buoy that had been bobbing calmly on the water started moving.

“Oh, you’ve baited a fish!” Little Boy said.

Zhang Heng did not react immediately. He waited until the buoy completely sank into the water before jerking the rod and reeling in the line. The large fish struggled as he hooked it out of the water.

“Too bad it’s a carp. We can’t eat that,” commented Little Boy.

“Who said carps can’t be eaten? I’ll cook it tomorrow, and you can give it a go.”

Zhang Heng bent down and put the fish in the pail.

“Shall we go back?”

Little Boy nodded, and the two walked alongside each other on the slightly muddy path. Little Boy kept opening her mouth to speak, but no words would come out. “What is it you want to say?” “I feel like everyone’s too laid back. It’s like they’re on vacation. Because Edward didn’t reply, the whole team is directionless. It doesn’t seem good for us to just kick back like that,” Little Boy confessed her worries. “Don’t worry. It won’t last long,” Zhang Heng assured her, “The real challenge is about to come.”