

Collapse 115

Chapter 115: The Broken Water Cup_1

Even though they had never seen Zhao Lei's father before, the few people watching the screen instantly recognized him.

He was wearing a tank top that had yellowed with age.

He wore a pair of drab, gray trousers, clearly a bit too long, as the cuffs were rolled up several times.

On his feet were a pair of worn-out, dirty sneakers, caked with a layer of mud on the soles.

When Zhao Guanhai rushed forward, he was carrying a water bottle.

It was one of those large plastic bottles that cost only a few bucks.

He tossed the plastic bottle, still containing a small amount of water, to the ground, and his small, thin figure charged forward.

Although small and thin, his strength was astonishing.

Several teachers were shoved aside before they could even react.

The stout man in the middle, mouth slightly agape in surprise, had no time to react before Zhao Guanhai landed a hard punch on him.

Zhao Guanhai didn't stop after the first punch. He grabbed the man and dragged him towards a deserted nearby stairwell, saying, "If you have a problem, deal with me! Leave my son out of it! Let's go talk this over somewhere else..."

Zhao Guanhai's expression was fierce.

The man was clearly terrified. Seized and dragged, he struggled, crying, "Let go of me! Let go of me!"

This man looked sturdy, but he was actually quite weak, likely from a lack of exercise, so Zhao Guanhai easily dragged him along.

Just as Zhao Guanhai was about to drag the man into the nearby stairwell, several teachers hurried over and grabbed both of them to separate them.

After they were finally pulled apart, the man quickly scampered back several steps, nearly hiding in a nearby office out of fear.

The teachers surrounded Zhao Guanhai, trying to placate him, but he kept staring intently at the other man, looking like he might charge at any moment. This terrified the man, who retreated several more steps.

Then, one of the teachers led the pale-faced man away.

At this moment, Zhao Lei's class advisor returned. Zhao Lei himself had been taken somewhere else and was nowhere to be seen.

After the class advisor returned, he said a few words to the surrounded Zhao Guanhai. Zhao Guanhai remained silent for a moment, then nodded and followed him into the office.

The other teachers outside exchanged bewildered glances.

They hesitated to go inside. Just then, the students, having finished dinner, were returning to their classrooms.

So, these teachers dispersed, each heading back to their respective classrooms.

Suddenly, the corridor was empty.

The class advisor closed the office door. Gu Mian could hear the two of them talking inside.

The class advisor's mouth moved, his voice somewhat muffled.

"This can't go on. You should have a serious talk with your son. Don't let him misunderstand you."

"Zhao Lei is a smart kid, but he can be too stubborn sometimes. You need to watch out for that, don't let him go astray... I know you're busy, but try to spend more time with him when you can."

Zhao Guanhai occasionally nodded, then shook his head. They discussed for about half an hour before Zhao Guanhai emerged from the office.

The class advisor didn't come out with him. He picked up his phone from his desk, apparently making a call.

The corridor was now very empty, with only the fluorescent lights overhead casting a dim glow.

After coming out, Zhao Guanhai stared blankly down the empty corridor for a while, as if looking for someone, but then he seemed to give up on the idea.

Then he walked towards the plastic bottle he had thrown into a corner earlier.

Perhaps because the plastic bottle was so cheap and inconspicuous, no one had paid it any mind.

Zhao Guanhai bent down and picked up the plastic bottle he had tossed on the ground.

The bottle had been thrown down so hard that it seemed to have cracked. Water droplets were now seeping from the fissure, and little water remained inside.

Looking pained, Zhao Guanhai lifted his shirt to wipe the bottle, drying the leaking water.

He then stared intently at the plastic bottle in his hand, as if to see if it could still be used, but water continued to seep out.

Still reluctant to throw it away, he held the plastic bottle and reached into his back pocket, fumbling for something.

Then he pulled out a battered old phone.

The group watched as he made a call: "Hey, Brother Li..."

"Any work lately? Haha, doesn't matter how tiring, as long as the pay is good..."

At this point, the screen abruptly went black. The recording had evidently ended. Uncharacteristically, Fatty remained silent after the disc finished playing.

He was usually the one to liven things up, but now he was quiet. Gu Mian noticed Fatty staring blankly at the dark screen, lost in thought.

Just as Gu Mian was about to speak, he heard a strange sound from behind. He turned to look.

The door behind them was ajar, revealing a sizeable gap.

In the darkness, a deathly pale face was pressed close to the doorframe, half of it visible. The exposed eye stared intently at the computer screen.

Xiao Zhang clearly saw the half-face too and gasped in fright.

Fatty finally snapped out of his reverie and turned to look at the door. He recognized the half-face at once: it was Zhao Lei's.

Before Fatty could react, the pale half-face abruptly pulled back. Immediately after, the sound of hurried footsteps receded down the corridor. It seemed Zhao Lei didn't want to see them.

Fatty's expression grew complicated. "If what we just saw was all true... then Zhao Lei clearly lied to us before, didn't he?"

He claimed Zhao Guanhai ignored him completely, but that doesn't seem to be the truth.

"Not necessarily," Gu Mian said, shaking his head. "To be precise, Zhao Lei didn't actually lie to us. He was never present when his father did those things, so he was completely unaware."

He only knew Zhao Guanhai wouldn't spare him an extra dime, causing him to lose face at school; he didn't know his father couldn't even bear to replace a worn-out water bottle.

He only knew Zhao Guanhai was idle, seemingly capable of nothing, and never reachable by phone. He didn't know that this supposedly incapable father was desperately taking on grueling manual labor, leaving him no time to answer calls.

He only knew Zhao Guanhai often scolded him and never stood up for him. He didn't know that when he was being berated, his father was the first to rush forward with even greater ferocity and land a hard punch on the person insulting him.

Zhao Lei knew none of this.

Fatty was silent for a moment. "Doctor... do you think Zhao Lei's father... is he really dead?"

If he's dead, how did he die?

Gu Mian shook his head. "I don't know." As he spoke, he took out the black phone—the same one Zhao Guanhai had used to make the call in the video.

"Logically, the instance's plot and its tasks should be interconnected."

"This instance contains Zhao Lei's past. If we trace it back far enough, we should be able to find out how Zhao Lei's father disappeared."

Gu Mian touched the vertical row of buttons in the middle of the phone again. "And the clues provided in this instance will be key to advancing the plot."

As soon as he finished speaking, he began pressing the buttons in that middle row on the phone.

"2" "5" "8"