

48 Hours 81

Chapter 81: The Mannerheim Line Welcomes You (End)

Two months later.

At a random farm on the border of Finland and Switzerland.

Zhang Heng wiped away the sweat from his forehead and put down the ax in his hand. He moved all the chopped wood back to the storeroom and arranged them neatly among the piles. A loaf of fresh bread and some fish soup was on the table when Zhang Heng entered the house.

The owner of this farm was a 67-year-old lady called Greta. Her husband and only son were tragically killed on the battlefield. She had a daughter as well but had since been married off to a man in the United States. A month ago, she took in Zhang Heng and Simone out of kindness, besides needing help with the farm work as well. Hence, the two of them decided they would put up here for some time.

When anyone asked about the two newcomers, Greta would tell them they were the relatives of her daughter's husband. Zhang Heng's fluent English was enough proof. As for Simone, she was a quiet girl and disliked socializing. As time passed, people around started to accept who she was. For good measure, both tossed away their weapons on their way here. Simone's gunshot wound was treated by a doctor who lived in a small town. The sad truth was, Simone had no family left in this world, with her great-grandfather passing away two years ago. In other words, there was nothing to hold her back and tie her down in this world.

Once the battle at the lake was over, Zhang Heng initially wanted to settle down in America with Simone only to realize later on that his plan was less than ideal. First, America was located too far away from Finland. Traveling all the way there would take a long time. Secondly, Simone's English wasn't the best. She would have a hard time communicating with the locals if she stayed there.

In the end, Zhang Heng thought it best to stay at the border between Finland and Switzerland. Finland was one of the dukedoms of Switzerland, which was why most Finnish could also speak Swedish. As for the people who stayed in the villages near the border, it was common that they would converse in two languages, Greta being one of them. At least Simone could freely communicate with the people here.

Through the window, Zhang Heng could see that Simone was returning from hunting. She had her sniper slung at her back and had a rabbit and a fox with her. As she entered the house, she placed today's catch in the kitchen, stored her hunting rifle in the attic, and washed her hands before settling in the dining room to have her meal.

Grandma Greta scooped a bowlful of fish soup for everyone with Zhang Heng thanking her in Finnish. This was an ordinary night for them, peaceful and joyful. After dinner, they bid each other their goodnights before retreating to their respective rooms.

Greta was already up in the early hours of the morning, preparing Zhang Heng and Simone's breakfast. She then put it in a basket. Today, Simone wasn't wearing the hunting outfit that she'd put on each morning. Instead, she had put on a dress with a floral design. Since this was a dress that had been made

initially for Greta's daughter, it seemed a little too small for Simone, looking slightly uncomfortable and squirmy.

"Have fun today," said Greta while passing the food basket to them.

"Bye, Greta!" Zhang Heng replied as he gave Greta a hug.

"Goodbye, children!"

Greta waved at them from afar. They sure looked very much like a couple going for an outing. Zhang Heng hopped on a bicycle, and Simone sat on the back. They soon passed the paddy field, and then a square in a small town, where their tiny hospital was plastered with blood donation posters. They enjoyed the serenity of the atmosphere as they passed all of it.

The war in Finland had ended, but the war in Europe had only just begun. Switzerland was considered a neutral nation. Hence, they did not need to suffer the pains that came along with war, making it a paradise during the era of the Second World War.

Shortly after that, Zhang Heng parked his bicycle on a grass field located on the outskirts of the hamlet. As they alighted the bike, they both carried the food basket down, seeing a field of flowers around them. Zhang Heng had no idea what species they were, but he heard that the national flower of Finland was called lily-of-the-valley. Unfortunately, this was not the right time to watch them fully bloom.

This was his last day of the quest. Earlier, Zhang Heng had told Simone that this day would arrive, to which she had said nothing. All she wanted was to spend time and have fun with him during his last day in Finland.

After taking a pleasant walk along the streets of the town, they fished at a pond and even managed to play some poker. In the end, they settled on a small hill to enjoy the fish sandwiches prepared by Greta. Still, they spoke little to each other.

Their silence did not mean they were awkward, but rather, this was simply their way of spending time with each other. Simone's hair and dress fluttered in the wind. At last, she lay her head on Zhang Heng's lap, and she closed her eyes. Zhang Heng then took a look at his watch, took off his jacket, and covered Simone with it. Her eyebrows twitched while she was asleep. Seconds later, he heard a familiar voice.

[Time to return. Quest completed...]

[You have completed 'The Mannerheim Line Welcomes You' quest. The game's third round has been completed. You will now be sent back to the real world...]

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Zhang Heng opened his eyes, finding himself sitting on a chair. It was unreal. Amongst the three quests that he'd completed, this was the shortest. However, he was always on edge throughout the entire mission, having to face the possibility of being killed by enemies every single day. Thrown all the way from World War II back into the current world, Zhang Heng felt that he had just traveled through time. The one single thing that he could rely on was no longer there.

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This time, Zhang Heng sat dazed for half an hour before he finally stood up. Something fell out of his pocket, and when he saw it, he was shocked. It was a necklace with a pendant made of an animal bone, the necklace that Simone had worn all the while! The bone used here was smaller than the ones given by the old man in Chinese attire. This one was as tiny as a fingernail.

What seemed to be a tall red pine with thick branches and a complicated root system was engraved on it. Zhang Heng hadn't the slightest of when Simone slipped it into his pocket. Since he could carry it back, that meant it was a game item. After spending 140 days, Zhang Heng thought that he would not acquire a game item in this round. To his surprise, the necklace had actually been with him for a long time.

He did not look for the bartender lady to identify the item, knowing that it shouldn't carry any side effects as Simone had been wearing it for a long time.

Right now, another item needed to be identified urgently. It was the Moresby bone. Zhang Heng had taken the old man's advice, trying his best to not let others know about their relationship. So, he had to wait until the quest ended before allowing the bartender to identify the item.

"I know that you possess a Lucky Rabbit Foot. Another game item?! Three rounds of quests, and you acquired three game items? Are you the son of the Lucky Goddess?" asked the bartender while staring at him with gaping eyes.

Chapter 82: PTSD

This time, the game ended in the early hours of the morning. Only a few people were still partying in the bar downstairs when Zhang Heng stepped out of the lounge.

Instead of summarizing his experience right away as he did in the past, he returned to the university, showered, and went straight to bed. Right now, all he wanted was to clear his mind of any thoughts. He genuinely did not want to think about anything.

In the middle of his slumber, the door suddenly creaked open, rousing him from his sleep. Zhang Heng instantly rolled off his bed and reached for a gun, but obviously, there was nothing for him to grab.

Wei Jiangyang who had just walked into the room was startled at his friend's reaction. He stood at the door, too stunned to react for a moment before muttering, "Bro... brother, are you alright?"

Zhang Heng cringed at the slightly awkward situation. Even though his body was physically the same, that two month war experience had scarred him in a whole different way.

Compared to before, he was a much lighter sleeper – even the slightest of movements would wake him. This was his body's self-defense mechanism kicking into high gear, in response to the complex and harsh environment he had been put into. Now and then, whenever he was walking down the street, he would subconsciously look around, keeping an eye out for bunkers.

Zhang Heng knew very well about a mental condition called PTSD, which stood for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It was common among veterans who had fought in wars. Mostly, symptoms varied from a complete reenactment of the battle experience, reclusiveness, and hypervigilance.

Currently, Zhang Heng was more prone to the third symptom. Although able to recover from most of the war's trauma in his final month in Sweden, it was going to be really difficult for him to return to the mental state he was in prior to the war.

Since he was already awake, Zhang Heng decided to not continue sleeping. He found himself something to eat in the cafeteria, then proceeded to the library with his laptop.

After spending an entire afternoon completing the game's summary, Zhang Heng found himself thinking about the necklace in his pocket, so he looked up Finnish folklores on the internet.

Finnish and Ugrian folklore were around even before the 10th Century and were very similar to those of the Samoyedic people and the Altai tribe. As time passed, the neighboring tribes had slowly influenced their lore.

Iranian myths, Turkic myths, and Baltic myths had, in their own way, been incorporated into Finnish folklore. Later on, influence of Islamic and Christian cultures was apparent as well. It was a very complicated subject, involving numerous deities. Considering these tales were not the most popular, only few records were left of them.

Zhang Heng had no choice but to breach the Great Firewall of China to access Google for the information he wanted. He had been combing through the web until 10 pm that night when he finally found a picture of a necklace that looked identical to the one he had.

Zhang Heng's drowsiness suddenly vanished! He clicked onto the webpage and found the deity in the picture—Tapio, the god of the forest. He was an ancient Finnish God, depicted as a fir tree. It was said that he could help in making hunts more fruitful for those who worshiped him. Religious reformist leader Mikael Agricola had preserved precious genealogical materials in a 'list of gods' which he had written in 1551. This included Tapio.

Simone was born into a family of hunters and had grown up in the mountains with her grandfather. So, it was no surprise that she too worshipped Tapio.

Except for the wood carving he obtained from Tokyo Drift, which he still found no information about, the Lucky Rabbit's Foot, Moresby, and the necklace from this round all had their connections to folklore. This was especially true for Moresby's appearance in the real world. Zhang Heng realized that things might not be as simple as they seemed.

Unfortunately, the old man in the Tang suit had already left for Europe, and Zhang Heng had no one else he could ask about these things. Apparently, it was because of some old covenant that he could not reveal too much information to him. At least that was what the old man said before he left.

Zhang Heng closed his laptop and remained seated for a while as he tried to piece the puzzle in his mind. However, not long after that, he heard the sounds of people giggling.

Three girls had occupied the table to his left. Two hours ago, Zhang Heng noticed that one of them, a lanky girl with glasses, had been stealing glances at him. He thought that there was something on his face. Now, there were another two girls giggling too as they peeked at him in secrecy.

When they saw that Zhang Heng was looking over to them, the two girls nudged the lanky girl. The latter got up from her seat and walked towards Zhang Heng, eyes on the ground. She stuttered, “Fri... friend... Can I ask you a question?”

Zhang Heng was a little surprised, but he knew why she had approached him. Even then, he still took the Advanced Mathematics workbook from her. Then, he very patiently wrote down a derivation process in great detail. After that, he looked at his mobile phone and told her, “I’m sorry. My girlfriend is looking for me.”

A flash of disappointment flickered in the girl’s eyes. She forced a smile, fumbled a thank you, before plodding back to her seat, crestfallen.

Now that he had sown the seed, he had to see this lie he fabricated out of kindness to the end. Zhang Heng packed up his things and left.

To his greatest surprise, however, it turned out that he really did receive a message on his phone. It was the bartender lady.

Zhang Heng opened the pdf file she sent him as he walked towards the elevator with his bag. It turned out to be the long-overdue game-points service form that he had asked her ages ago.

He briefly scanned the document. In addition to an identification service, there was also a list of items for sale – these were not game items, but a collection of bizarre things. When compared to these items, the tulewood box that contained them would easily be considered as ordinary.

These peculiar objects included blood from a cow’s first birth and the 45th feather of a crow, a bunch of things that made no sense. Amongst these were other normal items but seemed unusual because of their inclusion in the list.

Zhang Heng texted the bartender lady just to be sure.

[Penguin?]

She replied after a moment.

[Why? Are you trying to hit on me?]

Zhang Heng continued,

[No, I’m not talking about QQ. I just saw that ‘penguin’ is on the list of things for sale!]

Business must have been slow because the bartender lady replied to him almost instantly.

[Oh, why? Do you plan on buying one? They’re relatively cheap. One game point for two. You’ll even get a freezer for free!]

[No need for that. Thanks.]

Zhang Heng just wanted confirmation. There was no point in keeping two penguins in the dorm, having no knowledge whatsoever about the creatures. Besides, the school had refused to install air conditioners for the dorms even after everyone had repeatedly demanded for them. The dorms were like furnaces during the summer. Not everyone could take the stifling heat, let alone the poor penguins.

He continued to scroll down the list before something caught his eye.

[What does 'extra game' mean?]

[It means precisely what it says it is, but you'll need to have 500 game points, and you can only choose from the previous game script. Its duration is also fixed at 60 days.]

Chapter 83: Wall

The extra game was actually very straightforward. Unlike Zhang Heng, not everyone would spend a year and a half in the game. Most would simply use that time to pick up new skills as their ranks were still not that high. So, the extra game was a good opportunity for them to continue improving their skills.

But then again, 500 game points were simply too costly. Zhang Heng had gone through three rounds of games, yet he had only just broken through the hundred points ceiling. That meant that it would take him at least ten rounds to gather that many. If there was no other way to acquire those game points, very few people would be able to afford this product.

However, that wasn't even the most expensive thing on the list. Zhang Heng kept scrolling and spotted an item that cost 800 game points – a Mission Failure Exemption Card.

As its name suggested, this little card allowed its holder to escape punishment if they failed a mission.

Presently, Zhang Heng had successfully passed all three games. The first and third game's main mission was survival. If he failed, he would die – a mission failure exemption card would be useless in such a situation. But for games like Tokyo Drift, Zhang Heng had no clue as to what kind of punishment the players would receive if they did not complete the mission.

If he had enough points, getting one of those cards sounded like a good idea.

Zhang Heng also saw something called the 'No.137 Permanent Game Point Membership Card' at the bottom of the page. This one was priced at an eye-watering 999 game points, an item that seemed particularly suspicious.

According to the bartender lady, players with the membership card could enjoy a 20% discount when they spent their game points at checkpoints. Whether this was a good bargain or not, was all up to the players themselves to determine.

Zhang Heng did not see a single game item in this long list. Other than the Extra Game and Mission Failure Exemption Card, the items on the list were real tangible things that existed in the physical world. The penguins, for example, were hard to acquire for most people living on earth. It required only one game point and even included free shipping, which was frankly a fantastic bargain.

Of course, whether anyone would actually buy them in the first place was another question altogether.

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A week passed in a blink of an eye, and the end of the term was drawing near. The whole school was filled with students who only studied at the last minute. Hence, the library had recently become a hive

of activity, brimming with students every day. The queue to the library had now extended to the entrance of the canteen, and this forced Zhang Heng to alter his routine.

He would go to the gym and the archery range during the day, then wait it out until midnight. When the world had come to a halt, only would he make himself a cup of coffee and study in the empty library.

Zhang Heng rarely skipped classes. Except for that time when he missed roll call for English class, he was mostly a diligent student, putting him out of danger of failing his subjects. However, since he had spent such a long time in the game, he had forgotten many things and it was necessary for him to review them.

In the eyes of others, however, his behavior seemed a bit odd. Everyone was bustling around, trying to cram as much as possible in what little time they had to prepare for the term's final examination. Zhang Heng was the only one wandering around indifferently. Even his roommate, Chen Huadong, had managed to drag himself out of bed early every morning to study. With his head buried in books, Chen Huadong could not help but roll his eyes whenever Zhang Heng left the room with his bow.

Worse still, Zhang Heng would always return very late in the night – almost always just before lights-out. Chen Huadong wondered how his friend would be able to find any time to prepare for the exam.

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Zhang Heng felt great today, successfully hitting a moving target 50 meters away. All ten arrows hit the bullseye. He ignored the coach's resentful looks and took a drink of water. Since he had just completed the third game, there was still plenty of time before the fourth and did not pack his schedule with all the training. After his practice, he headed to the park to feed the pigeons there instead of going to the gym. When night fell, he spectated a game of football in the stadium.

It was ten by the time the match ended. Rather than taking the train, Zhang Heng opted to jog back to school. As he jogged, he passed by an alley and quickly noticed two drifters searching for food in a dumpster.

They appeared to be a bedraggled grandparent and her grandchild, both wearing tattered and soiled clothing. The older one fished out a piece of half-eaten fried chicken and two packets of takeaways. She called her grandson to her and they crouched by the wall to eat. When she looked up, she saw Zhang Heng suddenly racing toward them!

The pair had probably been bullied by other homeless for the moment they saw Zhang Heng coming towards them; they looked extremely terrified. The old lady dropped the plastic bag in her hand and reached to pull her grandchild closer.

Suddenly, something fell on her shoulder. From his angle, Zhang Heng was able to see everything. The brick wall behind the old lady melted like hot cheese, and some sort of black liquid crawled onto her shoulder. When her grandson, about seven years old, saw this happening, he froze in his tracks.

Zhang Heng ran quickly towards the elderly lady and grabbed her hand, but the black liquid was a hell lot stronger than he thought. That thing seemed to be able to shift between a liquid and solid form. Zhang Heng's pulling did nothing to free the old lady of its shackles.

Although he was conservative on strength, it would have been useless even if he used all of it. If he exerted too much force, the old lady's body might be unable to take it. As Zhang Heng was racking his brain for a solution, the black liquid had already engulfed half of the elderly woman's body.

Then as, if having a mind of its own, it crawled onto the old lady's arm towards Zhang Heng as if not satisfied with the prey that it already had.

Zhang Heng reacted quickly, withdrawing his hand at the very last second! Then, he grabbed the motionless child – the sudden movement shook him from his daze, and in panic, he started struggling. He wanted to save his grandmother but the black liquid moved so quickly that, in less than a minute, it had completely engulfed the woman. It then slowly pulled her into the back.

Half a minute later, Zhang Heng and the little vagrant were the only ones left in the alley.

A sharp pain shot up Zhang Heng's right arm. The kid had bitten him and struggled himself free. He rushed to the wall and fell, knees to the ground. No matter how hard he thumped and punched the wall, the bricks remained unchanged, as if everything that had just happened was a bad dream.

"Name?"

"Zhang Heng."

"Qualification?"

"Currently studying at a university."

"Place of birth and ID, please."

"....."

A person had just disappeared right in front of Zhang Heng. He had to report it to the police no matter what. Soon, police officers arrived at the crime scene. However, it was too late. As there was no one else witness the incident except Zhang Heng and no CCTV cameas around them as well, they had to check the pharmacy's CCTV that was located beside the alley. Still, the footage explained nothing about what just happened.

The police had to escort the two of them to the station first. Upon reaching, Zhang heng was seated down before someone summoned him to take his statement. Before him, the police officers were dealing with a domestic problem involving a married couple that was having a heated argument.

Once Zhang Heng faced the police officer, she started to ask him about his personal information. When the questions headed in the direction of how the person disappeared, Zhang Heng decided that he would give honest answers.

"It was quite dark over there, and I didn't manage to see the whole thing clearly. I think she was devoured by the wall."

"What? Is that a metaphor? Did the wall collapse and buried her alive?"

"No. Literally. I mean, she was literally devoured by the wall!"

“Being a university student, you should know that it’s illegal to lie to the police, right?! Do you want me to contact your university’s chancellor?” the female police officer angrily shouted while slamming her pen on the table.

Zhang Heng was speechless though he did not blame the police officer for getting pissed. She might have just pulled an all-nighter at the station. Obviously, no one spending a night at the station would be too joyous after listening to Zhang Heng’s ludicrous statement. However, being a matter of life and death, Zhang Heng had no reason to make up a story and mislead the police officer.

“Maybe I saw it wrongly as it was a really dark place. From my angle, all I saw was the woman disappearing into the wall.”

The officer frowned once again, albeit, this time, she managed to control her anger a little better. When she stared at Zhang Heng, she noticed that he did not flinch, with him gazing at her calmly. Judging from the way he behaved, she concluded that he wasn’t fooling around. Zhang Heng had also mentioned that the place was too dark, and he failed to see anything clearly. So, she decided that she would not dwell on this question. Instead, she turned to asking questions about the relationship between him and the woman that disappeared.

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The police officer took a total of 20 minutes to record Zhang Heng’s statement. Throughout the entire process, he was very cooperative. After the small commotion, the female police officer turned out to be very polite as well.

“So... there is no sign of infringement. You didn’t exactly provide us with reliable evidence, and that kid refuses to talk as well. I can’t form a basis for a case from what you told me. Anyway, I would like to offer my thanks for reporting a homeless kid to us. We will try to identify him as soon as possible and contact his parents to come and pick him up.”

For now, Zhang Heng had done everything he could do. This ended precisely as he’d expected. He was sad, but that matter was out of his control, knowing that it was impossible to save the woman. There were many people like her in a busy city. Usually, the busy pedestrians that walked the streets would simply pass them by. Whatever that slimy thing was, Zhang Heng knew that it was extremely cunning. It knew that such a target would not draw any attention even if it were brazen enough to devour her on the street. If Zhang Heng did not pass by the alley, no one would have noticed the disappearance of two homeless people in this city.

Zhang Heng stood up and shook hands with the police officer. He then stole a glance at the kid that sat on the bench. He was still holding the fried chicken that he picked up from the bin, and seemed to be in great shock.

Taking pity on the child, Zhang Heng took out 300 yuan from his wallet and handed it to the police officer.

“Can you buy some food for him? He hasn’t had dinner.”

“You are actually quite nice. Alright. Don’t worry about it. Now that he is at our station, we will buy him some food later.”

Zhang Heng was still rather upset after leaving the police station. The creature that he encountered this evening was definitely supernatural, and he had no idea who would do something like this. It could have been a monster like Moresby or even other players who possessed game items like him.

Whatever the answer was, this was definitely not a good thing. According to the old man, 'things' like that had existed in this world for hundreds of thousands of years, peacefully co-existing alongside the humans. Clearly, the mysterious game had destroyed the balance.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng realized that Moresby would appear at Hongqiao International Airport. The old man told Zhang Heng that it had chosen the two Chinese tourists randomly. Zhang Heng, however, did not agree. There must be a better reason why it had appeared on this foreign soil.

The most troublesome part was the existence of other players. If those they survived the game, they must have acquired game items as well. Zhang Heng could not figure out the system that the game's creator used to select players. Not everyone had the intention to lay low like him. When someone came into possession of such great power, they would start to think of how to utilize their newfound abilities fully. Death in the game was the one factor that pushed everyone to take extreme measures. However, Zhang Heng had no intention to become a hero, nor did he want others to make a mess of where he lived.

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It was almost twelve when Zhang Heng arrived back at the university. He did not go through the main entrance, choosing instead to enter from the side door located west. This door was further away from the MRT station, and few elected to use this entrance. At times, some teachers would still use it because it was nearer to their residence.

As Zhang Heng came up upon the entrance, he saw a shiny black Mercedes-Benz parked on his right-hand side. Shen Xixi quickly shuffled off the car! An awkward situation emerged between them when she laid her eyes on Zhang Heng.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng remembered a rumor that he had heard earlier. Unfortunately, the black Mercedes had already left, and he was unable to take a good look at the driver. Shen Xixi quickly put the black pouch into her bag as she attempted to make herself look as calm as possible.

"It seems like we always meet at the wrong time," lamented Shen Xixi with a bitter smile.

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Zhang Heng replied.

Both of them were nothing more than friends. No matter what Shen Xixi did, she had no obligation to tell him about it. Besides, Zhang Heng did not believe in the rumors he heard. He knew she was smart enough to stop the Mercedes away from the front entrance, lest the things said about her would become truth. The only question he had was why Shen Xixi did not defend herself when the allegations were thrown at her.

"We'll talk soon. My dorm will be locked in a bit. I have to hurry!" said Shen Xixi after glancing at the time.

The female dorm was further away from the western entrance, and the dormitories would be locked in five minutes. Both of them waved each other a swift farewell before retreating to their respective rooms.

Chapter 85: Christmas Eve

It had been two days since Zhang Heng reported the supernatural case to the police. After that, he did not come across any cases involving the unknown. Earlier, he was surprised when he received a message from Hayase Asuka. She wanted to invite him to an amusement park on Christmas Eve, where a few of her friends would tag along as well. This was not the first time she asked Zhang Heng out. She was the kind of that could not stay indoors for too long, heading out whenever the opportunity presented itself.

The one thing that surprised Zhang Heng the most was her academic results. Although she always hung out, she still managed to pass her exams with flying colors, never having failed any subjects before. He even saw her fooling around on the eve of the finals.

The way she behaved was actually very similar to someone Zhang Heng knew. Someone he had previously rejected a few times. He had never expected Hayase Asuka to be the persistent kind of girl. This time, he felt terrible that he had always dismissed her invitations, and so, went ahead and asked his friends to join him if they had nothing better to do. Ma Wei was passionate about doing well in his studies. As for Wei Jiangyang and Chen Huadong, they had been attempting to memorize everything that they studied so far. Both of them were dying for some entertainment outside the confines of the dorm room.

“Are you talking about the Japanese girl that you saved at Food Street? The thing is, we don’t speak Japanese.”

“Erm... she’ll be there with a few of her friends. It seems they are from China, Japan, and one of them is actually from Ukraine,” replied Zhang Heng while reading Hayase Asuka’s text.

“Never mind. I don’t think I will join you.”

Though Wei Jiangyang was interested in being friends with girls from different countries, he still thought that his life was his priority. He was not bold enough to abandon his girlfriend and instead have fun with others. As for Chen Huadong, he was devastated that his latest attempt in wooing Xu Jing had once again failed miserably. It would be a nice change for him to go out and distract himself from all the sorrow. Hence, he volunteered to go with Zhang Heng. Lastly, Ma Wei, the genius, was done with studying. He, too, decided to tag along with Zhang Heng.

After that, Zhang Heng told Hayase Asuka that he would bring a couple of friends with him. It was all in good faith, and she was totally fine with it. Both sides had agreed that they would meet at the entrance of the amusement park. Seeing that there was still some time left before they headed there, Zhang Heng played a few rounds of basketball with Chen Huadong on his computer.

After the game, they proceeded to the cafeteria for some food before departing. As the three of them had arrived ten minutes early, they purchased the entrance tickets first. When they came out, they spotted Hayase Asuka and her group of friends walking towards them.

On her head was a beanie with two fur balls hanging from it. They swung around as she ran towards them. She quickly waved her hands at Zhang Heng the moment she saw him. Two boys and five girls were here with her. The handsome blonde bloke should be the exchange student from Ukraine. He might have looked all imposing and cool from the outside, but once they had gotten to know him, he turned out to be actually somewhat timid.

All of them did a simple introduction about themselves. Hayase Asuka even spelled out her name in Chinese. They got to know how good the exchange students' mandarin was the moment they started the introductions. Amongst them, the guy from Ukraine had the highest proficiency in Mandarin, his great grandmother being from China. So, he named himself Zhang Wei.

As for the rest of the Japanese girls, only one of them could speak good Mandarin. That being said, they could all communicate with each other without problems. The only thing was that they had to say the words slowly, considering it wasn't their native language. The last Japanese girl had already started using some of the more complex Chinese phrases. Amongst them, Hayase Asuka had the lowest proficiency in Mandarin. Right after she introduced herself, she instantly reverted to Japanese again when she talked with the two girls. Apart from those two, the other two who could understand her were Zhang Heng and another boy that was currently taking Japanese classes.

Seeing that everyone was here, Zhang Heng distributed the entrance tickets to each of them. The amusement park was packed with crowds of thousands because it was Christmas Eve, with most of the visitors being couples. There were even a few Santa Clausus standing at the entrance to give presents to those that were about to enter the amusement park, giving out gifts to the entering visitors.

The group got their presents too, and when they opened theirs, they found out that they had all received different items. Zhang Heng got a nail clipper, and Ma Wei found a key chain. However, Chen Huadong was the luckiest amongst them, receiving a complimentary pass from the amusement park's management. The moment Hayase Asuka opened her present, her face immediately turned red! She quickly hid it in her bag before anyone saw it. [Read comics on our webnovel.](#) [live](#)

One of the guys persuaded her to show everyone what she got, though, Zhang Heng could roughly guess the item that she received. Immediately, he looked for a topic to distract everyone. At his quick thinking, Hayase Asuka looked at Zhang Heng gratefully. To be honest, the amusement park wasn't as entertaining during the night. For safety reasons, rides like rollercoasters and other thrills were shut down. Fortunately, the park made up for it with spectacular live performances.

Zhang Heng and his friends queued up to try some of the games offered at the booths nearby. Seeing that the live show was about to start, some of the girls suggested that they should watch it first.

"You guys go ahead. I will keep her company," said Zhang Heng when he saw that Hayase Asuka was more interested in the games she was playing.

"I will keep her company as well," said the other guy that spoke Japanese.

Zhang Heng did not brush him off, noticing that was trying to woo Hayase Asuka. In the direction of giving them more alone time, Zhang Heng volunteered to help hold on to their personal belongings. Hayase Asuka was so excited that she did not suspect anything was amiss. Secretly though, the guy was extremely grateful for what Zhang Heng did.

While Hayase and the guy visited the haunted house, Zhang Heng settled on a bench to answer a call. The call came from Ireland and was his parents. They both wished him a happy Christmas. At the same time, they kept teasing him and asking him to take a picture of the girl that was close to him. Zhang Heng then took a picture of the couple on his left.

“That’s pathetic...”

Now, his parents were nagging him, lamenting about their life in university. Judging from the background noise, Zhang Heng deduced that his parents were probably standing in front of a theater or stadium of some sort. As they were running out of time because the event they were about to attend was about to start, they had to come back to a more serious topic. They informed Zhang Heng that they would return to celebrate the new year with him. They even prepared a surprise for him as well.

Zhang Heng did not entirely trust everything they said. It had been two years that his parents had not celebrated the new year with him. Last year, they were both on holiday but had chosen to travel to Africa instead of celebrating Chinese New Year with their son. Initially, Zhang Heng wanted to ask them about Moresby, Tapio, and the crows that appeared in his mind when he used the wooden sculpture.

Though they most probably wouldn’t qualify as parents of the year, they were still experts in all these mystical stuff. Considering they were coming back in about a month, Zhang Heng decided that he would only ask when they came home. Talking about matters like these on the phone might just turn out to be more confusing.

After hanging up the call, Zhang Heng sat on the bench for a little longer. Suddenly, he saw someone familiar in the crowd. He frowned, when he looked again, the person had disappeared.

Chapter 86: Arcade Center

Zhang Heng didn’t know if he had been mistaken. Just when he stood up from the bench and wanted to investigate, Hayase Asuka and the guy had come out from the haunted house.

“I was so scared! A face appeared out of nowhere when I was walking around just now. The creature even stuck out its tongue to scare me! My only thought after that was to get out of this haunted house as fast as possible. I should have just listened to you about not getting in. You are the smartest one here!”

Zhang Heng then glanced at the guy beside her. He simply shrugged, looking somewhat disappointed. Visiting the haunted house was actually a good idea for a guy where usually, a girl would typically stay closer to him when she got scared. Hayase Asuka, however, was no ordinary girl, running as fast as her legs could take her when she was spooked. In the end, the guy had to go after her, and there was nothing very romantic about it.

Zhang Heng gave up the idea of going after the mysterious person after the two of them interrupted him. The good thing was, he did not dwell on it. There were a lot of people that looked similar to each other in this world. After getting only a quick glance, the person he saw could have been anyone.

“What are we going to play next?” asked Zhang Heng.

“Do I get to pick?!” asked Hayase Asuka while pointing at the big teddy bear not far away from her.

“Can I have that teddy bear?”

Offering various types of games, these were a bunch of arcade booths managed by the amusement park itself. Soon, the three approached one of the staff in a Santa suit. The employee told them that the teddy bear was the prize for the mini-games.

“Let me give it a try then,” said the guy.

Since he was interested in Hayase Asuka, he aspired to prove himself in front of her. He then turned around and took a look at his options. In the end, he landed his attention on a shooting game. It was common for most guys to play FPS games. Shooting was a subject that they were definitely familiar with.

After observing others play and reading the rules, he decided to give it a go. The guy tossed a token into the machine and picked up the laser gun. He then took a deep breath before pushing the ‘start’ button.

The game itself was pretty simple, where all he needed to do was to hit as many balloons on the screen as possible. Different colors carried different scores. The player was given two minutes to collect as many points as possible. In the beginning, it was relatively simple, where the guy landed all his shots on the balloons that carried the most points. He even had the time to shoot the red and yellow balloons that carried lesser points. Soon, his score accumulated really fast. At the rate he was going, he would be able to claim the teddy bear in less than two minutes.

As time passed, the balloons fell faster and faster, and black balloons started to pop up as well. The scores would be deducted if the player shot black balloons. The game was getting harder by the second. When the time was almost over, he started to panic and inadvertently hit another black balloon right before the time ended. In the end, his only reward was a sticker saying Merry Christmas.

This pathetic result had deeply embarrassed him. So, he decided to go for another round. Perhaps it was due to his nervousness or his desperation for better results, he fared worse in this second round. This time, he accidentally hit a total of four black balloons. The people behind him were literally laughing at him. Judging by their buff physique and attire, they were most likely students from a university nearby here. Though the guy was very unhappy that they were laughing at him, there was nothing he could do about it.

A fight almost broke out when one of them called him a ‘weak-ass.’ Though the person simply muttered it out, it was clear enough for the people around him to hear everything. In the end, they laughed at him even harder. Hayase Asuka could not understand the conversation, but she could sense that something was not right. So, she quickly told the guy that she did not want the teddy bear anymore. It was better for them to look for fun elsewhere.

Zhang Heng was fine with that. When the guy saw that the group of boys who laughed at him were strong and muscular and that there were only three of them, he knew that things could take a worse turn for them if he decided to confront them. None the wiser, he decided to swallow all the frustration that was burning within him.

The three of them ignored the rowdy gang and proceeded to the dart-throwing booth next door. On the other hand, the group of guys that laughed at him tried the shooting game. Hayase Asuka was overloaded with luck tonight.

Although she had never undergone professional training, she still managed to hit the bullseye thrice! Though her last dart missed the target, she still managed to get the fourth prize. The attendee then handed her a mug, which instantly lightened up her mood. Her admirer standing beside her was clearly distracted. He still had his attention focussed on the group of guys that laughed at him earlier. After playing two rounds, they only managed to win a consolation prize.

“I thought you guys are supposed to be really good,” the guy jeered at the group sarcastically.

One of the boys that looked like a basketball player overheard what he said. He turned around and looked at him with a smile.

“Hey! It’s you guys again. Why are you still here? Come play one round with me then.”

He did not expect his soft whisper to be heard by them. Nevertheless, he was forced to accept the challenge knowing that this was the worst time for him to act like a coward.

“What do you want to play?”

“Let’s all play a round of the shooting game then since we all look down on each other. I’m not going to make your life difficult, don’t worry. All you need to do is call yourself a weak-ass if you lose.”

The guy was furious when he heard the degrading slur again. As he looked at their score, he felt that he should be able to beat his opponent if he played carefully this time.

“Fine! Let’s do it then!”

The group guys were clearly excited when he accepted their challenge. All of them started to look at him as if he was a clown that was ready to perform in front of them.

“Wang Bin, you are so mean! Why are you bullying a retard?” asked one of the group members while blowing a whistle.

“I have to do it. He is calling us weak. He wants to teach us a lesson and brag in front of his girlfriend,” said Wang Bin with both hands wide open.

“You first or us first?” asked the guy who spoke Japanese.

Suddenly, he felt that something was not right. Their shooting was not as good, but they acted really confident in front of him. Was that simply mind games?

Although he knew in his heart that it probably was, he still couldn’t muster up enough courage to face them confidently. He even started to regret accepting the challenge.

Truth be told, Hayase Asuka did not actually understand the word ‘weak-ass’, and he was the one who was feeling embarrassed. In one way or another, Wang Bin was right about him. Without a doubt, he did have the intention to show-off in front of Hayase Asuka.

Chapter 87: Can I Borrow Two Tokens?

Going first had its good and bad sides. If he performed well, he could exert tremendous pressure on his opponent, putting him under a lot of stress. At the same time, that would also mean his trump card would be revealed. The guy speaking fluent Japanese hesitated for a while before choosing to go after his opponent, suspecting that his nemesis was playing tricks on him.

After they made their choices, everyone from the opposing team had their eyes on a plump guy standing amongst them. When compared to others of the same age, he looked like an ordinary, unassuming guy that no one would notice. The outdated Bosideng down jacket that he wore would surely pass unperceived. Earlier, when his friends were playing the shooting game, he just stood there silently without saying a word.

“Why did you guys bring me trouble again?” he asked, then smiled when he realized that everyone was looking at him.

“We are all just hanging out since its Christmas Eve. I will buy everyone supper when this is over,” Wang Bin proclaimed while handing the laser gun to the plump guy.

“This will be the last time I’ll be doing something like this. Teacher Guo advised us to stay out of trouble while we are here.”

The moment he picked up the gun, his temperament switched entirely, as if transforming into another person. One could instantly tell that he was no amateur from the way he held the laser gun. Immediately, the guy fluent in Japanese could feel that something was not right. Still, he was left with a tiny bit of hope that he could beat the plump guy.

The moment the game started, the plump guy’s performance completely annihilated whatever little hope he had. He might have looked ordinary, but his shooting skills were definitely something out of this world. At the early stages of the game, his superb skills weren’t apparent as the game was still easy. When the balloons started appearing faster and faster on the screen, he could still land his shots on the balloons that carried the most points.

His scores were rising steadily. Left in shock, the guy who spoke fluent Japanese realized that his opponent had surpassed his best score, and he still had half a minute left to complete the game. Right until the end, the balloons appearing on the screen became so fast that it almost faded into a blur. It was at that moment that the plump guy started to miss.

It was no longer relevant, however, as his score was high enough for the top prize. Upon seeing the win, the attendant of the arcade carried the giant teddy bear and approached him.

“I don’t need this giant teddy bear,” said the plump guy while putting down the laser gun.

“What now? Do you still want to compete with us?” asked Wang Bin while tapping on the shoulder of the guy who spoke fluent Japanese.

At that very moment, he realized that he had walked into a trap. The plump guy was no ordinary man. There was a reason why he was in the same school as Wang Bin. His forte was clearly not physical sports. From the way he performed just now, everyone realized that he must be a professional Esports competitor.

“You should honor the bet you made since you’ve lost the game.”

Wang Bin then took out his cellphone from his pocket and turned on the camera, switching it to record. The guy speaking fluent Japanese was deeply embarrassed in front of everyone. He knew that Wang Bin had intended all the while to make him look like a fool in public. What he did not expect was his opponent recording anything on video. His reputation would be eternally tainted if the clip were uploaded to the internet.

The worst thing here was that his impulsive decision had also dragged Hayase Asuka and Zhang Heng in with him. Despite all that, however, he did not hear Wang Bin saying anything about the loser having to do whatever he was asked to do.

He was so distracted that he did not realize the two persons beside him were gone. The plump guy harrumphed and saw that a crowd had started to gather around the arcade machine. He pinned the Eastern Tree Leaf drink he was holding under his armpit and picked up the laser gun.

“Can I borrow two tokens from you?”

Suddenly, Zhang Heng voiced out, asking Wang Bin for the coins.

“Not about to give up, huh? Fine.”

Wang Bin then took two tokens from his pocket and tossed it to Zhang Heng, who inserted one of them into the machine and placed the other under the screen.

“This token is for you to challenge my score later,” Zhang Heng told the plump guy.

Immediately, the crowd fell into a hushed silence. Even the guy fluent in Japanese thought that Zhang Heng had gone insane. Everyone saw that the plump guy dominated the shooting game. According to the arcade’s employee, the giant teddy bear had been sitting there for two months, with nobody managing to claim it as their own. This was the first time that someone had won it fair and square.

The plump guy was surprised that Zhang Heng wanted to challenge him. The crowd had started booing, but Zhang Heng chose to ignore them, starting the game instead. Somehow, he held the gun in a rather amateurish way. There was nothing particularly skillful about that.

Then, the tables started turning.

The moment he started firing a few shots, the plump guy quickly suspected that Zhang Heng might actually be better than him.

Outsiders were just there to watch them compete, but a real pro like the plump guy could instantly tell that Zhang Heng was a truly skilled marksman. In the game’s early stages, most players gained points at a predictable rate. Although the balloons had gradually appeared faster and faster on the screen, the plump guy observed that Zhang Heng still maintained his calm, and his performance had remained steady.

Zhang Heng played the game differently from the plump guy. Zhang Heng’s score increased bits by bits. After all the in-game battle-hardened training he got, his observational skills had grown better than most. Unlike the others, he did not impulsively focus only on the highest-scoring balloons while missing out on the rest.

After observing for a while, the plump guy noticed that Zhang Heng would arrange the balloons on the screen based on their value in the shortest time possible. He would not necessarily always shoot the ones with the highest value. Instead, he made sure to take out the rest of the valuable balloons before they left the screen as well. That meant Zhang Heng had to continually change his shooting sequence.

The plump guy had no idea how Zhang Heng managed such an incredible, striking great fear in him. Two minutes soon passed.

When Zhang Heng finally put down the laser gun, he realized that half of the crowd from the arcade center was watching him. Finally, his points on the screen stopped increasing. His final score was 2,765, 636 points higher than the plump guy's. Hayase Asuka was filled with excitement when she compared the scores.

This time, the group that bullied them was left speechless. Wang Bin quickly turned around and looked at the plump guy hoping that he would start another challenge. The plump guy, however, could only gaze at the coin on the machine with a bitter smile.

"I don't think I can surpass his final score."

Wang Bin and the rest of them became deeply embarrassed. Never in their minds did they imagine that he would lose to Zhang Heng. They were at a loss, not knowing what they should do now.

Chapter 88: Auction

The employee was left in a dilemma. Although it was true that Zhang Heng surpassed the score required for the first prize, no one would have expected that two players would be good enough to claim first prize. It was definitely a rare situation. The arcade's management, too, had no idea what to do next. As the victors were already present, going to get a second giant teddy bear now was out of the question.

In an attempt to ease the predicament, the employee suggested that they could choose other prizes in exchange for the bear.

Zhang Heng turned around to look at the group that bullied them earlier. It seemed this Wang Bin guy was the leader of the group. He appeared somewhat happy with the outcome and chose to stick to the bet.

"We have lost, and we will call ourselves weakasses."

Zhang Heng was taken aback hearing that they would stick to their promise. Since they came in bigger numbers, they could actually leave the place without honoring the deal. It would be embarrassing if they did so, but still, it was better than calling themselves weakasses. As for Asuka's admirer, Zhang Heng was truly disappointed in him. Although having knowledge that he lost the bet and had even dragged both of his friends into his trouble, he didn't even have the courtesy to tell his opponent that he would bear all responsibility.

"You don't have to call yourself that in public. I know you guys don't really want the giant teddy bear. Why not just give it to us? Then, we can put this matter to rest," Zhang Heng offered.

Wang Bin was taken aback by the methods Zhang Heng had used to deal with this matter. A few seconds ago, he saw the guy who spoke fluent Japanese taking out his cellphone and was prepared to put them on the record. They thought that they would surely be humiliated to death by the three of them.

Now, they were pleasantly surprised when they heard Zhang Heng's suggestion to call this off peacefully. Everyone initially thought that he was extremely arrogant when he left the coin under the screen if the plump guy asked for a rematch. His prior actions contrasted greatly with the merciful decision that he just made.

Zhang Heng and Wang Bin were no enemies, having simply undergone a small conflict. Earlier, Wang Bin was bullying the guy that spoke fluent Japanese because he knew that he had the plump guy behind him, which was why Zhang Heng used the same method to let him taste his own medicine.

The token just sat there under the screen, but none of them dared to touch it. This tiny gesture trumped over whatever word that would come out from one's mouth.

Since they had learned their lesson, Zhang Heng had no intention to humiliate them in front of everyone. Immediately, the plump guy handed the giant teddy bear to Hayase Asuka.

"This is great! True men like us should not play with teddy bears anyway. It's a good thing you guys want it from us."

The other members of the group laughed and smiled, seeking to make the whole affair a little less awkward. Before this incident, they had always go around and mess with other people solely in the name of proving that they would be the winner. This was their first time tasting the bitterness of what it was like to lose. Seeing that Zhang Heng was willing to let them off the hook, they were all relieved. Having no intention of lingering around any longer, they left the arcade the moment everything was settled.

Wang Bin was the last to leave. Zhang Heng frowned when he saw him walking towards them. He believed that he was a sore loser and wanted to come back for revenge.

"I owe you a favor this time. Save my number on your cellphone. You can call me anytime you need my help. Let me be frank. We are not going to get ourselves in any sort of fights. Our school is really strict about these things."

Zhang Heng was astonished that Wang Bin did not throw a tantrum in front of them. In return, he nodded and took down his number.

.....

Hayase Asuka hugged the teddy bear tightly as they walked away. She felt as if she was living in a dream.

"Woah! I didn't know you're such a good shooter! Were you a secret agent or something?!"

Hayase Asuka was so happy that she jumped around and pretended to shoot with her finger.

Zhang Heng could only think of the first excuse that came to his mind.

"I play a lot of shooting games," he said.

Since Hayase Asuka had never played an FPS game before, she did not suspect anything wrong with Zhang Heng's statement. All she knew was that he was really good at video games.

On the other hand, the guy who spoke fluent Japanese was now embarrassed by what he did earlier. He knew that he would never be able to get Hayase Asuka to like him. Besides, Zhang Heng had overshoot him by miles after successfully handling the matter. In the end, he made up an excuse for himself before hurriedly retreating to his dorm.

Zhang Heng wanted to convince him to stay, but he was determined to leave. That meant only two of them were left. After that, they both decided to try out the bumper cars while waiting for the live performance to be over. Soon, they met up with the rest of them at the Ferris wheel.

It was late, and the exam was at hand. So, they eventually decided it was time to head back to the hostel.

Of course, if someone could win an award for the most fruitful trip, it had to be Hayase Asuka. She hugged the giant teddy bear with one hand, and her other held the mug, becoming the envy of many girls. While chatting with the other two Japanese girls on the MRT, she told them she had singlehandedly won those two items by herself!

Of course, Zhang Heng had no intention to expose her. To be honest, if Wang Bin and his group of friends did not bully them in the first place, Zhang Heng would have never showcased his marksmanship.

If Chen Huadong and Ma Wei were there with him, they would never believe that he improved his shooting skills all by playing FPS games. A month ago, Zhang Heng played CS:GO with Chen Huadong and Jiang Weiyang. Zhang Heng's shooting skills only slightly bettered Chen Huadong. He would never accept Zhang Heng's reason.

All the skills he possessed right now were better than most of his counterparts. Considering that he was still really young, few people got to experience what he went through in the game.

As his skills would only improve the longer he spent playing the game, it would surely be harder for him to explain the things that he could do when the time came. Simply put, Hayase Asuka had actually saved him a lot of trouble by claiming all the credit.

.....

It was Christmas today and the last day to join the auction as well. Two days ago, Zhang Heng received an invitation from the gaming committee.

He had been invited to join an auction for game items.

Zhang Heng took a look at the auction's date and time written at the bottom left of the invitation and saw that it was to be held tomorrow night. He was always curious about how other players looked like, so naturally, he would not miss this opportunity. Of course, the main attraction was obtaining items that could assist him in-game.

Shadow Moment had played a significant role in Zhang Heng completing the third round of the game. Without it, Simone would have definitely killed him in the game's early stage. Though he could not see it, the Lucky Rabbit's Foot helped him a lot as well.

The chance of discovering these miraculous items were the reason why Zhang Heng looked forward to the auction.

Chapter 89: Fu Lou and Professor

[Verifying player...]

[Verified. Player 07958 has the invitation card. Connecting player to the quest...]

[Quest connected successfully. Current quest is Auction (Special)]

[Current quest has no story background and is not considered a round of the game.]

[Quest goal: None]

[Mode: Multiplayer]

[Time flow rate: 2]

(1 hour in the real world is equivalent to 4 hours in the game. Players would be sent back to the real world after an hour.)

[Friendly reminder. The game will begin in five seconds. Players, please get ready.]

.....

When Zhang Heng opened his eyes, he found himself standing on the deck of a cruise ship. He was wearing a black tuxedo perfectly tailored to his body, and there was a tag hanging in front of his chest. His player ID and place of registration were printed on it.

Zhang Heng then glanced at his watch and realized that it was ten at night. That would mean the auction would end at eleven. This time, he did not need to worry about the bug created by the extra time he had.

This round of the game was different from all the other quests that Zhang Heng completed. It was safe to say that he would not encounter any danger in this one, finally being able to relax.

After checking out his surroundings, he discovered that this place was similar to checkpoints that he had to go through before entering any game. He could see other players around him, but their faces had been blurred out.

One could not deny that the game's developers did an excellent job of protecting everyone's privacy. However, that did not mean that the players were always at peace with each other.

"Is this your first time attending an auction?"

Suddenly, Zhang Heng heard a voice from behind. Turning around, he saw a rather short man who immediately handed him his business card. His name was Ding Si, but Zhang Heng knew that it was fake.

“The world is not as safe as we thought it is! Some lunatics don’t know how to stick to the rules. We all have to be careful,” blurted the short man while shrugging.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You should be a new player, right? Before this, every player knew how to treat others with respect. Everyone was willing to help each other out whenever the going got tough. Unfortunately, some of the psychotic players came across the identities of others. They then hunted them down in cold blood! Most players are now in fear after the incident. That’s why everyone cares so much about their privacy nowadays. According to what I know, the number of people attending this auction is way lesser than last year.”

“Hunted?”

Zhang Heng looked at the card again and saw the words ‘North China Fu Lou Chamber of Commerce’ along with the person’s contact number.

“Yes. A large number of players are being hunted down. One of them found out that killing other players would allow them to rob them of their game items and game points. After that, this whole killing business went out of hand, turning into a full-blown catastrophe to all other players.”

“Are the developers going to do something about it?”

“As long as the players don’t reveal any information about the game to other players, they would not stick their noses in the business of other players. It seems like they have something more important to deal with....”

Ding Si had no intention to complete his sentence. Clearly, he did not want to dwell on it.

“You attended this auction to purchase some game items for yourself, right? Let me know if you don’t have enough game points, eh? Perhaps you can consider accepting our assistance.”

“What do you mean? Your chamber of commerce is selling game points?”

“You sure are a newbie, just as I expected. Not only the Fu Lou... many other chambers of commerce provide similar services as well. You can always purchase game points from us, though I wouldn’t recommend it. The exchange rate is really high right now. You will need 4.2 million yuan to exchange for 1 game point. Usually, you would only need 3.7 million. The best thing for you to do right now is to pawn your game items to us. Once we have appraised it, we will instantly transfer the game points to you.”

“Thank you so much. I will think about it.”

Ding Si was a professional salesperson. He knew the secrets of successfully closing a deal, patiently holding back and not pushing Zhang Heng into taking it.

“The auction only begins in an hour and a half. You can go explore, walk around the place a little. There are some interesting spots on this cruise. The first deck has a casino, cinema, and a game room. The second deck houses a theater for live performances and a place for you to relax. The third deck is a

public space for people to socialize. I'd advise you to check out the first deck before you proceed... if you want to."

Zhang Heng thanked Ding Si. This was his first time entering a social circle that was filled with players. In order to prevent more killings, Ding Si had told Zhang Heng that most of the players' real identities were strictly protected.

This was the only time Zhang Heng could see so many players all at once in the same place. Other than bidding for game items, they would also seize the opportunity to enjoy the pleasantly entertaining facilities offered here.

A good example was the Fu Lou Chamber of Commerce, where they provided the players with different services. Among these included bartering items for game points and providing loans. Otherwise, they would also help with the sale of game items and customize certain items according to the players' wishes. Custom-made items were usually cheaper than the regular by 20% to 30%. It was apparent that they were taking advantage of the auction to promote their services.

Amongst the three, Zhang Heng was most interested in the third deck. However, he did not go there right away. Instead, he took Ding Si's advice and visited the lower deck first, managing to collect a few more business cards from different chambers of commerce. The services they provided slightly differed from each other, but they mostly charged similar prices. The one thing that they shared in common was that their game points were cheap. Of course, a particular risk presented itself when trading with them.

Compared to all the other chambers, Fu Lou had the best reputation as it had been around since the very beginning.

After that, Zhang Heng tucked all the business cards away into his pocket and rode the elevator to the third deck. This was the most crowded place on the entire ship. Someone was giving a briefing on a podium about the most effective way to accumulate game points. Zhang Heng then looked for a seat and listened to what he had to say. Soon though, he felt that the person would always change topics the moment he reached the key point of his speech.

"He is telling us useless stuff! The formula for acquiring game points is the top secret of the chambers. No one would simply let it out. He's just trying to recruit others to join him."

The middle-aged man extended his hand while talking to Zhang Heng.

"You can call me professor. I hope you don't misunderstand. This is just my nickname. I think it's rude to address someone by a number. You either get a fake name or a nickname for others to address you."

"You can call me Simone."

Zhang Heng shook his hand.

"Welcome to the game, Simone. Where are your teammates?"

"Teammates?"

"I think you should be a newbie, huh. The invitation said that every quest has its specific challenges. It is recommended for the players to form a team first before entering the quest!"

Chapter 90: Dreamland of Death

“Everyone has their strengths limited in some way. We all come from different circumstances, and we have different forte as well. Some people love using their fists to solve their problems. Some prefer to use their brains to overcome their difficulties. Forming a team with others would allow you to overcome your weaknesses! After all, we are not superhumans. Your character panel should remind you of this as well. The previous quests that you have completed were probably designed to be completed alone. However, you will be in deep trouble if you come across a quest that cannot be completed alone!

Of course, solo-quests have their benefits. The yield for each quest is fixed, and you get everything that you earned. Being in a team, however, would mean that you’ll have to distribute your loot equally. Usually, people would only go solo after they have become stronger. Still, the risk of failure is very high. You can make all kinds of mistakes when you go solo on a quest.”

Zhang Heng was dumbfounded. The old man with the Chinese attire was the one who had invited him to join this quest. It seemed that the other players entered the game differently. He did not receive the invitation that the professor mentioned earlier. Until now, he had also not met other players at the game stop. It was no wonder that he was still playing the game alone.

Technically speaking, the old man did not actually put his life in danger. The extra 24 hours that he had was for him to solo the quest. This bonus time he had substantially lowered the risks of all the quests that he played.

“Unfortunately, my team is full now. Otherwise, I would have given you a test before allowing you to join my team. My advice is to go to the city that you live in and look for a team to join. This is going to be a long game. Your mental and physical state will undergo great stress, and you will eventually need someone to share it with. After all, we can never share these things with our friends and family. Your team members will be your pillar of support.”

Zhang Heng knew that the professor was right about everything. Unfortunately, he also knew that he was meant to keep those secrets to himself and not share it with others. Considering that he spent two years alone marooned on a desolated island, he had no problems with staying and playing alone.

“I heard someone mentioning something about a guild. What is that?”

“Guilds and chambers of commerce are formed by players, with both providing different services. Though you are still a newbie, I’m pretty sure that you’ve heard that the real world is actually not as safe as we thought it is. That is why certain players band together and form a guild to look after each other’s backs. Some of them even volunteered to deal with the supernatural stuff that happens around them.”

“Sounds good to me. Why are you so against the idea of joining a guild?”

Earlier, the professor had criticized the guild member that speaking on the stage. Zhang Heng could sense hostility between his words.

“Guilds are supposed to exist to serve the greater good. As time passed, the definition of ‘guild’ changed. In a guild, everyone was supposed to take care of each other. Sadly, when certain members become more and more powerful, they wanted more than just taking care of each other. Due to this,

some guilds have become unstable, the contributors to the chaos right now. We all have different opinions about guilds. Right now, I'm happy with my own team, and I have no interest in joining any other guilds."

After chatting for a while, the professor descended to the first deck for a round of cards, and Zhang Heng stayed on the third to listen to speeches from different guilds. An hour and a half later, everyone stopped what they were doing and gathered at the ballroom.

Zhang Heng came up with a rough estimate that there were around 4000 to 5000 people here. There were more than 500 items to be auctioned off today. Among these were 12 valuable items that required the bidder to raise their number if they wanted to bid for the item. As for the rest of the 488 items, players could only bid for them online. The system would then determine the highest bidder.

While walking around, Zhang Heng crossed paths with Ding Si once again. It seemed like he had just closed in on a deal as he was smiling from ear-to-ear. He even greeted Zhang Heng first.

He whispered, "According to a rumor I heard just now, I was told that a B-grade game item would on auction later. And there are a few unique C-grade game items as well."

"Are B-grade game items rare?"

"Of course! There are less than 200 B-grade game items within the entire circle of players right now. Most of the players I know would never sell these off. If I'm not mistaken, it was a B-grade item that left everyone in shock last year!"

Ding Si was really excited as he described the game item. As a businessman, he was always infatuated by objects that carried extreme value.

"Dreamland of Death! It's an item that can be used to curse others," Ding Si exclaimed. "

Everyone was afraid of this thing a few months ago. It can kill someone in their sleep when they are dreaming. The way to trigger this item is unknown. How the curse is lifted is unknown as well. A few elites in the player base have been cursed. The guild leader of Silver Wing was the owner of an A-grade game item and managed to survive the curse. In the end, a few guilds had to work together to eliminate the previous owner of the item. Since there's only one, it has been decided that they would auction it off."

"It's basically impossible for anybody to bid for it. Leaders of these powerful guilds would never allow such a powerful item to land in the hands of an unknown stranger. I'm pretty sure that one of the guilds would eventually get it, and, the rest would take the game points instead. Anyway, their financial strength is unparalleled amongst all guilds and players," he continued.

While they were talking, the auction finally began.

The auctioneer was a 60-year-old man who looked really serious. The wrinkles on his face resembled the bark of an old tree. He had no intention to hide his face. Just like the bartender lady, he should be one of the employees of the committee as well.

He waited until everyone was seated before presenting his five-minute-long welcome speech. Then, he introduced the first item to be auctioned.

“Escape Dagger. Grade-C. It can be used to teleport within a small area. Remaining uses: 3. You can check out its description after you bid for the item. The starting bid is 1,200 game points. Every additional bid costs 50 game points. The bidding ends when the hammer drops three times. Let’s begin.”

“Damn. That’s a good item!” said Ding Si.

“Are you going to bid for it?”

“It is a good item. Items that can be used to improve in-game survival are usually extremely costly! I’m here to looking for treasure for Fu Lou. It’s not for myself. Items that are undervalued are my target tonight,” answered an excited Ding Si while switching on his tablet.