

Ancient 53

Chapter 53 - 23: The Threat of the Joker

Gu Jianlin took a deep look at the elderly man in the wheelchair.

He truly looked old—his hair was silver but neatly combed, his weathered face marked by deep wrinkles, and his eyes clear and luminous like jade. Even while seated in a wheelchair, his back remained perfectly straight.

He resembled a resilient pine tree atop a cliff, steadfast and unyielding.

There was no denying that the divination seemed rather amateurish. The method of fortune-telling was overly simple, as was the interpretation of the hexagram. It felt more like a casual hobby than a professional pursuit.

Still, Gu Jianlin memorized the words, thanked the elder, and moved on.

"Hmm."

The elderly man nodded in satisfaction, his wise forehead creasing slightly as he collected the six copper coins.

"Hey, why don't you give me a reading, too?"

Cheng Youyu leaned closer, eagerly rubbing his hands together, the self-assured grin he always wore plastered on his face.

But the elder didn't even look up and replied indifferently, "Not for you. Didn't you just say earlier that I'm not professional?"

Cheng Youyu looked stunned, convinced that senior citizens typically had bad hearing. He hadn't expected this to be picked up.

Gu Jianlin observed the scene, his mind swirling with unease.

He couldn't shake the feeling that the elderly man had purposefully used the fortune-telling as an excuse to communicate something to him.

At that moment, a man in a tailored suit approached with three heat packs, smiling as he said, "Please take these. We hope you'll visit again. Should you need anything in the future, feel free to reach out. We're closing for the night."

"Our shop just opened—you're among the first batch of customers. Let's make friends. Here's our business card; if there's an emergency, give us a call."

Handing over the card, he turned and pushed the back of the wheelchair, saying, "Teacher, time to rest."

The elderly man responded with a gentle "Hmm" before being wheeled toward the back door.

Gu Jianlin accepted the business card and watched the pair leave.

He hesitated briefly but ultimately closed his eyes, using Life Perception on the two of them.

In the still night, the rhythms of life in the world reverberated in his ears once more.

After the practice from the previous night, he was now capable of distinguishing his target's signature even amidst chaotic melodies.

Yet what he perceived took him by surprise.

The suited man's life rhythm burned brightly like a blazing fire, vigorous and intense.

Meanwhile, the elderly man in the wheelchair exuded a deathly still emptiness—silent, oppressive.

"What are you looking at?"

Su Youzhu hugged her three heat packs and asked curiously.

"Nothing."

Gu Jianlin casually asked, "By the way, do you believe in fortune-telling?"

Su Youzhu shook her head. "I was just asking for fun; there's no loss either way."

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After leaving the grocery store, Gu Jianlin and Su Youzhu grabbed some roadside wontons before returning to school.

Notably, Cheng Youyu, the chubby one, shamelessly tagged along, chatting away cheerfully.

He occasionally dished out juicy gossip unknown to the siblings.

By 10:30 PM, lights in the girls' dormitory building had mostly gone out.

In the small garden downstairs, faint whispers of couples murmuring beneath the trees lingered. Some pairs even pressed against each other passionately, the rustling sounds carrying through the night, oddly stimulating.

"Well, I'll leave you two here. Carry on."

With a humorous smile, Cheng Youyu stopped in his tracks, his expression filled with implication. "I won't be the third wheel."

Gu Jianlin knew he had misunderstood but explaining felt too cumbersome.

Besides, Su Youzhu showed a complete lack of concern.

It seemed she wouldn't mind even if mistaken as lovers heading off into the woods.

Seeing her reaction, Gu Jianlin decided there was no need to clarify.

"Brother Lin, I'm counting on you to cover me during the mid-term exams! If we're assigned to the same exam venue, help me out!"

Before leaving, Cheng Youyu suddenly became serious and warned, "By the way, Peak City has been pretty weird lately. You've probably heard about those students who go crazy out of nowhere. Some rumors suggest these incidents are common near the school recently. Stay on campus during the next few days—don't wander around."

He reiterated, "Especially since there's been a psycho abusing animals near the school recently."

Gu Jianlin's heart stirred; this chubby guy seemed to know something and was deliberately warning him.

"Got it, thanks."

He nodded slightly. "I appreciate it."

After saying this, Cheng Youyu returned to his grin and swaggered off confidently.

Gu Jianlin watched him leave and then turned to the girl beside him. "Make sure to get some rest over the next few days. I'll bring you red sugar water on time. Let me know if you need anything—I'll go buy it for you."

Su Youzhu glanced at him and thought, "Even feminine products?"

"In any case, don't run around. Got it?"

Gu Jianlin instructed seriously, "Understood?"

With the arrival of Lu Zicheng, the influx of Ether Association investigators into the school, and the recent animal abuse incident, everything pointed to an impending event.

"I got it."

Su Youzhu took off the coat draped over her shoulders and handed it back to him. "Goodnight."

Gu Jianlin took the coat and replied softly, "Goodnight."

The dormitory doors closed, and Su Youzhu vanished around the hallway corner.

Gu Jianlin turned away with the coat in hand, walking across the playground and garden alone, and returned to the boys' dormitory.

His dorm was on the sixth floor, the first room next to the hallway entrance.

Four of his roommates were already lying on their beds, complaining:

"Damn it. It's bad enough the school cafeteria food sucks—there's not even a supermarket."

"Yeah, and the cafeteria lady's shaky hands make me wonder if she has Parkinson's. Lao Liu is ridiculous."

"Did anyone go to the outside supermarket? Give me snacks! I'm starving."

"Forget it. Even the twenty-four-hour convenience store outside is closed!"

Gu Jianlin walked in and listened to their chatter before sitting on his bed and asking in confusion, "That convenience store shut down, sure, but didn't it become a grocery store?"

Everyone froze.

"What grocery store? That convenience store has been closed and put up for lease."

One roommate said blankly, "Its roller shutters are down with a huge rental advertisement on them."

Gu Jianlin paused. "No way—I saw a grocery store there."

His roommate furrowed his brow. "I passed by there ten minutes ago. Brother Lin, if I'm being honest, is your brain still messed up from the car accident? Because I swear there's no grocery store. If there is, I'll eat shit upside-down."

Gu Jianlin fell silent. He thought again about the unusual clues regarding the grocery store, unable to sit still.

He quickly got up, headed to the rooftop on the seventh floor, and, using the lights scattered in the night, gazed across the street.

At that moment, his pupils contracted violently, and goosebumps prickled his skin.

The twenty-four-hour convenience store across the road had reappeared, lit with its familiar red-and-white sign. Its doors, however, were locked with roller shutters, adorned with a rental notice.

Meanwhile, the grocery store he'd seen earlier had eerily vanished.

His instincts hadn't been wrong after all.

That, without a doubt, was no ordinary grocery store.

Not to mention the elderly man in the wheelchair and the man in the suit—they were clearly far from ordinary.

Gu Jianlin searched his pocket and fished out the business card.

—Forget Sorrow Grocery Store, Phone: 138...

He stared at the card in silence for a long time, deciding to check out the place again tomorrow after school.

His phone buzzed with a new WeChat message.

Su Youzhu: "I just got back to the dorm and found someone left a letter on my windowsill."

Gu Jianlin froze for a moment. An old-school confession letter in this day and age?

Well, with her dorm on the first floor, someone sneaking past the dorm supervisor could easily manage to deliver a letter onto her windowsill.

Given her looks, it wasn't surprising.

Gu Jianlin replied, "Oh, someone's trying to chase you?"

Su Youzhu: "That's what I thought at first, but I opened it and realized the letter was for you."

Gu Jianlin stiffened.

Confused, he stared at his phone until a photo arrived via message.

For a moment, his pupils narrowed sharply, and the audible crackle of his clenched fist interrupted the silence.

It wasn't the content of the confession letter but the signature below that drew attention.

At the bottom of the page was a sinister depiction of a clown's face, its pale surface rendered in colored pencil, eerie to the point of discomfort.

The Joker's grin radiated malevolence, its crimson lips stretching nearly to its ears.

Just a glance made his chest tighten.

"Six o'clock the day after tomorrow. Backfield warehouse. Don't miss it."

"This is our little secret. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Or else... You know what'll happen."

The phone's glow faded away as the icy night wind blew across the rooftop.

Gu Jianlin stuffed his left hand in his pocket, his right hand clutched the phone tightly, and the coat slung over his arm billowed in the harsh breeze.

"They gave the letter to Youzhu instead of handing it directly to me."

He murmured softly, "Was this a threat?"

Under windswept hair, his expression grew cold and vacant, merging into the darkness of the night.

The grocery store remained lit through the night.

The elderly man sat in his wheelchair, playing with the six copper coins in his hand, and said suddenly, "Jing Ci."

The suited man attentively polished a blue and white porcelain vase with a cloth.

"I'm here, Teacher."

Without looking up, he replied, "What is it?"

"Do you think I'm really that unprofessional as a divination master?"

Jing Ci chuckled. "You're not even on the divination master's path, Teacher. Why bring it up? Are you still brooding over losing your bet with the master on Laojun Mountain?"

"If I were on the divination master path, as your mentor, I'd have more prestige out there."

The elderly man sighed wistfully, "Speaking of which, that kid from tonight was quite interesting."

Jing Ci paused his polishing and smiled. "Are you referring to how he instantly recognized the Joker's mutated evolution, or how he noticed the peculiarities of us and the shop?"

"Both, perhaps. I didn't expect him to uncover the shop's secrets so quickly. Shall we make a wager? On whether he survives or not?"

"I'll wager he lives."

Jing Ci placed the vase in the antique cabinet and said, "After all...you've already warned him."

"A warning is one thing. Understanding the warning is another. Figuring out how to respond is yet another."

The elderly man scattered the six copper coins across the table. "Then I'll bet he dies."