

48 Hours 731

Chapter 731: Choice

“Everything makes perfect sense now.” Zhang Heng nodded. “You still haven’t answered my previous question. Why are you emphasizing this day to me?”

Fabricotte did not answer. Instead, he blinked a few times. “Someone wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“Your most faithful servant and follower.”

“I don’t remember having servants and followers,” Zhang Heng said.

“There are many things you don’t remember, but it doesn’t matter. Take your time, and one day, you will remember them all,” Fabricotte said. “We can help you.”

“What’s the price?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“In the story, you told me that all those who dealt with you had to pay the price. This applied to the indigenous people on that small South Pacific island and this small town’s inhabitants...”

“No, no, you are different from them...” Fabricotte shook his head, “We don’t want anything from you. It’s our duty to assist you.”

“You are very caring, just like Haidilao’s waiter,” Zhang Heng said.

After he was done talking, he ignored the puzzled expression on Fabricotte’s face and stood up from the ground. Although the fishy smell in the sea breeze was stronger than before, it still could not overpower the foul breaths of those half-human, half-fish, and frog monsters.

Zhang Heng could sense many people approaching him. They came from four directions, which happened to block all escape routes.

Drawing his Winchester, he pointed at Fabricotte and warned, “Since you like staying this hell hole, you better make sure to stay put this time.”

The latter stretched out his hand to signal that he would not move.

Zhang Heng then looked at the wave breaker in the distance. He knew that the person Fabricotte wanted him to meet was probably behind the wave breaker, or more precisely, on the black reef.

He could not deny that he was tempted to meet the person as well.

Although Fabricotte had lied about the time before, he was still quite forthcoming about other issues. To know more about his life, Zhang Heng knew he needed to meet the person on the black reef.

At the same time, a lot of vigilance was also needed. They were desperately hoping that he would remember who he was. Zhang Heng was certain that they weren’t helping him out of kindness. Aside from memories before the age of six, he could remember his childhood quite well.

From elementary school to university, he had never experienced amnesia. Before getting involved in this game, his everyday life was similar to that of an ordinary person. Before he reached the age of six, however, he was simply too young to do anything. Therefore, what sort of memory did Fabericotte want him to remember?

This was also Zhang Heng's first time realizing that perhaps it wasn't the best idea to try so hard to look for answers to his questions.

It wasn't the time to think about such things. Zhang Heng hesitated, but in the end, he chose not to head towards the wave breaker. Instead, he continued to walk along the abandoned railway. If he wanted to leave this town, that would be the smartest move. Since the enemies were everywhere, it made no difference in which direction he chose. In other words, the problem of being tracked by his enemies did not exist.

But the bad news was his rifle was running out of ammunition. It wasn't because he hadn't taken enough, but he found only one box of bullets when he ransacked the grocery store before this. There were about forty rounds in the box, clearly not enough to deal with the inhabitants and monsters in this town.

Fortunately, his chef's knife was still with him.

In just less than twenty steps, Zhang Heng encountered the first team of enemies. There were seven of them, with two still in human form. It was the same man and woman that he saw in the restaurant earlier.

Without any hesitation, Zhang Heng fired first.

The bullet hit the head of a monster dead on target. Immediately, he drew his revolver from his waist with the other hand and killed another monster, with two bullets landing in the same position. Undoubtedly, it was hard to miss a target from such a close distance.

Zhang Heng's battle with them officially started the moment the two enemies fell to the ground. His quick kills had foiled their abilities, albeit only temporarily. At least it allowed him to reload.

Within the weeds, Zhang Heng's Winchester let out continuous booms. Each muzzle flash briefly illuminated his face in the dark.

Since he had three guns with him, he could maintain a steady stream of suppressive fire. Under his rapid-firing, no monster could get close to him.

As the battle ensued, his ammunition had nearly depleted. The first weapon that ran out of bullets was his rifle that wasn't really loaded, to begin with. After that, his revolver began drying up as well. Although there were still some bullets left, he began to ration his usage. To control ammunition consumption, he drew his chef's knife and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Unless it was his last resort, he would try his best to conserve ammunition.

After some time, he barely broke through the densest and most hazardous monster encampment. Despite the rain of lead from Zhang Heng's guns, the threat still existed.

There were just too many monsters. After the tragedy, this town was left with half its population. In the past few decades, however, they continued to multiply and grow. On a regular day, they would be hiding in the house and the dark. Now that each and every one of them had emerged, it seemed tonight would be more exciting than the tragedy forty-six years ago. And they only had one goal tonight.

Zhang Heng dumped the backpack that was slowing him down, the empty Winchester included. He had to make sure that he was light enough for better maneuverability. At the same time, his heart rate started rising as his movements intensified. As he faced such a dangerous environment, Zhang Heng noticed the four Shadow-set items on him were behaving abnormally.

There seemed to be a voice whispering in his ear, and though he couldn't understand the language, he could guess what it asked him to do. It wanted Zhang Heng to make a choice between the four Shadow-set items.

Zhang Heng hesitated and finally chose the item Arc of Light's winged-man gave him. As he grabbed the game item, it suddenly split into two. Simultaneously, a black shadow seeped out of the crack and merged into the Shadow behind Zhang Heng.

He felt nothing abnormal in his body, but the moment he pictured the crow in his mind, a pair of black wings grew out from his back.

More than five meters in length when fully stretched, they weren't tangible, seeming as if they were made out of pure shadows. It wasn't unlike the pair of wings he saw on the winged-man when he fought him that night. Zhang Heng's wings looked darker and more prominent, however, making him look like a fallen angel from a horror movie.

He, however, knew that he wasn't nearly as cool as those, where he could fly wherever and whenever he wanted. The moment he spread the wings out, he quickly learned how long they lasted—only twelve seconds, and he could only use them once a day. It was similar to Shen Dongxing's figurine-mechanizing ability.

Chapter 732: Wings

While those half-man-half-fish and frog monsters looked at Zhang Heng in bewilderment, Zhang Heng's soared into the air. A massive pair of black wings spread out behind him. And at the same time, feather-like fine fragments of shadows were falling from the sky.

This was Zhang Heng's first experience flying in the air.

Of course, flying on a plane didn't count. This time, he was flying without the help of an external source. Differing from the birds that flew in the sky, he could feel the presence of the wings in his consciousness, but they were not controlled by his muscles. As of now, Zhang Heng was still discovering how to use his wings right.

Zhang Heng looked a little clumsy as he tried to learn the reins of flight. Since it was his first time using such an ability, he did not dare to rise up too high, merely hovering high enough so the monsters could not reach him by jumping. After that, he flew out of the encirclement.

Under the moonlight, a black shadow floated over the wasteland. Zhang Heng could see that all those monsters lifting their heads, staring at him from the ground. They had been preparing for this battle for

a long time, and everything that they did was like a carefully rehearsed stage play. However, none of them foresaw that Zhang Heng would grow a pair of wings and fly away.

Twelve seconds was a short time.

Zhang Heng silently counted the seconds in his heart. He managed to lower his altitude one second before his wings disappeared. Due to his inexperience in flying, he couldn't estimate the right speed and strength needed for landing. His arm landed first, and he rolled on the ground a few times before coming to a stop.

He didn't even care about checking his injuries. After he got up from the ground, he continued to run forward. Although he had managed to avoid many enemies by flying, there were still many scattered nearby.

Since he could not use his wings, for now, Zhang Heng was not entirely confident that he would be able to run away. After all, the residents who had lived here for decades or longer knew these grounds much better than him.

Suddenly, he heard someone uttering a series of rapid syllables. The noise came was coming from the priest with the gold crown.

Zhang Heng wasn't sure if this priest was the one that survived the shootout earlier. Although there were more monsters than priests, he was certain there were more than just three priests. After a while, more and more monsters started to repeat the series of strange syllables and, at the same time, stopped advancing as well. It was as if they had just received an order from their commander.

Although unaffected by the chants, he still looked back as he ran. For the time being, he did not see them coming after him. It seemed they were just going to stand there and watch him leave.

After running for a while, Zhang Heng gradually slowed his pace.

Right now, another sound permeated his ears.

If the voices of those monsters made him feel uncomfortable, then these low-frequency hums filled with malicious intent would probably turn a sound-minded person utterly crazy. It was comparable to the sound that came from the deepest parts of hell.

Since Zhang Heng was gradually losing his emotion, he showed little reaction to the sounds. He guessed that the sounds roughly originated from the black reef.

It was a shame that the wave breaker blocked the person, and he couldn't see what was beyond it. All of a sudden, a cloud of white smoke reappeared beside Zhang Heng. Judging by its taste, it was the cigar that the bartender gave him.

Zhang Heng knew that it was time to leave. Before he left, he took one last look at the low and dilapidated buildings and ruins in the distant town, and half of the tower spire bathed in moonlight. He then allowed the white smoke to engulf him.

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“You stayed longer than I expected.” The bartender lady glanced at the clock hanging on the lounge’s wall and asked Zhang Heng, who had just opened his eyes, “How did the test go?”

“I don’t know if it went well.” Seemingly remembering something, he went silent before asking, “How much time has passed?”

The bartender lady wasn’t too bothered about Zhang Heng not wanting to talk more about the test. She was never a person who liked to explore the secrets of others and had done an excellent job as a game checkpoint staff. That said, she was quite obsessed with the game herself.

“You were in there for about half a minute. Since you are awake, come and settle the bill first.”

“How much?” Zhang Heng was not too surprised by her answer. Although he had been in that weird town for almost half a day, he had become accustomed to the change of time after experiencing so many quests.

But that place wasn’t like the dungeons he had been to before. His game items, character panels, and even his watch were taken away from him. If he were to describe it, it was more like a dream.

“100 game points.”

“Why is it so expensive?” Zhang Heng frowned.

“Compared with what you have recently received, this is nothing to you.” The bartender raised her eyebrows and returned all the game items to him. Zhang Heng had stored all his game items here before he entered the game.

“But I don’t have so many points with me.” Zhang Heng said.

“Impossible. Aren’t you ranked first on the proxy war’s leaderboard?” The bartender lady was surprised.

“But there were no game points to earn in the proxy war’s dungeon.”

Zhang Heng told everything truthfully to the bartender lady. Initially, he could have gotten four hundred game points from 1807, but the latter decided to pay with his game items. And the points that he earned from the Western dungeon had practically been used to pay off his debts. Now, all he was left with were thirty game points.

“All your points have been used to recast the sword.” The bartender lady rubbed her chin. “What should I do?”

“I still have twenty-nine game points. If possible, I will pay the remainder after the next quest,” Zhang Heng said.

“If it was someone else, I won’t take the deal because I don’t know if the player can survive the next round. And even if they do, I don’t know if they can earn enough points. But given that we have done so many transactions, I might make an exception and let you pay the next time. However, this is only a one-time thing,” Miss bartender said. She seemed nicer to him this time.

However, Zhang Heng did not seem to appreciate the favor very much. His expression changed, “You used to collect game points before providing me with services.”

“You mean, I’m making you pay all your game points now?”

“That’s not the case. I mean, why did you set a different rule this time. You seem to be really eager for me to participate in this test.” Zhang Heng looked into the eyes of the bartender, his mind filled with thought.

“Are you doubting me? Why? Did anything happen during the test?”

Zhang Heng could read nothing from the bartender’s cunning eyes. In the end, he said, “Nothing, maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

Chapter 733: Mukaiji Nanako

Tonight, Zhang Heng had achieved two things in one—he solved Yogurt’s kidnapping and accepted the Shadow-set’s test.

The former went by reasonably smoothly. Although he received no game points from 1810, he did acquire a game item. At least he got something in return after spending all that effort to look for Yogurt. As for the grievances between Yogurt and 1810, and the love story between Yogurt and Shen Dongxing, these had nothing to do with him.

After completing the trial of the Shadow-set items, he received a huge amount of new information. He had actually been unable to fully understand what was going on; until now, that was.

According to his previous analysis, he should have entered the Shadow-set’s dungeon for the test after inhaling the white smoke. Due to personal reasons, however, he returned to the strange town that he had dreamed of. This time, though, he managed to find out why the town was slowly rotting away.

But then Zhang Heng noticed Fabericotte’s behavior. That was when he first started to doubt if he should continue investigating his life.

In the end, he decided not to go to the black reef and meet the creatures there. Fabericotte did refer to him as his most loyal servant and follower. However, based on Zhang Heng’s experience, when someone did not mind paying the massive price of forcing another to do something, it often meant that myriad unfavorable factors would plague the matter.

When Zhang Heng first arrived in that town, he instinctively felt a particular connection with him. The person standing on the black reef should be the leader of those half-man-half-fish and frog monsters.

If Fabericotte wasn’t lying, and that person was his servant and follower, then who was he?

What about the other items from the Shadow-set?

If it was as simple as returning to his dream, how were those Shadow items on him? And what about the choice he had to make at the end of his dream?

Did he pass the test? If tonight’s dream was related to his body and he hadn’t completed the Shadow set’s trial, how did he acquire the wings?

What did the bartender have to do with this incident? Did she know that the ritual would go wrong? Could she have been one of the people that knew about Zhang Heng’s life?

What was the relationship between her and the old man in the Tang suit? Did they know each other? If this was the case, it was no coincidence that the old man asked him to come to this checkpoint where the bartender was.

...

So many questions were left unanswered, yet Zhang Heng was in no rush to get their answers. After he came out of the bar, he found a hotel and rented a business suite, falling asleep from morning all the way to the afternoon. Although the mysterious and depressive atmosphere had little effect on him, the battle that began at Gilman Lodge all the way to the swamp had cost him a great deal of stamina.

After returning to the real world, Zhang Heng didn't want to think about other matters, merely wanting to have a good rest. Fortunately for him, he had a sound sleep, where there were no interruptions and no strange dreams as well. When his eyes finally opened and he glanced at his watch, the time showed 4:20 in the afternoon.

After that, he headed to the bathroom for a shower. Once he came out, he turned on the computer on the desk and organized the information at hand.

Perhaps intentional or otherwise—Zhang Heng realized that Fabericotte had never told him the town's name from the beginning. However, he did mention that he was traveling around New England.

New England was in no way related to the United Kingdom. Referring to six states in the Northeastern United States, they included Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Newburyport was a city located in northeastern Massachusetts. Zhang Heng had gone to the United States twice in two games, and he still clearly remembered some of the country's facts.

But the name Arkham was unfamiliar to Zhang Heng. Those familiar with comics, however, knew that there was an Arkham Asylum in Gotham City. The place was filled with talented people, and they were friendly and polite. However, in reality, it seemed that such a place did not really exist. To verify his doubts, Zhang Heng clicked on an electronic map.

As expected, no such place existed.

So was Fabericotte lying about it?

Zhang Heng was in no rush to draw a conclusion. He continued searching for July 15, 1927, the day that Fabericotte and the townsfolk were very concerned about. However, the results obtained weren't beneficial. The 1946 plague shared no clues about the place he was looking for, and in the end, Zhang Heng was left with a frown on his brow.

Suddenly, his mobile phone vibrated. Zhang Heng picked it up, took a look, and found that Chen Huadong had sent him a message. There were only two words—HELP ME!

He even sent his location.

Zhang Heng took a look and knew that it was near a commercial pedestrian street, not too far from where he currently was.

As of now, the last thing he wanted was to dwell on this matter. He had recently been dealing nonstop with supernatural incidents, and he needed to relax his nerves by doing things an ordinary person would do.

So, he turned off the computer, went downstairs to check out his room, took a taxi, and rushed to where Chen Huadong was. The latter was waiting for him in front of the street. Scratching his head, a girl was beside him.

At about only 1.5 meters, her stubby height made her look petite, not to mention her silver hair and the quirky outfit she had put on. Her bangs were slightly cocked, making her look like she had just woken up from sleep.

Zhang Heng remembered Hayase Asuka saying that she had a friend who loved anime and was here as an exchange student. And she wanted to find someone to practice her Chinese, so Zhang Heng had recommended Chen Huadong, who himself had been coming to terms with his lengthy period of bachelorship. Hence, that marked the beginning of their international friendship.

After Zhang Heng got the contact information Hayase Asuka sent him, he immediately forwarded it to Chen Huadong. He never asked if the friendship worked out or not.

So this was Zhang Heng's first time seeing her in the flesh.

Chen Huadong was in luck this time. She was almost as gorgeous as Hayase Asuka. Although she fell slightly short of Hayase Asuka's sharp facial features, she was cuter than most of her counterparts. As they were walking just now, many boys had their eyes on her. It was rare that she shared the same hobbies as Chen Huadong. It was no wonder Chen Huadong had been so passionate about learning Japanese recently.

"You are finally here!" Chen Huadong's eyes lit up when he saw Zhang Heng.

"Well, how can I help?"

"We are going to visit the bookstore. Nanako... Oh, by the way, I haven't introduced her to you yet."

Chen Huadong started to speak in crappy Japanese. "Nanako... this... Zhang Heng, Zhang Heng, this Mukaiji Nanako."

Nanako then stretched out her hand, wanting to shake Zhang Heng's hand, "Asuka-senpai talks about Zhang-san almost three times a day. Recently, she had been complaining about you not contacting her. She admires you a lot!"

Chapter 734: Looking for Books

Zhang Heng and Nanako Mukaiji shook hands. After that, Chen Huadong explained the reason for seeking Zhang Heng's help.

When the two of them were shopping, Nanako Mukaiji suddenly asked to stop at the bookstore, saying that she wanted to find a few Chinese books to practice reading. However, she could not remember the name of the book. All she could remember was its contents. Unfortunately, Chen Huadong's Japanese was half-baked, and he could hardly figure out which book Nanako Mukaiji wanted to buy even after she

described the book explicitly with hand gestures. That was why he called for Zhang Heng's help since he could understand and speak Japanese well.

"Help a brother out. I will buy you a meal later."

"What are we eating?"

"How about... wonton?" Chen Huadong looked at Zhang Heng's expression. The latter put on a noncommittal look. So Chen Huadong changed his mind, gritted his teeth, and said, "I will buy you the food court's most famous barbecued seafood!"

"Sounds good to me." Zhang Heng nodded.

"My wallet is bleeding," Chen Huadong lamented. "Please make sure that your service is thoughtful enough. Well, don't be too thoughtful. I don't want her to be attracted to you. Shit! I'm starting to feel that it's unwise to ask for your help. You already have Shen Xixi, Hayase Asuka, and Han Lu, a filthy rich woman. I believe you won't snatch Nanako from me, right?" he pleaded while looking at Zhang Heng with suspicion.

"Remember, I want six oysters," replied Zhang Heng.

"No." Chen Huadong changed his expression when he heard Zhang Heng's request, "One oyster costs eighteen yuan. If you order six, that will cost me more than one hundred yuan! And I don't think it'll be enough to fill you up. After that, you'll ask for grilled fish, grilled shrimp, and grilled octopus. By the way, can't you just eat grilled buns, grilled eggplant, or something cheaper? Those are economical and affordable. I would rather you order kebabs or some chicken wings."

"What am I supposed to eat from a barbecue seafood stall if I don't eat seafood?" Zhang Heng casually returned the question, ignoring a shocked Chen Huadong.

"..."

"What are you talking about? Sounds delicious," Nanako Mukaiji curiously chipped in. Although she was learning Chinese, her vocabulary was still severely limited. The only words that she could understand were fish, shrimp, and chicken wings. She was staring at Zhang Heng and Chen Huadong, whose nerves were already frayed. With her bangs swinging in front of her forehead, she looked even cuter than she already was.

When Chen Huadong saw her reaction, he suddenly felt a sense of satisfaction.

All those raw oysters, grilled shrimps, or octopuses did not matter to him anymore... He then started to speak in his half-baked Japanese, "Nanako, angel... Zhang Heng, demon."

"Huh?" Nanako Mukaiji instantly felt shy the moment Chen Huadong suddenly praised her.

Zhang Heng also spoke out, "Describe to me the book that you want to buy."

"Really? Sorry for troubling you, senpai."

The three of them walked into the bookstore, and Nanako Mukaiji started to describe the book's contents to Zhang Heng. Upon consulting the staff, Zhang Heng found that most of the bookstore's

employees hadn't read it before. Hence, he could only head toward the corresponding area to search for the book.

Zhang Heng would first look at the cover and introduction of the books. This was the fastest way to help Nanako. Sometimes, the summaries of a book had nothing to do with its contents. In fact, it was suspected that the person who wrote the summaries had most of the time never read the contents. Or they would write the summaries in a way that could attract prospective buyers. After the readers bought the book, they would find out later that its contents had nothing to do with the summary.

It was quite a common practice nowadays.

Even though Chen Huadong was also helping to search for the book, it took the three of them almost an hour to find the exact copy she wanted. Now there was only one book left, a collection of poetry, and the author was Spanish.

Mukaiji Nanako was a little embarrassed, "Why don't we forget about the last book? We have wasted a lot of time here."

"It doesn't matter. We've got nothing to do anyway, right?" Chen Huadong glared at Zhang Heng.

For the sake of barbecued seafood, Zhang Heng had to support Chen Huadong this time. Hearing this, he said, "Well, I need to get a few books for myself too. I don't mind helping you to search for what you want."

"Chen-san, thank you so much." Nanako Mukaiji smiled at Chen Huadong. She was smart enough to know that Zhang Heng was only willing to help because of Chen Huadong.

"Ah, it's nothing. Don't worry about it. I am your Chinese teacher, after all." Chen Huadong scratched his head. He had to admit that Zhang Heng had also given his best this time. He first listened to what Nanako Mukaiji had to say and translated her words into Chinese. It was the most effective way for the three of them to search for the books she wanted to buy.

And Zhang Heng played the role of a wingman perfectly. He did not show that he was better than Chen Huadong. Any books that he found, he would give them to Chen Huadong and ask him to pass them to Nanako. Finally, Chen Huadong put down his guard and secretly gave Zhang Heng a thumbs-up while Nanako was not paying attention.

Zhang Heng responded with a six-finger gesture.

Immediately, Chen Huadong's eyes filled up with tears of both pain and happiness.

For the last book, Zhang Heng pointed at a bookshelf that he walked past earlier. Chen Huadong immediately ran there and pretended to search for the book. After that, Zhang Heng took the book of poems from Chen Huadong and translated it to Nanako Mukaiji for confirmation.

However, the latter shook her head. So Zhang Heng put the book back on the shelf. Suddenly, he paused because he saw another book on the shelf.

A book that did not belong here.

It was normal that the bookstore's customers randomly placed the books that they had flipped through. Earlier, Zhang Heng had roughly checked the books on the bookshelves and did not notice this book's existence at the time. This was nothing unusual to the average person, but with Zhang Heng's observational skills, he knew that the probability of this happening was not high.

In other words, someone placed the book here not too long ago.

Just when Zhang Heng wanted to grab it, someone took it first.

"Oh, so the book turns out to be here."

"It seems you've been quite free lately." Zhang Heng knew who the person was when he heard the voice. He turned his head and saw the old man in the Tang suit.

"I guess these are the perks of being your own boss. Although it's pressurizing, at least you have more freedom in managing your time, and you can go wherever you want." The latter shrugged and looked at Nanako Mukaiji. "Are you dating? Did you change girlfriends?" he asked.

"No. I'm just helping a friend," Zhang Heng replied.

"That's good. Old people are always more nostalgic. I still prefer the little girl named Hayase Asuka. Fan Meinan is not bad as well. As for Shen Xixi... You know I don't like the woman behind her, but I have to admit that you're pretty good at picking girlfriends," the old man in the Tang suit put the book under his arm calmly as he said.

Chapter 735: Guardian Angel

While Zhang Heng talked to the Tang-suited old man, Chen Huadong was walking towards him with a poetry book. He was shocked to see the old man. The latter, on the other hand, greeted him in kind. "You must be Chen Huadong. Pleasure meeting you here."

"Oh, glad to meet you too," Chen Huadong replied, dazed. He was a little confused about the current situation. If memory served him right, he knew he had never met an old man in a Tang suit before. Now when a person was called by name, they would naturally return the greeting. The old man seemed to have talked with Zhang Heng for a while just now, meaning he should be an elder or teacher.

Chen Huadong responded and cast his gaze on Zhang Heng, but the latter had no intention to explain the whole thing. Instead, he turned to Chen Huadong. "We have found all the books. I don't think you need me to be here anymore. I'll be making a move then."

"Of course. I'm sure you have other matters that need your attention." In the end, Chen Huadong couldn't figure out who the old man was to Zhang Heng. However, he could see that the two needed to talk in private, so he nodded and watched them leave.

The old man first headed to the counter to pay for the book he was holding. He also bought a self-driving tour brochure and a book about cat behavior. It confused people about what he wanted to do next. Did he plan to go on a road trip or stay at home to raise a cat?

Zhang Heng then headed downstairs and walked out of the bookstore.

Half a minute later, the Tang-suited old man also headed downstairs with his book. “I remember a shop around here that sells delicious yogurt ice cream. Do you want one?”

The old man came to the bookstore because he wanted to invite Zhang Heng to eat ice cream. The two hadn’t met very often, only four times until now. Although their paths would cross sometimes, it turned out that the old man would have an agenda each time.

During their first meeting, he wanted to hire Zhang Heng as his agent. The second time they met, he wanted to work with Zhang Heng in dealing with Moresby. And the third time was to prevent the brewing conflict between Zhang Heng and the Goddess of Justice. This time was no exception. But Zhang Heng was not in a hurry. He was waiting for the old man to speak first.

The two then headed to the famous yogurt ice cream shop together. The old man bought two large servings of yogurt ice cream and asked for all the toppings available in the shop. As he handed one to Zhang Heng, he said, “I know there has been some misunderstanding between us, and you don’t trust me a hundred percent. That’s totally understandable. Even the ancient kings could not trust their blood-related relatives, let alone modern society. Everyone has their little secrets.”

“You should know that I saw the book’s title, right? Even if you take it away, I can still buy it from the bookstore,” Zhang Heng took the ice cream and said.

“Of course. They have printed countless copies. They come in different languages printed by different publishers, so millions of copies flood the market. I can’t buy them all. And you can find them on the internet as well.” The old man nodded. “Actually, all I can do is advise you from the perspective of a partner and an old friend—try to stay away from these books.”

“Interesting, I thought you would make me investigate this matter.”

“Why say that?”

“The little gift you gave me—on the surface, it is a cheat that helps me extend time in the game, but it’s actually related to my body, right? You know that over time, my body would experience changes.”

The old man sighed. “You know, sometimes, right or wrong don’t apply to certain things. The factor of time can alter the outcome of an event. All in all, everything on this earth is closely tied to time. For example, if you like a girl, falling in love with her too early may not guarantee you will marry her. If you fall in love with her too late, she might have married someone else. Thus, the importance of timing.”

“Are you worried that I will cooperate with others after I know everything about my life?”

“No, no, I’m not worried about that. I mean... Actually, I am not the only one paying attention to you. And not everyone likes you. To protect you, I have to work with people I’m not fond of, including letting you join the game. Through that, you’d be protected by the rules, except for the fight between you and Justitia. Supposedly, no one is allowed to attack you right now except for their agents. This is why I’ve always reminded you to be careful of other agents... As you can see, the people who work with you and I don’t wish to see you get hurt. That’s our common goal. However, we do have some disagreements over certain matters, trial ones, really. For example, we still haven’t agreed on the right time to let you know the truth behind everything.”

“You just mentioned the people that you work with. Who are those? Are you referring to the bartender at the game’s checkpoint?” Zhang Heng asked.

“Sorry, I can’t give you the name list because I’m a reputable and reliable partner. I vowed never to expose their names even if I discovered that my other partners double-crossed me.” The old man in the Tang suit spread out his hands, looked helpless, and admitted, “I know you have always suspected that I was the one who’s been messing with you behind your back. You will be surprised when the truth is revealed, and you will find out that I am the only one who stands by your side. As I’ve said, I am like your little guardian angel.”

“Is this charity to you?”

“Of course not. Everyone in this world wants something, and I am no exception.” The old man scooped a spoonful of yogurt into his mouth. “The thing I want, however, will not harm your interests. I help you, you help me, and this is a win-win situation—the perfect cooperation. I said the same thing when we officially became partners—and that has not changed.”

“So you are telling me not to investigate further?”

“You are an adult, and you have the right to choose the right path for yourself. I’m just telling you that whatever you’re looking for might not be as good as you expected. And no matter what decision you make, I will always support you; even if you want me to give you the book now, I will do it right away.” The old man hungrily scooped an even bigger scoop of yogurt ice cream, and some of it fell onto his beard. It made him look really funny, “Oh, yes, I haven’t congratulated you on winning first place in the proxy war’s first round.”

“What’s the point? Anyway, you don’t care about the outcome of this sort of thing, right?”

“Who said that? Of course, I care. You represent my interests. I would read the news every day about proxy war.” The Tang suit old man grinned. “I am happy for you from the bottom of my heart. The final prize is good enough to tempt a god.”

As he spoke, he patted Zhang Heng on the shoulder, “Good luck, buddy.”

Chapter 736: Empire’s Dusk

Naturally, Zhang Heng would not fully believe what the old man in the Tang suit said. However, the timing of the book appearing was indeed a big problem, but he decided to put this matter aside for the time being. Recently, he spent most of his energy learning to control the pair of newly acquired Shadow Wings.

In order to avoid frightening the people on the street, Zhang Heng only practiced his flying technique when time stopped for him. Unfortunately, his flying time was capped at twelve seconds a day. After two weeks of training and exploration, he had finally mastered his flying technique, no longer landing face first.

During his last practice session, he climbed onto a 405-meter-high communications tower, looked at the city under his feet, took a deep breath, and took a leap of faith. His body began free-falling under the influence of gravity, and his rate of descent accelerated. When he was only a hundred meters above the ground, he closed his eyes and pictured the crow in his mind.

Almost instantly, a pair of Shadow Wings spread out on his back, helping him to slow his descent as he flew to the distant residential building. Right before the wings disappeared, Zhang Heng landed on the roof of a building.

The moment his feet hit the concrete of the roof, the wings behind his back folded and disappeared. The whole landing process was a smooth one. He figured that he might even perform more complicated moves in the air if he carried on with the daily training. This skill could prove instrumental in evading ground attacks or even flying over extreme natural environments.

But for the time being, he had achieved his goal—spread his wings and land smoothly during an emergency fall. In other words, he no longer needed to worry about untoward falls from high places.

Other than that, this pair of wings also served as an option for him to escape the threats he would face in the future. Since he had depleted the uses of Shadow Moment and Evil Wall, Zhang Heng had no game items that would get him out of serious trouble, although he had obtained a ton of items recently—the skill set he had helped him overcome many threats of late.

But now, with this pair of wings, he was shielded by another layer of protection.

And it had to be admitted that flying to the heavens had always been humanity's dream. There were murals that depicted flying since the dawn of civilization. Since then, the desire to take to the skies had penetrated many cultures. Whether it was Western myths or Eastern novels, the gods and demons always had a pair of wings on their backs.

With the advancement of science and technology, people had invented hot air balloons and airplanes that could take human beings into the sky. However, it was still unlike flying freely. Although the ability could last a scant twelve seconds, Zhang Heng did feel like a bird in the sky.

From up there, high above, he could see everything under his feet, free from the shackles of reality. When he looked at the familiar sights of daily life from a completely different perspective, everything became refreshing. Unfortunately, twelve seconds was not enough for him to fly to the clouds. Zhang Heng could only wish that he could reach out and touch the dark clouds.

...

After the proxy war started, the interval between the games he needed to complete had shortened. Before the war, he was required to complete one game every month. Now, he needed to complete one proxy war round in that month. Although his physique would be restored to tip-top condition after the end of the dungeon, the mental fatigue would remain.

Fortunately, it was not a big issue for Zhang Heng since he had an extra 24 hours. In fact, his resting time was twice as long as other players. Therefore, two weeks after the end of the first round of the proxy war, Zhang Heng returned to the game checkpoint and started an ordinary quest.

Prior to this, he learned that Shen Xixi's score for her first round of the proxy war was 325. Her score was not considered low, but it was not too high either. Especially after the top three guilds had begun to exert their strength, she still qualified to participate in the game's next round. However, she now ranked 60 on the leaderboard, and she was still falling.

Maybe Shen Xixi didn't give in everything she had to complete the quest, or perhaps other factors were affecting her. Zhang Heng had only seen Shen Xixi use her ability once during Yogurt's kidnapping incident. The little scale she had with her could probably attack a human soul. The moment she put it to use, her words were enough to shut 1810 down.

Zhang Heng's figured that it should be a Grade-B game item. Besides, as the agent of Justitia, Shen Xixi should have other abilities. Of course, there were limitations to these powers. She could only attack enemies with evil intentions; the reason she failed to intercept Shen Dongxing that night. However, she remained an excellent decision-maker. If her team members were there, she would find a way to maximize each of their abilities.

The current ranking did not represent her true strength. Besides, Zhang Heng had fallen from third place and was overtaken by the player in that position. The player had dived right into his second round of proxy war. He didn't take it at heart, though. According to Miss Bartender, the rewards were similar for those who ranked first to fifty.

So, he decided to complete his ordinary quest first.

However, he was a little worried about Fan Meinan, having not heard from her since the proxy war began. Until now, she still had not replied to Zhang Heng's message. The last time the two met was at McDonald's.

At that time, Fan Meinan did not look too good. She looked thinner and had Zhang Heng's offer to help as well.

"I've asked about your sword," the bartender said to Zhang Heng, "The fastest you can get it back is in four days. The latest is a week. I think you should be able to get it before the next proxy war round."

"Well, thanks a lot." Zhang Heng sat down and took out the alarm clock. There were only less than ten minutes to midnight. It appeared that Fan Meinan's affairs had to be put aside first. For now, he had to focus on his next quest.

After setting the time, he laid down on the deck, waiting for the dizziness to hit him as usual.

[Verifying player identity.]

[Identity verified. Randomly selecting the ninth quest for player 07958...]

[Draw complete. You are now participating in Empire's Dusk]

"Nerva founded the Antonine dynasty, Trajan expanded the territory, Hadrian perfected the bureaucracy, Antonine made sure that vault was always full. Aurelius wrote "Meditations," but everything would eventually come to an end no matter how brilliant it was. Where should the empire go now..."

[Task objective: Survive for 80 days]

[Mode: Single player]

[Time flow rate: 480] (1 hour in the real world is equivalent to 20 days in the game. After 80 days, the player will be automatically returned to the real world.)

[Friendly reminder: the game will officially start in five seconds, prepare yourself!]

Chapter 737: This Is Rome

Although the system did not mention anything about the dungeon, Zhang Heng could roughly guess the place he would be traveling to when it mentioned the five names.

It was Ancient Rome.

Or, to be more precise, the Roman Empire.

The origin of all brilliant stories often came from a legend, and Ancient Rome was no exception.

Numitor and Amulius were a pair of brothers, and their father was a king of the Latin people. Before the king died, he divided his inheritance into two and let his two sons choose from them. Numitor chose the throne, while Amulius chose the countless treasures their ancestors brought back from Troy.

So one of them became a king, and the other became extremely wealthy.

But Amulius, who possessed a lot of wealth, was unhappy to live under his elder brother's rule. So he used his wealth to bribe the ministers and the army to take his side. In the end, he successfully usurped the throne and exiled his elder brother, Numitor. And he also killed Numitor's son. After his daughter pleaded, he decided not to kill his elder brother's daughter, Sylvia. However, he made her into a Vestal Virgin.

The Vestal Virgin served as a sacrifice to the goddess of the Holy Fire, Vestal. And it required her to preserve her virginity. She was not allowed to get close to any men. In other words, Sylvia would not have any offspring. But no one thought that Mars, the god of war, would fall in love with Sylvia. He failed to control his desire and impregnated Sylvia with a pair of twins.

Amulius was furious when he heard about it. However, he did not dare to offend Mars. So, the only thing that he could do to Sylvia was to confine her. After she gave birth, she put the two babies into a basket and abandoned them in a river, hoping that nature would claim their lives. However, the river brought the basket to shore. After that, a wolf came to feed them with milk, a woodpecker brought food for them, and finally, a passing shepherd adopted them. He named them Romulus and Remos.

Like all the other great legends, a hero would always encounter a turning point before becoming a hero. After that, a surge of energy would grant him the strength to pull up the sword stuck in the stone.

The same thing happened to Romulus. The two brothers soon grew up, and not too long after that, Remos was involved in a conflict between the shepherds and was captured by the king. It was at that time that Romulus knew everything about him and his brother. So, he gathered as many people as he could that hated Amulius, starting an uprising. And eventually, he managed to kill Amulius and rescued his brother.

When the deed was done, neither of the two wanted to inherit the throne. Instead, they wanted to return the kingdom to their exiled grandfather, Numitor. After that, they built a new city where the shepherd found their bamboo basket.

However, in the process of building the city, the two brothers diverged again, this time leading to a great battle. Romulus won the battle and killed Remos.

And the new city was named after him.

This was the origin of the name of Ancient Rome's capital, Rome.

...

The story might sound gory and ridiculous to later generations, but many similar stories originated from China, such as Liu Bang killing the white snake and Lao Zi seeing purple gas coming from the east when he passed by the Hangu Pass. The older the tales were, the more mythological elements were mixed in them.

In the words of the author of "History of Rome," they are not based on reliable historical facts. So, I suggest that you don't have to affirm them nor deny them."

In short, with the establishment of the city of Rome by Romulus, Rome had officially entered the Roman Kingdom phase, around 753 BC. After that, Rome embarked on the road of kingdom expansion. In 509 BC, with the Etruscans' help, the last king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, was overthrown by his ministers. And Rome officially entered the Republican era.

It wasn't all smooth sailing during the process of this expansion. Rome was isolated by its neighboring countries. After the three Macedonian Wars, Rome had gained control over the whole of Greece. The subsequent Syrian war allowed it to conquer West Asia. It was at that time that Caesar made his appearance. After defeating his political opponents and two allies, he had all the power in the world that one could never imagine. With that, he became the emperor of Rome. Unfortunately, he was later assassinated.

Right after his assassination, his son Octavius inherited the throne. The first thing he did was eliminate his political opponents and two allies (Yes. You read it right. It was the same pattern.) He then established the Principate, officially entering Rome into the age of empires.

The Roman Empire welcomed its most prosperous period when it entered the Nerva-Antonine dynasty. The five princes in succession were introduced to the public. These were five people that Zhang Heng heard in the brief introduction from the system. They were also called the five emperors. From the period of Nerva's to Antonine's ruling, it was the golden age of Rome.

At this time, Rome was mighty, politically stable, and had control over a vast territory. They were basking in unprecedented prosperity.

But by the time Aurelius sat on the throne, Rome had begun to spiral downhill. Barbarians invaded the land, not to mention the frequent border wars and a plague that swept the country. Due to these unfortunate factors, Rome's population drastically reduced. With that, they received far lesser taxes, and their military expenditure skyrocketed. It caused the empire to plunge into a financial crisis.

Fortunately, Emperor Aurelius was in power during this critical period. An emperor and a philosopher, he worked diligently from the day he took over the throne till the end of his life. While dealing with the nobles, he had also fought off the barbarians from the north and south. And at the same time, he had to handle the civil war and rebellion. While dealing with so many matters, he still managed to make time to write a philosophical masterpiece carrying the title "Meditations."

However, with the death of Aurelius, the Roman Empire had started to turn away from prosperity again. Rome would never return to its golden age. His son Commodus was also the last emperor of the Antonine dynasty. As for what happened afterward, that was a story for another time.

Zhang Heng now could roughly guess that he was at the end of 2BC. At this time, Rome was in a bad state. After the death of Commodus, the empire would soon fall into a long period of civil war. But for now, with a territory spanning thousands of miles, a fifth of the world's population still came under the rule of the Roman Empire. It was indeed a veritable empire.

In fact, Zhang Heng had been quite interested in traveling to the Roman Empire. After all, the ancient Roman civilization was an important foundation of Western civilization and would greatly influence future generations. Unfortunately, they could only learn about it from film and literature.

This time, Zhang Heng had been granted the opportunity to travel in this ancient, colossal empire. However, his main quest also reminded him that this trip to Rome was about to be extremely challenging.

So far, he had received a total of two survival quests. One of them was the novice quest. He was asked to survive on a deserted island. And the second survival quest was the Soviet-Finnish War dungeon. Survival quests were usually quite simple and straightforward. He just needed to live until the end. That meant he could stay in the dungeon and do nothing. The troublesome part, however, was usually finding a way to survive from all the potential threats he was going to face.

Chapter 738: Arena and Death-Row Prisoners

The darkness that engulfed Zhang Heng faded like the tide.

Before he opened his eyes, he heard deafening cheers and screams. The sound was coming from the top of his head, and mixed within it were the roaring of beasts. These beasts seemed to be just one meter away from him.

Even Zhang Heng, who had always been calm, was taken aback.

What did it mean by being one meter away from the ferocious beasts? A beast like a lion and a tiger could kill him with a single pounce. If he was anticipating them, he might be able to dodge the attack. However, he did not know their exact location right now, and the countdown was about to end in five seconds. Zhang Heng's eyes still needed to adjust to the brightness around him. A delay of even a second would significantly increase Zhang Heng's mortality rate.

If the situation was what he imagined, then there was a high chance he would die at the beginning of this quest. Logically speaking, since he had just accepted an ordinary survival quest, he should not be placed in such a dangerous scenario right at the start.

In the next second, Zhang Heng resumed his vision.

The first thing he saw was the lion in front of him. The cheering had agitated it further, and it stood up, growling menacingly at him. It looked as though it would attack once the cage was opened. He was safe for now since the lion was still locked inside the cage.

Zhang Heng breathed a sigh of relief when he saw this. After that, he found himself standing in a dark and smelly room. Those cheers continued to come from above him, and there was another person beside him, holding a ceramic bowl full of raw meat, looking at the lion in the cage in fear.

Judging by the man's outfit, he should be a slave. Wearing a short-sleeved long robe and a pair of slippers, Zhang Heng found that he, too, was dressed in the same attire. Before he even had the chance to greet the man, another man with a whip came in, lashing it while yelling at the top of his lungs.

Zhang Heng was glad that he had spent considerable time learning other languages during the Black Sail quest. One of them happened to be Latin, the lingua franca of ancient Rome.

After more than a thousand years, the language would have morphed through time, and huge differences in terms of pronunciation and accent would have occurred. The ancient Romans, for instance, pronounced 'a' and 'e' separately, and when they pronounced 'c,' it sounded a lot like 'k.' Besides, their speech had a lot of rising and falling in cadence.

Zhang Heng felt as though he was listening to a dialect he had never heard before. Having had to guess what the person was talking about, it seemed he was asking them why they were not done with feeding Quinta.

Needless to say, Quinta was the name of the lion in the cage before him. Immediately, Zhang Heng took the bowl of meat from his partner and poured it into the cage.

Quinta finally stopped growling after getting its fill of meat.

However, the overseer was still dissatisfied with them. He yelled again and was prepared to lash his whip. The man beside Zhang Heng immediately lowered his head and ran out of the place in a hurry. Zhang Heng quickly followed behind him. Once they were away from the overseer, Zhang Heng took the initiative to ask the man a question. "Hey, what is your name?"

The other party did not seem to understand, so Zhang Heng repeated the question again.

"You know how to speak Latin?" This time, the man finally understood Zhang Heng's question. With a surprised look on his face, he answered, "I'm Varo, how about you?"

"My name is Zhang Heng."

Zhang Heng gave a simple introduction but paused at the end. "Please slow down when you speak. My Latin is not very good."

"Okay, okay... it's nice to meet you, Zhang Heng. No, I should say that it is unfortunate to meet you here." Varo put on a sad smile.

"Are we in an arena now?"

"Yes. To be more precise, we are now in the arena's underground."

"No wonder I could hear all that noise. What are they cheering about?"

"Don't you know? They are executing the death row prisoners. I used to be among that audience, cheering together with the others." Varo looked sad as he reminisced about the past. "...but now..."

“Do the Romans execute death row prisoners in the arena?” Zhang Heng asked.

“Yes, it is a tradition of theirs. They’ll let the wild beasts loose and devour them. Those unfortunate enough would be brought here. By the way, let’s talk as we walk. Partita wants us to clean up the mess. He will whip us again if the gladiator performance is delayed.”

Zhang Heng noticed how Varo’s eyes trembled in fear when he mentioned the gladiator performance. This wasn’t the time to ask him about it, though. Zhang Heng still followed him closely, and the two quickly walked through the tunnel with oil lamps and arrived at the ground.

This arena they were in wasn’t that large. Clearly, this was not the famous colosseum in Rome.

There were still several terraces of seats, however, and could contain at least seven thousand spectators. Almost all the seats were occupied. This was where the cheers and screams came from. The audience chanted in a repetitive staccato, “Kill him! Kill him!!!”

Everyone’s faces were filled with excitement as though they were witnessing a grandiose stage play.

And one of the two protagonists’ throats was bitten off by the beast. The leopard then sliced his stomach with its paws and began tearing up his internal organs. The blood gushing out of his body gathered into a stream. His face was disfigured. His nose and eyes could barely be seen anymore, while his skull began to expose itself to the audience.

Although the other death-row prisoner is still alive, fear had overtaken him. He was paralyzed on the other side of the arena. It seemed like he had lived a good life before he became a death-row prisoner. All the fat on his body was jiggling nonstop. He watched in horror as the cheetah was devouring another death-row inmate. The arena deliberately starved the cheetah for some time to increase the cheetah’s aggressiveness. It could further increase the performance’s entertainment value.

Although the audience in the stands had just witnessed a person’s death, they still seemed dissatisfied. The fat man on the other side of the arena was still alive. So they began to urge the trainers to make the leopard kill him. The two trainers then used a long pole to poke the leopard, interrupting its dinner and forcing it to attack the other prisoner.

The fat man wanted to get up and run for his life when he saw the feline coming for him. However, his legs had become so weak that he failed to get up even after two attempts. His antics caused the audience to burst out in mocking laughter.

Finally, the fat man stood up. Unfortunately for him, the leopard was getting closer. With no hesitation, he around and started to run. Clearly, he could never outrun the leopard. The fat man’s escape had triggered the leopard’s hunting instinct, and before anyone could react, it pounced on the fat man mercilessly.

By that time, Zhang Heng felt that it was pointless watching the leopard make another kill.

Chapter 739: Exciting Performance

After the beast-master put the leopard back into the cage, Zhang Heng and Varo were asked to clean up the mess.

The two came to the arena with a cart. According to Varo's statement, it was not the first time he watched an execution. During that time, he was one of the spectators. Although he sat on the top level allocated for ordinary citizens, he felt no discomfort, nor was he disgusted by it.

In fact, at that time, he was just as excited as the audience was right now. Surrounded by the frantic screaming and cheering, he would be naturally infected by the festival-like atmosphere. His adrenaline would start pumping, and his heartbeat would soar as if a grand play displayed in front of him. And the arena did, in fact, put on some plays from time to time.

In addition to feeding the beasts prisoners on death row, there was also another type of death penalty involving mythical or historical dramas. For instance, Icarus would make a pair of wax wings for himself and attempted to fly towards the sun. In the end, the wings melted, and he fell to his death. To reenact the legend, the arena would make the death-row prisoners put on the waxed wings. After that, they would find a way to launch him into the sky, watching him struggle in the air as he fell to death. Upon landing, his head would shatter into pieces, his blood at times even splattering as far as the emperor's pedestal. Some prisoners would play Prometheus, whose hearts would be cut open and devoured by eagles in front of everyone...

It had to be admitted that the Romans did have some ways of entertaining themselves in this era. They had an uncanny ability to come up with the most creative methods to execute the death-row prisoners. From a modern-day perspective, many of these were extremely inhumane and bloody. Especially in the years when Nero was emperor, some performances were so bloody and brutal that even the citizens of that era found it hard to accept.

The current performance, at least, seemed to cure the appetites of the rowdy spectators in the stands for now.

When Varo stood in the arena, he did not feel too good—especially when he saw the two severely mutilated bodies in front of him, he almost vomited his breakfast. On the other hand, Zhang Heng's expression remained unchanged. After enduring the Soviet-Finnish War and Black Sail quest, he was used to seeing dead people. Gruesome sights hardly affected his emotions now. When it came to weirdness and horror, the scene before him was nothing compared to what he saw in the basement of the Alien quest... not to forget the seaside town literally inhabited by monsters.

Varo trembled in terror when ordered to feed the lion in the cage. Knowing that he could no longer rely on Varo, Zhang Heng instructed him, "Follow me with the cart."

After that, Zhang Heng hooked up the corpse on the ground with the hook in his hand, dragged them onto the cart one by one, and retrieved a half-eaten foot courtesy of the leopard.

While they were cleaning up, several horsedrawn chariots drove ceremoniously into the arena and circled around. The slaves standing on them were in flower crowns and wreaths, and they threw bread and copper coins toward the stands. The whole thing looked like an interlude performance of a modern sports event.

Some spectators stood up to receive the gifts, while some took advantage of the break to get a drink at the drinking fountain or simply chat with their friends. According to Varo, the gladiator performance should be up next.

The day was slated to be packed with stupendous performances.

However, Zhang Heng and Varo would not get to watch them. It wasn't long before they cleaned up the bodies and were soon asked to return underground to resume their work.

Zhang Heng finally had the opportunity to check his character panel. What he cared about the most right now was the whereabouts of his game items. Before entering this dungeon, he was asked to choose the items he wanted to bring with him. The last thing he expected was for all of them to be all when he arrived here.

Name: Zhang Heng

Gender: Male

Age: 20

Player Number: 07958

Number of games completed: 8

Current game points: 0

Possessions: Infinite Building Block (B), Pestilence Bone Bow (B), Feign Death (C), White Horse Crown (C), Filter Lens (D), Paris Arrow (D), Lucky Rabbit Foot (E), Hunter's Blessing (F), Oath Ring (F), Marble Soda (F)

(Due to the nature of this round, all your items have been stored at Red Nose Smithy. Player can retrieve them with the password: Vulkan)

Skills: Swordsmanship Lv4, Sailing LV3, Shooting Lv3, Language proficiency Lv2 (eight languages at daily communication proficiency), Lego assembly Lv2, Archery Lv2, Field survival Lv2, Driving Lv2, Vehicle modification and maintenance Lv2, Aerospace Lv2, Hacking LV2, Criminal Investigation Lv2, Make-up Lv2, Cowboy Lv2, Piano Lv1, Skiing Lv1, Rock climbing lv1, Herbology Lv1.

Evaluation: Player inherits a portion of the Shadow-set items' power and possesses incredible swordsmanship. As an opponent in a battle, you don't want him to land his hand on any blade weapons. He is a Lego master, spear master, and a highly-skilled cowboy. Including sharp criminal investigation skills and an ability to camouflage himself effectively, he has a higher chance of encountering enemies than an ordinary person. He is also Pestilence's messenger with a white horse. Besides accumulating a considerable amount of sailing experience, he is also good at using bows and arrows. As for transportation, he can drive a car, fly an airplane, and navigate a spacecraft. Easily adapts to the wilderness. The skills he has mastered, strong combat readiness, along an ability to keep promises make him a rare gem among other players.

This time, Zhang Heng had left his Water-Soluble Metal and Betty's Shell behind since they wouldn't be instrumental to his survival in this dungeon. Instead, he brought Feign Death and Marble Soda. Other than that, his Shadow Key had depleted its final use after he passed his previous test.

Compared to the previous game, his skillset had undergone some changes. First of all, his shooting skills had finally upgraded to Lv3. This was also his third skill that was above lv3. Other than that, his cowboy

skill obtained from the Western dungeon was now Lv2, and his herbology learned during the Alien quest had achieved Lv1.

Although the Proxy War's dungeon was not designed to help players improve their skills or obtain game items, Zhang Heng had spent a relatively long time in the dungeons. While hunting down alien remnants to earn more points, he would take the opportunity to learn something new.

Basically, everything was what he expected so far. Next, he wanted to know what the system had to say about his game items' whereabouts.

Of course, he was relieved upon discovering that his items were still there.

He could understand why the system would do something like that. He started the game as a slave this time. According to Roman law, everything the slaves possessed belonged to their master. All the items he brought into the dungeon were not that eye-catching except for the White Horse Crown. If someone saw a slave carrying the White Horse Crown, it would cause him a lot of unnecessary trouble.

After Zhang Heng checked on his character panel, he saw Varo was standing there in a daze not far away from him. There was a gloomy expression on his face.

Chapter 740: Slave

Zhang Heng had heard about the tragic stories that were connected to the Roman slaves.

While Zhang Heng participated in the Black Sail dungeon, the slave trade happened to be booming. He had led the Jackdaw to attack several slave ships when he saw how countless black men were stuffed into the vessels' bowels, waiting to be slaughtered like livestock. The nauseating stench of urine and sweat permeated every cabin of the ship.

After he hijacked the ship, Zhang Heng selected the strongest fighters from those black slaves with Laeli's assistance. He would then recruit them into his pirate gang, and he would send the rest off to an island. These islands would later serve as essential covert supply points when his gang battled against the Nassau Marine. At that time, Zhang Heng was granted the title Liberator of the New World. He did not expect that he would become a slave one day.

The worst thing was that the system had made him a slave in the second century, a period where society itself had been built upon a system of slavery. Rome had a social structure that was literally like a pyramid. Right at the top were nobles, followed by commoners, foreigners, and at the very bottom, the slaves.

These slaves were not considered human and were simply treated as production tools or instruments that provided entertainment. The performance going on above them was the prime example of exploiting the slaves for pure entertainment—these gladiators would shed blood and flesh in exchange for cheers and applause.

"What's going on in your mind?" Zhang Heng asked Varro.

"What?" replied the latter, shocked. "Oh, oh, I'm thinking about when our turn to perform as gladiators will come."

“Are we required to do that?” Zhang Heng was a little surprised. Judging by the tasks that were assigned to them currently, they were supposed to be ordinary arena workers. Especially Varo—not only was he skinny, but he also lacked courage—he could not even muster enough confidence to feed the lion in the cage. If he was forced to become a gladiator and fight with his life, Zhang Heng suspected he would survive no more than three seconds.

“Not now, of course. We know nothing about becoming gladiators. We’ll be making a fool of ourselves if we jump into the arena now. No one wants to see our clumsy performance. But...” Varo lowered his voice, “I got news... The Germanic barbarians will be sent over here tomorrow! Once they arrive, we will have to attend the gladiator school to train with them.”

Varo looked at Zhang Heng. However, he did not see the panicked expression he expected. Startled by the nonchalant reaction, he added, “You... have nothing to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

“We are about to be sent to a gladiator training camp tomorrow. I heard that life there is worse than death. They will torture and lash us nonstop. Many have died trying to endure this brutal training. Those who do make it will have to participate in an assessment. If you pass, you will be chosen as a gladiator, where you will fight to your death during your performance in the arena.”

“If you are so worried about your own life, wouldn’t you be fine if you fail the final assessment?” Zhang Heng said.

“That’s the problem. All slaves failing to pass will be sold to the mines or villages to make up for the losses. Know how the people over there treat their slaves? They will keep you working all the time, just like their livestock. Until the day you die, you will never be free!” Varro explained in desperation. “It shouldn’t be like this. Chickpea promised me.”

“Who is Chickpea?”

“A slave trader. I was a friend of his. After I became a slave, he told me that the nobles would buy me over in the city, and I would get to run a business. As long as the person who buys me gives me a sum of money, I can generate more money for them. And once my business flourishes, I will be able to buy back my freedom again,” Varro clenched his fists with both hands. Unwillingly and painfully, he cried, “Why is this happening? Why have I been sold as a slave? I don’t belong here...”

“Maybe it’s because you have a well-maintained body?” replied Zhang Heng. “Were you a businessman before becoming a slave? You’ll look a little more like a soldier if you put on some armor.”

“But I have never learned to fight!” Varro shook his head. “This is ridiculous. It is obvious that I can use my business knowledge to bring in more wealth. Why would they send me to gladiator school to be tortured? This is such a waste of talent.”

“Heh, if what you say is true, maybe you should talk to the master here,” suggested Zhang Heng.

“I tried. I told the overseer about my situation and asked him to tell the master here,” Varo said.

“What happened after that?”

“Then... there has been no news until now.” Varo put down the rag in his hand and hesitated, “Maybe I should go and look for the master personally. What do you think?”

Zhang Heng did not answer right away. Instead, he asked, “You said you were a businessman before. Why were you sold?”

“Don’t mention it,” Varo sighed the moment he heard the question. “I sold antiques. A business passed down to me by my father. Our family had made a lot of money from this, but unfortunately, someone got to me afterward. I heard my friend telling me about how lucrative the flax business in Egypt was. So I discussed with a nobleman over there to grow more flax. He would provide the land, and I was supposed to pay for the rest of the expenses. Once the flax gets woven into the cloth, we would sell them to Rome. However, my friend was robbed as soon as he got on the road. He lost his people and money. And what’s worse was that I signed a contract with him earlier. If he did not get the money within the specified time, I would need to pay him a large number of liquidated assets. I tried my best, but still, I couldn’t collect enough money to pay him. So not only did I lose all my assets, but I also became a slave.”

“Well, what a sad story,” said Zhang Heng.

At that moment, there was another deafening roar of applause. It seemed the gladiatorial performance had reached its climax. All around the stands, the spectators were ecstatic.

And Varo had made up his mind. “Tomorrow, when the Germanic barbarians are escorted here, everyone would be asked to gather at one place. At that time, our master should also show up. I can talk to him and tell him about my business experience. If things go well, I’ll be able to leave this place.”

“Really? Then I wish you good luck,” replied Zhang Heng.

“Sorry, I can’t help you,” said Varo, embarrassed. He had just explicitly described the horrors of the gladiator school, and now he was saying that he was about to leave Zhang Heng here. The two had just met, and they couldn’t be considered as friends or even acquaintances for that matter.

After the previous conversation, however, the two had indeed gotten a little closer. Now, Varo was like a clay bodhisattva crossing the river. Protecting himself would be difficult, let alone watching out for Zhang Heng.

“It’s okay. Just remember to tell me the day you become a free man.” After Varo’s story, Zhang Heng wasn’t too optimistic about Varo’s success rate. He knew that amid the darkness, Varo had just seen a glimmer of hope. Nobody could persuade him to give up the idea of escaping the gladiator school now.