



GLOBAL
EXAMINATION

I
MU SU LI



GLOBAL

MU SU LI
BOOK I

EXAMINATION



Global Examination Vol. 1 by Mu Su Li

© 2024 Mu Su Li

English publishing rights authorised by Beijing Jinjiang Original Network Technology Co., Ltd.

Published by

Rosmei Copyright Private Limited

#13-02, 138 Cecil Street, Cecil Court, Singapore (069538)

Tel: (65) 8850 7606

E-mail: rosmeihey@gmail.com

Website: rosmeihey.top

Follow us on Twitter: [@rosmeihey](https://twitter.com/rosmeihey)



© Rosmei Copyright Private Limited

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author and publisher.

Title: *Global Examination Vol. 1*

ISBN: 978-981-94-0987-7 (Paperback)

Original Title: *Quan Qiu Gao Kao*

Translator: huayu, Wendy

Proofreader: Merry K.

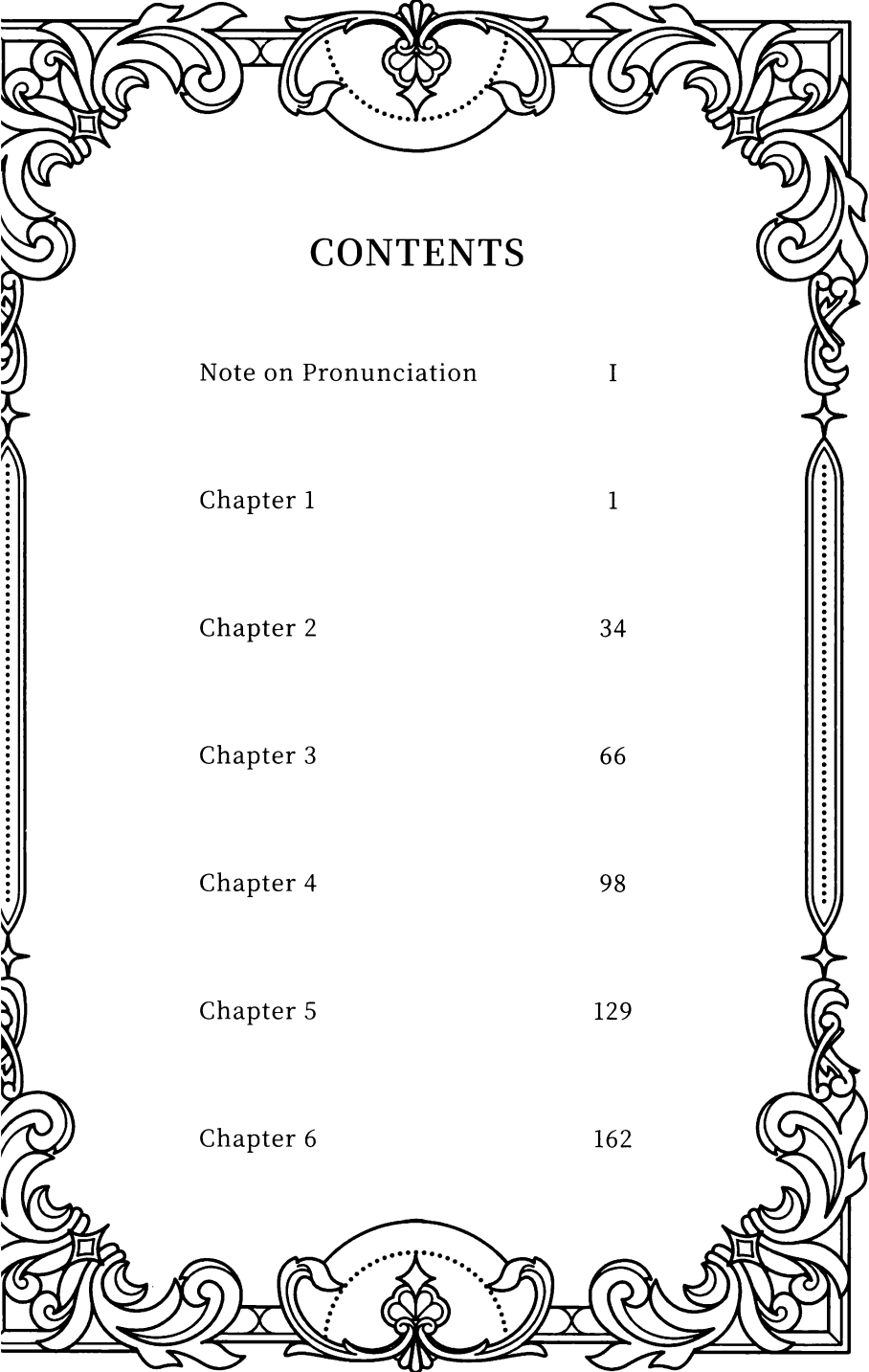
Illustrator: Yao San Ge Ling

Designer: Feliz, Xian Yu

Editor: Nyani, A Rong, Michaela M, Tina

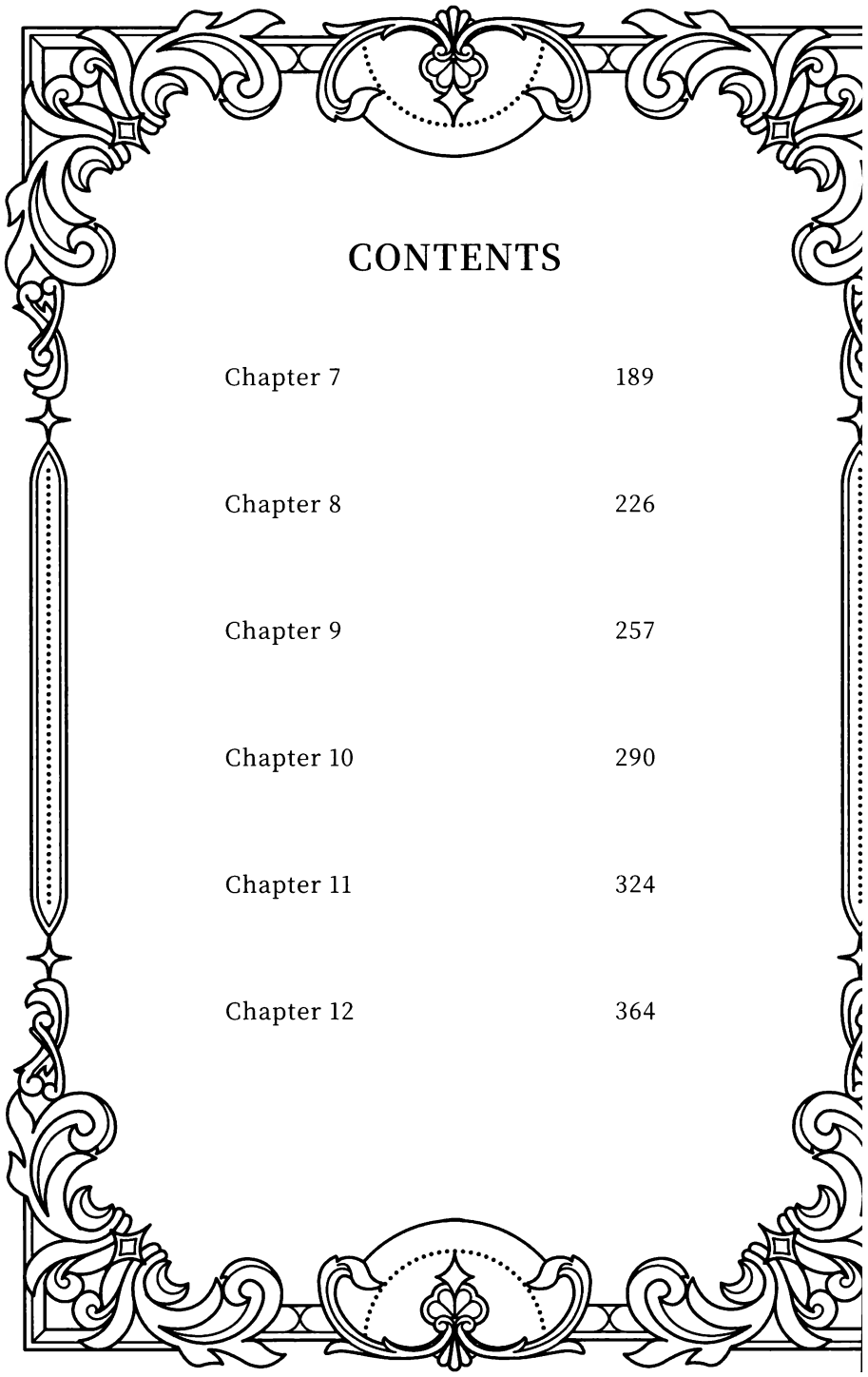
Chief Editor: X. H. M.

First printing edition 2024



CONTENTS

Note on Pronunciation	I
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	34
Chapter 3	66
Chapter 4	98
Chapter 5	129
Chapter 6	162



CONTENTS

Chapter 7	189
Chapter 8	226
Chapter 9	257
Chapter 10	290
Chapter 11	324
Chapter 12	364

✿ Note on Pronunciation ✿

You Huo's surname is pronounced like the *yo* in “yo-yo”, while Yu Wen's surname is pronounced like the letter *u* in French, or approximately like the *yoo* in “yoohoo”.



Chapter 1

The snowstorm had been raging in the mountains for four hours without any sign of stopping. In a remote cabin, hunting equipment hung on the walls, and a termite-ridden wooden table stood in the centre. A group from all walks of life sat around it, all Chinese except one.

Everyone shivered in the biting cold, their faces etched with worry, yet no one started a fire. Their attention was fixed on the old radio crackling on the table.

“Attention. It is now 5:30 p.m. UTC+8. The exam will start in thirty minutes. All examinees, please proceed to the exam site as soon as possible.”

The voice was raspy, tinged with the static unique to old-timey radios, casting a ghostly pall over the room.

This was not the first announcement. Three hours ago, it had blared “*Welcome to Exam Site 003712*”, startling an elderly woman so badly that she fainted and remained so until now. In a foolish attempt to dismantle the radio, a man had yanked out

the batteries and bolted outside in a trance-like state. Five minutes later, his body slid off the snow-laden roof. After that, no one dared touch the radio.

“Attention, examinees yet to enter the exam site, please do so immediately. Loitering outside the exam site is discouraged.”

The radio repeated itself twice more. The room was dead silent.

After what seemed like an eternity, someone whispered, “It issued another announcement... How does it know there are people still outside?”

No one responded, the air thick with unease.

Finally, a man at the end of the table broke the silence. “So, who’s still not in?” This impatient man, with his straw-coloured permed hair and tattoo sleeves full of a zoo’s worth of animals, had an average build but an intimidating presence.

Someone beside Inksleeves flinched. “Old Yu.”

“Old Yu? Who’s that?”

“The drunkard who puked as soon as he came in. The one who came with his son and nephew.”

The one who replied subtly jerked his chin towards the wall and gestured for silence, placing a finger against his lips.

Lounging on an old sofa next to the wall was Old Yu’s nephew. The young man in his late twenties was strikingly tall and handsome. When he first entered the cabin, hand on the doorframe, he fit in seamlessly with the backdrop of pine trees and snow. However, his persistent scowl lent him an air of arrogance. The sociable drunk, Old Yu, had mentioned his nephew’s

name: You Huo.

“He came back from abroad a few months ago and was visiting me in Harbin during the National Day break. I was supposed to drive him to the airport tomorrow morning... Ugh, it’s all my fault! I drank too much!”

Old Yu recounted how he’d gotten completely drunk at You Huo’s farewell dinner, staggering along the deserted streets late at night. In his inebriated state, he stumbled into a pile of joss paper on the pavement near a children’s hospital. Suddenly, the world whirled around him, and the next thing he knew, he, along with his son and nephew, found themselves in this weird place. His dizziness had not subsided upon entering the cabin, and he ended up vomiting on You Huo. The shock of the incident sobered him up instantly, and he had been sheepishly avoiding his nephew ever since.

Those who ended up here were all caught off guard and unprepared. By sheer luck, the foreigner, Maximilian, had an extra set of clothes in his backpack.

After swapping his dirty outfit for a clean one, You Huo withdrew from the group and remained silent thereafter, appearing to be asleep on the sofa. Behind the arm covering his face, his right ear sported an ear stud that was blindingly bright in the combined light of the indoor oil lamp and the outdoor snow.

The sky should have been dark by now, yet the blanket of pristine snow created an illusion of daylight. One of the women, who happened to be pregnant, glanced anxiously at the kitchen clock. With everyone’s mobile phones showing the wrong time,

this was their only reliable way to track the hours. She muttered, “It’s almost six o’clock, will Old Yu—”

Bang bang bang!

Her question was interrupted by a loud rapping against the door. Startled, everyone looked towards the door only to see Old Yu clearing the snow from the door window and leaning his face against the glass, mouthing, “It’s us. Open up.”

Everyone let out a small sigh of relief. Thankfully, Old Yu and his son, Yu Wen, had returned unharmed before the clock struck six. Covered in white flurries, they looked like walking snowmen.

“What did you find out there?” Everyone was anxious to know.

Old Yu, still shivering, rubbed his face vigorously and slapped the snow off from his son. Once he’d warmed up a bit, he said, “We tried walking in every direction, but it was no use! No matter where we went, we ended up seeing this darn cabin again within ten minutes. There’s no way out!”

“Did you see anyone else? Any other houses?”

“Nothing,” Old Yu replied gloomily. “We’re all alone.”

A sense of despair settled over the room.

No mobile service. No way to keep track of time. No way to orient themselves. Nothing.

And then there was that radio, constantly nagging them about some exam.

Fuck that exam.

Not long after the Yus had returned, the radio crackled to life

and cut through the silence. After spending a whole afternoon under its watch, everyone knew to shut up and turn towards it.

“Attention. All examinees have entered the exam site. The exam rules are as follows.”

Hearing this, the Yus, the last to join, both swallowed nervously.

“The exam must be completed within the allotted time. Once the exam has begun, no latecomers will be allowed in. Examinees are not allowed to leave during the exam unless accompanied by an invigilator in case of an emergency. Except for open-book exams, mobile phones and other communication devices are prohibited. Please ensure they are switched off. This exam is scored according to a point-based grading scheme. Unless indicated otherwise, answers must be written on the designated answer card to be considered valid.”

After the announcement, the room fell silent, only to be quickly filled with a burst of conversation.

“Who are the invigilators?”

“There are open-book exams?”

“Answer card? What’s that?”

“You guys are taking this seriously? You’re all out of your minds.” Inksleeves toyed with a Swiss Army knife, plotting goodness-knows-what.

“What else are we supposed to do?” The pregnant woman’s eyes were puffy from crying. “Have you forgotten about...” she whispered, pointing towards the roof.

The memory of the body made Inksleeves visibly tense for a

moment, and then he seemed to resign himself to the situation.

“Hey, kiddo,” he called out, waving his knife.

Yu Wen, confused, looked around before pointing to himself.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. Come over here.” Inksleeves patted the seat next to him. “Sit.”

“I’m not a fu—” Yu Wen glanced at his older cousin for help only to see him still sprawled on the tattered sofa, so he bit back his curse. “I’m eighteen, you know.”

Inksleeves didn’t look much older than twenty-six himself. What right did he have to call anyone else “kiddo”?

“It doesn’t matter what I call you!” Inksleeves was growing impatient. “Just sit here, I need to ask you something. Are you a student?”

“I guess?”

Inksleeves furrowed his brow. “Do you know how to take exams?”

“Does he!” Old Yu, always the proud father, replied. “He grew up taking exams!”

“Shut up, Dad!” Yu Wen’s tone was always harsh towards his father. After snapping at his dad, Yu Wen turned to find a roomful of hopeful eyes fixed on him. He knew he had to choose his words carefully. “I took the university entrance exam in June, then spent three months just having fun... I don’t remember much about taking exams now.”

The pregnant woman had been panicking all afternoon, yet she found a way to smile at the fresh graduate. “You’re still ahead

of us. It's only been three months for you. For the rest of us, it's been years. We've forgotten everything."

"Wait a sec, don't you guys watch movies or read novels?" Yu Wen couldn't help but notice the absurdity of the situation, momentarily forgetting his fear. "Do you seriously think 'exams' in a supernatural scenario like this one are anything like real exams? 'Exam' is probably just a metaphor for something!"

"For what, then?"

Yu Wen rolled his eyes. "How am I supposed to know? But in horror movies, people are too busy dying to take stupid maths and science exams. What, you think the Ministry of Education set this up?"

He continued to mock the situation with a taunting "hah", which was just loud enough to jolt his cousin, who had been out cold on the sofa, awake. Yu Wen turned to see You Huo sitting up and scanning the room with lidded eyes before dropping his head to the side to massage his neck. His long legs splayed out until they touched the old wooden floor, making the sofa look even more shabby. Just as he finished the massage and looked up, the clock on the wall began to chime ominously. Six o'clock.

The radio hissed to life again:

"Attention. The time is now 6 p.m. UTC +8. The exam is beginning."

"This is a kind reminder: once the exam begins, no latecomers will be allowed in. Leaving during the exam will result in dire consequences. Any examinee caught breaking the rules, cheating, or engaging in fraudulent activities will be expelled from the exam."

site. For all other exam guidelines, please follow the specific instructions given in your problem sets.”

After issuing these warnings, the radio paused for a couple of seconds.

“Duration: 48 hours. Subject: Physics. The exam and answer cards are now being distributed. We wish everyone the best of luck.”

With that, the radio fell silent again.

Yu Wen could curse up a storm. Shouldn't the exam and answer card be given out before the instructions?!

“The wall!” The pregnant woman gasped, pointing at the wall above the furnace. It had been blank except for some knife marks, but now, some text had appeared:

Question: A group of travellers came to a snowy mountain...

Requirements: The answer cards will be collected every six hours. If no points are scored within these six hours, one person will be disqualified and removed from the exam site.

Below these two lines was a blank space emulating the answer section on a real exam.

What kind of problem was this? Was that even a legitimate question? This so-called “exam” was baffling. No one had any idea how to proceed. How could they possibly score points in just six hours? Even with six hundred hours, it seemed unlikely anything would change.

Suddenly, a chilling gust swept through the room, carrying

snowflakes that made everyone shiver. They turned to see You Huo by the window, which he had opened.

“What are you doing?” Inksleeves roared.

One of You Huo’s hands was in his pants pocket while the other extended outside. He paused and looked back with a casual, almost mocking gaze.

That infuriated Inksleeves even more. “Why have you opened the window without asking? Are you ready to deal with the consequences?”

“Shut up,” You Huo replied coldly. Ignoring the man, he extended his left hand outside.

Old Yu nudged his son and whispered, “Ask him what he’s doing.” For some reason, the man always tip-toed around his nephew.

“Hey, Huo,” Yu Wen called. “What are you doing?”

You Huo pulled his hand back in, showing it as his answer. “Just checking what happens if I leave the exam site.”

Everyone gasped in shock at the blood trickling down You Huo’s fingers, pooling in his palm, stark red against his pale skin. Nonchalantly, he wiped his hand, picked a rusty tin can from the windowsill, and tossed it outside. They watched the can disintegrate and blend into the falling snow. Re-reading the question and requirements on the wall, everyone gaped with fear.

You Huo closed the window and scanned the group. His eyes settled on Yu Wen, the only one who had any recent experience with exams. However, he knew his younger cousin all too well.

Yu Wen's high school years were anything but educational. He was busy dating around, getting into scuffles, using the internet without permission, and being frequently reprimanded by teachers in front of the entire school. His schedule was always full but not with studying. The teenager also had entered a phase of what some called "middle-school syndrome", and he was not quite out yet. Physics? You Huo would rather consult a monkey for that.

As for the others... Some old bags of bones, some weak and sickly, plus a pregnant lady and a thug—a recipe for disaster if there ever was one. Of course, the first question would be a killer.

You Huo kicked over an aluminium basin brimming with coal from the corner, and his uncle diligently sparked a fire, making the furnace glow orange-red.

Yu Wen crouched dejectedly by the furnace, silently feeding wood into the swaying flames. He watched sullenly for a while and decided to talk to someone about his feelings before dying. He looked up to find his cousin standing nearby, hands extended towards the warmth, with an expression as detached and disinterested as ever. It only took a moment for Yu Wen to accept a quiet death.

"Uh, ahem." Old Yu broke the silence.

You Huo glanced towards his uncle.

"Sorry, I didn't get your name," Old Yu said, patting the pregnant woman on the shoulder, "but it's not good for you or the baby to be sitting out in the cold like this. Come warm up by

the fire.”

For a moment, she stared blankly at him, and then tears started dripping down her face.

Old Yu panicked. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I don’t even know if I’ll survive long enough to have this baby...” she sniffled. Still, she moved her chair up to the fire. Eventually, she calmed down, but her voice was still nasally. “My name is Yu Yao.”

Old Yu forced out a chuckle, trying to comfort her. “What a coincidence, we share a family name! You’re about the same age as my neph...” Out of the corner of his eye, he caught You Huo’s gaze and quickly corrected himself. “As my son. It must be fate bringing us together! Once we’re out of this awful place, I’ll give you a big red envelope that will turn the luck around for you and your baby.”

Inksleeves kept a grim expression, muttering, “Seriously? Chit-chatting at a time like this? Fucking hell!”

This made the others’ expressions stiffen, and they spread out to search the room. Everyone looked for clues to solve the exam question except for Inksleeves, who was more interested in finding hunting equipment to use as weapons, and You Huo, who remained by the fire until his hands were warm. He brushed the wall with the question scrawled across it before toying with the items atop the furnace. There were some bottles and jars, a heap of tarnished coins, a collection of oddly shaped stones, a few stray chicken feathers, and an ancient, mouldy pacifier lying in neglect.

Since You Huo didn't go off, Yu Wen followed suit. He recalled his teacher advising him before the university entrance exam to reread the question a few more times if he got stuck, so he repeated the question to himself while standing before the wall. "A group of travellers came to a snowy mountain... travellers... snowy mountain... hmm..."

Eventually, he noticed that the room had fallen eerily silent. Everyone was staring at him, holding their breath in anticipation.

"I was just reading out loud."

Old Yu, ever the traditional parent, took every opportunity to parade his son in front of a big group. "Got any ideas? Let's hear them."

Yu Wen rolled his eyes. "No, nothing."

Disappointed, the others resumed their frantic search. Inksleeves, however, remained sceptical and kept scrutinising him. "You sure about that? You're not hiding something?"

"Why would I be?"

Inksleeves glared into Yu Wen's eyes to the point of extreme discomfort.

"You better not be."

Inksleeves was clearly a thug who was used to hurling nerve-grating threats. As the man turned back to the hunting equipment, Yu Wen silently flipped him the bird. *Fucking idiot*, he thought.

Having just turned eighteen before the university entrance exam, Yu Wen was in the throes of a narcissistic phase. To him,

the world was full of fools, and not even his father was spared from this judgement.

The sole exception to this rule was his cousin, You Huo. The two cousins had only gotten closer in the last few years. According to his dad, You Huo had moved abroad as a young boy to receive specialised medical treatment. When they were a bit older, the boy started to make short but regular visits and would stay with the Yus. A few days a year over several years was still only a handful of days, but Yu Wen managed to learn quite a bit about his cousin with a dedication seldom seen in his studies. One key fact he discovered was that You Huo had memory issues. He couldn't recall certain periods of his life, which was the reason for his overseas treatment. Another fact Yu Wen noticed was how the older family members were a bit wary of You Huo. He never understood why, and his inquiries only earned him reprimands from his dad for focusing on irrelevant matters. He eventually accepted that adults feeling uneasy around You Huo was normal. After all, even Inksleeves, whom they had just met, seemed intimidated by him.

With You Huo nearby, Yu Wen was ready to confront Inksleeves and get under his skin a little. But when he turned around, he realised his cousin had long left.

"Where's he gone?"

"Who?" Yu Yao asked. Since she was pregnant, she didn't join the others in the search for clues.

"My cousin."

She nodded towards the other side of the room. "He went

over there.”

The cabin was rather spacious, with two bedrooms and a living room on the ground floor, and an old wooden ladder in a shadowy corner leading up to a small attic. The place felt dim and crowded, mostly due to the clutter of random items and the number of people rather than its size.

The bedroom doors were locked with rusted, oddly shaped locks. Even stranger, chickens were hung on the doors—a rooster on one and a hen on the other. Both were drained of blood, their feathers neatly arranged, and their heads twisted to face the same direction, like something out of a horror movie.

As Yu Wen got closer, he noticed You Huo lurking in the shadows by the doors, his presence even more unsettling than the creepy chickens. He rubbed the goosebumps on his arms.

“Huo, what’s that in your hand?”

“An axe. Never seen one?” You Huo barely glanced up.

“I have, but...” Yu Wen mumbled. *If everything was fine, then why would you just casually carry around an axe? That’s what I’m worried about!*

It would have been less alarming if You Huo had been holding the mini axe properly. Instead, he was toying with it, brushing a thumb on the blade.

“Have you found any clues after looking around?” You Huo still did not look up.

“Clues? I... What am I supposed to be looking for?” Yu Wen felt a bit out of his depth.

You Huo finally looked over. He was tall and always kept his

gaze slightly lowered. His eyes were light brown and thin-lidded, attractive but distant when expressionless. Yu Wen couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he definitely didn't feel the warmth that belonged to a cousin.

Yu Wen felt uneasy. "I mean, can you give me a hint?"

"What kind of questions could be related to a snowy mountain?"

"I... I'm not sure."

"Didn't you go to school?"

"I did go..."

"And go is all you did?"

"Well, no. I picked up some exam tricks. Like, in a multiple-choice question, you should choose the short answer if the other three are long. If it's the other way around, choose the long one. If two are short and two are long, pick B. If they're all different lengths, go with C. That's pretty much how I survived Physics."

Before the older cousin could respond, Yu Wen continued. "Oh, and there's one more thing that's important. Knowing when to give up."

"Would be useful about now."

Yu Wen got the hint that if he kept talking, he might end up with the axe in his head, so he quickly shut up. Thankfully, his dear cousin seemed to have lost interest in him and was not even looking his way anymore.

But eventually, Yu Wen's curiosity got the better of him. "So, why are you holding that axe?"

“I was looking for a pen.” With a derisive snort, You Huo tossed the axe into a broken bucket.

“A what?” Yu Wen stared at the axe.

“A pen.”

Yu Wen felt one of them must have lost his mind. But You Huo ignored him and climbed up the ladder to the attic.

Time flew as the examinees scoured the cabin. Before they knew it, the red countdown number painted on the wall had gone from 6 to 5, then to 4.

No one knew how to solve the problem or where to look for clues, and the looming numbers on the wall felt just like the countdown of the national university entrance exams. As the first submission deadline loomed ever closer, everyone grew increasingly anxious. Under such intense pressure, there were always those who, in their desperation, turned to any port in a storm for relief.

As You Huo descended from the attic, Yu Yao was dipping her finger into a small dark bottle, intending to scrawl something on the designated answer wall. A strong, sour smell filled in the air. The liquid smelt like spoilt ink, but its colour was not the typical black but a rust-brown hue under the dim yellow light.

“I-is it really okay to write this?” Yu Yao looked extremely anxious, and her voice was full of panic as she sought further confirmation from the others. “This has got nothing to do with physics, has it...”

“We’re completely in the dark. Who the hell knows what

might earn us points?” grumbled a short, middle-aged bald man with a grim expression. “I doubt there’s even a correct answer! Leave it blank or write something—either way, someone’s going to die when six hours are up.”

He shot Yu Yao a challenging look. “Don’t have the guts to write anything? I do!”

The woman flinched but still touched the wall with her wet finger. But as she moved her finger, no mark appeared. The ink vanished upon contact, leaving no trace. Meanwhile, they heard a faintly wet sound as if the wall had consumed the ink.

“N-nothing’s staying on...” Yu Yao looked alarmed.

“How can that be? Have you used enough ink?!” Baldie strode over, dipped his finger deep into the inkpot and pressed it firmly against the wall. Yet the result was the same. The ink disappeared, accompanied by that subtle, wet sound, before he could finish the stroke.

Baldie stopped, his emotions spiralling. “No... Why isn’t it working? It’s got to be the ink. We need more ink... yes, that must be it...”

He reached for the inkpot, intending to pour all the ink over the wall, but someone held his hand back. He turned to see You Huo staring down at him with an icy expression.

“Stop, this is no normal wall!” You Huo snapped.

Baldie struggled, his face reddening from the effort, but couldn’t free his hand.

“Yu Wen.” You Huo looked at the teenager. “Pass me that rope by the wall.”

“What are you doing?!” Baldie tried to wriggle free, his neck flushing red.

You Huo deftly formed a knot with one hand and then wrapped the man up, firmly securing his arms.

“Huo...” Yu Wen was stunned. “Where did you learn to tie people up so well?”

Then he caught You Huo’s light-brown eyes glancing over, and it hit him that his cousin might not even know the answer to the question.

You Huo tossed Baldie onto the old sofa and then sealed the “ink”, whose make-up was dubious at best. The moment he twisted the cap on, everyone heard a faint sigh, which made their hair stand on end.

“Who was that?”

As the last stain disappeared from the answer wall, a new message appeared in its place:

Warning: Unauthorised stationery used. Invigilators notified.

Invigilators: 001, 154, 922.

Suddenly, a rooster’s crow shattered the silence in the room and nearly made Yu Wen scream too. He grabbed You Huo by the sleeve and hid behind him while searching for the source of the sound. Then he noticed the rooster hanging on the bedroom door had twisted its neck at an impossible angle, its lifeless eyes staring at the front door.

You Huo began moving towards the entrance, but Yu Wen clung to his sleeve, desperately trying to hold him back, but he

got dragged along to the front door.

Through the window, they watched as three figures silently drew near amid the snow and wind. The leader, a tall man with short black hair and a snug coat, had a stature that exuded strength and bravery, evident even in his silhouette. As he reached the entrance, a gust whipped by, flinging snow into his face. He lowered his head and blinked, snowflakes trailing down his brows. When he looked up again, his dark eyes caught a glimpse of snow and then locked onto You Huo's.

You Huo found himself touching his ear stud.

"You know him?" Yu Wen said in You Huo's ear.

You Huo frowned and whispered back. "I don't remember."

Given the trio's arrangement, the tall man in the lead must have been Invigilator 001. He looked around the room like a traveller finding shelter from the storm. Smiling, he removed his black leather gloves as he walked into the cabin. "Not bad. You knew to start a fire. The blizzard's harsh. It was cold coming over."

Nobody returned the smile. In fact, most recoiled. Unfazed, 001 walked to the furnace and warmed his hands. A lingering smile played on his lips, with a hint of laziness and derision. The snow on his collar and shoulder melted, leaving behind damp traces that then gradually dried in the heat.

Everyone stared at him, but no one said a word. The tin can You Huo threw out of the cabin had turned to dust, yet the trio had walked through the storm unscathed.

Yu Wen was shivering cowardly behind You Huo, causing the

latter to shudder in synchrony. The teen whispered, "Are they still human?"

Hearing that, 001 glanced their way. His dark pupils shrouded in the backlit shadows, occasionally catching the flickering firelight. However, his gaze remained derisive.

You Huo watched the invigilator expressionlessly while pressing down the trembling figure behind him. He said calmly, "Be quiet, will you?"

And Yu Wen froze.

Only when 001 had warmed up and donned his gloves again did one of the invigilators at the door announce, "We are the invigilators for this exam. I am Invigilator 154. We've received a report that two of you broke the rules while answering the problem."

Yu Yao turned deathly pale. Already unstable on her feet due to the pregnancy, she now teetered on the edge of fainting while tears gushed out of her like a tap. Meanwhile, Baldie, who was tied up on the sofa, was too frightened even to draw a breath.

"But..."

Invigilator 154 turned towards the interjecting speaker.

Peeking out from behind You Huo, Yu Wen was surprised to see that the bold man was none other than his drunkard father, who was wilting under the invigilator's stern gaze.

"Th-ther was n-nothing specifying what we had to use to answer."

"Everything necessary has been provided," said 154.

"Where?"

The invigilator stared at him. “I’m not the one taking the exam.”

“B-but we didn’t know! W-we didn’t know s-so you can’t...” Old Yu’s voice dropped to a feeble whisper.

“That’s not within our purview.” The invigilator maintained his composure as he continued with his announcement. “Only those who have contravened the regulations will face penalties. The remainder of you may proceed with the examination.”

He pulled out a slip of white paper covered in scrawls. “According to our records, the ones to be penalised are a middle-aged man and a girl—”

He glanced back at 001 before looking back at the paper, then reiterated with a tightened expression, “A middle-aged man and a young lady. Will the two rule breakers please come with us?”

As he spoke, the third invigilator, who must have been 922, effortlessly hoisted Baldie from the sofa and dragged him to the door like a sack of potatoes. As the door was opened, biting wind blasted into the cabin, howling as it showered everyone with snow. Many examinees screamed and huddled by the stove, fearing the snow would harm them. All they could do was watch as 922 and Baldie vanished into the blizzard, leaving behind only the man’s screams of terror and a puddle on the floor.

“And a girl—ahem, a young lady.” Still wearing a stern expression, 154 scanned the room with a furrowed brow.

While nobody had been looking, Old Yu and two kind elderly women stepped in front of Yu Yao, shielding her from view,

yet they were shaking like leaves. Just before 154's eyes settled on them, 001 nodded towards You Huo. "That's him. Bring him along."

"Who?" 154 glanced down at the note, where the words "a girl" had been scrawled. He stared blankly at You Huo, who was glaring at 001 with a frown. Invigilator 154 had no doubts that if the standoffish, handsome man had been armed with a blade, his boss might very well have been decapitated. "Erm..."

Before he could say anything, 001 turned up his coat collar and strode into the snow.

"Fuck! Huo!"

"Oh, what the hell! What a bunch of unreasonable twats!" Old Yu jumped to his feet.

Yu Yao blanked out, but after two seconds, she pushed through the group frantically. "It wasn't him! It was me! It wasn't him—"

But she was too late. The wind drove sprays of granular snow in through the empty doorway. There was not a soul in sight. The invigilators, Baldie, and the wrongly detained You Huo had disappeared without a trace.

"Stop yelling!" Inksleeves spat. "They're gone, and if you care that much, you can go look for them!" He strode over and slammed the door shut before securing it with two locks.

The room fell silent.

Old Yu, eyes red with anger, slapped himself on the leg and collapsed to the floor. Yu Yao slumped back into her chair, sobbing uncontrollably. She'd been crying so much since entering

the room that she might run out of tears soon. Yu Wen stood frozen by the door, his face pale.

When he finally composed himself, he helped his father up, whispering to him with a frown. “Huo told me something before he left.”

“What?” Old Yu gasped. How could You Huo have communicated anything, given the invigilators’ supernatural speed?

“He told me to find a knife.”

“What kind of knife?”

Yu Wen shook his head slowly. Instead of answering, he turned to the answer wall. His father followed his gaze. He scanned the wall. His eyes eventually settled on a specific spot where skinny lines were carved into the wall. “Who made those?”

“They were there before the question appeared. I saw them.” Piecing together details, Yu Wen finally understood what You Huo had been doing. “Now I get it.”

Old Yu was confused. “What have you figured out?”

“He said he was looking for a pen but was only searching through the axes and hunting gear.” Yu Wen focused on the lines on the wall. “That invigilator said that everything’s been provided. Those lines are the clues.”

The ink wouldn’t stay on the wall, but the knife had left marks—so the knife was the authorised stationery. Old Yu’s eyes sparkled as he said under his breath, “He’s as extraordinary as ever.”

“What?”

“Let’s go find that knife! We’ll be doing our part.” Old Yu turned to share the breakthrough with everyone, but Yu Wen quickly covered his mouth.

“Wait! Hold on!” Yu Wen smacked his father on the back as if to calm him. “Don’t worry about my cousin, he’ll be fine! I’m sure of it!”

Old Yu was sure he had a few bruises forming from how hard his son was “comforting” him.

Then, in a barely audible voice, Yu Wen added, “He said that someone’s hiding the knife.”

The snow grew heavier. Winds whipped wildly from every direction, obscuring the mountains and trees in a thick mist. Yet, through the haze, a light shone in the distance.

You Huo trudged through the snow. His face was expressionless. The cabin had disappeared as soon as he was pushed out the door, eliminating any possibility of return. However, he was certain of one thing—as long as he was with the invigilators, the storm wouldn’t tear him apart. But it was the invigilators, not the storm, that troubled him more.

Baldie was still sobbing. It made You Huo feel as if he was in a funeral procession. Thankfully, their destination was close. Before he died from hypothermia, they reached a solitary cottage surrounded by trees—the perfect setting for a horror film.

“Here we are.”

Invigilator 154 pushed You Huo inside. Under the lamplight, You Huo looked even more aloof than usual, perhaps thanks to

the freezing weather. His lips were tightly pursed, and his skin deadly pale. The interior of the cottage was bizarrely overdone. Murals and statues of various sizes cluttered the ground floor, filling every nook and cranny. Stone faces, eerily pale, stared back at them from all directions.

Upon entering the foyer, Baldie collapsed. As if on cue, 922 dragged him away, presumably to avoid another messy incident.

“What do you want?” Baldie’s cries echoed from the corridor. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’ll never do it again! What do you want from me?”

“Scared?” a deep voice asked in You Huo’s ear.

It was 001, who stood there slowly removing his gloves. You Huo glanced at him. Then he brushed past and headed down the corridor. Invigilator 154 watched the young man go and then turned to his superior.

“Why look at me?” Invigilator 001 said lazily, tilting his chin towards the corridor, “Well? Don’t keep him waiting.”

The cottage appeared small, but the corridor stretched on for so long that You Huo suspected that they were trapped, walking in an endless loop. Fortunately, there was an end. After a few minutes, 922 stopped, opened a door, shoved Baldie inside, and locked it.

“What’s the penalty?” You Huo asked flatly.

Invigilator 154 blinked. “A time-out.”

You Huo blinked back. *Aren’t these people a bit too old to be playing House?*

“Honestly, that’s the penalty.”

You Huo noticed something about his tone was off. The invigilator no longer sounded like a cool-headed enforcer; his voice carried an edge of anxiety. “You’re scared. You’ve been put in time-out, haven’t you?”

Invigilator 154 frowned. “Why would I be scared? You’re the one who should be.”

Then You Huo noticed an odd sensation under his feet—something was sticking to his soles. He then heard a faint drip. He looked down to see a viscous liquid oozing out from under the door that 922 had just locked. It took a moment for him to realise the liquid was blood. Baldie’s screams soon followed, muffled and distant because of the excellent soundproofing. Yet, the terror in his voice was evident.

“Don’t worry, he won’t die,” 154 said as he opened the door across from Baldie’s room. While You Huo was deep in thought, he pushed the young man into the room. “Chop-chop.”

The door slammed shut. The locks clicked into place. Then the invigilator’s voice filtered through the edge of the door. “You only used the wrong stationery, so the penalty isn’t severe. The time-out room will force you to relive your most terrifying memory. I’ll be back in three hours.”

Meanwhile, on the first floor, 001 sat in an armchair, his chin propped in one hand, looking a bit bored. A pitch-black bird sat inside a metal cage on the desk. He stared out at the snowy forest while absentmindedly stroking the bird’s head, his face void of emotion.

Invigilator 922 was venting his frustration. “That bastard’s

wet himself four times. Every time I spoke or even tried to speak, he would leak!”

Invigilator 154 came in, waving a slip of paper loudly. His usual composure had disappeared. “A *girl*! You wrote it yourself!” If he had had the courage of a hundred warriors, he would have thrown the slip in 001’s face. Alas, he was a coward.

As they both ranted, they realised that their superior hadn’t reacted at all. He continued to stare out the window with a brooding look.

“Boss? Boss?” When this didn’t work, 922 raised his voice. “Qin Jiu!”

The invigilator called Qin Jiu snapped back to reality. Invigilator 922 swiftly pushed 154 forward and retreated. Invigilator 154 glared at him. *Damn it*, he cursed silently.

Qin Jiu looked at the two men. “I wasn’t listening. Want to repeat that?”

Invigilator 154 shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Boss...” Invigilator 922 approached timidly. “Are you okay?”

Qin Jiu raised his eyebrows. “That’s a stupid question.”

“I mean... I just thought you seemed upset,” 922 said.

“Am I?”

“A little... I guess.” Invigilator 922 chose his next words carefully. “Is it because you’ve been forced to invigilate today?”

“No.”

“Then why are you...” Invigilator 154 muttered.

“Speak up, I didn’t catch that last part.” Qin Jiu glanced at him. His piercing black eyes always made others uncomfortable.

Even after three years, 154 and 922 weren't used to his intense gaze.

Invigilator 154 stepped back. "Ahem, I mean... if you weren't upset, why would you have an innocent examinee brought here? Isn't that against the rules?"

"I was following the rules," Qin Jiu replied. "Didn't you see the ink on his hand?"

"I..." Invigilator 154 blinked. "I didn't."

Qin Jiu stroked the black bird on the head. "Besides..."

The two invigilators waited in silence for ten minutes, but Qin Jiu said nothing. Finally, he shook his head. "Never mind, it's nothing."

His subordinates were bursting with curiosity but were too timid to press further. They reluctantly left, their questions unanswered.

Above the first floor of the cottage was an attic. An entire wall was lined with white screens, each connected to a time-out room, broadcasting the experiences of those in time-out. It was a place where many secrets were exposed, and at the moment, it was locked up and protected from prying eyes. Only two screens were operational. One displayed Baldie and the other You Huo. The former was stained with blood, showing only the vague silhouette of someone hanging by the shoulder and a ghastly pale face. In contrast, You Huo's screen was pristine. The room had the same setup as before: three mirrors, a wall clock, a wooden table, and a wooden chair. That was all.

Three hours later, 154 arrived with keys to unlock the room.

He braced for a horrific scene with bloody limbs coming flying at him, but he was stunned upon opening the door. The room was untouched. The handsome examinee who was supposed to be penalised was asleep at the table, his face buried in his arms like a bored high school student napping during class. And the invigilator's intrusion finally woke him up.

Frowning, You Huo cracked open his eyes, took a look at the invigilator, and promptly shut them again. His face was etched with impatience and annoyance. After a few moments, he gathered himself and sat up in the chair. "Time-out's over?"

Invigilator 154 was flabbergasted. *Maybe I should have let the poor guy sleep more?!*

When You Huo exited the room, it was eerily quiet. Across the corridor, the screaming had stopped, but the blood had seeped out, sprawling over the floor. Disgusted, You Huo frowned and picked his way over the puddles. After a few steps, he stopped. He was overcome with the feeling that something was spying on him from above, its lifeless eyes quietly tracking his every move. He looked up, only to see the white ceiling and a dim light.

Rapid footsteps descended the stairs. "Oh shit! I nearly overslept and broke the rules! That idiot didn't even wake me—"

The grumbling was cut off as 922 rounded the corner. "Oh, it's you! Out already?"

You Huo shifted his gaze from the ceiling to him.

"Excuse me." In the presence of an examinee, the invigilator quickly reverted to a formal tone. He hurried down the corridor

and opened the door. Moments later, he waddled back out, carrying most of Baldie's weight on one shoulder.

"Why are you still here?" Invigilator 922 asked.

"Waiting for you," You Huo said lazily, hands in his pockets. "I'm not keen on turning to ashes."

"Where's Invigilator 154?"

"I don't know."

"Has that two-faced slacker sneaked off again?" Invigilator 922 grumbled under his breath. As Baldie began to slide down, the invigilator lifted him up. He didn't have the luxury to worry about 154.

"Come on," he said, nodding towards the corridor. "I'll take you both back to the exam site."

On the first floor, Qin Jiu leant against the window, his arms crossed and his gaze fixed on the scene below. The room's light spilt into the forest, briefly illuminating 922 and the two examinees as they navigated the shadows before being engulfed by the snowy fog. Deep in thought, Qin Jiu gazed at the spot where they had vanished.

The black bird cawed twice, its voice low and hoarse.

After a moment, Qin Jiu tutted and returned to the table. He fiddled with the bird's sharp beak and fed it a seed. "Aren't we forgetting someone?"

"Heh." The bird let out a mocking sound, eerily human-like.

"An invigilator?"

"Heh."

Qin Jiu tapped its beak and then headed downstairs. Almost immediately, the bird flew after him and landed on his shoulder. He scanned the foyer before moving down the corridor. He heard a chair scraping the floor coming from the time-out room recently vacated by You Huo. He raised his eyebrows and rapped on the door thrice. “Anyone in there?”

The chair thudded against the floor several times.

“May I come in?”

The floorboards could just about break under the violent thuds.

Qin Jiu unlocked the door and pushed it open. There, he saw the missing invigilator, 154, bound to the chair with his hands behind his back. The poor, exhausted man had his mouth stuffed with a wad of paper that had a message scrawled on it: *Who the fuck are you calling a girl?*

Qin Jiu found himself smiling.

Invigilator 154 was about to slam the chair down again to remind the other invigilator to release him, but the smile unnerved him so much that he gently set the chair down instead. Fortunately, the vulgar message didn’t keep Qin Jiu amused for long, and 154 soon regained his freedom.

Rubbing the raw skin on his wrists, 154 cursed, “I’ve been doing this for three years, and no lie, I’ve never seen one like this guy! Everyone else panics and cries, and he just *sleeps*, doesn’t even bat an eye. The others are so scared they’re blue, and he just ties me up like it’s nothing new.”

Qin Jiu leant on the table, saying lazily, “Nice, it rhymes. Go

on.”

Invigilator 154 swore he would show the “fuck” on the paper to Qin Jiu... if he had the guts to.

“As an invigilator, doesn’t it embarrass you to be tied up by an examinee?” Qin Jiu narrowed his eyes.

Invigilator 154 resumed his stern façade. “It does. Luckily, 922 didn’t see it, or he’d be laughing for the next two years.”

Everyone familiar with the system would know that invigilators were chosen from past examinees. Only the most outstanding individuals had the chance to transition to this role. Their invigilator number corresponded to their ranking in terms of competence and prowess. Those with single-digit numbers were the cream of the crop, revered and untouchable, like 001.

“You said the...” Qin Jiu stopped to find the right adjective. Ultimately, he just raised his eyebrows. “The examinee was sleeping in the time-out room?”

“Yes. When I went in, everything was the way it had been, the default setup. Everything was in order, and he was just fine. Must mean he doesn’t have any fears.” Invigilator 154 chewed over that and wondered out loud, “But a person without fears? How’s that possible? I’ve never seen another like him.”

Qin Jiu squinted while absentmindedly stroking the black bird on the neck.

“Maybe he’s been so lucky that he’s never faced anything terrifying?” Invigilator 154 speculated. “But if so, that luck ends today. This cohort’s got such terrible luck that they’ve got the notorious ‘toothpaste problem’ as their first test.”

Qin Jiu glanced at him.

“Y’know, like squeezing toothpaste, since you only get a little bit of the problem each time. Actually, it might be a bug in the system or something.”

“Who came up with this silly term?”

“The idiot, 922, not me.” Invigilator 154’s face was as expressionless as ever. “But I think it fits. Those were the questions I feared the most as an examinee! They’re not necessarily hard, but they start you off with nothing and make it impossible to score any points, so someone ends up dying by default when the first submission deadline comes around.”

Invigilator 154 lost himself in his past for a moment, and then he shuddered. “I’m lucky I only had a ‘toothpaste problem’ once, and I wasn’t the one who died... I wonder who it will be today?” He glanced at the time. “We’ll know in a few seconds.”



Chapter 2

Invigilator 922 was so exhausted from escorting the two examinees back to the cabin that pride was the only thing keeping him from breaking character. Before leaving, he called out to You Huo, who appeared annoyed.

“What now?”

The deadline for the first submission was coming. The tension and fear in the cabin were palpable, even with the howling snowstorm outside. There was no time to waste.

“There’s another rule,” the invigilator said. “As individuals who have been in time-out, the two of you aren’t allowed to answer the question in this round.”

You Huo appeared even more upset.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger,” the invigilator raised his hand defensively. “Besides, the first round of these questions is like a death trap. You wouldn’t score any points—”

You Huo ignored the invigilator and opened the cabin door. As the warm indoor air hit his face, the rooster crowed again—it was time for the first submission. Baldie was so startled that

he fell to his knees. He crawled to a corner and stared straight ahead vacantly while shaking like a leaf. His panic triggered a domino effect, and several other examinees also collapsed.

Yu Wen had a knee on Inksleeves' back, holding him down on the floor. In his hand was something he'd just wrestled away from the latter. Amid the chaos caused by the rooster, Yu Wen looked up dumbly at You Huo and raised the object. "Huo, I found the knife... but is it... is the time up?"

What now?

With that thought, almost everyone went weak in the knees, too terrified to even breathe. Each crow from the rooster only intensified their panic.

"Will we... be kicked out of the exam site?" someone whispered, their voice barely audible over the noise.

Would they be reduced to ashes in the snowstorm like the tin can that had turned to powder?

Bam! The lock on the cabin door burst open, and the door slammed against the wall. Invigilator 922, who was outside about to leave, also stopped. Everyone inside shuddered as an intense wind swept through the cabin. It was like an emergency hatch on a plane had been flung open, creating a massive suction force that pulled everyone to the exit.

"Nooo!" Old Yu cried out. He lost his balance, hit the floor, and began sliding towards the door as if dragged along by invisible hands.

Thoughts flashed through You Huo's mind:

The submission only ends when the rooster crows nine times.

There's also a trick to this stupid problem's first submission. Tsk... It's really stupid.

With no time to waste, he snatched the skinny pocket knife from Yu Wen, vaulted over the long table, and dashed to the answer wall. As the rooster crowed for the ninth time, he scratched a word onto the wall: "Solution".

Invigilator 922 watched through the doorway, dumbfounded. *How the hell is that an answer?*

The rooster went silent, and the suction ceased immediately. The answer worked.

Old Yu had just reached the doorway and lost a bit of scalp on the top of his head. Yu Wen, who had held onto his father's leg for dear life, toppled over. They just sat there, faces pale and hearts racing.

Then they turned to the answer wall. After what felt like an eternity, a red annotation appeared next to the hastily carved "solution": +2.

Everyone was stunned. Invigilator 922 was flabbergasted. He lingered in the biting wind for a few more seconds before hurrying off to report to his colleagues.

Eventually, the examinees regained their composure and staggered to their feet.

"Holy shit, I thought I was a goner..." Old Yu was now missing part of his scalp. Blood trickled down his face, but he was alive.

Yu Wen let go of his father's leg and collapsed out of exhaustion. A few seconds later, he sat up abruptly and slapped himself

on the head.

“I’m an idiot! How could I have forgotten? Our teachers always said that if we didn’t know an answer during an exam, we should at least write ‘solution’ to show we tried. That word alone got us two points! Huo, you’re so awesome!”

You Huo put the knife away without a word, unimpressed by the compliment. To stop the idiot’s ramblings about the “solution”, he decided to waste his precious breath. “Who had the knife?”

Yu Wen’s expression darkened. “Guess who!” He nodded towards Inksleeves. “That guy kept it to himself. I just knew he was up to no good. While everyone else was looking for clues, he was stuffing knives in his pocket like a bear stocking up for hibernation. If we hadn’t gotten into a scuffle because he bumped into Yu Yao, he wouldn’t have dropped it. Then who knows how long we’d have kept searching?!”

The thought of what had just happened made Yu Wen shudder. If it weren’t for that chaotic brawl, or if they unfortunately had found the knife any later... Even You Huo’s timely return might not have been enough to save them. His dad, Old Yu, would have...

Now, Inksleeves was restrained in a chair. The group was ready to put him on trial when the answer wall was updated again.

Question: A group of travellers came to a snowy mountain and took shelter in Hunter Alpha’s cabin.

The hunter said, “I have 13 sets of tableware but

not enough food, so I can only feed 12 guests. A secret lies within the tableware, and one guest is fated to die. Will you be the lucky survivor? It's not difficult to escape death, considering light is the most marvellous thing in the world."

Requirement: Identify the cursed set of tableware without damaging it.

Topic: Optics.

As the group digested the new information, another message appeared below it.

Warning: Question answered by unauthorised examinee. Invigilators notified.

Invigilators: 001, 154, 922.

All eyes turned to You Huo.

Ten minutes later, on the first floor of the cottage, 001 twirled his pen while watching the second-time offender, who was slouched on the sofa with his legs stretched out, casually fiddling with his ear stud. The room was silent.

Finally, Qin Jiu scoffed and shot the young man a look. "Are you planning on moving in?"

You Huo calmly glanced up, then dropped his gaze.

No explanation. No apology. No acknowledgement of the situation. This kind of attitude was the most challenging to deal with.

As soon as 154 entered Qin Jiu's office, he felt he'd travelled back to the suffocating atmosphere of a detention centre.

"Sir, what is it?" In front of the examinee, he spoke formally,

even using honorifics.

“What’s the punishment for a second violation?” Qin Jiu turned to 154, pen spinning around his fingers. “It’s been a while since I’ve invigilated. I can’t quite recall.”

Invigilator 154 blinked. “A time-out, sir.”

You Huo stopped fiddling with his ear stud and glanced up. His expression was cold, exuding nothing but a bored indifference, yet the derision was palpable. Perhaps it was in his genes. Or maybe Qin Jiu just tended to attract such looks.

“Is there nothing else we can do?” Qin Jiu pressed.

Invigilator 154 made to respond, but a beep interrupted him. You Huo looked for the source and found a flash of red light coming from Qin Jiu’s wrist.

“See?” Invigilator 154 pointed out. “Dealing out extra punishment isn’t permitted.”

Qin Jiu looked down at his cuffs as he lazily adjusted them. When the light faded, he looked up, his gaze meeting You Huo’s. “It’s rather dull just staring at a table and chair for three hours.”

Although he was looking at You Huo, his remark was intended for 154, who nodded in agreement. “That’s true.”

“How about you join him? At least there’d be a scene.”

Invigilator 154 blinked. *Who’s the one being punished here?*

Qin Jiu smiled. “Relax, I’m just joking.”

Invigilator 154 sighed in relief. This was the unpredictable and sometimes harsh humour that he’d come to expect from Qin Jiu. “So, should I just send him down? And let him sleep

for three hours before taking him back?”

“Since when were we running a hotel?”

Invigilator 154 fell silent. He waited and listened, eyes cast downwards. When no new instructions came, he glanced over at You Huo, who was still on the sofa. The examinee was staring blankly out of the window with an expression that 154 interpreted as a blatant challenge: *Let's see what you've got*. The young man radiated cool defiance, coloured by a distinct touch of aloof arrogance.

Qin Jiu, on the other hand, had his hands loosely clasped in front of him and was studying You Huo's expression. Invigilator 154 sensed that his boss was both intrigued and slightly annoyed by the challenging examinee before him.

“Sir?” Invigilator 154 prompted.

Another few seconds went by before Qin Jiu looked away. “Get another examinee to break the rules. Then we can lock them up together.”

Invigilator 154's poker face nearly cracked. The thing on Qin Jiu's wrist beeped again—another warning. Invigilator 154 clenched his jaws, but Qin Jiu seemed indifferent.

“Should we just forget the punishment and send him back now?”

Beep.

Qin Jiu clicked his tongue. He thought for a while before asking 154, “Have you cleaned the time-out room that was used?”

Confused, 154 glanced at You Huo. “Was I supposed to clean

it? I put away the rope and threw away the vulgar note.”

At the mention of the note, You Huo stopped fiddling with his ear stud briefly, but he continued to stare out the window with an icy expression, pretending not to have heard them.

“No, the other room.”

“Not yet. 922 and I were about to, but with so many violations, we haven’t had the chance.”

“Then let’s have the culprit...” Qin Jiu paused, looking at You Huo. “What’s your name?”

You Huo snorted.

“Let Mr Snort handle the cleanup.”

Worried that the office might descend into chaos, 154 quickly agreed and escorted the troublemaker downstairs with his usual stern face.

In the storage room, 922 and 154 rummaged through the cleaning supplies while You Huo, the offender, leant against the door with his arms crossed, wearing a scowl.

“Lose the scowl.” Invigilator 922 smirked. “If you guys actually fought, he’d mop the floor with you.”

His attitude towards You Huo had softened a bit, probably thanks to the genius “solution”. You Huo said nothing, but his sceptical expression said it all.

“Do you think he’s 001 just for kicks?” Invigilator 922 continued. “The first time I saw him was... I forget which exam it was, but the location was just off an army base. It was an absolute bloodbath! Everything was drenched in red, bodies everywhere, and there he was, casually wielding a shoulder-mounted

rocket launcher like it was nothing.”

“Go find a bucket,” 154 interjected curtly.

“Okay.”

Under his colleague’s stern stare, 922 snapped out of his memory and said to You Huo. “You head over first. I’ll bring the bucket over.”

The examinee followed 154 down the long corridor.

“All this needs cleaning,” the invigilator said, pointing at the bloodstains on the floor before he unlocked Baldie’s time-out room.

“Were you all once examinees?” You Huo asked abruptly.

Invigilator 154 nodded. “Yes, many years ago.”

“How did you become an invigilator?”

Invigilator 154 chose his words carefully. “We passed the exam with flying colours.”

You Huo frowned. “And what exactly is this exam?”

“It’s a... special elimination process,” 154 answered vaguely, his eyes flicking to You Huo. “It’s just like any exam.”

“Who’s the system trying to find?” You Huo mocked. “Courageous nerds?”

At the same time, he felt the eerie sensation of being watched again. He glanced up, but the ceiling was just an expanse of white. No peeping holes or mysterious creatures peering down at him.

“What kind of people get dragged in here?” he continued, brushing off the paranoia.

Invigilator 154 pondered briefly. “Unusually dangerous indi-

viduals.”

You Huo didn't look impressed.

The invigilator recalled the old, weak, sick, and pregnant examinees in the cabin. “Okay, maybe that's not quite accurate.”

“Then what is this place? Some kind of X-Files shit?”

Invigilator 154 shook his head. “No, not paranormal. It's—”

Beep. That sound again.

You Huo glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting 001 to appear, but the corridor was empty. He realised the beep had come from 154 this time. He noticed the invigilator touching a simple band on his own index finger which was emitting a faint red glow. The moment the invigilator saw the crimson glimmer, he clamped his mouth shut.

“What's that?” You Huo asked. “001 had it too.”

“A violation warning,” 154 explained as he twisted the ring to conceal the light.

“Invigilators have rules and restrictions too?”

“Oh, you bet! Loads of them!” came 922's voice as he approached, carrying an aluminium bucket and picking his way around the bloodstains. “No discussing sensitive topics. No abuse of authority. No assisting the examinees. No romantic relationships with—”

You Huo gave him a flat look.

“Well, that last one's pretty much impossible,” 922 continued. “It's good enough if we don't fight with examinees. And even if we do, we're not allowed to kill examinees... and the list goes on.”

“What if an examinee kills an invigilator?” You Huo asked.

Invigilator 922 blinked.

“And what happens if invigilators break the rules?”

Invigilator 154 went pale, and even the usually amiable 922 was silent for a few seconds before forcing a laugh.

“Let’s just say the consequences are severe. It’s never happened to me, and I hope it never does. Anyway, let’s drop the dangerous questions and steer clear of trouble, shall we?” He placed the aluminium bucket at You Huo’s feet. “Focus on surviving the exams. You’ll learn what you need to know in time.”

Without another word, 154 unlocked the time-out room. As the door swung open, a certain aroma assaulted them—the room was smeared with blood and littered with blobs of flesh.

“You guys clean these rooms yourselves?” You Huo looked disgusted.

“Not manually.” Invigilator 922 pinched his nose. “That’d be more of a punishment than cleaning itself. It’s sickening but still better than time-out.”

You Huo gave him a frosty look.

“I mean...” Invigilator 922 gave an awkward smile. “At least you’d feel better than if you were stuck in a room with 001, right?”

He then hastily pulled 154 away, and the corridor returned to being silent.

You Huo was certainly not going to do a thorough cleaning. Leaning against the door, he first surveyed the chaos with a look of disdain and then filled the bucket with water. He sloshed it

across the room, diluting the bloodstains and rinsing off the things that clung to the floor and walls. You Huo crouched down to examine the pale objects only to find that they were bone fragments tangled with black hair.

Just what twisted scenarios had played out in Baldie's mind? You Huo swallowed his nausea and stepped inside, face impassive.

After a cursory cleanup, the bucket was filled with bloody water and scraps of human remains. Floating on top in a tangled mess of hair was a large, waterlogged piece of skin, its pale, rubbery texture giving it a synthetic appearance. On it was a delicate tattoo that stood out—a simple yet elegant bellflower.

After three hours, 922 escorted You Huo back to the cabin.

Qin Jiu stretched his muscles and thought about asking 154 to get something to eat, but as he opened his office door, he was met with the ghastly sight of a bucket filled with blood and flesh. Next to it, a torn piece of paper sported a messily written message: *For you. Enjoy.*

"Hey Boss." Invigilator 154's voice came from somewhere in the cottage. "I'm making grilled beef. Want anything?"

"No... I've lost my appetite for the day."

"What?" Invigilator 154 wandered over, oven mitts in hand. He stared at the bloody bucket for a good three seconds before saying, "Actually, make that for life."

Qin Jiu picked up the note, leant against the door, and read it carefully. He then asked 154 in a slow, drawn-out manner, each word dripping with provocation. "What's the punishment for a

third violation from the same examinee?”

“There wouldn’t be a third time, right?”

“What if there was?”

“The punishment would involve us... overseeing the exam on-site and keeping a close watch on him.”

Invigilator 154 held his breath. Qin Jiu didn’t speak. The silence was stifling.

Invigilator 922 lingered by the cabin door again after finishing his escort mission. Because of what had happened, he was curious to see what else You Huo could do. However, regret found him only a few seconds later because the young man came outside again. His face fell.

“What now?”

“I thought of something.”

“What?”

“The rules in this world, are they based on actual exam rules?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“There’s one rule that wasn’t mentioned.”

“Which one?”

“If examinees encounter problems, they can contact the invigilators, right?”

Invigilator 922 hesitated. “Yes...” *But we don’t really want you to.*

To avoid suspicion, he followed up with: “Just like in real exams, you can’t ask for answers. We can’t and won’t assist with

that.”

You Huo hummed in acknowledgement. However, his casual demeanour left 922 sceptical.

“So, how do we contact invigilators if needed?”

“Just... use authorised stationery, and write under the exam question—” He meant to say “the number of the invigilator you want to summon”, but the metaphoric cat got his tongue, since he genuinely didn’t want to be the one summoned. Instead, what came out was: “001.”

You Huo stared at him.

“Yeah.” The invigilator repeated with an innocent look. “Write 001.”

After a long pause, You Huo nodded and slammed the door in his face. Pleased with himself for secretly stirring shit, he went along his merry way to the invigilators’ cottage.

Meanwhile, the fire in the furnace blazed in the hunter’s cabin. Inksleeves, isolated due to the knife incident, sat alone at one end of the table, his expression dark and brooding. The rest of the group deliberately kept their distance, even going so far as to walk wide circles around him.

“Huo!” Yu Wen sprang to his feet upon seeing You Huo’s return, brandishing the confiscated knife. “Did the invigilators do anything to you? What was your punishment? Are you okay?”

Everyone’s attention shifted to the returnee.

Frowning, You Huo dodged the blade and pushed Yu Wen away with his foot. “I’m fine.”

Yu Wen looked unconvinced. “Are you sure?” He glanced

nervously to a corner of the room and lowered his voice. "That guy only went once, but he came back totally messed up. The punishment must've been extremely horrific!"

You Huo glanced at Baldie huddled in the corner, the whites of his eyes yellowed, bloodshot, and bulging unnaturally. He rocked back and forth in a twitchy manner, muttering phrases that made no sense. The man embodied madness. You Huo felt sick thinking about Baldie's time-out room.

"Has he been like this the whole time?"

"Yeah, all three hours. Hasn't improved." Yu Wen shivered. He leant in closer and whispered, "You know how he's been talking to himself? I actually squatted there and tried to listen."

"What did he say?"

Yu Wen shook his head. "All I caught was 'unlucky'. Oh, something about 'burning joss paper' too. Couldn't make out the rest."

You Huo only hummed in response.

"You were punished one more time than him though. How come you're okay?" Yu Wen asked curiously.

You Huo was too lazy to over-explain and chose a versatile reason. "Different punishments."

"What were your punishments?"

You Huo gave an abbreviated answer: "Took a nap, then gave the invigilator a bucket of blood."

"What? Why did you give them a bucket of blood?"

"Don't know," You Huo said mockingly. "Maybe he likes it."

His cousin had said "he", not "they". Yu Wen caught the nu-

ance. “Which one? Who’d like that kind of stuff? Is he messed up in the head?”

“001.”

“Ew...”

You Huo didn’t like any of the invigilators, and neither did they him, so he wanted to change the subject. He looked around the room, frowning. “Did you guys just sit around doing nothing for three hours?”

“Of course not.” Yu Wen pointed to the answer wall. “Your ‘solution’ inspired me, so I added a bit more.”

You Huo eyed the wall, which was covered in Yu Wen’s chicken scratch that he couldn’t make out. Yu Wen took the silence as a cue to elaborate. “Our teachers always said to write down whatever we thought of. Even if we don’t have the solution, sometimes just showing our thought process can earn some points.”

“So you wrote an essay?” You Huo squinted, attempting to make sense of the scribbles. “What does this line say?”

Yu Wen leant in towards what his cousin pointed at, struggling to decipher his own writing. “Um, it says... ‘We know there are 13 people and 12 sets of tableware’. Yeah.”

“Why did you rewrite the problem?”

“Well... when I really don’t know what to write, I try to bulk up the content by reiterating the key points.”

What fucking key points? You Huo closed his eyes in frustration. Then he pointed to a mess of circles on the wall. “And these?”

“ $F=mg$, $g=9.8\text{ N/kg}$.”

“What do they have to do with optics?”

“The thing is... I don’t even know what tableware has to do with optics.” When he got no response, Yu Wen knew he had to appease his cousin. “I did write some stuff about optics, though.”

“Where?” You Huo didn’t want to sift through a wall filled with irrelevant scratches.

“Here,” Yu Wen said sheepishly. “I wrote the refractive index, parallel beams, spherical surfaces, convex lenses, focus, imaging... These are all related to optics, right? I also drew a couple of simple diagrams of mirrored imaging.”

Seeing You Huo’s unimpressed expression, Yu Wen quickly led him away from the answer wall and changed the subject. “Let’s not dwell on these downers. We did more than just answer questions.”

Indeed, after the last update on the wall, the examinees had turned over everything in the cabin. According to the wall, this cabin belonged to Hunter Alpha, who owned thirteen sets of tableware but only enough food for twelve people. They scoured the attic, cupboards, and every jar and tin but found neither the hunter nor any tableware. As for food, it was a pipe dream.

“We searched for two hours,” Yu Wen said dejectedly. “Just this one cabin, for two whole hours! We left no stone unturned, but there’s really nothing. What a shitty question!”

“Are you sure you’ve looked everywhere?” You Huo asked.

“Not exactly,” interjected a sickly man as skinny as a bamboo, clad in hospital pyjamas. “There were two places we haven’t

checked.”

After a few coughs, he pointed with a skeletal hand to the two locked bedrooms. On the door of each room hung a creepy chicken—one a rooster, the other a hen—their necks twisted unnaturally, black glassy eyes staring outward. What’s more, their unsettling crows signalled either a rule violation or a submission deadline, so no one dared disturb them.

“We couldn’t find the keys,” Bamboo Man added.

You Huo nodded and scrutinised the padlocks before turning around to scan the walls with the hunting equipment.

Yu Wen was worried his cousin might resort to brute force and quickly intervened. “Wait! I’ve played more video games than anyone here. Trust me, game logic suggests it’s best not to force our way through locks.”

You Huo gave him a chilly glance. “Do I look like an idiot?”

Yu Wen recoiled and fell silent. After a moment, he muttered, “Then why were you looking at the hunting gear?”

“Who’s touched the hunting equipment?” You Huo asked.

All eyes turned to Inksleeves.

“The fuck are you looking at me for?” Inksleeves leapt up in rage. “You falsely accused me of taking the knife. What is it gonna be this time?”

“Falsely accused?” You Huo frowned.

“With that whole clusterfuck, who the hell knows who had the knife?” Inksleeves spat out a few more curses, irritated. “Goddammit, no use explaining to you knobs!”

You Huo gave him a cool, appraising look. Inksleeves re-

gained his composure. "Oh, forget it. Just... ask your damn question."

You Huo nodded at the wall. "Put the hunting equipment back exactly as it was. I want to see the original arrangement."

Inksleeves glared at him. "Are you crazy? I took that crap down, so why the hell would I put it back up?"

Three minutes later, Inksleeves begrudgingly replaced each piece of equipment back in its original spot while You Huo trailed behind him with hands in his pockets.

"I'm not a dog, so stop treating me like you're taking me for a walk." Although Inksleeves cursed up a storm, he dutifully replaced each item. Afterwards, he spat on the floor and stormed off.

"What's wrong with the equipment?" Yu Wen asked.

You Huo pointed to the last wall. "There are two free nails."

"So?" Yu Wen looked puzzled.

"Where did the items hanging there go?"

Silence fell across the room.

"That's right..." someone suddenly spoke up. "We're missing two items. Did anyone secretly take something?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"It was like that when we first came in," Old Yu said.

Everyone turned to him, whereas Old Yu turned to his nephew. "Well, before the exam started, I stepped outside while you were asleep. I'd been looking for an umbrella or something to shield me from the snow before I left, and I noticed those two nails were already empty."

“So, you’re saying the two items were missing before we entered the cabin?”

“Then who has them?”

“Maybe Hunter Alpha?” Yu Wen guessed. “Maybe he does exist... He’s just not at home. He’s out hunting.”

The group started to panic. “But we can’t go outside, and he’s not inside, so how do we find him?”

“It’s probably not his time to show up yet,” You Huo remarked.

You Huo’s “time theory” was met with a mix of scepticism and hope. Meanwhile, You Huo had pulled up a chair by the fire. One by one, the others followed suit, taking seats around the hearth and staring silently into the flames.

Yu Yao moved over gingerly with her hands pressed against her lower back. She watched You Huo for a moment, his features softened by firelight, though his lowered eyes retained their usual detached coolness.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her expression filled with guilt.

You Huo’s eyes lifted to meet hers.

“The ink...” Her voice was hushed. “I used it, but you got punished for it. I wanted to apologise earlier, but you’d been taken away.”

When she got no response, she continued. “I know an apology doesn’t change much, but next time, let me take the blame.”

You Huo gave her a half-lidded glance before looking back at the flames. “No, thanks.”

Yu Yao wanted to say more but decided to remain silent. Af-

ter a while, she asked another question. "Aren't you scared?"

You Huo tucked a foot on the chair to rest his arm on his knee and stretched out the other leg, the warmth of the fire lulling him.

"Scared of what?" he finally said.

"Dying, breaking the rules... anything. Everyone wonders how you stay so calm as if you're not afraid."

"What good does being afraid do?"

Yu Yao nodded, whispering. "You're right. But it's hard to control when and what to fear. For instance, I'm terrified..."

You Huo didn't look up. "You're not that scared. Certainly brave enough to use the ink without even knowing what it was made of."

His voice was low and cold, his lips barely moving as he spoke. Yet, the warmth from the crackling fire softened his words, stripping away any accusatory tone.

Yu Yao lowered her head, overwhelmed with guilt and struggling to find the right words. When she finally mustered the courage to speak, she said, "Actually, I..."

But she trailed off when she noticed You Huo was nodding off again. She was taken aback, but she swallowed her unspoken words. Instead of disturbing You Huo, she quietly rejoined the two elderly ladies.

"Asleep again?" One of the ladies whispered. "Maybe he didn't get much sleep before coming here?"

Yu Yao said nothing. She leant against one of the elderly ladies, her gaze wandering to a corner of the room, lost in

thought.

Meanwhile, Yu Wen overheard and glanced at You Huo. *My cousin's always tired, even with a full night's rest.*

The old clock on the cabinet finally ticked past the hour, marking 4:00 a.m. UTC+8. The crow of a rooster shattered the silence, jolting everyone awake. Confused glances were exchanged in the dim light as they realised they had all dozed off.

Yu Wen slapped his cheeks, trying to dispel the sleepiness. Just as his hands fell back to his sides, a strange noise caught his attention.

“Shhh.” He raised a finger to his lips and whispered, “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Old Yu, looking bewildered, stared at his son's antics.

“You guys didn't hear it? That creaking noise,” Yu Wen breathed.

The room fell deathly silent. Everyone froze, holding their breath, straining their ears in the dark, waiting. The eerie crunch sounded again. This time, everyone heard it. It sounded like something heavy was being dragged across the snowy ground outside.

Then Bamboo Man started pointing towards the window, mouthing silently: “Over there.”

Before he could close his mouth, the door creaked open ominously. A shadow stretched across the floor, followed by a pale-faced man dragging a rope behind him. His build was sturdy,

though he wasn't particularly tall. His complexion was unnaturally pale, while his irises were so large that his eyes looked nearly all black.

After entering the room, he bent over to slowly gather the rope. The large butcher knife and small animal traps at his waist clinked together, producing a chilling melody. No one spoke. They watched as he dragged a burlap sack into the room and shut the door behind him. He then turned to the furnace, his black eyes blinking slowly.

"Ah... How wonderful! Guests."

The group exchanged uneasy glances. There was no doubt about it—this creepy character was the long-awaited Hunter Alpha.

He rubbed his hands together slowly. "After being trapped by the heavy snowfall in the mountains, I knew more foo... guests would be arriving soon."

Everyone stayed silent, deeply unsettled by his gentle tone.

"It's freezing outside. The snow's piled up so much that I couldn't see a thing. It took me ages to dig out some food." He then nudged the burlap sack with his foot and flashed the group an eager grin that nearly stretched from ear to ear. "Lucky for you guys, you've arrived just in time for my meal."

He soon sighed. "Can't be helped though. There's so little sustenance up in these snowy mountains, and visitors are rare. I have to tighten my belt to just stay alive, so I limit myself to only two meals a day. One at 4 a.m. and one at 4 p.m. It's not often I get to share a meal."

He glanced at the clock on the cabinet. “Ah yes, 4 a.m. on the dot. It’s time for the morning meal. You all must be starving after the long wait. I can hear your stomachs rumbling. Eager for breakfast, are we?”

His eyes glinted with an unsettling hunger as he surveyed the tense, silent group.

“How many of you are there?” He extended a bony finger, counting them off one by one with dehumanising labels. “An old hag... a sickly runt... a hooligan... a drunkard... a drunkard’s spawn...”

Faces paled with each description. When the hunter reached You Huo, he faltered. His voice oozed disdain. “Another one dead to the damn world?”

“Hmph, whatever.” The hunter’s excitement appeared slightly dampened. He took a look at the text on the wall. “I hear there are thirteen of you, but I’ve only got food for twelve. What a shame.” He licked his lips slowly. “I’m famished though. Everyone needs to sit patiently for a little while longer, okay? I still have lots of preparations to make. It’s not often I get such a big batch of guests.”

Yu Wen frowned. *It’s not often I see a hunter who speaks more than a gossip girl!*

Hunter Alpha picked up the heavy burlap sack. It seemed abnormally heavy, although the group wisely chose not to ponder on the specifics. Dragging the sack, he moved across the space and stopped in front of the hanging hen. After a noisy search through his keys, he found the right one and unlocked the door.

A putrid smell wafted out—a nauseating mix of rotting flesh, dust, and mouldy wood. Everyone had thought that room was a bedroom, but it turned out to be a kitchen. There was a cutting board large enough to fit a person. Opposite it was a wide, red cabinet where multiple padlocks were hung.

Hunter Alpha flashed the group a smile and bowed slightly. “Just a moment, I’ll be out shortly.” He then shut the door behind him.

Silence hung heavy by the furnace until someone gasped. “I don’t want to eat, I want to go home!”

“Who the hell doesn’t?” Inksleeves had slipped back into the group, driven by fear of Hunter Alpha. “But can we? I dare you to open the door and run?”

The group fell silent again.

Old Yu swallowed nervously. “That hunter’s mouth is so big he could swallow my head in one go. I can’t shake the feeling he’s a cannibal...”

“What was in that sack?” Yu Yao murmured.

Together, the two utterances chilled everyone to the bone. All eyes turned to the window. Outside, the snowstorm raged on. Before the exam, Old Yu had ventured out and found nothing but a blanket of snow, indistinguishable trees, and a disturbing silence—no houses and no signs of other people. Where had the hunter been looking for prey? Plus, the hunter said he’d dug through the snow to find the food. That was when they recalled the man who had tampered with the radio and then died. His body had ended up buried underneath the snow...

The thought drained the colour from everyone's faces. Yu Wen looked like he could throw up any second.

"If you're gonna hurl, do it the other way." You Huo suddenly said. "I don't want to get splashed again."

"Huo, you're awake!" Yu Wen exclaimed.

"Keep it down!" Inksleeves barked, his voice gruff. "Do you have to shout?"

You Huo shot Inksleeves a glance. "I wasn't sleeping."

"Oh... Then why are your eyes always closed?"

"They're just sore."

Yu Wen then recalled something his dad had mentioned—You Huo had undergone eye surgery. Bright lights pained him, but it wasn't something You Huo liked to talk about, so Yu Wen often forgot.

"Did you hear everything the hunter said?" he asked.

You Huo nodded.

"What should we do?"

"Wait for breakfast," You Huo said lazily. "I'm hungry."

Yu Wen was convinced that his cousin was trying to scare them. As You Huo was the group's de facto leader, his casual remark silenced everyone instantly. Unease fell upon the room, each person gripped by a sudden, suffocating dread.

Unfortunately, the kitchen walls were thin, and they could hear faint, rustling noises from within. *Bang!* It sounded like something large and frozen being set on the cutting board. It wasn't long before unmistakable rhythmic chopping followed. *Thunk... thunk... thunk...*

The clock ticked on, each second stretching on for eternity. It felt like centuries passed before the kitchen door finally swung open, releasing an even fouler stench into the room. Now, mingling with the other odours was the unmistakable, faint but sickening scent of blood.

Hunter Alpha wiped his hands on a dirty towel before poking his head into the doorway and reporting his progress. “Almost done. Did you know that frozen meat has a pristine texture? The ice crystals add a really nice crunch...” He trailed off, lost in his own ghastly thoughts, before snapping back to the moment. “I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Yu Wen, hidden in the group and bolstered by his cousin’s presence, muttered under his breath, “Fuck... What a sick bastard.”

That was when he heard You Huo’s stomach growl. Yu Wen froze.

Hunter Alpha’s smile widened. “Aha! I heard that. Wonderful! Someone shares my eagerness for a fine feast. There’s rather a lot to prepare. I could use the help of a willing guest.”

His overly large eyes slowly swept over the group. Everyone shrank back—everyone except You Huo, who was, in fact, ready to get up. Yu Wen pushed him back down, his face twisted with fear.

“It’s okay, I know you’re all very shy,” Hunter Alpha said. “No need to volunteer. I’ll choose one myself. This food was hard to come by. I need a delicate, steady hand to assist me. Otherwise, it’d be such a pity if any of the plates got broken.”

He lumbered into the living room, his bulky frame disproportionate and ungainly as he moved. The examinees held their breath and glanced at the corner where the insane Baldie sat huddled in the shadows, oblivious to the danger. He was muttering unintelligibly and rocking back and forth with jerky movements. Baldie's only mercy was that Hunter Alpha was too focused on the larger group to notice him, but as he passed by Baldie's corner, someone gasped.

"Huh?" Hunter Alpha stopped and turned his head at an impossible angle.

"Crap," Yu Wen breathed.

The severe twist of the hunter's neck was sickening to see. It was far beyond what any normal human could manage. Like an owl, his face now rested fully sideways atop his shoulder. Maintaining the disturbing posture, he set his gaze on the oblivious figure huddled at his feet.

"Oh... another guest? How did I miss you? Let's see," Hunter Alpha murmured as he squatted, which his thick legs made difficult.

Baldie, his eyes cloudy and unfocused, was oblivious to the large, pale face hovering before him. Hunter Alpha didn't like being ignored. He grabbed Baldie's chin and patted his face. "Wake up, my dear guest."

There was no response. Impatient, Hunter Alpha slapped him, sending a shudder through Baldie. His bloodshot eyes snapped into focus, locking onto the hunter. Seconds later, the hunter's shoes were soaked with urine.

Annoyance flashed across Hunter Alpha's pale face before it split into another unsettling grin. "I think this guest meets my requirements very well. Come, why don't you kindly carry a thing or two for me?"

Baldie remained listless on the floor, entirely unresponsive.

"Get up!" Hunter Alpha rose, yanking the man to his feet.

Baldie shook like a leaf.

"Stand up straight!"

Petrified, the man could only comply, quivering where he stood.

"See, this is how a good guest behaves. Follow me."

Baldie cast a glance at the others, but before anyone could react, Hunter Alpha issued a chilling warning: "I expect everyone to stay put. If anyone tries anything funny, it won't end well for our friend here."

Those who had thought to signal to Baldie quickly withdrew their hands. Baldie was too terrified to look again and followed the hunter into the kitchen on trembling legs.

The kitchen was a bloody mess of bits and scraps, thanks to Hunter Alpha's crude methods. On the counter were thirteen empty porcelain plates and a glass bowl filled to the brim with chopped meat, frozen stiff and unidentifiable. The rest had been stuffed back into the burlap sack and tightly secured with a rope.

Baldie trembled uncontrollably. His jaundiced eyes were fixated on the cleaver on the cutting board.

"What are you looking at, my dear guest?" the hunter asked

softly.

Baldie's legs buckled, and he quickly withdrew his gaze.

"Now, that's better." Hunter Alpha handed him two plates. "These are quite heavy. With those shaky legs, you must be extra careful. There you go. Be careful. If you drop and shatter anything... then our portions may just be enough."

Baldie froze in sheer terror.

As they exited the kitchen, Hunter Alpha issued a stern reminder to the group. "Did you all catch that? You must be careful when assisting me. In this house, anyone who damages the tableware will be punished. I trust none of you wish to end up as someone else's meal, hmm?"

Hearing this, the examinees looked at the answer wall. The last part of the requirements was clear—the tableware must not be damaged. They had assumed this question involved a single casualty, but apparently, there was a lethal trap.

Baldie and Hunter Alpha placed the glass bowl of meat in the centre of the long table and arranged the thirteen plates around the perimeter. After setting down the last plate, Baldie exhaled deeply and slumped into a chair.

"Don't!" someone cried.

Baldie froze and then turned towards the voice. He saw Old Yu blinking frantically at him to look at the answer wall. Panicked, Baldie read the updated information he had missed after returning from the time-out room: *I can only feed 12 guests... one guest is fated to die.*

His face went pale. What if whoever sat in this chair would

become the “fated” one? He tried to stand, but the hunter’s large hands clamped down on his shoulders.

“You’ve picked your seat,” Hunter Alpha said in his ear. “No changing now, not even if you get up. Just stick with it.”

So he did. Baldie fainted, collapsing onto his chair.

“Huh... did he just faint?” The hunter sounded regretful. “We’ve only brought out the meat. The drink’s still in the kitchen.”

Breakfast had yet to begin, and they had already lost a team member.

Hunter Alpha’s creepy gaze swept across the group, searching for another victim. “I need someone else to help with the glasses,” he muttered, shuffling clumsily forward. “Who should it be? I do favour the young ones. Let’s pick one...”

His bulging eyes slowly scanned the captives before settling on Yu Wen. The young man felt all the air leave his lungs. Hunter Alpha began raising his hand.

“How about you”—before he could finish, You Huo stepped in front of his cousin—“my child?”

The bony digit now pointed squarely at You Huo. Hunter Alpha’s sickly features stiffened.

You Huo met his gaze coolly. “Me? Sure.”

Sure, my arse. The hunter was not happy.

“What, changed your mind?” You Huo asked.

Hunter Alpha retracted his finger, his face twisting into a grimace that barely resembled a smile. “Not at all. A good host must keep his word.”

His eyes narrowed with disdain before giving a reluctant wave. “Come, my kind-hearted guest.”

“Come” sounded more like “Die, why don’t you”.

Hunter Alpha turned back to the kitchen, and You Huo made to follow, but his startled cousin quickly grabbed him by the arm.

“What are you doing?” he hissed.

You Huo glanced at him. “Getting the glasses.”

“Didn’t you hear him? You’ll die if you’re not careful and drop one!”

“Am I paralysed or handicapped? You think I can’t carry a glass?”

Yu Wen opened his mouth, then closed it. His cousin had a point, but still... You Huo always found a way to defy expectations. “Just tell me why you want to help him with the glasses.”

You Huo nodded at the answer wall and freed himself from Yu Wen’s grip. “You read the requirements?”

“Of course, I’ve got eyes.”

“Then let me tell you something,” You Huo said flatly.

“What?”

“The more they emphasise something, the more suspicious it is.”

With that, he followed Hunter Alpha into the kitchen, leaving Yu Wen frozen in place.

“What did he mean by that? Why do I feel so uneasy?!” Yu Wen murmured, turning to his father with a worried look. Only, Old Yu looked even uneasier.



Chapter 3

When You Huo entered the kitchen, Hunter Alpha was fumbling with the seven keys attached to his belt by a brass ring. He picked out three to unlock the three doors on the right side of the red cabinet. He then carefully took out thirteen wine glasses and lined them up on the counter. You Huo casually picked one up to examine. At first glance, it seemed like an ordinary wine glass.

Hunter Alpha frowned and barked, “Put that down! Did I say you could touch it? You’re a guest, yet you have no manners at all?”

You Huo scoffed and placed it back on the counter. He glanced over at the clock in the living room and remarked, “At your pace, are there enough hours in a day for two meals?”

The hunter glared at him before muttering a curse and forcing a smile. “No worries, no worries. A generous host can always forgive a rude guest. I know you must be starving.”

You Huo let out a scoff.

Hunter Alpha just about had it with him. He'd never had such a bold and defiant guest. He turned to busy himself with the wine glasses.

While the hunter fussed with the glasses, You Huo stood in front of the cabinet, scanning its contents. Aside from the porcelain plates on the table and the wine glasses on the counter, all that remained inside were a small silver gravy boat, a bundle of knives and forks, and another bundle of silver spoons.

"That's enough!" Hunter Alpha suddenly spoke. "It's rude to snoop around."

You Huo ignored him.

"Get the cutlery out too, please."

You Huo glanced at his expression before handing him the items from the cabinet. The hunter then secured his keys back on his belt, pulled out a round platter, and carefully arranged each glass on it.

"I've noticed something," You Huo said.

Hunter Alpha paused, his pale face facing You Huo. "What?"

"You're extremely careful with the glasses."

Hunter Alpha fell silent for a while, feeling defensive. "You're mistaken. Dining is a sacred act, and I treat each piece of tableware with reverence."

You Huo gave a noncommittal "okay", but Hunter Alpha still eyed him suspiciously.

"Actually, I just made all that up."

In the living room, Yu Wen was fretting over his cousin, worried that the fearless guy might destroy all the tableware in the

kitchen, when he heard Hunter Alpha's angry shout.

"Get out!"

You Huo walked out with empty hands and a blank expression.

"What happened?" Everyone asked in unison.

"Where are the glasses?" Yu Wen waved his hands frantically. "Weren't you supposed to help him bring them out? Why's he kicked you out?"

Instead of reuniting with the group, You Huo stood by the table with his hands in his pockets. "He changed his mind. Said he could manage on his own."

This made everyone exchange uneasy glances, worried that angering Hunter Alpha could spell trouble. After all, he was the exam problem itself! What might he do next? What if he had the power to condemn someone to death by speech alone?

While the group was overcome with nerves, Hunter Alpha returned with a large tray filled with glasses and cutlery. He shoed You Huo away and began setting the table with precision. You Huo watched as if it was all a fascinating performance. Meanwhile, Yu Wen was wrought with anxiety. He gestured frantically to You Huo, mouthing, *Come back! Get back here! Why are you just standing there?*

You Huo ignored him. He just kept his lazy gaze lowered on Hunter Alpha.

"Get lost!" The hunter roared, forgetting his manners as host. Then he turned to the rest of the group, grinning. "Why are you all standing around? Take your seats. Breakfast's ready."

He snatched a piece of raw meat from the glass bowl. Everyone watched in horror as he opened his cavernous mouth and swallowed it whole—bones, gristle, and all crunching audibly as he chewed—just as he had described earlier. It caused the two elderly ladies to faint, sending a new wave of panic through the room.

He licked his lips and said softly, “Ah, my apologies.” He pointed accusingly at You Huo. “This reckless guest made me upset. And whenever I get agitated, my hunger becomes insatiable.”

His eyes scanned the remaining meat pieces in the bowl. “Oh dear, it seems in my lapse I’ve eaten one of the portions. There are only eleven now.”

Everyone stared at him, frozen. Hunter Alpha, unaffected, picked up the last glass from his tray and smiled. “I’m sorry, but it looks like... one more person must die?”

Everyone paled, the blood rushing away from their faces, but a calm voice pierced the tense silence.

“That’s against the rules, isn’t it?”

It was You Huo. Hunter Alpha awkwardly tried to turn his head towards the young man, but his grotesque form meant that his body contorted into a strange pose.

“You again!” he growled, his brow furrowing as he teetered on the brink of losing his temper. Next thing he knew, You Huo landed a kick on him. His world spun, and his pale face hit the floor with a loud thump, along with the wine glass in his hand. As it shattered, the hunter stared at the shards for two dazed

seconds. His eyes then widened in horror.

Everyone froze in the spot, gaping in shock. Then the dreadful rooster crowed again! Two new lines of text appeared on the answer wall that had been dormant for four hours:

Warning: Exam requirements violated. Invigilators notified.

Invigilators: 001, 154, 922.

Yu Wen stared at the answer wall, his mind blank. He might have felt a twinge of pity for those invigilators.

In the cottage deep in the woods, 922 burst into Qin Jiu's office with a notice in hand. "Boss..."

Qin Jiu furrowed his brow. His first instinct was to look at the clock.

"Don't bother." Invigilator 154's face was blank. "He's only been back for an hour."

Qin Jiu let out a short laugh, leaving the other two invigilators unsure whether he was amused or irritated. "What's this about now? Tried to answer the question or what?"

Invigilator 154 shook his head. "No, a bit more serious than that. He killed the exam problem."

"Killed what?"

Invigilator 154's expression was blank. "You heard me. The exam problem is dead."

Qin Jiu fell silent and then walked out.

Invigilator 922 looked utterly bewildered. "Can the bloody 'exam problem' die? How the hell did that happen?"

The rooster on the door twisted its neck to crow at the window again. The three invigilators arrived, expressions stony and dusted with snow, bringing the biting wind to a familiar scene with familiar faces. The poor examinees looked as dumb as 154 looked grim.

“We’ve received another warning,” he announced, holding up a slip of paper. “It concerns a certain examinee—”

“A certain examinee who appears fine and dandy but is quite the troublemaker,” Qin Jiu interjected mockingly as he removed his gloves.

Invigilator 154 shot him a look of disbelief.

“Something wrong?” Qin Jiu raised his eyebrows.

“Not at all.” Invigilator 154 wondered what kind of blind fool could see “fine and dandy” in You Huo. But since 001 was the one who had made the remark, he had no choice but to let it slide.

Meanwhile, You Huo leant against the wall, arms crossed, eyeing Qin Jiu coolly. Across the room, lit by the amber glow of the fire, Qin Jiu responded with a smile and a nod. His manner was gentlemanly, yet the mockery was evident.

Worried that a fight might break out between invigilator and examinee, 154 hurriedly interjected with a strained expression. “An examinee violated the rules and caused the core of the exam problem—”

“Hunter Alpha, that is,” 922 chimed in.

“—to die on the spot. This is a highly unusual situation—”

“Completely unprecedented, really.”

“—so we need to investigate this incident. We’d like you to explain what occurred here.”

“You, singular.”

Invigilator 154 briefly closed his eyes. His boss was antagonising the examinees and making enemies while his colleague clearly had some screws loose. He took a moment to compose himself, then opened his eyes and calmly tucked the paper away. “Where is Hunter Alpha?”

The group parted down the middle, revealing the long table and what looked like a pile of rags on the floor next to it. As the invigilators approached, they realised it was a long, black cotton coat and an ancient, mouldy cape lined with black bear fur, all reeking of sour decay. Lying face down under this pile was the incredibly unfortunate Hunter Alpha.

Out of professionalism, 922 reached down and rolled the rigid figure onto his back. Hunter Alpha had been notably pale in life, but in death, his skin had taken on a ghastly greenish-grey hue. His face was turned to one side, his eyes wide and bulging, frozen in an expression of disbelief. His mouth hung open in a rictus while his tongue and lips were a shocking crimson. Invigilator 922 stepped back with feigned solemnity before discreetly wiping his fingers on the back of 154’s coat when no one was looking.

Invigilator 154 fought back an eye-roll at his colleague’s juvenile behaviour. He crouched down to examine the body. Hunter Alpha had the base of a wine glass still clutched in his

meaty fingers while the rest of it lay scattered in shards across the floor. According to the violation notice, Hunter Alpha had issued a warning that anyone who damaged the tableware would face severe punishment. By smashing a glass himself, he turned what was supposed to be a standard proclamation of the exam guidelines into his own death sentence more quickly than any punishment he could have administered.

Although aware of this context, 154 dutifully asked You Huo, “Did you kick him?”

You Huo met his gaze coolly. “My legs fell asleep. I stumbled.”

Everyone stared at him in wonder. *Yeah, right, you stumbled.*

“Isn’t your excuse a bit weak?” Invigilator 154 said.

“Did I make the rule about not damaging the tableware?”

“Well, no...”

“Did one of you father this clumsy piece of shit?”

Invigilator 154 struggled to maintain his composure against You Huo’s cold, mocking tone. He looked around, hoping for support from someone with an even sharper tongue, but the only one nearby was 922. The big, bad 001 hadn’t even bothered to inspect the body.

Sensing 154’s hesitation, Yu Wen plucked up his courage. “Erm... Hunter Alpha dropped the glass himself. His death was kinda his own fault. Could you let my cousin off the hook?”

Beep-beep-beep. The system chimed with three violation warnings at once. It was the first time it had ever warned three invigilators simultaneously.

The unfamiliar sound left the other examinees puzzled. Yu Wen glanced around nervously. “What’s happening?”

“Don’t worry,” 922 said assuringly. “The exam system is just urging us to enforce the penalty.”

The air became heavy with tension.

“Then... could I take the punishment instead?”

Everyone turned to the voice. Yu Yao raised her slender hand like a student eager to get the teacher’s attention. Her trembling fingers hinted at her nerves, but her gaze stayed resolute.

Despite her bravery, the invigilators ignored her. The system beeped twice more, prompting the two junior invigilators to move towards You Huo. Others considered following, but their resolve faltered when 154 shot them a look, stopping anyone who thought of moving closer.

Invigilator 922 adopted a casual tone with You Huo and started rambling, especially since the other examinees couldn’t hear them. “Look, we don’t want any trouble, but I gotta be honest. When we got the violation notice, 154 nearly fell down the stairs, I dropped beef on my foot, and 001 was playing with the bird and almost twisted its head off. We don’t wanna punish you if it means torturing ourselves. And don’t give me that sneer—I know you’ve got issues with our boss.”

You Huo glanced at Qin Jiu, then quickly looked away as if the very sight hurt his eyes.

Invigilator 922 shook his head. “You’ve got balls, mate.”

You Huo looked unimpressed. The invigilator pressed on.

“The exam rules on the wall clearly state not to damage the

tableware. Sure, you didn't break the glass directly. If you had, you'd be the one dead on the floor. But if I were the system, I wouldn't let you off the hook either, just because you say the glass 'broke' and the exam problem just 'died'. An indirect cause is still a cause."

Invigilator 922 rubbed his neck under his hair where a red glow had appeared when the system had given its warning. Then he added, "This was the fairest outcome the system could come up with."

You Huo straightened up.

"What are you doing?" Invigilator 154 asked warily.

Invigilator 922 noted that You Huo stood at about 185 centimetres—a bit taller than 154 and about the same height as himself. Yet, when You Huo stood up straight and locked eyes with him, he seemed to loom over him, exuding an imposing presence that felt almost condescending.

You Huo's gaze drifted over them. "Did I say I refused to be punished?"

"Then why are you just standing there with your arms crossed?" Invigilator 922 asked.

You Huo's lips quirked. "I was being polite and waiting for you to finish yapping."

If the two invigilators had guns, You Huo would be full of holes.

You Huo turned to leave, but as he passed through the group, Old Yu grabbed him. "You're really going?"

You Huo frowned. He disliked physical contact, especially

without warning. However, he sensed his uncle's genuine concern and tolerated it for a moment before gently withdrawing his hand. "I'll be fine."

This would be his third time. How bad could it be? He'd been in time-out, cleaned up blood, and even seen bits of flesh and bone. What else could they throw at him? Besides, no matter how annoying the punishment was, even if he had to stare at 001 the entire time, it would only be for three hours. Summoning his last bit of patience, he waved at Old Yu and headed for the door. "It'll be over after a catnap."

"Not so fast, Mr Snort..."

The voice he knew so well stopped You Huo at the door. His hand on the handle, he turned a blank look to the left where the voice was coming from.

Qin Jiu was leaning on the back of the sofa while toying with a leather rope that looked like a whip. He drawled, "Where are you off to in such a rush?"

You Huo held his gaze for a moment before his lips twitched upward. "To hell. Care to join me?"

Qin Jiu barked out a short, deep laugh. "Flattering offer, but no need to go that far."

You Huo frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, right." Qin Jiu scanned the room. "Where's our dear Invigilator 154? Have you not told him about the punishment this time?"

You Huo cast a suspicious look at 154, who pulled out a slip of paper.

“According to the rules, any examinee who violates the regulations three times during the same exam will be placed under special supervision. Invigilators will oversee the exam on-site and monitor the examinee closely.” For some reason, the invigilator sounded like he was in pain. He glanced at You Huo before continuing. “Additionally, the examinee’s right to select exam subjects is revoked for one session.”

The room went deathly still. A beat passed before You Huo turned to Qin Jiu. “You’re kidding.”

Qin Jiu extended his hand as though to say “this way please”, an infuriating display of gentlemanly nonchalance.

“Not at all. There are still”—he fished out a phone from his coat pocket and glanced at it with mock seriousness—“thirty-six hours and twenty-four minutes left until the exam ends. That means we’ll be spending the next day and a half together. We’ve even brought our luggage. It’s right by the door if you want to take a look.”

You Huo opened the door to find two suitcases standing there, prim and proper. Thirty-six hours and twenty-four minutes... That wouldn’t be a mere catnap but a goddamn hibernation. And what was with the stupid suitcases?

“Oh, and I should remind you guys,” Qin Jiu said. “You have twenty-four minutes—soon to be twenty-three—until the second submission is due. As per the rules, anyone who has violated a rule cannot answer in the same round. To prevent our determined troublemaker from skirting the rules, I’ll have to be a bit uncivil...”

He formed a loop with the leather rope and slipped it over You Huo's left hand. Then he spun You Huo around by the shoulder and threaded his right hand through before giving a hard yank. The rope snapped into a secure knot, binding his wrists together. Qin Jiu said into his ear while maintaining a firm grip on his shoulders, "This is for that dirty bucket. Do you like it?"

You Huo liked it so much he could die.

The attic had a low ceiling supported by a single column in the centre like the handle of an umbrella. A four-poster bed was crammed into the small space. Its sheets, unwashed for what seemed like centuries, and tattered canopy emitted a foul, sour odour.

Qin Jiu held his gloves against his nose as he surveyed the room. Since he was even taller than You Huo, he had to stoop to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. "Let's see, where should I put you?" he muttered. "On the bed? I can tie the rope to the posts. It's thick enough, even if a bit short."

He shook the bedposts, testing their sturdiness. When he turned around, he was met with a glare from You Huo that said "I fucking dare you". Had it been Yu Wen or Old Yu at the end of that look, they would have turned tail and fled. Yet, Qin Jiu only chuckled, a deep sound muffled in his throat. "Fair enough, it is filthy, and the posts are too flimsy for you... Well, any preferences, since space is limited?"

You Huo remained silent, his expression icy, but Qin Jiu, un-

deterred, simply stared back and waited.

Finally, You Huo spoke in a tone full of irritation. “I prefer seeing you lie on that delightfully smelling bed with the rope around your neck and the other end in my hands. Then I can just pull, and all would be quiet. How about that?”

Qin Jiu narrowed his eyes. For an instant, You Huo thought he must have been displeased, but the man only let out a chuckle. “Sorry, but I haven’t got that kind of kink.”

You Huo glared at the annoying knob.

The knob still had some decency left and didn’t tie him to the hunter’s grimy bed. Instead, he had You Huo sit on the floor with his hands behind his back, secured to the column that supported the roof. Then he went around the examinee and opened the small window barely larger than a hand. The frigid air that rushed in helped clear the sour stench from the room.

“Are you cold?” Qin Jiu asked.

It was a pointless question that he disregarded. You Huo was in a T-shirt, and it was snowing outside. Obviously, he was freezing, but he preferred the chill to the foul smell. He asked with a frown, “Can I stand up?”

“No.”

You Huo glared at the invigilator as he walked back and sat on a small, round wooden table near the bed, facing him.

“Your legs are too long. Wouldn’t want you to have another stumble, would we? Sitting will be better for you.”

Yeah, better for me, sure. After being irked twice within minutes, You Huo turned his head to the right, choosing to ignore

the invigilator. Where a wall should have been, there was a large glass pane. From his spot, he could see half of the living room, where the other examinees stayed idle, twiddling their thumbs. Without his presence, they were sitting ducks.

Yu Wen stood before the answer wall, knife in hand. As his heart raced, he tried to put down every physics equation he could remember, optics-related or not, but after racking his brain for five minutes, he had run out of things to carve. If only he'd acquired more knowledge in school. Reality had finally hit him at age eighteen, and he felt a deep pang of regret.

"What else?" Yu Wen pleaded with those behind him. "Does anyone remember anything?"

Yu Yao looked embarrassed. "I was in the STEM stream in high school, but I switched to humanities in university and have been working for so many years... I wouldn't have remembered the equations on the wall if you hadn't started writing them."

"Please, just try to remember anything you can. It'll help!" Yu Wen looked at her with puppy dog eyes. Although he wasn't as striking as You Huo, he had always been popular at school, thanks to the genes from his mother's side.

Yu Yao's maternal instincts kicked in under his gaze. She said shyly, "I only remember the simplest ray diagrams. Don't make fun of me, okay?"

"Of course not! I'll chop up anyone who laughs, I swear."

Yu Yao flinched at the intensity of his oath. Carefully, she manoeuvred her pregnant belly forward and used the knife to

draw an arc along two refracting rays of light.

Yu Wen let out a soft “oh”. It was so simple... yet that hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“Who else?” he asked, scanning the group like a desperate salesman. The two elderly ladies likely knew nothing of physics. Inksleeves and Bamboo Man shamefully avoided his gaze. Baldie, still unconscious and soiled, was beyond help. There was also an old man with his twin granddaughters. He was hard of hearing and senile, and the girls looked like primary school students, too young to have been tortured by Physics. Maximilian, the foreigner, only knew two phrases—“Hello” and “Excuse me?”. Absolutely useless. And his father... the drunkard only knew alcohol. Yu Wen finally understood You Huo’s despair.

As 922 carried the suitcases into the cabin, he noticed Yu Wen zoning out in front of the furnace. “I suggest you step back from the fire, unless you’re keen on burning alive before answering the problem.”

Yu Wen was getting desperate. He thought he might as well turn into human charcoal—at least then he would die a braver, brighter death. He looked towards the attic. The aged glass had become too cloudy to make out much, and the lighting inside was dim. *What’s 001 doing to Huo up there? Is Huo watching from above as we struggle helplessly? Is he disappointed by my failure?*

“Five minutes left,” 922 called out, sending panic surging through the room.

In the dilapidated cabin, liveable space was scarce, and seat-

ing was even scarcer. The table was fully set with tableware, one of which supposedly marked death, so everyone was hesitant to take a seat. Invigilator 922 went around with the suitcases in tow but eventually squeezed onto the sofa next to his stony-faced colleague.

“The boss is in the attic,” 154 whispered, puzzled by 922’s decision.

“I know.”

“Then why’ve you brought the luggage here? You expect him to take them up himself?”

“With those two prickly characters up there, I’d rather stay here for now.”

How brave of you. Invigilator 154 rolled his eyes.

Invigilator 922 pouted. “What? Why don’t *you* go up?”

Invigilator 154 sat up straighter and fixed his gaze on the examinees. “I’m invigilating.”

“Since when did they need invigilating? The one in need of invigilation is upstairs.”

“The boss can handle him alone.”

An awkward silence ensued between the two invigilators until 922 blurted out, “Never have I seen in my three years as an invigilator... no, make that in all my years as both examinee and invigilator, I’ve never seen a student this lawless and brazen.”

Invigilator 922 thought his colleague would agree, but the latter replied, “You have.”

“Huh? Who? When?”

Invigilator 154 tilted his chin towards the attic.

It took a moment for the invigilator to catch on. *Oh, of course!* How could he have forgotten? The last time someone was this difficult, he became 001. Just how rebellious had Qin Jiu been? Legend had it that he'd nearly brought the system to its knees.

"Speaking of which, I've always wanted to ask him about his legendary past," said 922. "After all, I've only ever seen his awesome side twice."

"Don't joke about that," 154 warned warily. "You'd better forget it."

"Why not? Can't I even ask? You always cut me off whenever I bring up his past."

"You'd be in serious trouble if I didn't," 154 replied grimly. "He doesn't remember his own past. There was an accident with the exam system once that ended up with him losing some memories."

Invigilator 922's jaw dropped. "That can happen!? How come I never knew?"

"Because all you ever think about is food," 154 said flatly.

While 922 sat in stunned silence, the other continued. "Haven't you noticed that he never mentions his past? I made a foolish mistake when I first became an invigilator... Let's just say I don't want to go through that again, and you definitely wouldn't want to either. So please, show some self-respect and drop it."

The only oil lamp in the attic was unlit. The small space was faintly illuminated by the light filtering through the trapdoor

and the foggy glass, which gave everything there a fuzzy glow. The snowstorm raged on outside, with the wind howling and battering against the window.

Qin Jiu observed You Huo while the latter kept his gaze on the living room, appearing concerned, resigned, but also calm. His eyes had a subtle, translucent shine, and his ear stud flickered occasionally in the light.

Qin Jiu's deep, lazy voice broke the silence. "Have we met before?"

You Huo didn't look at him immediately, but when he did, his light brown eyes were clear and cold as a winter night. "No. If we had, I'm afraid only one of us would've lived to tell the tale."

His tone was icy and laced with mockery, but Qin Jiu was unfazed. "Really?" He pursed his lips, pondering the remark before nodding. "That's a pity, but it does seem likely."

Just then, the stairs leading to the attic creaked, and 154 called out, "Sir, it's almost time."

Invigilator 922's quieter voice followed behind 154's. "Everything okay up there? Why am I so nervous?"

"Shut up," 154 hissed back before poking his head into the attic. "Are you coming down? It's about time for the second deadline."

"How are they doing?" Qin Jiu asked. "I saw a kid down there writing non-stop."

Invigilator 922 was still on the staircase, but his voice drifted in. "It's useless. I didn't look closely, but from what I could see, if

that mess of an answer scores any points, I'll celebrate by cutting my head off."

The old clock on top of the cupboard ticked loudly, each movement of the second hand resounding ominously. Normally, it wouldn't have drawn any attention, but now, every tick sounded like a countdown for a bomb. After a few more ticks, the rooster began to crow. The three invigilators descended the stairs amid the panic-inducing noise. They even waited for the ninth crow before releasing You Huo to ensure he wouldn't break any rules.

The examinees huddled together in the corner farthest from the door, like a huddle of hatchlings in a cage, as if grouping together could somehow prevent them from being expelled from the exam site for failing. Almost every examinee had their eyes closed, bracing for the moment of judgement.

One minute passed.

Invigilator 922 broke the silence. "Did the system crash? Are there too many words for it to process?"

No sooner had he spoken than the answer wall responded. Yu Wen peeked out from between his fingers. In the sea of messy scratches, he saw two things circled in crimson: the "refractive index" written by him and the simple ray diagram added by Yu Yao. Next to the circles, two numbers appeared: $+1$, $+2$.

Before anyone could react, the wall updated again. All content that had not earned points vanished and were replaced with lines of red text:

Bonus points: 1 person out of 13 died, fulfilling

problem requirements, +6.

Additional points: All examinees survived, +2.

Total score: 11 points.

The cabin was silent for a long time. Then Yu Wen burst out screaming, “Damn! Eleven points! I thought we were goners for sure, but we got eleven points! Huo! Did you see that—I got a point!”

Amid Yu Wen’s deafening uproar, 922 looked at 154 in shock. “The system must be malfunctioning! They got bonus points for killing the exam problem?”

Seeing his colleague was just as stunned, 922 turned to You Huo, who had spent the last twenty minutes tied up. The big shot had managed to score an impressive eight points with a single kick.

You Huo met 922’s incredulous gaze with a cool look and extended his hand. “You can give me your head now.”

Invigilator 922 quickly hid behind 154.

After doling out those points, the system seemed to have a breakdown. It did nothing for an eternity before finally producing another line:

Neatness, -2.

The score dropped from 11 to 9, and Yu Wen, who had feverishly scribbled everything, had his points go from +1 to -1. Just wonderful...

Just as the examinees and invigilators were grappling with the turn of events, the exam problem on the wall updated again:

Question: Only 12 guests and 12 sets of table-

ware remain in the hunter's cabin, one for each guest. Now, everyone can have one without conflict. However, the secret of the tableware remains hidden beneath the light. The one who sits before the conspiracy will be cursed. Will that be you?

Requirement: Identify the special set of tableware (without damaging any pieces).

Topic: Optics.

The examinees stared at the new information in shock. Suddenly, a shrill scratching noise cut through the silence like razor-sharp fingernails on wood.

“W-who was that?”

Everyone's hair stood on end. They stayed huddled together, only brave enough to crane their necks to search for the source of the sound. No one wanted to be alone in what felt like a scene straight out of a horror movie.

“B-behind, me!” A voice sobbed, “It's behind me! Help!”

It was Baldie. Unlike the others, he hadn't joined the group by the answer wall. He had been sitting alone, paralysed in his seat at the long table. He'd fainted at the intimidation of the hunter, but the scratching brought him back. Now, tears and snot ran down his face as he cried out in panic, “It's behind me, help me! P-please, h-help me!”

“But there's no one behind you...” Yu Yao whispered.

“Yeah, there's nothing there,” another added.

This only made Baldie cry harder. The others, too frightened to approach, waved their hands frantically. “Don't just sit there!

Come over here, hurry!”

“I can’t! This chair... I can’t move... it’s holding me down!” Baldie babbled incoherently.

“You mean, you can’t leave the chair once you’ve sat down?”

“That’s right, I’m stuck... It wants me to die, it wants to kill me!” Baldie sobbed.

Immediately, everyone else stepped back from the table. You Huo, however, moved towards it.

“Huo?” Yu Wen wanted to stop You Huo from taking any unnecessary risks, but after reflecting on his cousin’s impressive actions and his own dismal score of negative one, he decided to back You Huo up instead.

Together, they walked behind Baldie and discovered the source of the noise. Sawdust floated down from the back of Baldie’s chair as if someone were carving into the wood, exposing the lighter wood beneath.

“It’s writing something!” Yu Wen exclaimed.

You Huo nodded. More patient with “ghosts” than people, he crossed his arms and waited for it to finish. The rest of the group eventually dashed over to cluster behind him.

“Twelve!” Inksleeves shouted. “It’s writing twelve!”

Then the chair beside Baldie started emitting the same scratching sound. You Huo took two steps in that direction, and the herd of examinees rushed to follow. He halted, and the clump of people behind him abruptly crashed into a comical pile. You Huo wondered whether they were taking a physics exam or playing Red Light, Green Light instead.

The eerie scratching continued for five minutes. When it finally ceased, each chair around the table bore a number from one to twelve. The hint was clear: identify the cursed set of tableware and write its number on the answer wall.

“My answer and Yu Yao’s were both about refraction, and they scored points,” Yu Wen pondered aloud. “Does that mean we need to use refraction to find the right set of tableware?”

“Probably,” came the chaotic chorus of agreement. “But what’s refraction?”

Yu Wen froze. His expression of utter helplessness was so comical that Yu Yao burst out laughing. It was the first time she had shown any emotion other than sorrow since the exam began, and even she was surprised by her own reaction. After collecting herself, she rejoined the group and began explaining refraction to the elderly.

Yu Wen snapped out of his daze and looked up, noticing You Huo was staring off into the distance. Yu Wen edged closer to him and called his name. Following You Huo’s gaze, he saw the group of elderlies, the battered sofa, and the ever-watchful invigilators seated there.

“What are you looking at the invigilators for?” he whispered.

You Huo’s gaze snapped back to him, peering down with lofty disdain.

Yu Wen quickly shrank back. “Never mind, keep looking if you want. I won’t ask again.”

Though they had survived two submissions and gained six more hours to solve the exam question, not a single person felt

relief. Everyone inspected the tableware as if they were artefacts in a museum.

“Can we even touch these plates?” Inksleeves muttered. “Does it count as choosing a seat if I just pick one up for a closer look?”

“Don’t risk it, death is”—Old Yu started to warn, but before he could finish, You Huo casually picked up a wine glass—“impossible!”

Inksleeves rolled his eyes dramatically. The others watched You Huo with bated breath. When they saw him standing unharmed and not forced into a chair, they relaxed and began to inspect the tableware themselves.

“How can you be so reckless?” Old Yu hurried over to his nephew with concern. “What if merely touching the glass counts as making a choice?!”

You Huo picked up another glass. “No, it doesn’t. I already touched one in the kitchen.”

And is that something to be proud of? Old Yu was irritated beyond words by his nephew but couldn’t bring himself to reprimand him. He could only shoot You Huo furtive glares behind his back.

“Dad, move,” Yu Wen said as he reached past his old man to pick up a silver spoon. After finding nothing unusual, he picked up a silver fork. At first glance, everything seemed perfectly ordinary. The plates were plain white porcelain, and the silverware was simple with no embellishments, but when he picked up a gravy boat, he noticed that his cousin wasn’t examining anything else and couldn’t help but ask. “Why are you only looking

at the glasses?”

“No need to check the others,” You Huo replied as he set down the third glass he had investigated and stepped away from the table.

“Huh?” Yu Wen blinked.

While Yu Wen tried to understand what his cousin meant, Inksleeves finished examining most of the tableware and started to grumble. “There’s nothing special about these cheap trinkets. What secrets could they possibly hold?!”

Another person sighed in agreement. “The problems just keep getting stranger. How are we supposed to find the secret without any hints?”

You Huo crouched beside Hunter Alpha’s body to inspect one of the glass shards. Unlike the others, he had picked up quite a few hints. Earlier in the kitchen, he’d noticed how carefully Hunter Alpha handled the wine glasses. After one had been broken, the wall specified that only twelve complete sets of tableware remained. It was clear: the wine glasses were the only relevant items in the set. The secret had to be hidden within them.

After looking blankly at the answer wall, Yu Wen suddenly jumped up, slapping his thigh in realisation. “Oh—Huo, I get it! Everything else is irrelevant! Only the glasses count as ‘tableware’ in this problem!”

Everyone who was holding a plate, fork, or spoon froze. Yu Wen gestured excitedly at them. “Stop examining those and check the glasses!”

He rushed over and plopped down before You Huo, waiting to be praised. "Aren't I smart!"

You Huo responded with a noncommittal hum.

Unfortunately, the excitement was short-lived. Despite everyone's efforts—breathing on the glasses, warming them up, shaking them, flipping them over, and examining them from every other angle—they found nothing unusual.

Over on the sofa, 922 cracked his knuckles one by one. "I'm a bit nervous... and a bit hungry. Is invigilating always this stressful?"

"Deal with it," said 154. "There's still 36 hours left."

Invigilator 922's face fell.

Qin Jiu, head propped up on one hand, let his gaze drift past the table to a corner of the room. You Huo crouched there with his back turned, examining shards of broken glass. His posture formed a visually pleasing arc while his shirt outlined his shoulders and spine. After some time, Qin Jiu suddenly asked, "Have either of you seen him before?"

Invigilator 154 looked puzzled. "Who?"

Invigilator 922 looked equally puzzled. "Huh?"

Their reactions said it all, so Qin Jiu didn't press further. "Never mind," he said lazily. "If you're hungry, go make some food in the kitchen."

The two junior invigilators looked to the kitchen with a deadpan expression. "We're not hungry."

However, a few seconds later, 922 stood up and rubbed his hands. "Erm... I'm going to check out the kitchen."

Invigilator 154 scoffed. “You think you can handle that disgusting place?”

“I’m just gonna look.”

After 922 left, 154 watched the examinees until he suddenly understood Qin Jiu’s question. He glanced back and forth between You Huo and Qin Jiu. He and Qin Jiu sat in silence for about a minute before the latter broke it.

“Do I have something on my face? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Invigilator 154 clammed up.

Qin Jiu shot him a glance. “Say it.”

Invigilator 154 chose his words carefully. “I was thinking... if that troublemaker had seen us before, he would’ve recognised us.”

Qin Jiu’s gaze shifted back to You Huo. After a moment, he hummed in agreement with 154. If they had met before, You Huo’s reaction would have been different. It was highly unlikely there was another one like him who also lost some memories. That would have been too much of a coincidence.

After a brief exploration of the kitchen, 922 decided against staying. He returned to the sofa and opened up one of the suitcases on the floor. He pulled out a grilling rack and a box of perfectly sliced beef, but as soon as he opened the container, Yu Wen let out a scream, “No, don’t do that!”

The three invigilators turned towards the table to see You Huo tap the base of the broken wine glass against the edge of the table. With a crack, it broke into more pieces.

Invigilator 922's hands shook, spilling the beef onto his trousers. Holding the half-empty box, he asked 154, "Can we convert him into an invigilator after four violations? I don't want to invigilate him anymore."

Invigilator 154 remained silent. *Yeah, get in line, mate.*

The examinees were also shocked by You Huo's actions. Old Yu, flustered and frightened, hopped around like a startled rabbit. "Y-you! How could you...?! Didn't the rule mention not to damage the tableware? You... Agh!"

Meanwhile, You Huo continued to examine the bottom of the glass, not bothering to look up. "It's fine."

Invigilator 922 was completely speechless. *Fine?! The guy was treating violations like he was at an all-you-can-eat buffet! How was it "fine"?*

The room fell silent for several seconds. Almost everyone believed You Huo had broken another rule, so they anxiously peered at the answer wall, bracing for the fourth rule-violation warning. No one wanted to know what kind of punishment awaited a four-time offender, especially with Baldie's breakdown still fresh on their minds.

For a moment, the answer wall flashed red before returning to its blank state. It flickered between red and plain several times, yet no new message appeared. The bizarre sight dumbfounded 154.

"Feels like the system is having a panic attack," 922 taunted.

The silence was finally broken by the rule breaker himself, who handed the bottom of the glass to Yu Wen. "Check if

there's anything inside. My eyes don't feel well."

Yu Wen was on his knees, overcome with panic. "Huo, we're not supposed to damage the tableware."

You Huo turned away from the fire, eyes shut, and said in an icy voice, "Did you see me damage the tableware?"

Yu Wen held up the broken glass, seriously wondering if he'd become blind.

"The problem said there are now twelve sets," You Huo said. "Do you know how to count to twelve?"

Stunned, Yu Wen only stared at him.

"I can teach you if you want."

Then it clicked for everyone. But of course! "Only 12 guests and 12 sets of tableware remain in the hunter's cabin." All twelve sets were neatly placed and accounted for on the table; of course this already broken glass didn't count. Whether by design or not, the glass that Hunter Alpha broke had been excluded, and further damage wouldn't make a difference.

"Oh my goodness! You're my hero!" Yu Wen was revived and held the glass base up to the light. Old Yu was about to reprimand him, but Yu Wen exclaimed, "Wait, I think there's something here!"

The base of the wine glass was slightly concave and was attached to an elongated stem on top. However, You Huo had chipped the cylindrical stem, leaving it jagged and uneven. Under the dim light of flickering oil lamps and the furnace, Yu Wen contorted himself as if to play Twister. "From this angle! Look right here! There's definitely something inside!"

The others flocked to him, craning their necks to catch a glimpse, but struggled to find the right angle and distance.

“What is it? Where?”

Inksleeves tried briefly, then gave up. “What did you see? Can’t you just tell us?”

“If I could see it clearly, would I be twisting my body like this?” Yu Wen snapped. He was on the verge of another argument with Inksleeves when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Let me take a look.” You Huo returned to the group after giving his eyes some rest. He took the glass from Yu Wen.

“Look at it like this, from here.” Yu Wen directed, turning the glass and pointing to where the stem joined the circular base. “Isn’t there something there? I think it’s an embedded picture, but it’s super blurry. I can’t tell if it’s an image or text.”

You Huo nodded, then tapped the glass against the table again. With a sharp crack, the thin stem cleanly broke off from the base as if it were designed to do so.

“There it is!” Yu Wen caught the small object that floated down from the break. He cradled it in his palms reverently like an offering to a god.

Everyone stared at the tiny paper disc in Yu Wen’s hands. It was no bigger than a pea, presumably hidden beneath the glass stem before You Huo broke it. The back was a blank, mirrored surface, and the front bore the tiny words: *Simon le Zélote*.

Maximilian read the words softly.

The two elderly ladies frowned, deepening the wrinkles on their faces. “Huh?”

An awkward silence followed. Maximilian, frustrated by his inability to explain in a way they could understand, felt helpless.

“The Last Supper,” someone whispered.

“Watch it! You’re gonna jinx us!” Inksleeves snapped.

The utterance had come from Bamboo Man, who always looked utterly drained, as if even speaking took all his effort. Although he did his fair share of work, his presence was almost depressingly non-existent. It took everyone a moment to recall his name—Zhou Jin. For the first time, all eyes turned to him, and everyone waited for him to continue.



Chapter 4

Zhou Jin wearily rolled his eyes at Inksleeves. “I’m talking about the painting *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci.”

Inksleeves opened his mouth again, but Zhou Jin quickly shifted his gaze to You Huo. He was afraid Inksleeves would ask something inane like, “Who’s Leonardo da Vinci?” Zhou Jin pressed on, “Simon le Zélote, or Simon the Zealot, was one of the twelve disciples in the painting.”

“You can name all twelve from memory?” Yu Wen exclaimed with astonished awe.

Zhou Jin broke out in a coughing fit, then said quietly, “I study art, so I happen to know a bit about it.”

“Meal” and “twelve”—the keywords of the painting aligned perfectly with their current situation. Though the older folks didn’t quite grasp the symbolism of *The Last Supper*, the twin girls shouted out a familiar name, “Judas!”

“That’s right! Judas!” Yu Yao and Yu Wen, though not sib-

lings, spoke in sync.

The Last Supper, the Twelve Disciples, and the infamous traitor Judas. The answer seemed just within reach, and the group buzzed with excitement.

“No, wait! It’s not the name!” Someone shouted as the knife was raised to write the answer.

Since each set of tableware had a corresponding number carved into the chairs, the answer on the wall wouldn’t be “Judas” but rather the number of the wine glass that represented Judas’s identity.

The impatient Inksleeves rushed to the table and picked up a wine glass to inspect it closely. He’d seen the paper slip out between the stem and the base of the broken glass, but no matter how much he scrutinised the glass he was holding, he couldn’t make out the contents of the slip. He pressed his eye practically against the glass. “Why can’t I see anything?”

No one else could read it either. If the hidden names had been easily visible, they wouldn’t still be struggling. Everyone knew where the names were concealed, but no one could see them. Unlike the glass on the floor, these glasses couldn’t be smashed like You Huo had done.

Suddenly, Yu Wen smacked his forehead. “I got it!”

“What is it?”

“Refraction!” Yu Wen said. “That’s what Yu Yao and I scored in the last submission. We need to apply it here. The names are hidden because... because... the refraction is off. Um... I can’t quite explain it, but I’ve solved a problem like this before.”

No one said anything, as his rambling sent everyone into a pit of despair. His clumsy hand gestures didn't inspire any confidence. Still, they clung to a thread of hope.

"So, how can we see it?"

Yu Wen's face flushed with embarrassment. "I... dropped physics after my first year of high school. That problem, I saw at least two or three years ago. I've... forgotten."

The rest of the group's faces screamed, "We goddamn knew it!"

You Huo was watching his flailing cousin impassively, debating whether to let him keep digging himself into a hole, when he caught sight of the three invigilators out of the corner of his eye. Invigilator 922 had dragged over a charcoal brazier, set up an iron grill, and carefully laid out the remaining pieces of beef. Invigilator 154 wore his usual poker face, casting furtive glances at 922. You Huo couldn't tell if he was hungry or annoyed by the latter's foolishness. As for 001, simply sitting still in his seat was an outright display of provocation and mockery.

You Huo averted his gaze, snatched Hunter Alpha's keys from his dead body, and headed into the kitchen. The slips of paper with the name were attached to the base of the wine glass and refracted through a curvature. It couldn't be read from a normal angle, but what if it were refracted again? He rummaged through the kitchen but found no water. Hunter Alpha had said he would prepare wine, yet the glasses brought out were empty. The only liquid in the entire kitchen was the trail of drying blood snaking across the floor. The fact that it was so hard to

find any liquid made it clear to You Huo that this was the key to the answer.

You Huo walked out of the kitchen with the keys and surveyed the cabin. His gaze finally settled on the adjacent room, its rooster-adorned door still unopened. Without hesitation, he picked out the unused key and slid it into the lock. *Click*. The door swung open. A cloud of dust hit him in the face. He quickly pinched his nose and waved a hand to clear the air. The room was small and narrow, like a broom closet without the brooms. It contained only a single bottle of rum resting at an angle on the single wooden rack. You Huo walked out with the bottle. “Found it.”

The others crowded around him.

Yu Wen slapped himself on the thigh. “Right, just add water! Now I remember!”

After You Huo uncorked the bottle, the sharp, heavy smell of cheap alcohol filled the room. This was the most prized item in the hunter’s feast, but he never had the chance to enjoy it. You Huo poured some of the amber liquid into the glass for Chair 1. Everyone held their breath, craning their necks to peer inside.

“I see it! I really see it!” Old Yu, ever the drunkard, shouted excitedly.

A name appeared inside the glass: *Mattieu*.

Zhou Jin was excited too. “That’s Matthew! That’s it, *The Last Supper*. Quick, let’s find Judas!”

One by one, the twelve glasses were filled with the rum, revealing each disciple’s name in turn: *Barthélemy, Jean, Thomas,*

Philippe...

When they reached the eleventh glass, Baldie in Chair 12 started trembling. He was aware that there were only two names left: Judas and Jesus, the most crucial figures in the painting. If Jesus's name appeared in the eleventh glass, Judas would be in the twelfth, marking him as the cursed guest. He might be the next to die. He felt so nervous he could vomit. He hadn't even been this scared in the time-out room, surrounded by scraps of flesh and bone. Those, at least, weren't his flesh and bone, but now, it was his life that was in danger.

Suddenly, the group exploded into cheers.

"Judas!" Zhou Jin shouted over the noise. "It's Judas!"

Baldie froze for a second before slumping onto the table. *It was Glass 11! Thank God! Judas was Number 11! It wasn't me! There's no karma...*

The knife, the answering tool, was thrust into Zhou Jin's hands. He flashed his first smile since entering the cabin. "Shall I do the honours? Alright, I've got this..."

Zhou Jin took his stance before the answer wall, gripping the knife's handle as he inhaled deeply. Then he carved the numeral "1". Just as he was about to carve the second "1", someone rushed up behind him and grabbed him by the wrist.

"No, wait. We were almost misled."

Zhou Jin turned in shock to find You Huo standing beside him.

"It's not 11. It's 12."

After the scene in *The Last Supper*, Jesus was the one who

ended up on the cross; the guest sitting in Chair 12 was the cursed one. Judas was only the traitor.

You Huo carefully carved “2” into the wall. As he lowered the knife, the radio, silent until now, buzzed to life.

“Correct answer detected. Examinees have submitted ahead of schedule, successfully concluding this session. Final penalties and rewards to be tallied shortly.”

They had turned in the exam 35 hours, 22 minutes, and 11 seconds ahead of schedule. That was impressive.

New information appeared across the answer wall.

This session consisted of four questions:

1. Unknown (5 pts)
2. Unknown (5 pts)
3. Number of guests reduced from 13 to 12 (6 pts)
4. Cursed set of tableware found (8 pts)

Under normal circumstances, the maximum score is 24 points in this session, but special circumstances allow additional points to be awarded and/or deducted.

Hushed murmurs rippled through the group.

“There were two unknown questions?”

“Yeah, our first points were for the third problem. Looks like we missed the first two.”

“No, the first two points we got were for the word ‘solution.’”

“Based on the order, those two points were part of one of the unknown questions.”

“But Yu Yao and my points seem to be from the unknown

questions too.”

“So the first two were only leading up to the main problem?”

“Could Hunter Alpha have triggered them?”

“Maybe, who knows. Honestly, I don’t want to know.”

Hunter Alpha’s accidental death meant the first two problems were skipped, leaving them forever unknown. The first two problems may have been worth 10 points, almost half the maximum score, but no one felt regret. If You Huo hadn’t been in their group, one of the participants would have died in the first round, and who knows how many more afterwards? By the end of 48 hours, five or six people might have died, so none of them cared about missing a few questions. They just wanted to pass by answering the fewest and easiest questions. Staying alive was enough.

Meanwhile, the answer wall continued calculating points:

Solution: 2 pts.

Refraction: 3 pts.

Question Three: 6 pts.

Additional Points: 2 pts.

Neatness: -2 pts.

Question Four: 8 pts.

Total: 19 pts, 11 pts above average.

Total Time Elapsed: 12 hrs 37 mins 49 secs—35
hrs, 22 mins, and 11 secs faster than average.

Yu Wen gave a low whistle and turned to You Huo. “So the average time is 48 hours?”

“That’s considered normal.” Invigilator 154 could barely con-

tain himself. *Can't you guys keep your egos in check?*

But then he realised, out of the twelve hours, You Huo had slept for three and spent another three cleaning up... If not for the penalties, this group—or rather, this particular person—would have completed the exam in less than six hours. *What in the world...?*

The answer wall displayed a reward for the incomprehensible being that was You Huo.

Reward: Examinee You Huo will receive two chances at the random draw.

“A draw?” You Huo frowned. He couldn’t quite grasp what the system wanted because the answer wall became inactive after displaying a message saying, “Keep up the good work.”

Ding-dong! It sounded like someone received a text message.

You Huo sensed a presence behind him. A hand brushed against his cheek as long, bony fingers reached around, casually dangling a deck of playing cards in front of his eyes with a teasing shake.

You Huo’s expression immediately went flat. “You again...”

“You knew it was me just from my fingers?”

Invigilator 001’s nonchalant drawl grated on You Huo’s nerves so much he wanted to smack the man.

“Sneak attacks won’t work on me.” He laughed and stepped back, evading You Huo’s hand. He then opened the box and pulled out the cards. “Time to draw your card.”

The others gathered around them, warily standing in a loose circle at a distance of two metres from 001. His smiles never

quite conveyed friendliness or warmth, so the group didn't come any closer, set on only craning their necks to see.

Qin Jiu held a deck that looked identical from the back but had different words on the front. Some were quite appealing:

Total score +15 (Individual)

Total score +10 (Group)

Exempt from exam (One session, one individual,
scored by average)

And others rather bizarre:

A "cheat sheet"

Last-minute cramming

The names were self-explanatory, but how useful they would be in the exam was another story. Aside from the obvious rewards, the deck was interspersed with many baffling inclusions. You Huo saw more than a dozen with phrases like:

Excellent student—keep it up

Model student—keep working hard

Top scorer—stay on track

You Huo doubted these generic motivational awards would help in this hellish place. They sounded more like *Thank you, come again!*

"What's the black card? A penalty?" He pointed to a few of the more distinctive cards that were ominously black without any text.

Qin Jiu drew one out and showed You Huo both sides. "Not really," he said, dragging out the vowels. "But they are... special. They're not standard rewards. One black card represents an ex-

amination reform, effective immediately.”

The younger examinees’ faces turned pale, especially Yu Wen, who looked like he might faint. “That shit exists here too?”

The recent graduate had been thoroughly traumatised by exam reforms throughout high school. Whenever the scope of the university entrance exam changed, their study focus would have to realign. One day, the final score would be based on three general and two specialised subjects. The next day, some comprehensive subjects were graded by levels instead of points. He never imagined he would face reforms even after the real-life exam.

While everyone looked uneasy, Qin Jiu tipped the box again and pulled out the last card. “Almost forgot this one. This should be your favourite.”

Graduation (individual)

The room fell silent before erupting into a buzzing furore.

“Graduation... Does that mean what I think it means?” Zhou Jin asked. Because of his illness, he couldn’t afford excessive excitement, making him the sole coherent voice among the flustered examinees. “Are you saying... no exam at all?”

Qin Jiu hadn’t even replied when 922 chimed in. For some reason, he enjoyed explaining this particular card.

“It looks like the ‘Exempt from exam’ card, right? But the exemption only allows you to skip one session with your score calculated from the average points of all other examinees on that exam. It’s a safe and standard reward.” Invigilator 922 continued. “The ‘Graduation’ card’s different. That’s the real deal. Only one

card per deck. If you get it, you'll skip all the remaining exams. You can have a feast, take a nice nap... and when you wake up, you'll be home."

Home? Nearly every examinee in the room froze. Returning home was the last thing they wanted to think about in the past 12 hours. Mere survival relied on their teammates and sheer luck—who would be so presumptuous as to hope to go home? Yet now, this graduation card sparked that longing in everyone.

Old Yu bravely asked, "If we don't get this card, how long will it take us to get back?"

Invigilator 922 gathered his thoughts. "It depends on the current format. Complete the required subjects and meet the score threshold—satisfy those two conditions, and you're free to go."

Before Old Yu could inquire further, Qin Jiu had returned the card to the deck and shuffled it a few times. Then he fanned the cards out, backs facing up, towards You Huo. "Come on, two chances, hurry up."

But You Huo didn't move. He turned to the others. "Whoever has good luck, pull it for me."

Immediately, the radio hissed to life. "*Warning: The right to the random draw is not transferable.*"

You Huo glared at Qin Jiu.

"It was the system's warning, so why are you looking at me?" Qin Jiu lazily lifted his chin. "Good looks don't grant extra privileges. Hurry up."

You Huo's expression was as cold as ice. He stared at Qin Jiu, looking like he could curse up a storm, before finally yanking

out a card. The group waited with bated breath for him to flip the card over.

Top scorer—stay on track

Note: This is a confirmation of the examinee's skill.

We hope you continue to do well.

You Huo's expression remained flat. *What rotten luck, drawing this meaningless rubbish.*

The radio chimed in with ill-timed beeps. "*One chance used.*"

Qin Jiu prodded his cheek with his tongue, curving up a corner of his mouth. "Not bad, go again."

You Huo gave up hoping for good luck and drew another card. Yu Wen clasped his hands together, praying to any deity that his cousin would get a good card. The prayer might have worked a little. At least it wasn't another encouragement card.

Assistance from an invigilator

Note: Your outstanding performance has earned the favour of an invigilator.

You may make one additional request during the exam, which the invigilator is obligated to fulfil.

This card is effective until the end of your next session.

You Huo closed his eyes and felt mocked by every word on the card. He managed to stay calm enough to ask, "Are the invigilators the same across each session?"

"Of course not," Qin Jiu said. "The invigilators are randomly reassigned each time."

The radio crackled to life.

“Two chances used. Random draw concluded. Congratulations.”

As the voice fell silent, new text appeared on the answer wall:

Punishment: One guest has taken the cursed seat. He has evaded death and will become the new Hunter Alpha.

Everyone stared at the last few words, barely comprehending their meaning. Or rather, they were too afraid to understand.

“What does it mean to become the new Hunter Alpha?” someone murmured.

Suddenly, shrill screams pierced the room, and everyone stiffly turned to look.

Baldie bolted upright in Chair 12, eyes bulging in horror as he stared at his hands. His flesh was rapidly draining to a sickly blue-grey, and his lips turned blood-red, cracking wide at the corners against his ghastly pale skin. Strange spots also emerged near his hairline and fingertips. He slowly looked up, frozen for a long moment, before twisting his neck and standing up with a jerky motion. His mannerisms grew more and more like the deceased Hunter Alpha, though his expression still held traces of fear.

“No, no, no, this can’t be happening... You can’t leave! Stay with me, please, stay with me...” He mumbled faintly before suddenly lunging at the group.

Whoosh!

A chilly gust hit them out of nowhere, snow battering their faces. Instinctively, everyone shielded their eyes with their arms. When they could see again, the cabin was gone, and so was

Baldie—or rather, the new Hunter Alpha. Even the three invigilators had vanished.

They now stood in the middle of a swirling snowstorm with a faint footpath leading downhill to a pine forest. The descent was long and eerily silent, partly because they were so frozen they couldn't move their lips and partly because they were still shaken by Baldie's transformation into Hunter Alpha.

After the group trudged through the forest for half an hour, carrying and leaning on each other for support, the terrain finally opened up to a road at the foot of the mountain. A boundary marker stood slanted by the roadside. One side read: *Mt Cock-a-Doodle*. The other side: *100 m ahead*. The name "Cock-a-Doodle" referred unmistakably to the dead chickens hanging inside the hunter's cabin, where they had come from. "100 m ahead" signposted the road directly in front of them. However, it was lost in the swirl of snow and mist.

"W-what is after the h-hundred m-metres ahead? Is the r-rest b-buried in s-s-snow?" Yu Wen's lips quivered violently from the cold. He kept his hands buried in his pockets for warmth and nudged the snow-covered marker with his shoe.

"What does it say?" The others called out.

Shuffling back with his teeth chattering, Yu Wen replied, "Th-the g-ground's fr-frozen solid. C-can't scrape it off."

The marker still only read "100 m ahead", although the cleaning had made it clearer.

"Don't tell me it's..." Zhou Jin whispered. His frozen face was as pale as a ghost.

Yu Wen couldn't help but blurt out, "N-no w-way, not a-an-other one r-right after the l-last. Th-that'd be s-sending us to our d-death!"

A heavy silence settled over the group as their steps faltered.

"Stay here if you want." You Huo's voice cut through the harsh snow like a sharp gust of wind, sending shivers down their spines.

Exchanging uneasy glances and shivering, the others quickly followed him. With You Huo leading, the group had no choice but to proceed steadily. Soon, they saw the shadowy outline of a building through the snowy mist. Memories of the hunter's cabin still haunted them, so no one was thrilled at the sight. As they climbed up the gentle slope, more buildings appeared, but it was too few to call it a town. It resembled more of an obscure mountain stop with scattered residents catering to the occasional tourist. These places received very few visitors throughout the year and were always on the verge of shutting down.

At the forefront, one house sported a glowing sign, "Lodging, Heating, Dining", in bold red letters on a white background. Its straightforward appeal was hard to resist. Everyone stopped in their tracks, captivated.

"How about we stay here tonight?" Old Yu suggested carefully, half-expecting You Huo to dismiss the idea immediately, given the uncertain safety of the place. To his surprise, his nephew was the first to enter, stepping through the door without hesitation.

You Huo's hunger had become unbearable during the snowy

trek. His biggest regret was submitting the answer so soon. If only he'd waited a few more minutes, 922's beef might have been grilled to perfection, and he would have enjoyed it. Unfortunately, 001's loathsome presence had robbed him of what could have been a satisfying meal. As Qin Jiu's face flashed through his mind, You Huo's mood soured further. He absently toyed with his ear stud as a scowl found itself on his face.

Thus, when the receptionist looked up, he was met with You Huo's frosty glare as if the man was at a funeral rather than the lobby of an inn. The young, wiry guy thought for a second before yelling towards the back, "Ma'am! We've got guests!"

"What the hell do you need me for? Do I have to teach you how to greet them?" came a lady's crisp voice, tinged with a biting edge, from behind the door.

"I was worried a greeting might scare them off," the receptionist replied sheepishly after glancing at You Huo.

"In this godforsaken place? Where do you think they can run to?" The door at the end of the corridor swung open, and a lady with cropped hair wielding a kitchen knife stepped out. The receptionist flinched, and even You Huo tensed.

"Ma'am, the knife...?"

"Oh, don't mind me. Wasn't in the mood for canteen food today, so I picked up some ingredients next door to cook instead." She set the knife down and flashed a smile at You Huo. "Hey, handsome! Just finished a session? Xiaohu, get them checked in."

Xiaohu, now reassured by his manager's presence, turned to

You Huo. "Could I have your name, sir? I need to check how many days you'll be staying."

The rest of the group, who had just entered, paled when they overheard the conversation.

"How did you know we just finished an exam?"

The manager arched an eyebrow, her smile bordering on eerie. "What a curious question. Why don't you look at this?"

She tapped the back of the knife against the wall, and as Xiaohu stepped aside, the full message became visible: *Examinee Service Centre*.

The revelation was unsettling.

"I thought..." Zhou Jin murmured.

"You thought you were going to arrive in the town?" said the manager, not missing a beat. "Not surprised. Everyone thinks that during their first visit here."

"What's this about deciding how long we can stay?" Old Yu interjected. "Shouldn't we decide that?"

The woman's laughter echoed in the room. "In your dreams, maybe."

Old Yu's face turned red with frustration.

"Alright, enough jokes," she said. "There are rules about how long you need to rest after each session. You don't get to choose when you leave. Now, instead of blocking the entrance, let's have your names and get you checked in."

Hearing this, Inksleeves bristled, his tough street smarts kicking in. "Fuck this! I'm not staying! This place is a death trap. If any of you wanna stay, go ahead, but I'm outta here!"

Unbeknownst to him, the manager was even tougher. She stabbed the kitchen knife into the reception counter, making Xiaohu leap back in fright.

“Leave if you’ve got balls,” she challenged, pointing towards the door.

Inksleeves glared at her as he yanked up his collar, stuffed the zipper between his teeth, and stormed out.

Who would have guessed the check-in would feel like a scene from a gangster film? The others were visibly tense, eyes darting between the front door and the knife still embedded in the counter. Only You Huo kept his cool and gave his name without a hint of concern.

Xiaohu tapped rapidly on the keyboard. “Got it. You guys are booked for a full week starting from”—he glanced at the wall clock—“3:12 p.m. today. You’ll be checked out automatically seven days later at exactly 3:12 p.m. Here’s your key card.”

You Huo took the card and saw the number 404 in bold on the front.

The manager glanced over and remarked casually, “Don’t overthink the room numbers. We don’t hold with superstitions here, whether it’s 313, 413, or whatever—they’re just random. Besides, it’s not as if a lucky number would guarantee your survival, right?”

Her words sent a chill through the group. You Huo, unfazed, just flipped the key card to read the details on the back.

Examinee Service Centre. Manager: Chu Yue

Examinee: You Huo

Examinee ID: 860451-10062231-000A

Completed Subject: Physics

Total Pts: 19

Chu Yue looked genuinely impressed. "Nineteen points in one session? You sure don't look the part!"

You Huo met her gaze with an icy stare.

"It's a compliment! With that pretty face and a name like yours, who would've thought?!"

When You Huo remained silent, Chu Yue let out a chuckle and headed back into the kitchen with her knife.

Xiaohu gathered his thoughts and then recited the rules to You Huo in a formal tone. "We have hot water and central heating. For those who've just arrived, don't rush to warm your hands, bathe, or head to bed. I'll bring you a bucket of snow and alcohol. You'll need to rub it on your exposed skin until you warm up before going inside. Meals are served at 7 a.m., 11 a.m., and 5 p.m. The canteen's just around the corner on this floor. Each mealtime lasts two hours, meaning service ends at 9 a.m., 1 p.m., and 7 p.m. sharp. The chef has tempers hotter than a blazing inferno, so there isn't any food outside of the scheduled times."

You Huo nodded before asking, "Any food available now?"

"There isn't any food outside of the scheduled times..."

You Huo stared at Xiaohu, who held his gaze but only for two seconds. He shouted towards the back again, "Ma'am! Our guests want to eat!"

Chu Yue claimed to be a sucker for pretty faces. Fortunate-

ly, this group of examinees included You Huo. Soon after the group had warmed up, they clustered in the canteen and enjoyed the manager's homemade dumplings. Yu Wen claimed he wasn't hungry but ate more than anyone else.

A hearty meal later, their tightly wounded nerves finally began to uncoil. Drowsiness crept up on them as they slouched against each other, drifting into a post-meal coma.

"You're quite the interesting bunch," Chu Yue remarked.

You Huo peered at her. Despite the heavy snowfall, she had a bottle of icy beer in her hand. She took a swig before continuing, "The group before you had only three people." She gestured upwards. "They stay in their rooms, coming down only for a bite or two of the food—sometimes, they even skip those. They spend their time either spaced out or weeping."

"Three people? How many were there originally? What test did they have?" Yu Wen asked.

"The same as you," Chu Yue responded matter-of-factly. "Everyone staying here recently is for the same test."

"The same one?" Yu Wen said. "The one with Hunter Alpha? And they were down to three?"

"Three's on the low side," Chu Yue admitted. "But five or six is more the norm for that test."

"How many groups have you seen?" Yu Wen shivered at the memory of Baldie turning to Hunter Alpha. "Doesn't that mean there are many Hunter Alphas?"

"Of course not, when I say the 'same test', I'm referring to the same site. A new group can only enter after the previous

one leaves.” She leant in closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Y’know, some say you can find parts of past examinees at some sites. I heard someone found a fingerbone, and another found a ring. You can try your luck.”

Humans are incredibly resilient creatures. Everyone had adapted to life at the Examinee Service Centre by the second day. This place wasn’t exactly a town, but it was a vast improvement over Hunter Alpha’s cabin. Everyone got food and comfortable beds. There was no risk of dying just by stepping outside and no creepy chickens reminding them to submit answers.

There was a three-storey building across from the service centre. Its entrance was draped with a thick, yellowed plastic curtain, opaque from age except for a circle of white glow seeping through. A wooden sign hung outside: *Corner Shop*.

“What’s a corner shop?” the twins asked in sync.

Old Yu, who was always patient with children, explained, “It’s just another name for a shop where you can buy almost anything. Haven’t you been to one?”

The girls and several others shook their heads. “We don’t call them that where we’re from.”

“Is that so?” Old Yu muttered, intrigued. While everyone was shopping, he pulled the shopkeeper aside for some chit-chat. To his surprise, he discovered they were from the same town. However, Zhao Dianzhang was remarkably calm meeting another from his hometown.

“Dianzhang, was it? You don’t mind me calling you by your

first name, do you?” Old Yu asked.

The shopkeeper was younger than Old Yu, at most forty, and solidly built with a straight posture. He accepted Old Yu’s request, dangling a cigarette from his lips as he lazily replied, “Sure.”

“Dianzhang, you’ve been away from home for many years, haven’t you? Your accent’s almost gone. Mine’s quite mild too, but yours is even fainter. I wouldn’t have guessed we were from the same region if I hadn’t seen ‘Corner Shop’ on the sign.”

Zhao Dianzhang exhaled a cloud of smoke. “More or less.”

“Have you been running this shop ever since?”

“Pretty much.”

Old Yu let out an “Ah” and probed, asking, “Judging by your posture, you used to be in the military, right? How did you end up running a shop here?”

Zhao Dianzhang finally peered at him through the smoke and replied tersely, “I wasn’t. But judging from your posture, you were. How’d you end up so plump?”

Old Yu fell silent as the shopkeeper finished his cigarette and crushed the butt in the ashtray.

“No need for that hometown chit-chat here. Folks get misty-eyed one day and dead the next.”

Old Yu said nothing as the man lit another cigarette.

“Buy what you need, or get out.”

The ground floor of the shop was hazy with smoke, making the feeble Zhou Jin cough uncontrollably. Despite this, he didn’t want to miss out on shopping. The cramped three-storey

building was packed to the brim, and the selection of goods far exceeded everyone's expectations. The shop was more like a decrepit supermarket. They found clothes, bedding, pillows, pots and pans, tableware, and medications for internal and external use—everything a supermarket would have, and more. Each floor had a few dusty trolleys. Everyone grabbed one, gave it a quick wipe, and started a wild shopping spree. They looked like they were there to loot the place.

"Wait, none of these items have price tags!" Yu Wen suddenly exclaimed.

Zhou Jin grabbed some cough syrup and a variety of anti-inflammatory drugs and painkillers. "I noticed that too... *hack-hack*... Just like a tourist trap. The prices are definitely doubled."

"They're profiting from our fear of dying. Pretty standard."

The others agreed. They all understood how the shops at tourist attractions operated, yet it didn't stop anyone from filling their trolleys. When money could buy a chance of survival, the cost hardly seemed to matter anymore.

Something about this situation nagged at Yu Wen to seek out You Huo. He pushed his trolley through the aisles until he found his cousin in a corner on the second floor—with a trolley too, to his surprise.

"Are you stocking up too?" Yu Wen remarked as he approached.

You Huo gave him a withering glance that seemed to say, "No, duh?"

Yu Wen quickly waved his hands. "Never mind, just browsing

around...”

Seeing his cousin stocking up was reassuring. Curious, Yu Wen peeked into his cousin’s trolley, expecting to find emergency supplies like torches, batteries, ropes, and blades. Instead, he only saw a change of clothes and a black backpack. Nothing else.

“Uh... Huo, not getting anything else?”

You Huo then shifted through the clothes on the racks and added a black down jacket to his trolley. “That’s about it.”

Yu Wen glanced at his own one filled with glowsticks, torches, and batteries, and felt silly—as if he were a peddler outside a concert.

When they returned to the ground floor, most of the others had finished shopping and were crowded around the till with their overflowing trolleys. You Huo hated human contact, so he stood back by the wall, looking bored.

“Could you ring these up for me? Won’t take too long.” the elderly lady at the front of the queue asked.

Zhao Dianzhang puffed on another cigarette and squinted through the haze at the trolleys overstuffed with a wild assortment of goods. He snorted with amusement. “First-timers, huh.”

The others exchanged bewildered looks.

Seeing their confusion, he held up two fingers. “Usually, folks take this many at most.”

“Two items?” Old Yu asked.

“Well, the biggest spenders I’ve seen.”

How bloody expensive are the things here? The group silently looked at their overflowing trolleys.

Zhou Jin stepped forward, unable to contain his question. "Can we pay by credit card or something? I haven't got much cash."

Yu Wen agreed, "I haven't taken out cash in over a year."

"I don't take any of those," Zhao Dianzhang stated flatly.

Zhou Jin and Yu Wen deflated, but the shopkeeper hadn't finished. "Not even cash."

"Not even cash?" Yu Wen asked. "Then, what're we supposed to use?"

"You all have this, yeah? You use this." Zhao Dianzhang took out a card from beneath the glass countertop, identical to their room keys. He flicked it with unprecedented enthusiasm, chuckling as if he'd been waiting for this exact moment. "See your exam ID on the back? And your total points? You gotta use points to buy my stuff, which isn't expensive at all. Daily essentials like clothes are half a point each. Food and medicine, one point per item. As for blades or anything that could be considered a weapon, two points each. Easy to remember, right? Though you should tally your own totals first."

The realisation that buying everything in their packed trolleys could leave them with negative points hit them hard, the colour draining from their faces. Zhou Jin looked at his trolley full of medicine and immediately gasped. He choked on the cold air and began coughing violently. No wonder the shopping trolleys were so dusty. No wonder nobody ever took more than two items. The points had been earned at the risk of their lives, and who knew what the next exam session would entail? Spending

even one point too many could cause a failing grade later and become a fatal mistake.

Zhao Dianzhang wasn't surprised by their reactions. He continued in a lethargic tone. "Well, let's ring 'em up."

Immediately, the group took two steps back.

"Nobody's buying?"

The aloof You Huo, who was by the wall, suddenly spoke. All eyes, including Zhao Dianzhang's, turned to him. Straightening up, You Huo pushed his trolley to the till and produced his room key from his jeans.

"Ring these up, please."

Zhao Dianzhang's jaw dropped as he looked at the young man's trolley, his cigarette butt falling on his shoe. You Huo, holding out his room key, started to get impatient. The shopkeeper quickly stamped out the smouldering butt. "Right, let me see..."

The change of clothes, jeans, backpack, and down jacket totalled three points. You Huo nodded at the total. Feeling his budget was still sufficient, he scanned the shelves behind the counter. "Give me a pack of cigarettes and a lighter too."

Zhao Dianzhang stared wondrously at him. Even Yu Wen couldn't contain himself. "But why? You don't even smoke."

As You Huo packed the clothes into his backpack, he replied without looking up, "Just in case."

Two minutes later, You Huo returned to the service centre with his new backpack, the points on his exam ID having dropped to 15, the dead last in their group.

Yu Wen watched how nonchalant his cousin looked and couldn't help but feel impressed.

The seven days at the Examinee Service Centre flew by. On the last day, at precisely 3:12 p.m., they were automatically checked out, and Chu Yue personally booted them out the front door.

"Head straight that way. About 200 metres ahead, you'll come to a crossroads." She waved. "Don't be late, or you'll lose the right to choose the next subject. See you around!"

With that, she shut the inn's door. The "Lodging, Heating, Dining" sign flickered twice before going dark. The cluster of buildings with their black windows stood silently in the snow as if abandoned for ages.

"Are you sure this place isn't haunted?" Yu Wen shuddered.

You Huo remembered his earlier question to the invigilator about whether this was some kind of *X-Files* scenario. The invigilator had denied it and seemed ready to explain more when he received a rules violation warning. So... what *was* the true nature of this place? You Huo mulled this over, determined to find an opportunity to coax the truth out of the next invigilator—if he was lucky enough to find one susceptible to trickery.

The two hundred metres passed quickly. Soon, they arrived at the crossroads Chu Yue had mentioned, where a security booth stood with a hunched figure leaning against it. As they approached, the figure struggled to his feet. It was Inksleeves, who had refused to stay at the Examinee Service Centre. But

now, he looked drastically different. His body was smeared with dried blood, his left arm hung lifelessly, and he walked with a pronounced limp.

“What happened to you?”

Although none of them were particularly fond of him, they didn’t wish to see him crippled or dead. After all, they had been strangers with no bad blood.

“I’m lucky I’m not raving mad,” Inksleeves rasped.

“How long have you been out here?” someone asked, looking at the booth.

“Two days.”

“Why didn’t you go back to the service centre?”

Embarrassment and indignation bloomed on his face. “Like hell I’d go back. Besides... I couldn’t find my way. No matter which direction I turned, I couldn’t even retrace my steps to those buildings. This is the only place I could go to.”

“Then why didn’t you just keep moving?” Yu Wen asked.

Inksleeves gestured to the paths. “See for yourself.”

Following his gesture, they finally noticed this was a four-way junction, with each path marked by a sign. Typically, such signs would display a street name or direction, but these four read: “Language Arts”, “Foreign Language”, “Mathematics”, and “History”.

Out of nowhere, a loudspeaker crackled to life, and the familiar voice from the radio sounded from the booth:

“Attention. The current format mandates five sessions consisting of three core subjects, one natural science, and one social studies

subject. Congratulations on completing your first session. You have four sessions remaining. Examinees have the right to choose the order in which they proceed. Please make your decision within 30 seconds. Latecomers automatically forfeit their subject choice."

The group exchanged uneasy glances, preferring to stay at the intersection forever rather than choose a path.

Yu Wen immediately grabbed You Huo. "I'll take whichever path you take!"

The others nodded in agreement, their eyes fixed expectantly on You Huo.

You Huo looked around, face blank. "Is there even a choice? All four signs here are labelled 'Foreign Language' for me."

Yu Wen's jaw dropped. "What?"

Even more irritating were the tall figures, each holding an umbrella, waiting for You Huo in the middle of each path. He let out a derisive chuckle, his face darkening. "Yu Wen."

"Y-yes?" Yu Wen stammered at the sudden address.

"Do you see anyone on those paths?"

Yu Wen glanced around, confused. "Anyone? What do you mean?"

You Huo's gaze lingered on the distant shapes. "Like a ghostly, ever-present invigilator."

"Now's not the time for ghost stories!" Yu Wen was taken aback. They hadn't even picked a subject yet, so why would there be an invigilator?

The others looked around too, but aside from the signs, the intersection was empty for them.

“Never mind, it’s not a problem,” You Huo said. “The only choice I’ve got is Foreign Language. Are you sure you want to follow?”

Yu Wen grimaced. “To be honest, I’m terrible with languages.”

You Huo shot him a look.

“But then again,” Yu Wen said, “I’m terrible with every subject.”

You Huo’s silence spoke volumes.

Clasping his hands, Yu Wen pleaded, “I’ll follow you anywhere! I’ll do any hard work, carry any load—whatever it takes! Just help me get through all the sessions alive and well!”

The rest gazed at You Huo with equally desperate eyes.

You Huo clicked his tongue disdainfully before zipping his jacket up to his chin. “Ugh, gimme a break.”

“What did you say?” Yu Wen inched closer, straining to hear.

You Huo’s expression was as cold as snow. “Where’s ‘Foreign Language’ for you?”

In unison, the group pointed to the left. Without another word, You Huo set off in that direction. At the same time, the speaker in the booth sounded again:

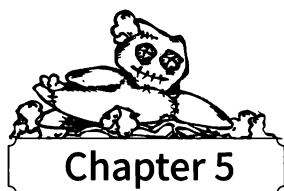
“Friendly reminder: there are five seconds left to choose your exam.”

Startled, everyone scampered after You Huo. The road labelled “Foreign Language” was just as misty as the others, and no one knew what awaited them at its destination...

“Four... Three... Two... One.”

“Examinees no longer have the right to choose a subject.”

As the count reached zero, the last person in the group stepped into the heavy fog.



Qin Jiu stood at the end of the road in a black overcoat and a dove-grey cashmere scarf. He waited patiently under a black umbrella, a hand stuck in his coat pocket.

When You Huo emerged through the dense fog, his chiselled features were ashen, and his expression was one of lethargic indifference. A black backpack hung loosely on his right shoulder. Though he was still far away, Qin Jiu could see every detail clearly. You Huo's light brown irises always had a thin, fragile glaze over them, letting off a cold gleam like the stud on his earlobe. Qin Jiu tipped the umbrella back, letting the snow slide off the taut canvas. As You Huo drew nearer, the invigilator raised the umbrella, sheltering You Huo from the falling flakes.

"What a coincidence," he drawled. "We meet again, Mr Snort. Have you rested well these past few days?"

You Huo's expression remained stony as he stared at the man. Qin Jiu insisted on using the mocking nickname despite knowing his name. *What's this guy's problem?*

“Does stripping me of choice mean I have to see you everywhere?”

Qin Jiu narrowed his eyes and let out an amused chuckle. “Not quite. The revocation of choice simply means that you, an examinee found in violation of the rules, have no autonomy in selecting your next exam subject. That decision falls on me, the lead invigilator. Is that easier to understand?”

Qin Jiu spoke as though he were trying to calm down a child throwing a tantrum. The clear provocation fuelled You Huo’s ire, but Qin Jiu’s smile only deepened at the examinee’s stiff expression. “As for which subject an invigilator oversees, that’s usually up to the invigilator. But you see, I’m a bit lazy, so I go with randomised selection. This time, it landed on Foreign Language. Though looking at your expression, I’d say you were... dissatisfied. Maybe next time—”

“There’s a fucking next time?” You Huo cut him off with a scowl.

“It’s not off the table, given your extensive record of priors. Anyway, if you have a preference for the random subject selection, you’re welcome to let me know in advance. I can take it into consideration—provided you’re on your best behaviour.”

You Huo felt like retorting, *I hope you’ll randomly die, mind considering that?* But thinking it through, he suspected the deranged exam system would likely demand that he follow suit, so he bottled up his anger with a scowl and waited silently by the thick fog.

Soon, Yu Wen dragged Old Yu out of the mist, followed by

Yu Yao and Maximilian.

“Huo!” Yu Wen rushed over but skidded to a halt at the sight of Qin Jiu. “What the f... I mean, what brings you here, sir?”

Intense survival instincts prompted the deferential address, though it did little to mask his sheer terror.

“Waiting alongside your cousin for the rest of you to arrive,” Qin Jiu said slowly and deliberately.

Yu Wen’s face paled even more as he gaped at his cousin in horror. You Huo just glared at Qin Jiu silently. If looks could kill, the invigilator would already be dead.

Yu Wen mustered up some courage. “Does the full-time in-person supervision from the last session roll over to this one too?”

When Qin Jiu shot him a look, he hastily conceded, “Oh, never mind.”

In the eyes of the cowardly Yu Wen, 001 was a big shot who always carried an air of arrogance and only acknowledged those who matched his stature, like his cousin. Yu Wen was self-aware enough to know to steer clear of the invigilator.

As Yu Yao and Maximilian approached, Yu Wen asked, “Where’s Zhou Jin and the others?”

“They were right behind us,” Old Yu replied. “Let’s wait a bit.”

Eventually, two strangers emerged from the mist. One was a muscular man of average height, uniquely distinguished by a square jaw and a gym bag over his shoulder. The other was thinner and bundled in a jacket, blowing on his hands for warmth.

“What’s going on?” Yu Wen was surprised. “Why are there other examinees here?”

You Huo looked to Qin Jiu, who tilted his head and said, “Did anyone say the groups were fixed?”

You Huo blinked. “No.”

“Just because you chose the same subject doesn’t mean you’ll be at the same site. For instance, 154 and 922 have also been assigned to Foreign Language, but they’re not here. What does that mean?”

“It means they don’t want to see you either,” You Huo remarked.

Yu Wen shot a wary glance at Qin Jiu, afraid his cousin might’ve angered the invigilator. But Qin Jiu merely smiled, his eyes squinting naturally. “Incorrect. It means there are so few examinees that only one invigilator is required.”

“So few?” You Huo furrowed his brow.

Sure enough, after five more minutes, no one else from the previous session showed up from the fog. Zhou Jin and the others must have been assigned to different sites. The original team, despite its mix of abilities and ages, had come to understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses, but now, with the addition of two strangers, they needed to go through it all again. And who knew if this would be for better or worse?

“At least Dad and I didn’t get split up,” Yu Wen said with relief.

The two strangers weren’t surprised to see new faces. The square-jawed man, looking fierce with his furrowed brow, gave

a quick nod to the group and proceeded to ignore them. The thinner one, however, was friendlier.

"I'm Chen Bin from Chongqing. And this is Liang Yuanhao from... Hebei, was it?" He turned to the square-jawed man, who glanced at the group and grunted in affirmation.

"Chongqing? I was stationed there for a few years while in the army. We're practically fellow townsmen." Old Yu said. With his sociable nature, he quickly forged a new connection.

"Liang Yuanhao and I were in the last session together, and it must be fate for us to still be in the same group this time. This is my third session." Chen Bin's expression grew sombre. "I barely finished the first two by sheer luck. My scores were so low that passing feels like a distant dream."

Old Yu was about to comfort him when You Huo interjected, "Do you know what the passing score is?"

Chen Bin blinked in surprise. "You didn't? It's 60."

Old Yu shook his head. "We didn't. The full score for our last session was something like... 24, with random extra points and penalties added in. It was confusing and not a round number. We haven't heard about the scoring for the other sessions, so we couldn't figure out the passing threshold."

"Haven't you met any old-timers?" Chen Bin asked.

"No, everyone in our previous session was a first-timer."

"That explains it then," Chen Bin said. "An old-timer I met mentioned that the full score for each session might vary, the total across all five is 100, and we need 60 to pass."

"Sixty, huh..." Old Yu sighed as he counted his points.

Chen Bin looked even more distraught. "I've only got ten points from two sessions. Just how well must I do on the remaining three?!"

Liang Yuanhao, meanwhile, turned ashen and began pacing nervously away from the group.

"He's not a bad guy," Chen Bin explained. "This is his fourth session, and his scores from the previous three weren't great, so he's worried..."

The group expressed their sympathies. When their lives were at stake, even the worst of tempers was understandable. To comfort them, Yu Wen pointed at Maximilian.

"Don't worry! We've got our secret weapon, our precious darling, Maximilian, for the Foreign Language exam!"

Chen Bin, trying to be polite, said, "We noticed him when we arrived. The problem is he doesn't seem to understand us, which could be a problem if we can't communicate..."

Yu Wen gestured to You Huo. "No worries, my cousin lived abroad for some time. He can help us too, though... he's not much of a talker."

Chen Bin brightened up. "As long as someone can understand the foreign language!"

Even Liang Yuanhao cheered up a bit at this news. Maximilian and You Huo's presence was like a shot of dopamine for the group, instantly lifting their spirits.

"So where do we go now?" someone inquired after all the chit-chat.

You Huo pointed to the left expressionlessly. Everyone then

spotted the bus stop sign about three metres away. The sign looked normal—a board on a metal pole. Thankfully, the text on it wasn't in a foreign script. It read “Intercity Coach” with a polite multilingual translation below but no information about the destination or route.

As they stood there in bewilderment, a horn blared through the heavy snow. A vehicle emerged from the fog, shuddering to a halt at the stop. The coach was so dusty that its original colour was unrecognisable, and its wheels were splattered with mud. Calling it a “coach” was being too generous; it resembled an old van from the 90s, wheezing with every turn.

What's with the vehicle? For a test on Foreign Language? The group exchanged bewildered glances, utterly perplexed. Even 001 was displeased.

You Huo found satisfaction in the invigilator's displeasure. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and boarded the bus first. Surprisingly, the interior wasn't as dilapidated as he had expected. The seats were relatively clean. He took a window seat in the last row. Seeing that 001 had also boarded, he fiddled with his phone, put on his white earphones, and leant against the window to sleep.

The driver, a swarthy middle-aged man, might have been a mute, since he had not said a single word. Once everyone was aboard, he floored the accelerator and set off.

As You Huo began to doze off, announcements started screeching from the speakers of the minibus, the same contemptible voice reading the same contemptible rules.

“Attention. The time is now 6:30 a.m. UTC +8. The exam will begin in 30 minutes. The exam rules are as follows...”

With Maximilian and You Huo’s reassuring presence, the examinees remained relatively calm compared to their initial, nerve-wracking state.

“Any examinee caught breaking the rules, cheating, or engaging in fraudulent activities will be expelled from the exam site. For all other exam guidelines, please follow the specific instructions given in your problem sets.”

The announcement paused, almost teasingly, to let the information sink in before delivering the last few pieces.

“Due to the unique nature of this session, exam details will be disclosed in advance. Duration: 10 days. Subject: Foreign Language. Language: Romani. We wish everyone the best of luck.”

The speaker remained silent after announcing the exam information, leaving the minibus in utter stillness. The passengers couldn’t believe their ears. So much for secret weapons or reassuring presences—the mention of Romani shattered that illusion completely. For a moment, the examinees slumped in their seats, looking lifeless. The rickety minibus felt like a hearse carrying their shocked souls to the afterlife.

Being rudely awakened was bad enough, but the disheartening news made You Huo’s mood even worse. Just as he was about to sit up, he caught a glimpse of someone approaching and quickly shut his eyes, pretending to be asleep.

The minibus glided like it was floating on clouds. Footsteps halted beside him, and the backrest he was leaning against sank

under additional weight. Then he felt a gentle tug on his earphone cable. He continued to feign sleep, maintaining a cold expression. The cable received another set of light tugs, jostling his earlobe and ear stud. Nonetheless, he pretended to be asleep.

“There’s no signal here. What’s the point of these? Quit pretending,” came a familiar, lazy drawl.

You Huo could no longer maintain the act. He opened his eyes a crack and glared at the hand still tugging on his earphone. “What do you want?” Only then did he raise his eyes to the person standing there. His demeanour and tone clearly said, “Talk or fuck off”.

Qin Jiu released the cable and rested his hand on the backrest of the seat in front. With a wry smile, he nodded at the seat next to You Huo. “Can your bag move over? I want to sit here.”

“It doesn’t want to move,” You Huo replied with a straight face, putting his earphones back in and closing his eyes.

Not even two seconds later, the same annoying hand returned to pluck the earphone out. You Huo felt a tickle as the fingers brushed past his earlobe. He touched his ear stud and opened his eyes with a frown. “What is it now?”

“If it really doesn’t want to move, then I’ll have to make it move.” Qin Jiu smiled, tested the weight of the black backpack, and placed it on the luggage rack above You Huo.

You Huo glared at him. “Can’t you find another seat?”

“I’m afraid not. There are only nine seats on this bus, and the examinees have taken up seven. If I don’t sit here, I’ll have to hijack this bus and sit in the driver’s seat. You might appreciate

that, but the others probably wouldn't."

You Huo regretted not counting the seats before boarding. How could he have anticipated such a cramped setup in this dilapidated vehicle?

Qin Jiu took the seat beside him. Even though his long coat made him look tall and slender, You Huo could sense his athletic build and feel the heat and firmness of his arms through the fabric.

Fortunately, with so few seats in the minibus, there was ample legroom between rows. Even so, their knees brushed against each other. You Huo wanted to fully stretch his legs to avoid contact, but that would mean kicking the seat in front. In situations like this, giving up space first felt like conceding the advantage, so You Huo stubbornly jammed his knee against Qin Jiu's. As he tugged his collar up, preparing to go back to sleep, he heard the invigilator mutter.

"Romani, huh? That'll be fun."

The comment caught You Huo's attention. "Didn't you choose this?"

"Why would I do that?" Qin Jiu glanced at him and lazily gestured "no" with his finger. "You shouldn't throw wild accusations around."

You Huo gave him a cold look. *But you definitely would.*

"Just look at the gem you got." Qin Jiu pointed to Maximilian's seat. "From what I know, this examinee's got quite the colourful heritage—French, Spanish, German, and Russian—yet, he turned out pretty plain."

You Huo's brow furrowed.

"Sorry, that was a bit harsh," Qin Jiu said, not looking the least bit apologetic.

"You have access to the examinees' information?"

"What do you think?" Qin Jiu's low and lazy voice had an attractive quality to it even when he drawled.

You Huo scoffed. If the exam system could pull random people into this godforsaken place, it must have had comprehensive data on them all. But how much did the invigilators know? After reflecting on the invigilators' behaviour, he decided that they likely didn't have full access. Bound by strict rules, they probably needed to follow a formal process to access the examinees' information—a process that likely wasn't that simple. Otherwise, the first examinee the invigilators 001, 154, and 922 would have looked up was him.

Qin Jiu rested his chin on a hand, his dark, fathomless eyes studying You Huo. "Relax, I generally have no interest in the examinee's personal information."

You Huo let out a noncommittal hum.

"With someone like that in your group, it's no wonder you ended up in this bizarre place," Qin Jiu concluded.

You Huo didn't understand the true nature behind this so-called "exam system", but it definitely had a petty, rebellious temper. To circumvent the native languages of everyone in their group, it came up with the outlandish Romani—in hindsight, almost inevitably. Having reached the explanation, he no longer blamed Qin Jiu.

Interestingly, the invigilator appeared to be displeased, as far as You Huo could tell, ever since boarding the minibus. He peered at Qin Jiu, who was lost in thought with his eyes down-cast. His own eyes started to ache again. The snow outside was probably too bright. He gave them a rub before putting his ear-phone back in and retreating into a muted slumber.

Ten minutes into the journey, the minibus hit a sudden bump, jolting the despondent examinees awake. Only then did they notice their surroundings had changed. The blanket of swirling snow and fog had disappeared, revealing a winding mountain road that was in terrible condition. The mud and stones littered about caused the minibus to rattle like crazy. The road was also extremely narrow, requiring any oncoming vehicles to inch past each other cautiously to avoid plunging down the cliff. The lush vegetation below obscured any hint of depth—a fall could easily leave one's remains unrecoverable.

That didn't stop the driver from driving recklessly. At one point, he took a hand off the wheel to fiddle with the radio dial. The speakers crackled to life, tuning into an oldies station that played dated tunes interspersed with occasional traffic updates about rockslides and road closures. During one such announcement, a warning sign appeared ahead, indicating a massive boulder and fallen trees just beyond that wouldn't have allowed a typical vehicle through. The driver ignored the sign completely, driving the old vehicle straight through. The minibus bucked twice and flung everyone into the air. Screams filled the cabin. When the examinees landed back in their seats, the minibus

had cleared the rockslide area and was heading deeper into the mountains.

The sky suddenly darkened, and even with the heater on, everyone shivered. When they finally emerged from the winding mountain road, they saw an old road sign with a route number by the road.

Old Yu huddled in his seat, muttering as he eyed the numbers. "Doesn't this road cross the border..."

"We're leaving the country?" Yu Wen asked, his eyes wide.

"No idea."

Yu Wen shrank back, anxiously peering out the window. "Can we just cross international borders like that?"

As he spoke, the minibus took a sharp turn, plunging into the forest. The group was confused by this strange route and tried to ask the driver, but he stayed silent.

After another ten minutes, the minibus came out of the forest and screeched to a halt next to a dirt road.

"Huo, wake up. We're here." Yu Wen got on the seat with one knee and leant over the backrest towards You Huo. He truly admired his cousin's ability to sleep so soundly through all this.

You Huo ruffled his own hair and cracked his eyes open slightly, glancing at the empty seat beside him. "Where'd he go?" he muttered, his face still half-buried in his collar.

"Come again?"

You Huo shook his head, now fully awake. He rose, stamping feeling back into his numb legs, and peered out the window. "Where are we?"

This time, Yu Wen heard him. “No idea. The driver just stopped here and ran off.”

“Ran off? What do you mean?”

“See the dirt road? He got out and took off like the wind.” Yu Wen pointed outside.

They had stopped at the entrance of a village. Through the tangled branches, they could see scattered rooftops of varying heights. Besides the narrow road leading into the village, there was nowhere else to go—just an endless sea of trees.

Yu Wen followed You Huo out of the minibus, where the other examinees stood, exchanging bewildered looks. Only 001 stood amid the trees, staring up at something, his hand on a trunk.

“Huo, my dad said the previous road was near the border. Are we in a real-world location?” Yu Wen asked.

“No, not from my experience,” said their new teammate, Chen Bin. “But you’ll notice some traces of reality here, and some things might even look familiar.”

Yu Wen frowned. “If it’s not real, does that mean the risk of death is... also not real?”

Chen Bin gave a wry smile. “Not sure. You’d have to try to find out. But who would risk that?”

“True...” Yu Wen’s face fell.

You Huo showed no interest in the morbid topics. After getting out of the minibus, he walked around the dirt road before stopping and giving something a kick. “There’s a stone marker here.”

“Oh, you’ve found it. I was looking for that.” With experience from previous sessions, Chen Bin had started searching for clues as soon as he got off. He squatted down and pulled away the weeds in front of the stone. “It should name the area. Might not be very useful, but at least we’ll know where we are...”

The group crowded around, hoping for a clue, but saw only strange symbols carved into the eroded stone.

“What are these?”

“Letters, maybe...?”

Chen Bin wiped the mud off with a tissue, but they strained to make out the shapes.

“K... is that an A?” Yu Wen wondered.

“LI...” Chen Bin frowned. “What the hell is that supposed to be?”

“Looks like a P,” Yu Yao said, tilting her head as she supported her belly. “That looks like an H... U... V.”

Amid the random mess of indecipherable fragments, the words on the stone marker were: *KALI PHUV*. Everyone stared, puzzled. Where on earth were they? How could they figure out their location from a stone marker like this? *What a joke.*

While everyone was lost in despair, the previously silent driver reappeared. His boots were caked in dark mud, and he was accompanied by a middle-aged man wearing a military greatcoat and fur hat. Judging by his features, the man was not a foreigner.

“Here they are,” the driver gestured towards the examinees.

Old Yu was startled. “You can speak?”

The driver gave him a sidelong glance and rasped, "He'll take you to the site. Remember, don't go into the woods."

With that, he waved to the man before climbing back into the rickety minibus and driving off. The vehicle veered into the woods, the dense branches quickly obscuring it until even the rumble of the engine faded into silence. An eerie stillness descended over the woods, putting everyone on edge.

"What are we doing here?" You Huo asked the man.

"Hm? Weren't you here to see Dark Widow? Why are you asking me?"

"Dark Widow? Who's that?" Chen Bin stepped forward.

The man shivered slightly, tightening his hat. He looked down and muttered, "An old lady. She came here with the Russians during the war. She calls herself a Roma. Anyway..." He huddled deeper into his coat, his voice dropping lower. "I'll show you the way. Just be careful. Our village's been strange ever since she arrived. What were you thinking, spending ten days here?"

The examinees stared back. *Do we look mad? We don't want to stay here either!*

The man turned out to be the village chief. He introduced the place as Chasu, home to eighteen households. The village was near the border, and during the war, Dark Widow and many Russians had fled here. As for the symbols etched on the stone, even the chief couldn't decipher them. That was part of Dark Widow's handiwork.

The group followed him along the dirt road into Chasu. On

one side was a frozen river, and on the other, houses of varying heights. Some had concrete walls, while others were made of brick. Regardless of their structures, all the roofs had the same dark red hue.

“Didn’t you say eighteen households?” Yu Wen muttered under his breath. “There are way more than eighteen houses here just at a glance.”

The chief trudged on, ignoring the comment and huddling deeper into his coat, but Old Yu tapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, sir, slow down. We’re talking to you!” Even in these circumstances, Old Yu still used the honorific “sir”.

Startled, the chief stopped. “There were more than eighteen,” he mumbled. “But people left or died, so the numbers dwindled.” He pointed to two houses. “Like this one here, and that one there. You can tell no one’s been living in them.”

Just as Old Yu was about to nod, You Huo interjected flatly, “I can’t tell. They all look uninhabited to me.”

The chief froze. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s too quiet here.”

At those words, everyone ground to a halt. You Huo was right. As their footsteps faded away, the jarring silence of the village became obvious. The village was eerily quiet. Despite it being morning, there were no voices, no clanks of pots and pans, no sounds of doors opening or closing... nothing at all. A chill ran down their spines as they stared at the chief, who looked awkward and uneasy. After a moment’s hesitation, he let out a long sigh.

“People do live here. It’s just... we’re too scared to go outside. We try to sleep as much as possible.”

“Too scary? Why?”

The chief cast a wary glance into the distance. Everyone followed his gaze to a cluster of houses on the other side of the river. These houses looked distinctly out of place, their grey walls unassuming and drab. Even their roofs were a dull grey hue, practically blending into the woods looming behind them. The chief dropped his voice to a whisper as if afraid of being overheard. “It’s not safe at night. Remember—don’t go out after dark during your stay, and no matter what you hear, don’t open your doors.”

“What do you mean?”

The group exchanged looks of trepidation and confusion, but the chief spoke no more. He quickly waved them off and continued walking with his head lowered. Utterly bewildered yet too afraid to pry further, the group fell into an uneasy silence.

“Holy shit!” Yu Wen yelped and nudged You Huo. “Look at that house.”

You Huo and those who heard looked over. There, someone was peeking through the first-floor window and watching them behind the curtain.

“Seeing that face peering out was so scary!” Yu Wen put a hand on his chest.

They quickly realised it wasn’t an isolated occurrence. Silhouettes from other houses parted their curtains to watch them pass by.

“They’re just curious about the visitors,” the chief explained. “But after so many scares, they don’t come out anymore.”

“They just stay inside all the time?” Yu Wen exclaimed, shocked. “But how do they get food and water?”

“Every house has a basement, accessible by a ladder, where food is stored,” the chief clarified. “We do go out sometimes... at noon or in the afternoon, but everyone’s back inside before nightfall.”

“I see.”

“Does this have something to do with Dark Widow?” You Huo asked.

The chief stayed silent for a moment, then nodded. In a hushed tone, he asked, “I heard you guys are here for... her services?”

“Her services? What for?”

Everyone paid close attention to the mention of something that hinted at their “exam problem”.

“Dead things, of course!” Startled by his own outburst, the chief paled. He lowered his voice to a murmur. “Dark Widow deals with death, such as stitching broken corpses back together.”

A heavy silence fell over the group.

“If someone’s kin goes missing, we might ask her to tell us if they’re dead or alive and where the remains might be.” The chief’s tone grew more sinister. “Sometimes, she even finds... herself.”

Yu Wen’s mind blanked from fear. “Find *what* herself?”

“Well, a few years ago...” The chief pointed to the frozen river. “A girl floated downstream, and Dark Widow got a huge basket and collected her.”

Floated? Collected? The chief’s words conjured up gruesome images that left them pale and shaken. Yu Yao felt weak in the knees, and a few of the men even gagged. Only You Huo remained unfazed.

“If she only deals with the dead,” he said, “why are the living so afraid?”

The chief shook his head grimly, hands shoved into his pockets. “You don’t get it, but you will after a night.”

Soon, he led them to the end of the frozen river and crossed the thick ice to the opposite bank. In front of them stood the grey houses. Up close, they could see the stone structures, their outer walls pocked and uneven. White patterns were haphazardly painted on the grey rock surfaces, and dried branches hung by the entrances alongside tattered felt mats. One house stood out. An aged crystal ball and bone-white finger-like digits rested on its windowsill. Even before entering, they felt lightheaded smelling the heavy scent of incense.

The chief stood as far back as he could. “That’s Dark Widow’s place.” He craned his neck to glance inside. “What time is it?”

The group checked their phones—it was 11:13 p.m., clearly out of sync with their location.

As they stood befuddled, a deep voice said, “It’s 6:55 a.m.”

They turned to see Qin Jiu, who waved his phone. “Still functional, and it’s more accurate than yours.”

Chen Bin looked at him with surprise. “Wow, impressive, man! How does your phone stay synchronised when each session’s time differs from reality?”

Qin Jiu put his phone back into his pocket. “Maybe it’s because I’m an invigilator,” he said with a lazy tone.

Chen Bin nodded and rummaged through his bag. A moment later, the bag fell to the ground with a thump. “Wait... *what?!*”

Ignoring him, Qin Jiu pulled out a card and turned towards You Huo. “Does this count as helping?”

It was “Assistance from an invigilator”, which You Huo had previously drawn as a reward. You Huo took the card, flipped it over, and stuck it in front of Qin Jiu’s nose. “You might want to read the fine print again. It specifies ‘additional’ assistance. You know what ‘additional’ means?”

Qin Jiu’s smile had a mocking edge. “Not quite.”

Then, wipe that smile off your stupid face. “Open a dictionary.”

If an examinee weren’t wearing a watch during the exam, asking the invigilator for the time wouldn’t count as “additional” assistance. It was like escorting an examinee to the toilet—things that are just part of being an invigilator. As expected, the card didn’t expire.

“Pity,” Qin Jiu said, pocketing the card.

The chief stood there blankly for a moment. “Dark Widow gets up at 7:30 a.m. She won’t answer the door before that. Let me show you where you’ll be staying.”

Beside Dark Widow’s house, there were four tiny, unoccu-

pied houses. Each had a small living room and a single cramped bedroom with a bed. All walls were covered from ceiling to floor in weathered rugs that made the interior look like the inside of a tent carriage.

“You might have to squeeze in together,” the chief said.

Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao, the newest additions, would share one house. Yu Yao, the only female, needed a separate house for propriety’s sake. That left the two Yus, Maximilian, You Huo, and Qin Jiu to split the remaining two houses.

You Huo thought for a while, then asked Qin Jiu, “Don’t you get a cottage?”

“Thanks to you, I’m on full monitoring duty this time, so no cottage. We’ll have to share these cramped, unsanitary accommodations.”

You Huo pretended not to hear. His expression was blank as he turned to the chief. “You can make the arrangements as you see fit.”

“Why don’t the three of us—me, my dad, and my cousin—bunk together? We’re family, after all!” Yu Wen suggested.

Maximilian took one glance at Qin Jiu and refused outright. Pretty much everyone felt uneasy around the invigilator... except You Huo.

Two minutes later, everyone watched with bated breath as You Huo and Qin Jiu entered one of the houses. Just as they were about to settle down, a familiar voice rang out from within.

“Attention. The time is now 7 a.m. UTC +8. The exam is be-

ginning. Part one is listening comprehension. The audio passages will begin playback in 30 minutes. Each recording will be played twice, so please listen carefully and answer attentively.

“Additionally, inappropriate relations between examinee and invigilator are strictly prohibited. Please arrange alternative rooming assignments.”

Everyone was baffled. You Huo became convinced the system was asking to be destroyed. The waiting period before the exam problem was published should have been tense, but the nonsensical warning completely changed the atmosphere. The examinees were left gaping, yet none dared utter a word. Yu Wen had intended to follow You Huo inside, but now he hovered indecisively at the door. The atmosphere was rather daunting...

You Huo shot Qin Jiu a sidelong glance before turning away impassively. Expressionless, he scanned the room until he found the source of the voice. It was a stuffed crow mounted on a brass stand with wings outstretched and beak open.

Its beak had been shut when they entered, so You Huo gave it a long, steady stare from above. “Which idiot’s operating this exam system? Who programmed such nonsense recordings? Can I file a complaint?”

The crow stayed silent, so You Huo turned to Qin Jiu. The device on the man’s wrist beeped and flashed red. He touched it and winked at You Huo.

“Just a friendly tip—some things are better left unasked. That was a warning to remind me not to leak unauthorised info. Ask again, and you’ll be disqualified from the exam.”

You Huo gave the crow's head a gentle pat.

Qin Jiu's dark eyes lingered on You Huo for a moment before shifting his gaze to the crow. "Fine, I'll switch rooms. I'll bunk with Maximilian instead."

The crow was silent for a few seconds. Just as everyone thought the matter had been settled, it started repeating its earlier statement: *"Inappropriate relations between examinee and invigilator are strictly prohibited. Please arrange alternative rooming assignments."*

To accommodate Maximilian, it even provided a multilingual translation.

"What about him?" Qin Jiu pointed to Yu Wen.

"Inappropriate relations between examinee and invigilator are strictly prohibited. Please arrange alternative rooming assignments."

Amid the parrot-like repetitions, the group realised this injunction wasn't aimed solely at Qin Jiu and You Huo. The blasted system was treating them all like horny bastards.

Yu Wen discreetly nudged his father. "This system must have some PTSD. It's so sensitive... Does sharing a room automatically imply bareback fucking? Squeezing into one bed means instant babies?"

Old Yu gave his son a stern look. "Watch your language!"

Qin Jiu also walked up to the crow. "Cancel the full-time in-person invigilating then. Let this examinee do whatever he wants."

Beep—violation warning.

Qin Jiu burst out laughing. He wasn't allowed to share a room with examinees, yet he had to monitor You Huo full-time. How was that supposed to work? He rubbed his wrist, eyes on the crow, as tension grew. He made to do something but stopped and said calmly, "How about the examinee stays in the bedroom, and I take the sofa?"

Thankfully, the crow stayed silent this time—a sign of acceptance. Everyone sighed in relief.

You Huo shot Qin Jiu a puzzled look. Despite their prickly dynamic, he had to admit that the invigilator had a unique aura. It seemed like the rules and regulations couldn't truly restrict him. Invigilator 001, negotiating with the exam system with a smile and a relaxed tone, looked like he could disrupt the system at any moment. His concession and compromise were like a lazy lion taking a nap—a lion was still a lion. If it wanted a nibble—who would be foolish enough to try and get in its way?

At least the lodging issue was sorted out. After all the hassle, the final arrangements weren't much different from the initial plan. However, their frustration had definitely increased.

The examinees soon discovered that the houses were almost identical, each with a crow in the corner acting as the system's messenger. Apart from the invigilator and You Huo, who had each touched its head once, no one else dared to approach the eerie figures.

Soon, 7:30 came around. Everyone waited anxiously as they heard shuffling and creaking from Dark Widow's house. She had awakened, and her door opened.

The crow spoke, "*Attention. The listening comprehension is about to begin. All examinees, please proceed to the exam site as soon as possible. Each recording will be played twice.*"

As soon as Dark Widow woke up, the chief looked ready to bolt like a mouse seeing a cat. Before rushing off, he told the group, "Dark Widow has a ritual for her visitors. You need to draw a card before entering."

Another card draw? You Huo's face fell.

"What kind of cards? Playing cards or those tarot cards that girls play with?" Yu Wen asked, showing some familiarity from his unsavoury school days. "Do we get fortune readings afterwards?"

"Would you even understand the reading?" Old Yu asked, annoyed.

"Good point, so why draw then?"

The chief mulled over his answer. "It determines if you'll sleep peacefully tonight." Anticipating their reaction, he added, "Don't even think about skipping it. You must draw a card, or you'll be worse off."

The chief shuddered, recalling something from the past. "Just remember—don't provoke her under any circumstances!"

With those ominous words, he hurried away, bundled in his coat, and scurried across the frozen river to hide in one of the nondescript houses, firmly shutting the door and windows. An eerie stillness blanketed over the village divided into two distinct areas by the river.

With the experience of past sessions, no one dallied. They

soon arrived at Dark Widow's door. A small, thin, vulture-like old lady stood there, waiting. Her face was like ancient tree bark, deeply furrowed, but the white of her eyes was bright and childlike, an eerie contrast that made the examinees uneasy. She wore an ornate headscarf, and both hands jangled with heavy strands of charms that seemed to weigh her arms down with every move. She stared at them unblinkingly for a few moments before bursting into a sudden cackle, her thin, pointed teeth sending chills down their spines. She muttered something under her breath before fanning out a deck of cards and nodding at Old Yu, who was at the front of the group.

"Sh-should I draw?" Old Yu said in a panic.

Dark Widow thrust the cards at him. Old Yu exchanged worried glances with the others before reluctantly taking a card. She flipped it over. Everyone gasped. They might not have understood the script, but they recognised the ominous, scythe-wielding figure on top of a pillar.

"Fuck..." Yu Wen whispered. "That's the Death card, isn't it? I can't recall the exact picture, but it looked like this..."

A chill ran down the examinees' spines. Dark Widow let out another high-pitched, girlish giggle. Just then, a sharp scratch came from the door she leant against, like fingernails against a board—a sound they knew too well from experience. A new question flickered into view on its surface in the blink of an eye.

Listening Comprehension: Answer the following questions based on what you hear.

1. What is Dark Widow's first and last name?

2. Where are Dark Widow's family members?

Please find them.

3. How many people are in Dark Widow's house?

Requirements: The answer cards will be collected every morning at 7:30 a.m. If no points are scored, one person will be randomly chosen for coffining.

Many eyebrows were raised. *Coffining*? What did that even mean?

As soon as the information was all displayed, Dark Widow opened her mouth, revealing needle-like teeth. She started speaking, but it sounded like gibberish. Eight faces stared back in bewilderment. Another ominous scratch came from the door, and another line appeared:

The recording has been played once. It will be played a second time. Please listen carefully.

Dark Widow opened her mouth again, but a hand suddenly thrust forward, stuffing a ball of cloth into it. Her words were instantly muffled.

"Excuse me, can you wait a moment?" said You Huo.

Everyone was flabbergasted. The new teammates, Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao, found their jaws dropping. *What the hell is he doing?!*

"Huo, what..." Yu Wen eyed the cloth in Dark Widow's mouth and whispered, "Where did you get that?"

"Grabbed it from the room," You Huo replied. After a pause, he added, "It's not dirty."

Yu Wen blinked. *My dear cousin, is hygiene really the issue*

here?

But the cloth did appear impeccable. It sported an ornate floral pattern and fragrance like the incense smoke from Dark Widow's house, so the others tried to reassure themselves that at least it wasn't something Dark Widow disliked. Still... was this really okay to do? Wouldn't she become cross? The chief had warned not to upset her. Now this, only a few minutes into the session?

Qin Jiu, now You Huo's personal invigilator, spoke up, "Can't you go a single day without breaking the rules?"

"Did the system prohibit pausing the audio in the announcement?"

"Well, no, it didn't."

"What about stuffing her mouth?"

"No, not for that either."

"Then what rule did I violate exactly?"

Qin Jiu was rather amused by this. He gestured for You Huo to continue, curious to see what other antics the young man had in store.

You Huo pulled out his phone from his jeans pocket, opened the voice recorder app, and removed the cloth from Dark Widow's mouth. "Here, go ahead."

For a moment, no one said anything, not even Dark Widow.

"Right! We can use our phones!" someone finally exclaimed.

At this point, the group realised they had not been told to turn off their devices for this session. Just minutes ago, some of them had even checked the time, but no one had thought

to record the audio. You Huo's move spurred everyone into action. In an instant, all the examinees whipped out their phones, pointing them at Dark Widow, who suddenly had seven phones in her face.

Two seconds later, 001 also took out his phone.

Only then did Chen Bin catch himself. "Is this really okay? What if she gets angry?"

"Too late for that now," You Huo replied.

The two new examinees suddenly felt they might have hopped on the wrong boat, but it was too late to get off. Chen Bin stood with his phone in hand, trembling, but then he noticed that Dark Widow's eyes were fixed solely on You Huo. To her, the others seemed irrelevant. Her pupils were extremely dilated, making her irises appear vast and deep. When unmoving, they resembled a corpse's vacant stare. Anyone subjected to that gaze would have felt dread, yet You Huo was completely unfazed. Though she glared at him, he casually looked down to fiddle with his phone, saving the recently recorded file. He was so calm that everyone else felt bad about panicking.

You Huo renamed the file "Gibberish" and asked Dark Widow, "Anything else?"

She stared at him blankly for a moment before breaking into that giggle again. It was as if the mouth gag and recording were trivial interludes, or perhaps she was keeping a score to settle later. Her bony, withered fingers grabbed You Huo's wrist and dragged him into the house. Then she fixed her gaze on the others, who weren't as bold. Under her stare, they meekly filed in

through the door while she nodded in approval.

Liang Yuanhao was the last to enter. As he stepped over the stone threshold, the door slammed shut with an ominous creak. The lock clanked into place as if something had been following on his heels. Staring at the secured entrance, the examinees suddenly recalled the last question about the number of people in her house. They instantly paled and squeezed close together, not wanting to be left alone, while the invigilator made himself comfortable in an armchair.

Dark Widow's house was more spacious than expected. It was said that the Roma people, no matter where they lived, preserved the customs of their ancestors by decorating every room like a tent carriage with carpets, rugs, and tapestries on every surface. The thick, heady incense was stronger inside, making them feel lightheaded and dazed. Chipped teacups, teaspoons, and trays cluttered the windowsill and hob. A jar sat on the wooden table, filled with some dark substance. You Huo leant down and sniffed, catching the scent of aged tea and hints of tobacco smoke. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but it was a mild reprieve from the overpowering incense.

Near the furnace were two wicker baskets brimming with balls of yarn and knitting needles of varying lengths. Dark Widow reached into the basket, her countless bangles and charms jingling and weighing her hand down. She took out a few dolls that were incredibly ugly. Their faces and limbs were made of faded, greying fabric, stuffed with cotton into rounded lumps and cylinders, and stitched together haphazardly with coarse

yarn. Most of them were missing heads or limbs, clearly not complete, but one was, and Dark Widow put it into her apron. They looked like voodoo dolls used in tarot or dark magic.

She then pointed to a wooden rack in the corner and spoke in her indecipherable tongue. This time, the group was well-prepared; their devices had not stopped recording from the moment they entered, so her garbled speech was captured. You Huo looked at the rack, where some completed dolls sat in a row. Dark Widow added the one from her apron and then distributed the yarn and needles among the examinees.

She uttered something else, pointing to the baskets. Even though she spoke Romani, her meaning was clear: finish the incomplete dolls. She took out an hourglass and flipped it over on the table before walking away, back hunched. As soon as she stepped out of the house, the examinees heard a series of clicks and clunks from the doors' locks.

Chen Bin quickly rushed to the windows and tugged on them. "They're all locked... She's locked us in. What do we do?"

Yu Wen nodded towards the bamboo baskets. "Seems obvious. She even set an hourglass—either we can leave when the sand runs out, or we finish stitching these dolls before time's up."

The group exchanged uncertain glances before reluctantly sitting on the floor. Each picked up an unfinished voodoo doll and stared at it, lost in thought.

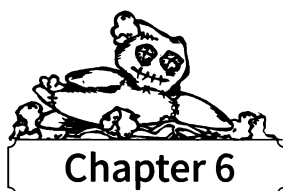
Old Yu sighed heavily. "What else can we do? Let's stitch. Dark Widow is the 'exam problem', so we have to follow her de-

mands. We can figure out the next steps once the sand runs out, right?”

He then turned to You Huo. The group had deferred to the young man as their de facto leader and sought his opinion on everything they said or did. However, he noticed that his nephew hadn't rushed to join them. Instead, You Huo stood by the bed, peeking through a parted curtain. The others tensed up.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” He wanted to see where Dark Widow had gone. Outside, her hunched silhouette was already far in the distance. In the blink of an eye, she vanished into the inky black woods.



You Huo let go of the curtain. He headed towards the furnace, but he noticed a doll lying askew near the edge of the bottom tier of the rack, about to fall over. Covered in a layer of dust, it was unremarkable—except for one protruding leg that caught his eye. He walked over and picked it up. Judging by the faded fabric and caked grime, the doll must have been crafted a long time ago in a hasty, crude manner. Crooked stitches connected the limbs to the torso, and the colour of the spindly legs didn't match the arms. The odd little thing gave off an unsettling, almost pitiful vibe, but its bizarre, ramshackle appearance wasn't what had caught You Huo's attention. There was a pattern on one of its legs that was a stark contrast to its shoddy craftsmanship. It looked like an elaborate tattoo inked around a person's ankle, appearing to be a strand of delicate bellflowers. You Huo studied the tattooed pattern intently for several moments before reaching over to prod the invigilator, who was lounging on the armchair.

Qin Jiu had been leaning back with his head propped up, watching You Huo. When he felt the prodding, he drawled lazily, “What is it?”

You Huo held the doll’s leg towards him. “You seen it? I’m bad with faces, so I may be mistaken.”

Qin Jiu looked at the pattern. “Why should I have seen it?”

You Huo tutted impatiently. “The items I cleaned out of the time-out room... the stuff in the bucket I left outside your door, didn’t you see something with this pattern in there?”

Qin Jiu just stared back at him blankly, amazed that the guy had the audacity to bring it up.

Indeed, if anyone had the audacity to bring anything up, it would be You Huo.

“I put the piece with the tattoo right in the middle of the bucket. It was on top, clearly visible. You must’ve seen it.”

Qin Jiu laughed in exasperation. “So I was supposed to pay attention to your disgusting prank, was I?” He flipped the doll’s leg over and examined it. “Besides, if I answer you seriously, will that count as extra assistance?”

You Huo took the doll back. “Never mind then.”

The others, never having been to the time-out room, were baffled by their cryptic exchange, but interrupting was the last thing on their minds.

Old Yu, a seasoned drunkard, struggled to do delicate work with trembling hands. He tried to thread the yarn through the eye of a big needle but did not succeed even after repeated jabs for five minutes. Yu Wen couldn’t stand it any longer. He

grabbed the needle and yarn from his father.

"This is what you get for drinking so much!" he grumbled as he threaded the needle for his father and tossed it back. "Shaky hands now, shaky feet later. Serves you right."

The others followed suit, threading their needles and preparing to stitch their dolls. Only Yu Yao sat there, clutching her doll.

"These dolls," she whispered after some time, "they creep me out. Can we not stitch them?"

Her voice was barely a murmur. Only Old Yu, who was close by, heard her. Needle in hand, he was about to reassure her when You Huo said, "Hold on."

His sudden command startled the examinees, and they stopped to look at him anxiously.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?" Chen Bin asked.

You Huo bent over to check the contents of the baskets. He rummaged through the pile of arms, legs, and heads, and picked up a few crudely made doll limbs before tossing them back in. "Don't stitch them," he said, dusting off his hands.

"Why not?" Liang Yuanhao, who was usually reticent, couldn't help but ask.

"Take a look." You Huo pointed to the baskets. "The fabric scraps here are all like the same greyish colour, yet the finished dolls on the rack have limbs and bodies in completely different shades."

Liang Yuanhao furrowed. "So?"

"So, nothing." You Huo straightened up. "I've just got a

hunch something's off."

Chen Bin could see the group trusted You Huo. He gave Liang Yuanhao a nudge and shot You Huo a sheepish smile. "The colour thing is pretty weird, but Dark Widow told us to stitch the dolls. Are you sure nothing will happen if we don't?"

"I'm not."

Chen Bin nearly choked. Liang Yuanhao was about to argue, but the former shook his head and tugged him on the arm.

You Huo's patience was worn thin by Dark Widow's cryptic riddles. "How can anyone be a hundred percent certain about anything? To do or not to do, it's up to you." With that, he pulled a chair closer to the furnace and sat down, silently warming himself.

"Hey... you're really not gonna do it?" Yu Wen asked, glancing nervously at the doll in his hands.

You Huo rested his chin on his fingers, giving a nonchalant hum in response.

"Alright then, I... I won't do it either." Yu Wen eventually put the doll back into the basket.

Following their earlier experience, everyone else from the session with Hunter Alpha put down their dolls too. This was a risky choice. In this world, nothing was ever certain—every decision was a gamble with one's life. Only You Huo remained abnormally calm, like a peculiar adventurer—cold on the outside but wild and reckless at his core.

This bold choice swayed everyone except Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao. The latter was especially under immense pres-

sure due to his low scores in the past three exams. He viewed everyone with suspicion. He hadn't been with the others in the last session, so he didn't know the group's scores or witness You Huo's past performance. To him, You Huo had been pushing the limits since the session began, every move he made challenging the boundaries of the exam system, provoking all the mysterious entities. He couldn't understand such reckless behaviour. Why not play it safe? Why go against the rules of this horrific place? Was a few more days of life really too much to ask?

"Suit yourselves," he snapped angrily. The successive deaths around him had left him jittery and unsure of what to do next. Compared to You Huo's brashness, he preferred to follow Dark Widow's instructions. He picked up a doll's leg and started to stitch, the coarse yarn grating against the fabric.

Chen Bin glanced between Liang Yuanhao and You Huo, torn between the two approaches.

The sand in the hourglass drained quickly, leaving the top half empty in no time. Liang Yuanhao, clumsy as ever, managed to stitch only two legs onto his doll despite his best efforts. Chen Bin had taken a while to decide. In the end, he chose to stitch but only managed to half-finish a single arm.

Clack. The lock on the door turned, and the hunchback woman shuffled back inside. She scanned the room before walking to Liang Yuanhao and Chen Bin with small, measured steps.

"Hmm..." She lifted the half-stitched dolls from their hands, frowning in obvious disapproval.

Liang Yuanhao's face paled, and he muttered bitterly, "It was

them, they wasted my time. Otherwise, I would've easily finished..."

Dark Widow looked at everyone else. The sight of their empty hands made her face fall. The group watched her uneasily, expecting her to explode with anger, but then her expression shifted to a sly grin as she licked her lips. She put all the dolls back into the basket and tidied up while muttering something indecipherable. Then she shooed them all out of her house.

As soon as the door closed, the crow spoke, *"That is the end of the listening comprehension. You will be given sufficient time to reflect on what you have heard. The reading comprehension begins at 7:30 a.m. tomorrow. Please do not be late. We wish everyone the best of luck."*

You Huo and Qin Jiu returned to their house, and the others followed like chicks trailing after their mother hen until the living room was packed.

"So what was the point of stitching the dolls?" Yu Wen scratched his head. "Didn't seem to matter whether we did or not."

Old Yu patted his back. "Don't get your hopes up. Nothing's ever that easy. Maybe the consequences just haven't kicked in yet. Just you wait."

You Huo ignored them, pulling up a recording on his phone. "Anyone have a translation app?"

"I do, I do!" Yu Wen piped up.

"But there's no signal here," Chen Bin said.

"Mine works offline. It's got a built-in dictionary and voice

recognition!”

The examinees buzzed with excitement. You Huo hit play and tossed his phone to Yu Wen, who cradled his own phone reverently and listened intently. When the recording finished, everyone stared at Yu Wen with bated breath.

About two minutes later, the teenager’s face paled. “Fuck...”

“What is it?”

“The app doesn’t support Romani...”

“You call that a translation app?”

Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao opened their own translation apps in disbelief, only to find that theirs didn’t support the language either. The group exchanged defeated looks. It was infuriating that the system managed to find a language so obscure that even translation softwares couldn’t recognise it. *Well, fuck. Looks like we’ll be dying in the foreign language exam.*

“What about getting internet access?” Yu Wen tapped his phone furiously, growing agitated. “Maybe some dictionaries aren’t installed? If we could get online, would that help? Can the invigilator assist with that?”

All eyes turned to Qin Jiu, who was by a cabinet in the corner, fiddling with an incense burner out of boredom. Finding the incense smoke too thick, Qin Jiu twisted open the lid and sifted through the ashes inside with his long fingers, unbothered by the heat. He plucked out the source and tossed it aside. Without even glancing back, he said flatly. “You’re not the one who drew the card, so why should I care?”

Hearing his indifferent response, the group looked implor-

ingly to You Huo instead. But before he could speak, Yu Wen, who first suggested the translation app idea, calmed down. “Never mind, I must have all the dictionary files installed. If multiple apps don’t support Romani, getting online probably won’t be much help anyway. We’d just waste the card for nothing.”

Chen Bin glanced around before voicing the question he’d been holding back. “What card? I’ve heard you mention it a couple of times since we teamed up, but I didn’t know how to ask.”

Since the random draw had been held in the open, there was no need for secrecy. Those from the previous session explained the cards’ function to Chen Bin.

The man’s jaw dropped. “Wait... they’re real? I’ve only heard rumours and assumed they were a myth. How did you get a chance to draw a card?”

The others averted their eyes, knowing their exceptional score was simply due to dumb luck, courtesy of the system that teamed them with the remarkable You Huo—their Mr Coattail.

The tactful Chen Bin didn’t pry after seeing everyone’s varied expressions. He exchanged a glance with Liang Yuanhao, whose tightly pursed lips and grim face mirrored his own troubled expression. While they hadn’t seen the reward cards, they had heard enough through hearsay. Earning such an opportunity, regardless of the reason, proved one thing—the group was good. Or, more precisely, the group had someone truly formidable, and it was obvious who that person was. Yet they had made the

opposite call of that person's decision.

When the others continued discussing, Chen Bin nudged Liang Yuanhao lightly, asking under his breath, "Any regrets?"

Liang Yuanhao scowled. "The consequences haven't been revealed yet. Just because he made the right choice once doesn't mean he'll be right every time. Either way, I don't regret it."

"I do. A little." Chen Bin stared at the floor, his face furrowed.

"Huo, should we ask the invigilator for help?" Yu Wen asked.

"No." You Huo was on his phone, perched on the arm of the sofa.

Qin Jiu replaced the lid on the burner, wiped his fingers with a cloth, and strolled over to stand behind You Huo, resting his hands on the back of the sofa. "You sure about that? The card's been in my pocket for so long. I've been itching to use it."

You Huo scoffed coldly, not even sparing a look.

Qin Jiu found the nonchalance intriguing. You Huo had no problem pinning him with endless trivial questions and commands, but when it came to using the additional assistance, he flat-out refused, as if accepting help was beneath him.

A tough nut to crack, 001 mused.

You Huo tapped his phone, and Dark Widow's girlish voice filled the room again.

If the language were Germanic, they might have had a chance to understand it even if none of them spoke it. Repeating it or slowing it down might have helped. But Romani was utterly incomprehensible. Playing the recording repeatedly wouldn't

have changed anything. The group stood in tense silence, overwhelmed by the gibberish.

After replaying the recording a dozen times, someone clapped, jolting everyone else back to alertness.

“Who was that? What’s going on?”

It was Maximilian. He sat with his mouth agape, unmoving until the final two sentences finished playing. Then an excited look appeared on his face as he blurted out a stream of words. He spoke so fast that his words also sounded like incomprehensible babbling to Old Yu and the others. They looked at You Huo, confused.

“What did he say?”

You Huo furrowed his brow. “He said that her Romani was mixed with some Farsi and Russian words.” Turning to Maximilian, he asked, “*Sind Sie sicher?*”

Although Maximilian didn’t look like he was of mixed heritage, he knew several languages. He slowed his speech to explain that one of his grandfathers was Russian, so while he wasn’t fluent, he knew quite a few Russian words. As for Farsi, he’d taken it as an elective in university.

Upon hearing this, the group immediately grew animated with renewed hope. Romani people often absorbed loanwords from the local populations into their own language during their migration. They would also pick up local languages, which explained why Dark Widow understood the examinees. The village chief had mentioned that Dark Widow had fled here with Russians during the war, so it made sense her speech patterns

were influenced by her former Slavic companions, perhaps without her even realising it.

Yu Wen eagerly looked at Maximilian. "Come on! Tell us! What words did you catch?"

Maximilian flushed, his doughy face turning beet red as he hesitated with multiple false starts before finally mustering a few muddled syllables that You Huo translated in succession. "Grave, flower, needle, sun."

You Huo waited for a second, then looked at the rest of the group. "That's it."

A dejected silence fell over the room.

"Um, what were the exam questions again?" Old Yu asked.

Yu Wen recited them monotonously. "What is Dark Widow's name? Where's her family? And how many people are in her house?"

Which of those four words could possibly answer any of those? The flicker of hope was quickly snuffed out. Everyone leaning forward in anticipation pulled back, their faces now clouded with disappointment.

By then, the sun had slanted westward and slipped behind the trees, casting a dim, hazy glow over the village. Seated by the window, Yu Yao lifted a corner of the curtains and murmured, "Villagers..."

"Huh?" Yu Wen leant closer. "What about the villagers?"

Drawing the curtains fully open, Yu Yao pointed out the small, circular, stone-framed window. "There are people across the river. Probably villagers, right?"

The frozen river glistened faintly in the twilight. On the opposite bank, a few shadowy figures emerged from their houses, buckets slung over their shoulders as they cautiously made their way to the riverbank.

“You’re right,” Chen Bin murmured. “The chief did mention that villagers would come out to get some air in the evenings. Safety in numbers, I s’pose. But...” He trailed off, frowning. *How much safety could a handful of people really provide?*

Even so, where there were people, there were potential clues. You Huo zipped his black down jacket up to his chin, hiding the lower half of his face, and headed out the door. Everyone else followed closely behind.

Qin Jiu strolled casually alongside You Huo, keeping half a step behind. “Did you buy those clothes with your points?”

You Huo narrowed his eyes at him.

“Though I’ve received several ‘gifts’ from you, I’m still happy to offer some friendly advice,” Qin Jiu said, hands buried in his coat pockets as they walked across the frozen river. “Few ever pass the exam, at least from what I’ve seen as an invigilator for many years. For most examinees, it’s best to not waste points early on.”

You Huo’s nose was hidden beneath his collar, but each breath still appeared as a white mist in the cold air. As he reached the opposite bank, his light brown eyes roamed until they settled on a middle-aged woman dressed in typical attire for the frozen borderlands. Bundled up in an ankle-length winter coat and an oversized scarf that threatened to swallow her

head, she squatted by the riverbank and called over to the man next to her. "Come on, let's cut the ice."

You Huo observed them for a while before tossing a remark back to Qin Jiu. "Save your advice. I don't need it."

With that, he walked to the two villagers, who looked at him, momentarily startled. Then their frozen expressions slowly melted into smiles. "You must be one of the visitors? The chief mentioned you'd be arriving."

You Huo looked at the chief's house, noting the tightly shuttered doors and windows. "Yes, we arrived this morning."

The villagers nodded with little enthusiasm. "Are you staying across the river?"

"Yes."

An awkward silence fell as the two exchanged glances. "Don't you have any questions? Adjusting to the village life must be tough."

You Huo raised his gaze. "It's fine."

More uncomfortable silence as they studied him. Then they squatted down to continue chipping away at the ice, all the while stealing furtive glances at You Huo.

"Did you... visit Dark Widow's place?" the woman finally blurted.

You Huo nodded. "Yes, we spent the afternoon there."

"Oh... What did you do?"

"Made a few dolls. Not sure if you've seen them before."

The villagers paused, their expressions rigid with discomfort.

"Though a few of us didn't make any."

For some reason, they recoiled again at this piece of information.

After a pause, the woman looked up. “No, only visitors visit her. We rarely cross the river.”

“There have been other visitors?”

She nodded. “Yes, they usually come in groups like yourselves.”

“What happened to them?”

The woman looked confused for a moment, then slowly shook her head. “I guess... I’ve never seen them leave.”

The examinees who had just arrived nearly slipped in shock and almost fell upon hearing this.

Qin Jiu walked over to You Huo while lowering his head slightly. “You really are a genius at making friends, aren’t you?”

You Huo was about to retort when the male villager’s iron bucket clattered on the ice with a loud clang. Both You Huo and Qin Jiu turned to see the man staring at You Huo for several seconds before shifting his gaze to Qin Jiu with the same intense scrutiny. Finally, he spoke in a slow, bemused tone. “I feel like... I’ve seen you two before.”

You Huo started. “Who? Us?”

“Yes, I’ve seen you before.” The man grabbed You Huo’s hand. His hand was as rough as sandpaper, chafing painfully against You Huo’s skin with an unyielding chill.

You Huo wrenched his hand free, his expression darkening as he flexed his wrist. “Where exactly have you seen us?”

The man stood still, brow furrowed in confusion for a few

moments. Then, as if he didn't hear You Huo's question, he repeated, "I'm sure I've seen you... yes, I've seen you before."

"Oh, here we go again," the woman sighed, setting down her ice pick. "Don't mind him, he has this... condition."

"What do you mean?"

She tapped her temple. "He's not quite right up here. It comes and goes in episodes. When it happens, he likes to latch onto people, insisting he recognises them, asking if they know him, and if they remember him."

As if on cue, the man grabbed Qin Jiu by the arm. "You know me, don't you? You remember me?"

"See?" the woman said. "Just like that."

"How did he go mad?" Qin Jiu asked.

The woman thought for a while, then shook her head. "He's always been this way."

She called out for help, and two other villagers drawing water by the river hurried over. They took the madman by his arms.

"Take him back," she said. "He'll be like this for a while."

The villagers nodded and started dragging the man back into a house. On the way, the man grabbed onto Yu Wen, who was closest to him, and struggled against his restraints. "I've seen you! I really have!"

Yu Wen started to protest, but he couldn't help feeling a twinge of pity for the man. His ashen skin was cracked, especially around his mouth and eyes, due to the dryness. A few wisps of grey hair sprouted from his sideburns, giving him a haggard, worn look. "Hey, don't pull him so hard. Do you need help?"

The two villagers firmly shook their heads. “It’s okay, we’re used to it. He’s surprisingly strong when he gets like this. You won’t be able to hold him back. Besides...”

“You’re visiting Dark Widow,” one said bluntly. “We... don’t welcome outsiders into our homes.”

They soon dragged the madman into a red-roofed house. The door slammed shut behind him and muffled all sound. The bizarre interlude left the examinees exchanging bewildered looks. These villagers were like NPCs in a game, following routines that were hard to distinguish as scripted or spontaneous. Without context, it was unwise to meddle rashly. The group simply watched the strange incident play out, holding their ground rather than intervening unnecessarily.

You Huo made a mental note of the house’s location before turning his attention back to the woman. After a few fruitless minutes of chatting, his patience wore thin. “Does anyone here speak Romani?”

The woman began hacking away at the ice. She raised her chisel high before slamming it into the frozen river, sending shards flying. Each strike was so intense it was unsettling, as if she might use that same ferocity had it been a person lying there. She hacked away for a few more moments before shaking her head. “No, none of us speak it.”

“But the chief said that Dark Widow provides services. If nobody understands Romani, how do you communicate with her?” Old Yu asked.

“It’s always the visitors who seek her out, not us villagers,” she

replied. “And she hasn’t always been alone—she had a Russian husband and a few kids with her. She doesn’t only speak Romani.”

A Russian man? And kids? The examinees felt like they’d stumbled onto something important. “Were they her family?”

The woman nodded. “I s’pose so.”

“Well, where did they go?” one examinee asked.

She shook her head. “They left. I don’t know where exactly. Maybe back home? They just disappeared one day without notice.”

“Does anyone know where they went?”

Another shake of the head. “No, none of us wanted to pry into her affairs.”

Deflated, the group exchanged crestfallen looks.

You Huo glanced at the setting sun. “Are there any graves nearby?”

The woman froze mid-swing with her ice pick. She then looked up and smiled. The smile made her face livelier, but it was also unsettling, sending chills down their spines. Lifting a gnarled hand, she gestured at the surrounding trees. “You see these trees?”

They all turned to look at the dense woods surrounding the village.

Her smile widened. “That’s the cemetery. This whole ring of trees...” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “They’re all graves.”

The sun dipped below the trees, its last rays vanishing as dusk quickly turned to night. The woman looked up at the sky and

hurriedly grabbed her bucket to leave.

“Wait.” You Huo caught her arm.

“What are you doing?! It’s dark out, let me go! I need to go home!” She was much stronger than You Huo had expected, and she managed to wrench herself free from the young man who was caught off guard. Clutching her bucket, she backed up. “You should hurry back too, it’s nighttime!”

“What happens after dark? The chief mentioned that villagers don’t come out at night.”

The woman shuddered and pulled her scarf tighter around herself, glancing around nervously. Then she whispered, “Evil spirits roam freely in the dark. They’ll knock on your doors, pry open your windows, lurk by your bedside, or slither underneath. You’d best be careful...”

Then, she pressed a finger to her lips. “Shh.”

An uneasy chill ran down the examinees’ spines.

Having delivered her foreboding message, the woman turned and hurried away, her iron bucket swinging wildly. Her pace was remarkably brisk in the falling darkness, and she reached the houses in the distance. She opened the door to one and peered warily about before ducking in and shutting the door and windows.

An eerie stillness descended over the village. A few scattered lights flickered faintly, their wavering glow only adding to the sense of trepidation.

Chen Bin rubbed his arms. “What should we do? We’ve got no leads for the listening portion. Should we... head back and

analyse the recording again?"

The dejected suggestion spoke volumes of their fading hope. Without a translation tool, no villagers speaking Romani, and now, ominous tales of malicious night spirits... How were they supposed to answer the exam problem?

"I'm heading into the woods," You Huo declared abruptly.

"You're going where?" Old Yu nearly had a heart attack, but before he could finish his sentence, You Huo's footsteps were already fading into the distance.

"Dammit," Old Yu muttered, not daring to swear at his nephew. He spat on the ground and yelled, "At least take a light with you!"

You Huo lazily waved a hand, not even looking back. The rest of the group exchanged uneasy looks.

"Does anyone have a flashlight? A phone would work too!" Old Yu looked around urgently. "Mine died earlier. Fuck... I can't let him go into a goddamn graveyard alone!"

But the others could only shake their heads apologetically. The endless audio playback in the afternoon had drained everyone's phone batteries. The remaining battery power was too precious to waste on a light that wouldn't last.

"What about you two veterans? Do you have a flashlight?" Old Yu turned to Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao.

"No," the latter said.

Chen Bin awkwardly waved his hands. "They sell them at the service centre shops, but..." He grimaced. "Our point totals were just too pathetic to splurge."

“Well, erm...” Yu Wen piped up, fishing out a slender object from his pocket and offering it over. “I, uh, spent half a point on this glowstick. Would that work?”

Old Yu slapped him hard. “Who in his right mind would buy a glowstick? Why not a pack of matches? That would’ve been way more useful.”

Yu Wen yelped in pain. “I’ve read too many novels. Y’know, you can’t use flames in many places.”

Clutching the glowstick, he grabbed his dad by the arm and chased after You Huo.

“I... I’ll go too,” Yu Yao spoke up timidly.

Once Maximilian followed her, that left only Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao behind in bewildered silence.

“Are they... really this reckless?” Chen Bin murmured. “Should we go after them?”

Liang Yuanhao’s expression remained stony. “The villager said there’s nothing but graves. Go if you want, but I’m going back to the house.”

An eerie stillness permeated the woods; even the birds didn’t break the silence. You Huo’s footsteps crunched on some branches, which he casually kicked aside.

Qin Jiu let out a derisive huff. “Could you be a bit more considerate? Someone’s walking behind you.”

Without a word, You Huo kicked more branches behind him, which elicited an annoyed tut from the invigilator. With his hands shoved in his pockets, You Huo ambled around the

graveyard as if he were in a park, unfazed by the darkness.

“Are you sure you don’t need a light? I can lend you one,” Qin Jiu said.

“Thanks, but my night vision’s excellent. Why don’t you shut up and keep quiet for a bit?” You Huo replied flatly.

“I’d rather not.”

Qin Jiu’s cheeky response was ignored.

After a while, the invigilator stopped. “Who in the hell is that?”

You Huo paused, listening intently. He could just make out Yu Wen’s trembling voice. “Huo... where are you...”

Through the trees, a faint greenish glow bobbed, barely illuminating a few faces. You Huo snapped a handful of branches and turned it into a makeshift torch with his lighter.

“Over there! I see a light!” Yu Wen cried out in relief, scrambling over with the others in tow.

Old Yu held onto a tree, wheezing. “Hey... you... for crying out loud, what are you looking for?”

“Nothing, just looking around,” You Huo said.

Everyone’s faces paled instantly.

“Well... did you find anything? If not, maybe we should head back?” Old Yu suggested.

You Huo swept the flaming branch across the ground near his feet. “Look, a line of graves.”

Everyone recoiled. Their eyes followed the illuminated path to a line of weather-worn headstones half-buried in the loamy soil. Odd letters were carved on the stones, looking like circles

or squiggly worms, much like the letters on the stone marker at the village entrance. Without a doubt, they were the work of Dark Widow.

Yu Wen looked around in confusion. “How did you find this place?”

“Dark Widow came into these woods earlier today.” You Huo squatted down and waved his cousin over. “Does your phone have any juice left?”

“A little.”

“Take some pictures, then copy it all on Dark Widow’s door.”

The rest of the group exchanged baffled looks. “What?” *To provoke her even more?*

“What’s usually found on gravestones?” You Huo asked.

Old Yu replied, “Names of the deceased, photos, birth and death dates.”

You Huo blinked.

A flicker of self-preservation made Old Yu quickly add, “Oh, and the names of their relatives. Plus whoever carved the stone.”

The others froze in realisation. Right... Dark Widow had carved these! Which meant her name had to be etched into the inscriptions!

You Huo held the torch while Yu Wen photographed the gravestones. Suddenly, You Huo felt someone lightly step on his right foot.

“Why’d you step on me?” he asked Qin Jiu, annoyed.

The invigilator looked confused. He glanced down and saw fresh smudges of dirt on You Huo’s shoe; it looked like someone

had stepped on it. He met the young man's gaze. "Now, why would I do that?"

"Who knows." You Huo eyed him suspiciously. No one else stood within reach except Qin Jiu. And who among the examinees would be brave enough to try such antics?

Before You Huo could ponder further, Yu Wen exclaimed in frustration, "Hey, who kicked me? I'm getting blurry photos over here."

Old Yu quickly raised his hands. "Wasn't me."

Yu Yao shook her head as well. "Not me either."

Yu Wen grumbled, "Well, if it wasn't you two, then who was it?"

A tense silence fell as everyone slowly looked down. You Huo swept the torch across the ground and noticed strange disturbances in the soil—subtle mounds of leaves and branches pushed aside. It looked like something had crawled through the dirt just moments ago. They froze, exchanging horrified looks as the flickering firelight cast a sickly pallor over their faces. Yu Wen's lips parted to speak, but You Huo quickly raised a finger to his own lips, signalling for silence.

In the stillness that followed, faint rustling and scrabbling sounds began to echo through the woods and overlap in the mountain enclave, making it impossible to pinpoint their source. Some noises seemed worryingly close—practically at their feet. Most of the examinees stood paralysed, too scared to move.

You Huo turned, sweeping the torch across a patch of under-

growth. Under everyone's disbelieving gazes, several sickly pale and indistinct forms flitted through the bushes before vanishing in a blink. Judging by their trails, they were headed into the village.

Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao shared a house. They decided roaming into the woods at night was unwise, but wandering around the village was just as risky. The best option was to hide in the house and sleep through the night.

Chen Bin stood by the window, anxious. "Should we really just leave them? It doesn't feel right..."

"This isn't your first session, Bin." Liang Yuanhao leant against the bathroom sink, splashing water on his face. "How are you still this indecisive? This is a team-graded exam. When someone answers correctly, we all get the points. No need for everyone to charge ahead recklessly. If they find clues or answers, good for everyone. We'll owe them one, but we can repay the favour later."

"What if they don't find anything? Or get into trouble?" Chen Bin pressed.

"Then..." Liang Yuanhao grabbed a towel to wipe his face. He said, his words muffled by the towel, "It's their fault for being reckless. We warned them, didn't we? The driver and the villagers all said not to go into those woods. If they ignore the risks, that's on them for being so foolish with their lives."

Chen Bin still looked listless and anxious, so Liang Yuanhao continued, saying, "To be honest, after three sessions, the big-

gest lesson I've learnt is that we need to prioritise staying alive. We can't afford to all act recklessly, and we can't put all the eggs in one basket. By hanging back, we keep our options open. If the others run into trouble, at least we'll still be here to continue."

After spacing out for a bit, he added, "It maximises our chances of success."

Chen Bin looked at him. "Yuanhao, you sound like a human calculator weighing every probability."

Liang Yuanhao ran an agitated hand over his buzz cut. "Enough analysis. I'm turning in. You should too."

They each burrowed under separate blankets, determined to fall asleep quickly. Though they expected a restless night, the incense seemed to have a soporific effect. Before long, snores filled the room.

A faint knock suddenly came from their neighbouring houses, muted yet unnervingly audible in the stillness of the night. Chen Bin rolled over in bed while Liang Yuanhao's snores droned on. Neither of them was awake to notice.

The knocking migrated, sounding from house to house, drawing steadily nearer. Soon, the ominous rapping reached their door.

Knock-knock-knock.

Chen Bin rolled over again, his eyelids fluttering.

Knock-knock-knock.

This time, he jolted awake, lying petrified with his eyes shut tight, straining to pinpoint the sound's origin. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead as he realised it was right beneath his bed.

Something was tapping on the planks under his back.

Knock-knock-knock.

It seemed to know he was awake. Three more raps, and then an airy voice pierced the silence. "I'm looking for naughty visitors. Have you stitched any dolls today?"

Chen Bin nearly wet himself. He squeezed his eyes tighter, feigning sleep.

The voice asked persistently, "Tell me—have you stitched dolls today?"

Beside him, Liang Yuanhao's leg twitched; he was evidently roused as well.

The voice was right by their ears now. "One last time—have you stitched any dolls?"

Dead silence filled the room.

The voice let out a soft, disappointed sigh. "Ah..."

Suddenly, Liang Yuanhao cried out, "I have, I have! We both have!"

"Oh..." The voice sounded almost regretful. "Well-behaved visitors. Then I suppose you'll have to live..."

The implication hung heavy in the air as the two men processed the chilling words, a hint of relief washing over them.

"Who stitched more?" the voice asked again.

"Me! It was me!" Liang Yuanhao blurted. "I stitched two legs! He only did half an arm!"

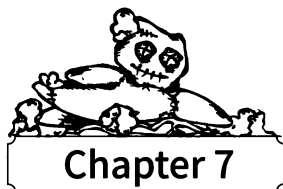
Chen Bin gaped in horror.

"How wonderful," the voice purred with satisfaction.

Liang Yuanhao sighed in relief and dared to crack an eye

open. A glint of steel in the darkness—the last thing he saw was a deathly pale arm holding a cleaver high, swinging it down at his legs. In that split second, he was struck by how eerily similar the motion was to that village woman furiously chipping away at the ice...

It's the same...



You Huo's group wandered through the woods nearly all night, scouring every corner without finding a trace of those crawling creatures. The soil looked undisturbed after that incident, and the dead undergrowth appeared untouched. Only when the first light of dawn began to brighten the sky did they finally leave the woods.

"Wasn't so scary after all, was it?" Old Yu muttered. "They said to never go into those woods, but we spent the whole night there, and nothing happened."

Yu Wen's face was pale. "I've had enough scares for one night..."

"But we're alive and unharmed, aren't we?"

"That's true."

Yet, they couldn't ignore the mysterious movements and noises. They suspected that those deathly pale things went around them because there were other targets.

Dawn arrived swiftly, but the villagers' houses stayed dark be-

hind cracked, weather-beaten windows while some doors were draped with spiderwebs. At first glance, it looked like an abandoned village.

To the group's surprise, You Huo stopped in front of a house. The others paused and remembered that this was the home of the madman.

"You all go ahead," You Huo said before going up to the door.

"You're going to talk to that villager?" Yu Wen asked. "You can't possibly believe what he was raving about yesterday?"

Yu Wen knew his cousin had memory problems and thought he might have been curious about the madman's claims. Though the villager didn't seem trustworthy, maybe You Huo's curiosity had simply gotten the better of him.

But You Huo said, "No, not a single word."

Upon close observation, You Huo had noticed that the madman's gaze wandered aimlessly most of the time, but it flickered with strange lucidity when falling upon Qin Jiu. Especially when claiming to know him, the madman wore an expression of earnestness. If the madman had been truthful about anything, it was likely the part about Qin Jiu. But the invigilator had been momentarily blocked from view and wasn't aware of the madman's gaze.

In any case, whether 001 recognised the madman or decided to interact with him was none of You Huo's concern. He knocked only because the madman, having no qualms about anything, might loosen his tongue and spill valuable information. But after he knocked for five minutes straight, no one came

to answer the door.

“Probably too scared to come out. Or still in bed, perhaps? The chief did say all the villagers try to sleep as much as they can to avoid the night terrors.”

“Should we try again later in the afternoon?”

The others agreed, so they moved on instead of lingering. With the deadline approaching, they rushed across the frozen river and gathered before Dark Widow’s door. Yesterday’s listening comprehension questions were still visible, but the answer area remained blank. Drawing upon their experience, they quickly found the answering tool—this time, it was an actual pen, though it was peculiarly carved from bone, which gave Yu Wen an unsettling chill as he grasped it.

Yu Wen wrote “1” and copied the whole chunk of indecipherable characters into the answer area, punctuation and all, from a photo of the gravestones. As he prepared to do the same for the second question, You Huo stopped him.

“Why?” Yu Wen asked. “The name of Dark Widow’s family members should be on one of these gravestones too. We basically have the answer to two questions.”

You Huo gave him a look that seemed to etch the word “idiot” onto his forehead. “Save one for tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Uh... okay.”

The examinees, all grown adults, clustered around the door like anxious students waiting for exam results. You Huo, exhausted from the night, leant against the wall, dozing off as dawn broke.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed Qin Jiu off to the side, one hand in his pocket, the other idly toying with the assistance card. From this angle, he couldn't discern the invigilator's expression, but he couldn't shake the inexplicable feeling that something was missing. What exactly, he couldn't articulate. After all, he'd only known this person for a few days.

After what felt like forever, Old Yu suddenly exclaimed, "Why aren't Chen Bin and the other fella... Liang Yuanhao, up yet with the deadline so close?"

"No idea. The crow reminded us about the deadline earlier. They should be awake."

"You guys wait for the door, I'll get them," Old Yu said, heading off to knock on their door.

His knocking soon blended with the crow's insistent cawing.

The first submission deadline arrived. On Dark Widow's door, two words were circled amid the dense text copied from the gravestones: *Luludi Zhemchuzhnaya*. And beside it: +5.

The group sighed in relief and delight. *An excellent coattail to ride if there ever was one.*

Immediately, a new question appeared on the bottom half of the door.

Reading Comprehension: It's time for Chasu's annual Voodoo Festival, and Dark Widow has prepared gifts for every villager—intricately stitched dolls, as you might have expected. She wrote a long prayer with personalised blessings for each villager. Read the prayer carefully, and using the

information within, help Dark Widow deliver the dolls to the correct recipients.

O Voodoo God above, may the inattentive always be punished, but the observant be guided home by the villagers. The path home lies where there are no trees. Can you find it?

The reading comprehension problem was even more daunting than the listening comprehension. The group inhaled sharply as they read it, but before they could exhale, Old Yu's voice rang out. "Oh my god, come quickly!"

They rushed to Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao's house, finding Old Yu flattened against the living room wall. The house was a bloody mess.

"There's not a clean spot in there! It's an absolute bloodbath!" Old Yu said.

"Fuck... What the hell happened? Where are those two?"

Old Yu pointed to the wide-open bedroom door. "They should be in bed. Look at the humps. I called, but no one answered. I would've flipped the covers over, but I was afraid that would be rude."

Blood coated the bedroom floor, walls, and bed, with two long, smeared trails leading out to the front door. The others paled. They had never seen anything like this before.

"A-are they still alive?" Yu Wen asked, horror-struck.

Old Yu didn't answer. With the amount of blood loss, any person would have died. Besides, the smell of blood was so thick in the air, and the pools on the floor had dried to a crust; who-

ever the blood belonged to must have died by then.

An uneasy hush fell over the house. None of the examinees wished this grim fate upon Chen Bin and Liang Yuanhao, even though they were newer and not particularly close to the group, especially the latter, who often came off as off-putting.

“Let me check it out again...” Old Yu’s years of military experience shined in these situations. While most turned green, he could steel himself after some mental preparation. Only his nephew could make this hardened soldier chicken out. But before Old Yu could do anything, his dear nephew had entered the bedroom.

Qin Jiu remained outside, resting against the doorframe with arms crossed, his gaze intently fixed on You Huo, although the corners of his mouth were set in a grim line. He would have looked repulsed by the bloody scene if only he’d shown a bigger reaction.

Old Yu wanted to enter the bedroom, but the invigilator blocked the doorway. After weighing his options, the old man found no opportunity to ask the invigilator to move. *If I pace around, surely the invigilator will hear me*, he thought. However, even after pacing around the doorway four times, Qin Jiu didn’t even turn his head. Old Yu realised he would be waiting until the cows came home. Finally, he decided to clear his throat.

“Ahem...”

Almost immediately, something heavy hit the bedroom floor, followed by a shrill, unhinged scream.

Yu Wen had just finished vomiting and rushed in front of the

bedroom. “Huo! Are you okay?”

Even Old Yu was startled by the harrowing cry.

The invigilator finally turned to glance at Yu Wen. “Is your cousin able to scream like that?”

Yu Wen looked bewildered. *What’s it to you how my cousin screams?* Then it dawned on him. Of course, with You Huo’s impassive personality, not even death could have wrought such a scream from him. So... who else was in the room?

Everyone rushed into the bedroom, and more screams erupted, one after another.

“Holy fuck, are you human or a ghost?” Yu Wen’s voice cracked as he stared at the blood-soaked floor beside the bed. There sat Chen Bin, screaming louder than anyone.

The cacophony gave You Huo a pounding headache. “Shut up!” he barked, silencing everyone.

The others exchanged horrified, bewildered glances before someone found the courage to ask, “Are... are you still alive?”

Old Yu gingerly felt Chen Bin’s skin. “Alive and warm.”

“Then... what about Liang Yuanhao?”

Chen Bin stared blankly before whispering, “Gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

Stammering incoherently, Chen Bin recounted, “Last night... someone knocked on our beds, asked about the dolls. She had a knife. I passed out...”

The rest could scarcely follow.

“Slow down, start from the beginning,” Old Yu said.

After ten minutes of sorting through Chen Bin’s garbled tes-

timony, the grotesque reality became clear.

“So whoever stitched a doll will be visited and then cut at the places they stitched?”

Chen Bin nodded dumbly. “She asked who stitched more. Liang Yuanhao said he did, that he stitched two legs, and then... she cut his legs off. I fainted immediately, but I heard that voice say...”

“What’d she say?”

Chen Bin swallowed hard, trembling. “She said... see you tomorrow.”

Just like that, Liang Yuanhao had disappeared. The bloody trail in the living room implied he’d been dragged out, but it ended abruptly at the front door, leaving his ultimate destination unknown.

Though unspoken, they could all hazard a guess—the man had been dragged into the woods. But with the endless trees encircling the village, searching would be like trying to recover a needle from a haystack. Nonetheless, they searched for a long time but to no avail. The crow’s ominous warning finally urged them back, and they dejectedly returned to Dark Widow’s door.

“Warning: The reading comprehension section has begun. Proceed to the exam site at once.”

The crow repeated its chilling message three times before the grim-faced group knocked and pushed open the door.

Everything felt like a replay of the previous day. Dark Widow fanned out her deck of cards so the person at the front could draw a card. Everyone looked tense and uneasy. Yesterday, they

had drawn Death, and now, there was one less person in their group. If they picked another ominous card, who knew what might happen next?

This time, Yu Yao stood at the front. Under Dark Widow's long, hard stare, her hands began to tremble. With her head bowed, Yu Yao clenched her jaws and drew a card. It wasn't Death. The card had a blond angel blowing a trumpet from which flies the flag of Saint George.

"What card is this?" someone asked. Everyone was nervous.

Yu Yao gripped the card. "Judgement," she whispered.

"What?" No one expected her to recognise it. "Is it a good or bad card?"

Yu Yao thought for a moment. "It symbolises resurrection, rebirth, and good luck..."

"Then, it's good!" Relief washed over the group.

"Resurrection?" Old Yu said. "Could that bring Liang Yuanhao back... somehow?"

The promise of resurrection and good luck made everyone relax, but Dark Widow wasn't pleased. She glared at Yu Yao, who had drawn the card, with resentment while the examinees talked.

After an awkward silence, Dark Widow retreated to her room with small steps. She returned with an envelope from her nightstand drawer, which must have been the "prayer letter" mentioned in the reading comprehension section. She handed it over and pointed to the dolls on the wooden rack, muttering, "*Yekkh, dui, trin, shtor, panj... desbushov.*"

After saying this, she rubbed her hands with worry.

"What's she doing?" Yu Wen felt like he was watching a bizarre pantomime.

"Counting heads," You Huo replied.

Dark Widow seemed dissatisfied with the number of dolls. She dragged the basket over and handed everyone a ball of yarn. Then she inverted the hourglass and left the house. After seeing what had happened to Liang Yuanhao, everyone eyed the yarn balls with dread. These weren't just balls of yarn, they were god-damn cleavers!

"Who'd stitch anything after that?" Old Yu muttered, tossing the yarn back into the basket.

The others quickly followed suit, but You Huo suddenly asked Chen Bin, "Repeat what you heard last night."

Chen Bin looked confused. "Which part?"

"About 'well-behaved visitors'."

"Oh, the monster asked if we'd stitched the dolls. We said yes, and she called us 'well-behaved visitors' and said we'd have to live."

Well-behaved visitors would have to live... The chilling implications hung in the air as the realisation dawned on everyone. Previously, they had been too afraid to ponder its meaning, but hearing it again in this new context made their blood run cold.

"If well-behaved visitors have to live... then what about the ones who aren't?"

"They have to die," You Huo answered.

Stitching the dolls meant dismembering themselves, but

refusing meant being killed. Was that even a choice? Panic and dread gripped the others as they struggled to find any sliver of hope or reasonable course of action. For a long while, no one could think of a solution.

As an invigilator, Qin Jiu found the events unfolding before him excruciatingly dull. Out of sheer boredom, he picked up Dark Widow's envelope and began skimming the strange script inside. He had barely read two lines before the papers were snatched from his hands.

"Can you at least act like a proper invigilator and not disrupt the exam?" You Huo chided, settling onto the sofa with the letter.

"I can't." Qin Jiu rubbed his empty fingers together. He looked over at the examinee. "I don't know, I suddenly feel that being an invigilator is actually so boring..."

You Huo scoffed. "How insightful of you."

"So, when exactly are you planning to use the assistance card?" Qin Jiu asked, waving the card in front of him.

"I'm going to let it collect dust."

The prayer letter was full of squiggles that You Huo didn't recognise, so he tossed it aside in under five seconds. *Stupid exam problem.*

Qin Jiu picked up the papers again, drawling mockingly, "What's wrong? Are the genius examinee's tricks not working this time?"

You Huo rose and walked away, circling Dark Widow's house in search of clues beyond the Romani script. Based on the ex-

amination premise, her husband might have been Russian, so she likely spoke some Russian herself. He searched for traces of that... yet Dark Widow had cleansed her home thoroughly. He found not a single relevant clue. *What to do...?*

The hourglass lasted longer today, but everyone felt the sands were draining too quickly.

"More than half the time is already up, so what'll it be—do we stitch or not?" Old Yu asked.

Yu Yao suggested softly, "Maybe we can keep searching? There might be another way."

"How about we hide in the woods again tonight? It saved us yesterday!" Yu Wen said.

The woods at night were terrifying, but it would be better to be scared than dead. With their previous success, the group readily endorsed the idea. Just as they were about to make a unanimous decision, You Huo decided to be contrary.

"I'm going back to my house to sleep."

"Why?" Yu Wen gasped.

"To see if I die."

Everyone was stunned. *Is this something you should be gambling with?*

"You want to be in the house alone? No, no way," Old Yu protested.

Qin Jiu casually interjected, "Excuse me, do I not count?"

Do invigilators count as people? Certainly not in the eyes of the examinees. But Old Yu didn't have the audacity to object since it was Qin Jiu speaking. Examinees feared 001. So far, he

hadn't done anything particularly frightening. He hadn't exercised his authority, apprehended anyone for violations, or confiscated any items, but the examinees were still scared of him. They assumed the invigilators were part of the system, its eyes and claws. The exam system was terrifying, so the invigilators were too. No one wanted to provoke one unless absolutely necessary.

Well, except for You Huo.

Old Yu felt a headache just thinking about his nephew. The idea of this rule-breaking boy alone with the fearsome invigilator made his body ache. "Maybe I shouldn't go to the woods either."

"We've only survived this long thanks to you. Leaving you here while we run off feels wrong..." Yu Yao said softly. "I can't do that. What if you'll need our help?"

The others murmured in agreement, but their pleas were harshly rejected.

"Too many people, too noisy." You Huo refused to discuss it further.

Unable to sway him and fearing that defiance would endanger everyone, they reluctantly relented.

As dusk settled, a few villagers emerged across the river, chipping away at the ice as usual.

"Looks like the same ones?" Yu Wen counted from the window. "The one in the long coat is the woman we've talked to, right? And that madman... and the two men with leather hats, weren't they the ones who dragged him inside?"

Yu Wen's eyesight was keen. Despite his constant gaming, he'd never needed glasses. While the others couldn't make out the details from afar, a glance confirmed his descriptions.

You Huo studied the scene briefly before his gaze returned to the wooden rack. When Dark Widow counted the dolls, he had counted along. There were sixteen completed dolls, and he remembered their general arrangement. But now... a few dolls seemed to have subtly shifted positions? If he remembered correctly, the doll on the far left of the top row had been lying down that afternoon, but now, it sat upright...

As You Huo approached for a closer inspection, Dark Widow returned. The first thing she did upon entering the room was check the stitching progress, but all the examinees' hands were empty! No one had followed her instructions! She was displeased. She stared at them silently before letting out a cold chuckle. Limping to the wall, she reached for Yu Yao's judgement card and flipped it upside down with a sinister giggle.

The group froze, bewildered. How could she still manipulate the card once it had been drawn? Though they didn't understand the card's meaning, they sensed that flipping it upside down was bad.

Yu Yao trembled. "If it's upside down... doesn't that reverse the meaning?" *Wouldn't resurrection and hope become death and despair?*

Dark Widow took out a sack, swept the dolls on the rack into it, and then picked out from the basket four unfinished ones which looked aged. One was filthy as if it had been dragged

through the dirt or slightly singed. She put the four in the sack before closing it and giving it to You Huo, who was the closest to her.

With the dolls given over, she shooed all the examinees out of her house. The hourglass ran slower today. By the time they were dismissed, the villagers had finished chipping ice and gone home. The heartless people kept their doors shut, refusing to answer no matter who knocked. The examinees saw no point in wasting effort, so they split into two groups. You Huo and Qin Jiu returned to their house while the others followed the frozen river into the woods.

“I still don’t get why the villagers are so afraid of the woods,” Yu Wen muttered. “Sure, it’s full of graves, but there are barely any exposed ones. Creepy, yes, but better than being trapped indoors, right?”

“Who knows,” his dad replied.

“They must have some reason for their fear...” Yu Yao added.

Although they came to seek refuge, they remained worried about You Huo’s safety and lingered at the edge of the woods rather than going deeper inside.

“Let’s wait here,” Yu Wen suggested, looking back at the houses and shielding his eyes with his hand. “This spot has a clear view of Huo’s house.”

No one objected. They settled on the ground, gnawed on stale, dry bread, and waited for the dead of night to arrive.

Inside the lit-up house, You Huo searched each cabinet while

Qin Jiu sat on the sofa, breaking a stale baguette into two.

"I'll share half with you?" he offered.

"No, thanks." You Huo didn't turn around. The terrifying crack was enough to indicate how stale the bread was.

"Not enough?" Qin Jiu persisted. "I can give you the bigger half."

Hungry after a long day, You Huo wasn't in the mood for jokes. He slammed a cabinet shut and walked past the sofa with his eyes fixed ahead. "If you want to choke to death, be my guest. Just leave me out of it."

He searched every spot in the living room, kitchen, and bedroom: cabinets, furnace, wooden boxes, tin cans... nothing. This wretched place was completely devoid of food. *Why couldn't it just blow up and be done with it?*

Straightening up in frustration, You Huo felt something poking his face. He looked down and saw the half-a-baguette held in front of him like a knife at his neck.

"Just give up," Qin Jiu said from behind. "I've already looked everywhere. There's nothing else."

You Huo blinked back in defiance.

The undutiful invigilator nudged the bread against the corner of You Huo's mouth. "Just take a bite. It's not as bad as you think. I've never had an examinee starve to death on my watch. Don't be the first."

After glaring at the bread for a moment, You Huo finally grabbed it. "There were three invigilators. Why must it be you who does the on-site monitoring?" he asked coldly, breaking off

a piece of bread.

Qin Jiu returned to the sofa, dropped some tea leaves into a freshly cleaned pot, and placed it on the fire. Only then did he look up. “Standard protocol—dull tasks like on-site monitoring falls on the shoulders of the lead invigilator, and I happen to be that unlucky lead invigilator. Would you have preferred someone else?”

“922, 154, anyone but you.” *At least the others knew to bring beef.*

As the flames rapidly brought the water to a simmer, Qin Jiu narrowed his eyes through the steam. “I’ll let them know. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled to know an examinee misses them.”

His mocking tone stripped away any sincerity from the words. You Huo ignored him.

For a while, the only sound in the room was the boiling tea. You Huo lost his appetite after forcing down a few bites of the stale bread. He brushed off the crumbs and glanced at Qin Jiu. “You’re the lead invigilator?”

“Do I not look like it?”

“Who decides the numbering sequence? What’s it based on?”

“Ability? Combat skills? Supposedly, many factors are considered,” Qin Jiu’s answer was vague, as if he didn’t care about the details, even if they pertained to himself.

“So 001 ranks first?”

Qin Jiu chuckled, stretching his legs. “There was another sequence before us... a senior of sorts.”

“Another sequence... Negative values?” You Huo casually

asked.

“Not quite.”

From what little Qiu Jiu knew, the system used to operate differently. Invigilators were specially recruited—fewer but more elite. One stood out, remarkably young yet extraordinarily capable.

“But that was years ago. Invigilators had letters as labels back then, and that person was designated ‘A.’”

Maybe it was the whistling pot or the steam, but when You Huo heard the letter “A”, he spaced out for a moment.

Qin Jiu rubbed the edge of his cup and raised his eyebrows. “Quite interested in my senior, aren’t you?”

You Huo snapped back to reality. Having tossed the bread aside, he rested his chin on his hand, his expression cooling once more. “Just making small talk while we wait for tea. This invigilator who surpassed you—”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Qin Jiu corrected with a somewhat serious tone. “When he was an invigilator, I was still an examinee. Later, I became an invigilator too, but we didn’t work together for long. Hard to say who had the upper hand.”

You Huo snorted.

“As for him now...” Qin Jiu said. “Dead? Maybe. One thing is for sure: he’s been removed from the system.”

Picking up on the nuance in his tone, You Huo looked up. “You didn’t like him, did you?”

Qin Jiu let out a mirthless chuckle, his lips settling back into a lazy smirk. Due to a system malfunction, he’d suffered memory

loss, leaving those years and the people involved hazy shadows, including Invigilator A. To fix the glitch, the system locked all relevant data from that period, making it currently inaccessible. His entire perception of Invigilator A came solely from hearsay.

Supposedly, when Qin Jiu was still an examinee, he constantly provoked conflicts with Invigilator A. Supposedly, their working relationship as invigilators remained hostile—like water and fire. Supposedly, during that fateful system failure, he and Invigilator A were the only two in the affected zone. Neither could reconcile even in that dire situation, and both suffered catastrophic consequences. Qin Jiu nearly died, and Invigilator A was removed from the system.

Just how much truth lay behind these rumours remained unknown. Regarding the system malfunction, Qin Jiu forgot most of it except for one vague, fragmented scene:

It seemed to be a ravaged ruin, surrounded by jagged fences, scattered rusty vehicles and machinery, and severed cables... He sat on a fallen metal pipe, one leg bent, an elbow on his knee, and the front of his shirt drenched in blood. He coughed and let out a bitter laugh.

Someone stood before him. The person's attire and appearance eluded recollection, but he remembered an expanse of a windbreak forest far behind that figure. Based on the rumours, this person should have been Invigilator A.

This single scene was his only remaining memory from those years. Whenever it resurfaced in his mind, his mood soured so drastically it was as if... he'd never be happy again. But to say he

hated Invigilator A? That didn't seem quite right either.

The aroma of the aged tea wafted through the air, refreshing but not very fragrant.

You Huo studied Qin Jiu for a while, then stood up and rummaged through the cabinet for a usable cup. He poured some tea from the pot, and after a few sips, the feeling of dry bread lodged in his chest finally went down. He must have been crazy to chit-chat with an invigilator. Now that he had his breath back, he felt normal again. He put down the cup and went to the bedroom.

The space was relatively tidy. Several blankets were stuffed into the wardrobe as provisions for visitors who would never wake up again. You Huo pulled one out, planning to lie down and go to sleep immediately, but before he closed the door, he glanced at the rigid sofa in the living area and paused.

A minute later, he threw a blanket onto the sofa, nearly hitting the invigilator in the face with it. Qin Jiu dodged in surprise, still holding his cup of tea, as he looked from the blanket to You Huo.

Wearing an expression that demanded, "Why don't you just go die?" You Huo went back to the bedroom, exhausted, and slammed the door shut with a forceful thud.

The first half of the night passed quietly in the village. No monsters with cleavers burst into the room. You Huo fought off sleep for two hours before finally surrendering. Wrapped in his blanket, he drifted into a deep slumber.

When the clock on the wall ticked past 3 a.m. with an omi-

nous clack, the knocking began again.

Knock-knock-knock.

It started outside and quickly moved inside.

Knock-knock-knock.

Within minutes, the sound started coming from beneath the bed, tapping against the bedboard under You Huo. He didn't notice; once asleep, he was hard to wake.

Knock-knock-knock.

Still no reaction from You Huo. He laid on his side, cheek pressed against the pillow, one hand shielding his eyes, sleeping peacefully.

The mischievous entity knocked fruitlessly for nearly five minutes before falling silent, seemingly baffled and frustrated. The room stilled until faint scuttling noises arose—the same eerie rustlings that had been heard in the woods the previous night, as if something was crawling on the wooden floor from the bedroom to the living room, seeking out the other living person in the house.

Knock-knock-knock.

After the first set of knocks, the invigilator sleeping on the sofa twitched. He pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed.

Then, a wispy female voice inquired in the direction of the coffee table. "I've come to find naughty visitors. Have you stitched any dolls today?"

Qin Jiu was speechless. *This exam problem must've bugged out, attacking an invigilator out of sheer desperation?!*

Eyes still closed, Qin Jiu replied dismissively, "No, so what?"

“Oh... pity, I’ll have to take your head then,” the voice sighed as if it were truly sorry.

A ghastly pale arm swung upwards with a cleaver poised to strike, but the descending blow was caught in a tight grip, stopping inches from its target.

Sitting upright while still gripping the arm, Qin Jiu calmly switched on a lamp with his free hand, revealing the entity’s full form. It wasn’t even a monster, just a severed arm. No head, no body, just an arm. The wound looked old, suggesting the grisly limb had been chopped off long ago. He was reminded of Liang Yuanhao’s fate. This creepy arm probably belonged to another unlucky examinee.

Not restricted by a body, the monstrous arm was extremely agile. Wielding its wicked cleaver, it twisted and slashed in Qin Jiu’s grip, trying to take the man’s head. Qin Jiu was beyond annoyed. He let out a scoff, pulled out a leather rope from beneath the coffee table, and bound the arm and cleaver into an immobile bundle. Then, gripping this gruesome package, he rapped sharply on the door of the heavy sleeper.

You Huo awoke to the tickle of feathers against his nose. He turned to sneeze, then raked his fingers through his tousled hair as he sat up in annoyance. Only then did he notice someone seated beside the bed.

“How did you get in?” he asked with a scowl.

Qin Jiu jingled a keyring. “Spare keys.”

“Couldn’t you have knocked first?” he grumbled.

Qin Jiu stared at him. *Are you serious right now?*

“What’s that you’re holding?” You Huo’s gaze landed on the pale, furiously writhing object in the invigilator’s other hand.

Qin Jiu held the bound arm in front of his face. “Surprise—your bedtime gift. Like it?”

You Huo frowned, confused.

“This thing came to chop your head off. You ignored it, so it came for me instead,” Qin Jiu said. “Do me a favour and handle it like a proper examinee.”

The unwanted kindness left You Huo repulsed for a solid five minutes.

“Give it to me,” he finally said.

Qin Jiu thought he was going to destroy it or bury it, but this unconventional examinee loosened the leather rope, holding one end while keeping the arm restrained with the rest.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s thrashing like that to go somewhere. I’m walking it back. Duh.”

Qin Jiu raised an eyebrow.

Twenty minutes later, the group huddled in the frozen woods spotted You Huo casually strolling towards them. He was leading what looked like... a dog? No, it was an arm tethered by a leather rope! The arm moved at an alarming speed. Its fingers clawed into the ground as it flopped up and down, occasionally swinging the attached cleaver in futile resistance against its restraint.

The grotesque yet curious sight held them all spellbound for a moment. They had been on edge, fighting off exhaustion, des-

perate to stay vigilant in the woods. You Huo's bizarre display jolted them fully awake.

"Huo, are you..." *having fun*? Yu Wen wanted to ask, but he gulped the words back when he saw his cousin's sleep-deprived scowl.

As You Huo drew near, he forced the arm to stop. It then flopped in a circle, whipping around, swinging its cleaver madly. The group flinched before rushing in to pin it to the ground.

"How did you catch it?" Chen Bin looked at You Huo, bewildered. Indeed, the entity that had chopped a man up so violently the previous night now looked almost comical. Who wouldn't be confused? Not to mention, he'd narrowly escaped being its victim just hours prior. He hadn't yet shaken off his fear when You Huo treated him to this performance...

"I didn't." You Huo jerked his chin at Qin Jiu. "He gave it to me."

Chen Bin's brow furrowed. *Gave it...?*

"You're welcome," the invigilator said graciously.

"Did I thank you?"

Qin Jiu nodded with a smile. "I read between the lines."

The revelation that the invigilator had subdued the arm left the group stunned.

"So... does this mean the assistance card's been used?"

Qin Jiu pulled the card from his pocket, saying with regret, "Not yet."

"Huh?" Everyone was shocked. "Why not?"

"He acted in self-defence. No assistance was provided," You

Huo explained flatly.

Qin Jiu stared at the back of You Huo's head and nodded.

"Fair enough."

"Self-defence? That thing was crazy enough to attack an invigilator?" The group was even more confused.

You Huo explained the situation, leaving out any overly disturbing details.

Yu Wen smacked his fist into his palm. "So we'll be fine as long as we don't wake up when the monster comes? I knew there had to be a way to survive! Not everything leads to death."

"Easy for you to say," Old Yu grumbled. "How do you stop yourself from waking up? It's not just about keeping your eyes closed."

"Oh... What about taking some sleeping pills?"

"Son, find me one of those magic pills, and we can talk." His father's retort shut him up.

Upon further analysis, the group couldn't shake the sense that this session was rather high-handed and unreasonable. Not that they were completely without options, given You Huo's capabilities, but Dark Widow and the severed arm acted irrationally. Beyond the exam requirements, Dark Widow set up her own obstacles, like tarot cards and doll stitching. The severed arm had lost sight of its original target and attacked the invigilator instead of the examinee.

"That's really weird..." Yu Yao said, her suspicion was growing. She had progressed a lot since the first exam, from being reduced to tears to holding it together quite admirably. "Could

previous sessions have been different? Maybe they get harder each time to make the examinees struggle more?"

For the time being, no one could discern a clear path forward. They were at the mercy of the system, and no strategy guaranteed survival.

"Anything happening in the woods?" You Huo asked.

"About the same as last night," Yu Wen replied. "Lots of things crawling around but too quick to chase. You can only catch glimpses before they vanish... probably the same as that thing." He glanced at the ghastly pale arm.

You Huo hummed and gestured for the group to release the arm. Gripping the leather rope, he instructed, "Keep moving then."

The arm remained motionless. Perhaps it had been bullied too much tonight and had no fight left. It lay limp in the mud, playing dead.

After a moment, You Huo's patience thinned. He kicked it. "Suit yourself. I'll just drag you out of the woods once the sun rises."

There had to be a reason these creatures only came out at night. You Huo guessed they might be vulnerable to sunlight or feared something else that emerged during the day. His words had the desired effect. No sooner had he spoken than the ghostly arm sprang back to frenzied life, twisting wildly.

"It's scared, isn't it?" Emboldened by the arm's reaction, the others began to threaten it.

"It's already almost 4 o'clock. The sun will be up soon."

“Maybe we should show the villagers what’s been terrorising them at night. Go door-to-door and—”

When Yu Wen mentioned visiting the village, the arm abruptly froze. It lay on the ground, its rotten grey fingers digging into the earth in a rhythmic, pulsing motion—an eerie mimicry of breathing or a sign of unease.

But fear of what exactly? The villagers? You Huo frowned, confused. He was about to yank on the leather rope and say something when the arm suddenly reacted. Digging its fingers into the soil, it scurried further into the woods, desperate to return to its lair to bury itself beneath the damp earth before the first light.

The group gave chase after the trailing leather rope, and quickly lost themselves among the trees. A chilly fog hung thick in the heart of the woods, the heavy, moist air smothering their torchlight into a feeble glow.

“What’s that smell?” Old Yu sniffed the air. The deeper they went, the stronger the smell became.

Chen Bin paled. “This smell... It’s just like the one in our houses. The same odour that knocked Liang Yuanhao and me out cold last night.”

Everyone remembered that scent. It was slightly different from the one in Dark Widow’s house and had a tranquillizing effect. Maximilian, overweight and weak, was already weary from the overnight vigil. He stumbled and collapsed from the overpowering scent. One by one, the others also succumbed. In the chaos, the arm took its chance and darted around a tree.

The moment the rope became taut, the arm cleaved it off. It burrowed into the moist dirt, vanishing instantly.

By the time everyone recovered enough to search, all traces had disappeared.

“Fuck—we were so close!”

Frustration and disappointment hung thick in the air, but it was gone. There was nothing more they could do but head back in defeat.

Dawn was fast approaching. At 7:25 a.m., just five minutes before the second submission deadline, the crows started cawing, reminding everyone that time was nearly up.

Yu Wen clutched his phone and bowed to You Huo. “Thank goodness, Huo, for stopping me from answering the second question yesterday. We’d be doomed today if you hadn’t...”

Despite their progress overnight, none of the information could help them earn points. Luckily, You Huo had the foresight to save Question 2 of the listening comprehension for today. Otherwise, someone would have died.

The answer was simple—the woods or the graves. After all, her family had long been buried and marked by gravestones. Yu Wen grabbed the bone pen and began writing “the”. As he started to add “woods”, a drawling voice interrupted.

“I have a question.” Qin Jiu raised two fingers.

“Finish it,” You Huo told Yu Wen before turning to Qin Jiu. “What must you ask right now?”

“I tried to hold it in, but I can’t.”

“Go ahead,” said You Huo.

Qin Jiu tapped the door. “This is an exam on Romani. See what language you’re urging him to write? Aren’t you a genius?”

You Huo fell silent as everyone cursed, realising he was right. *We were too careless!* They had been misled by the language in the questions and mindlessly answered in the same language.

As soon as Qin Jiu finished speaking, the red light on his wrist blinked three times. Before the crow could say anything, Qin Jiu cut it off. “Invigilator Guideline Number 7: If examinees show confusion or misunderstand the answering rules and make obvious mistakes, the invigilator must provide a reminder. Their brains are clearly not working now.”

After his mocking words, he turned to the examinees. “Sorry, that was a personal attack.”

No one could say anything. His mocking tone was polite yet nonchalant, which annoyed everyone.

After angering the examinees, Qin Jiu calmly turned back to the crow. “I’m just doing my job. On-site monitoring is dull enough without you nitpicking.”

Everyone held their breath, expecting the invigilator to be in trouble. After what seemed like an eternity, the crow shut its beak, to everyone’s surprise.

Qin Jiu remained leaning against the doorframe, not having changed his posture once since speaking. He retracted his gaze and said to the group who stared at him, “Two minutes left. Do I have the answer written on my face?”

Yu Wen gripped the bone pen, panicking. “Huo, how do you write ‘woods’ or ‘graves’ in Romani?”

“No idea.”

“Wait, didn’t Maximilian hear ‘grave’ in the recording last time? He might know!” A stroke of genius struck Yu Wen. He jumped up, looking around, “Where’s Maximilian?!”

“Still passed out on the sofa!” Old Yu rushed to Maximilian’s house.

Maximilian had an extreme reaction to the scent in the woods. He puked twice after coming back, and the group had shoved him onto the sofa to rest. At this moment, he was still out like a light. Everyone thought they had it covered, so they hadn’t bothered waking him. Who could have predicted something like this would happen?

“Sorry, sorry...” Old Yu slapped Maximilian awake. Maximilian’s daze hadn’t worn off. The man opened his eyes and dry-heaved. Shouting the only German he knew, Old Yu dragged Maximilian out. “*Schnell! Schnell!*”

In front of Dark Widow’s door, You Huo gripped the bone pen tightly. He scribbled furiously, managing to copy the inscription of an entire gravestone in two minutes, omitting Dark Widow’s name to save time. Seeing Maximilian approach, he made one last firm stroke and shoved the pen at him. “*Bitte schön.*”

As the crow cawed twice, Maximilian quickly added the Roman word for “grave” to the door.

Phew—they made it just in time. Everyone let out sighs of relief.

“That was a life-or-death moment...” Yu Wen clutched his

chest, feeling his heart finally settle. “I hope the gravestone mentioned the location and not just ‘so-and-so is buried here.’”

Even if the inscription didn’t specify, at least Maximilian added “grave” just in time. With this double insurance, they were sure to score points. Or so they thought.

After a tense wait, the answer area finally updated. The system’s grade gave... a bright red X.

The X was plastered half over the gravestone content and half over Maximilian’s addition. The meaning was clear: Neither was correct. Everyone, including You Huo, was stunned.

“It’s wrong? How?”

“The system’s glitching? Or a grading error?”

Nobody could understand why the answer was marked incorrect.

You Huo stared at the answer wall, eyebrows knitted in deep thought. If both the inscription and the word were wrong, and it wasn’t a grading error, it meant only one thing—Dark Widow’s family’s graves were in the woods, but their bodies weren’t there.

His gaze fell on the third question in the listening comprehension asking about the number of people in her house, and he pondered deeply. Would a religious fanatic keep her deceased family members at home?

Soon, he answered his own question—*what wouldn’t a crazy old witch do?!*

Before anyone could recover from the shock, the answer wall refreshed with new content.

Notification: Unfortunately, no points were detected for this round's grading.

Punishment: An examinee will be chosen at random for confining.

As those words appeared, You Huo patted Qin Jiu's shoulder. The invigilator tilted his head, his gaze shifting from You Huo's fingers to his face. "Let me guess, our friend Mr Snort is finally going to ask for help?"

You Huo said nothing. *What do you mean by "your friend"?* He didn't want to use the card unless absolutely necessary, but the current situation was troubling. He didn't know who would be randomly selected or if there were any loopholes. If things got too difficult...

As he pondered, another line appeared under the penalty announcement:

Note: Funerals in Chasu are held late at night. We respect tradition and will carry out the punishment tonight.

Tonight? This penalty wasn't carried out immediately, unlike the ones in previous exams. You Huo immediately removed his hand from Qin Jiu's shoulder. "It's too early. We'll talk later."

Qin Jiu studied him for a moment. "Let me give you a little reminder. When the system enforces a penalty, it won't give you a heads-up or tell you who was selected seconds beforehand. One of you could simply vanish mid-conversation. If it ends up being you, how will you ask for help?"

"Invigilator 922 said to write 001 if we need you guys. And

now that you've mentioned it, I'll ask *you* something," You Huo said mockingly. "He said I have to write the number on the answer card. What's with that stupid rule?"

It wasn't an issue at Hunter Alpha's house, where the small space made things convenient. But at larger exam sites like Chasu, making a big detour to find the invigilator was simply unreasonable.

"922, you say? I'll have to make a note about him," Qin Jiu said. "However, that's just for reaching general invigilators."

"Then how about contacting the so-called lead invigilators like yourself?"

"Oh, there are many ways for that," Qin Jiu smiled. "You can try writing my number anywhere on the site and see if I get notified."

You Huo scoffed. "Do I look insane?"

When the punishment details were first announced, everyone felt some relief. At least they had half a day as a buffer. However, they soon realised that a forewarned penalty was more agonising than an immediate one. It was like having a blade pressed to your neck, the sharp edge grazing your skin, while the executioner whispered, "Sorry, it's not time yet. You'll have to wait."

As usual, Dark Widow made them stitch dolls, refusing to stop until every examinee was chopped to bits. Not that anyone cared about the dolls. Their minds were already elsewhere. They sat around restlessly, lost in their own fears, oblivious to You Huo's unusual behaviour.

While the others panicked, You Huo quietly took several

dolls from the basket and grabbed a needle at random. Normally, people stitched evenly, keeping the stitches in a row, but he haphazardly jabbed the needle through the fabric just twice to connect a limb. By the time the others noticed, he had a line of eight dolls in front of him.

Old Yu nearly fell to his old knees. "What's all this?"

You Huo finished the ninth doll in a flash. "Making preparations," he said without looking up. His eerie preparations continued until the last grain of sand fell in the hourglass.

When Dark Widow entered and saw sixteen new dolls, her old face immediately stiffened. She'd been the "exam problem" at this site for so long but had never encountered such a visitor. She couldn't even speak, only staring at You Huo as if he were insane. After a while, she muttered something under her breath and reluctantly placed the sixteen new dolls on the wooden rack.

Night fell faster than the previous two days. Before the villagers could return to their houses, the group crossed the frozen river to speak to them.

"You're still here." The village woman greeted them, holding a bucket of crushed ice, though the undertone of her greeting was better left unexamined.

Old Yu, on a mission from You Huo, got straight to the point. "Can I ask you something, miss?"

After a moment, the woman replied, "What is it?"

"I heard the village has a tradition of holding funerals only at night?"

“That’s right.”

“Do you folks prefer burial or cremation around here?” Old Yu probed further.

The woman paused, looking stunned. She tilted her head slightly as if she wanted to glance towards the woods, then she snapped back with a dazed expression. “Burial. No cremation. We can’t cremate.”

“Why not?” You Huo interjected.

The woman tilted her head again and thought for a while. “No reason. It’s just tradition not to cremate.”

You Huo fell silent, and Old Yu continued to ask, “So the coffins... where would you usually put them?”

“In the woods.” the woman replied.

“I know it’s in the woods.” *Isn’t that obvious?* Old Yu thought, but he patiently explained, “What I mean is, this ring of trees seems occupied. I’m asking where there might be unoccupied space to bury a coffin. Surely you don’t stack them on each other, do you?”

“Oh, no, of course not.” The woman thought for a second, then pointed to the east and west. “That area over there, and this one too, are still vacant.”

Everyone quickly memorised the locations.

As Old Yu prepared another question, the woman glanced at the darkening sky and said, “It’s getting dark; I need to hurry home. You all should head back too. Don’t wander, and don’t go into the woods.”

With that, she clutched her iron bucket and ran away. The

sound of slamming doors filled the air, and the village slipped back into silence.

Old Yu grumbled, "With that kind of courage, they hold funerals at night...? Is the system bullshitting us? These villagers won't even open their doors at night. How could they possibly hold funerals in the woods!"

Chen Bin muttered, "If the exam problem says so, then it must be so. This place can't be judged by common sense."

Regardless, they at least knew the burial locations now. This way, the others knew where to search for the unlucky person facing coffin punishment.

After bidding goodbye to the villagers, the examinees didn't return to their houses. Instead, everyone gathered at You Huo's place, their current headquarters. As night deepened, they munched on dry bread while discussing their plans for the evening.

"If we're going into the woods, we should bring some weapons," Yu Wen suggested, raising his hand. "For defence, but also... what if we get lucky and catch another arm?"

"I found some rope in my house. There are probably knives in each house, but who knows if they can match the meat cleaver," Old Yu said. "And if we need to dig up a coffin, we'll need shovels, right?"

He turned, unconsciously seeking You Huo's approval, only to find the single-seat sofa behind him empty. You Huo, who had been sitting there, had vanished.

"Where'd he go? He was just there..." Old Yu muttered, con-

fused, as everyone stared at the vacant sofa.

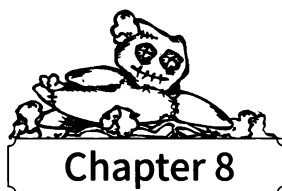
After a few seconds of silence, pandemonium erupted.

“Fuck!” Yu Wen shouted instantly, “Huo? Where are you?”

He called out three times with no response.

Most ominously, Qin Jiu was still there. During the exam, the invigilator had to follow You Huo everywhere. The only exception was if the system punished him. They suddenly recalled Qin Jiu’s words from that morning: “One of you could simply vanish mid-conversation.”

Who the fuck could have foreseen that the system would randomly select You Huo at such an untimely moment, instantly removing their Mr Coattail?



Mr Coattail lay in a cramped space with very limited oxygen, unable to fully extend his legs or lift his arms. There was no doubt—he was the unlucky one who had been randomly coffined.

You Huo wasn't surprised by this outcome or any outcome. He'd prepared for two scenarios earlier that afternoon while stitching dolls. If someone else got coffined and he couldn't help them, he would reluctantly use the assistance card. But if it were him... maybe he wouldn't even need the card.

In the dark, You Huo reached out and touched the walls of the coffin. They were wet and cold, emanating a thick, earthy scent. He guessed the coffin was buried beneath the woods' muddy ground. The woods were so vast that even with a general area mapped, searching for it was like going on a wild goose chase. Locating a person is always difficult. But... non-human creatures might fare better at finding people.

The other examinees carried bundles of rope and flaming branches and went searching in the eastern patch of woods. Suddenly, they froze as they heard the familiar scuttling sound. Old Yu sharply gestured “shhh”.

Everyone held their breaths and listened. The slithering was different tonight. It didn’t head for the village. Instead, it moved towards the woods’ centre.

Seconds later, Yu Wen called in a low voice, “Oh shit... look over there!” as he pointed ahead. Following his gesture, everyone’s jaws dropped.

Over a dozen ghostly pale arms and legs swarmed in from all directions, converging on a clearing up ahead. Brandishing meat cleavers of varying sizes, they ominously chanted, “Have you stitched a doll today?”

Buried six feet under, You Huo replied with what little air he had, “Yup, sixteen of them.”

The limbs quieted briefly before raising their blades to strike the ground. Chen Bin, traumatised by these severed limbs, froze in terror.

“What in the world?!”

“Weren’t they talking about stitching dolls?” Yu Wen peeked from behind a tree trunk, eyes wide. “None of us did it today... The only person who stitched is Huo!” He gasped. “Those things are looking for him! He’s definitely over there!”

Old Yu suddenly understood You Huo’s “preparations” in the afternoon. No wonder he’d stitched so many dolls. It was a pre-emptive move, marking himself first in case he got confined

to lure the severed limbs right to him. And he wasn't satisfied with just one limb—he summoned sixteen at once. Was he using the monsters as hounds? No, not just hounds—a ready-made excavation crew...

The enthusiastic excavation crew worked with shockingly high efficiency. Blades flashed in the night as they tirelessly hacked, churning the muddy ground into chaos within seconds.

Everyone watched in awe.

Thankfully, the examinees didn't go dumb.

Gripping the ropes, Old Yu gulped as he watched the flashing blades. "That's my nephew in there. I can't just stand here doing nothing. You guys... I won't force you, but I must go..."

"Me too!" Yu Wen declared.

Chen Bin cringed each time the blades flickered his way. Slapping his face to muster courage, he whispered, "I've never been much of a team player, but I'm not heartless. The two of you can't handle so many monsters by yourselves. Count me in. I can't just stand and watch."

Yu Yao and Maximilian also voiced their agreement, and Old Yu nodded. "Alright then, here's the plan..."

Brute force wouldn't work. There were too many limbs. As the saying goes, "Desperate times call for desperate measures." Those arms and legs were already dead, so they had nothing to fear.

Old Yu used his long-unused skills to make a noose with his rope.

"You know how to make a noose?" Chen Bin asked, sur-

prised.

“Don’t let my drunken look fool you. I was a fighter twenty years ago.” Old Yu grinned, but his fingers were clumsy from years of heavy drinking.

“Enough bragging. Your belly’s getting bigger than Yu Yao’s.” Yu Wen quipped, hating when his dad talked about alcohol. He grabbed the remaining ropes and quickly looped them into knots. Despite using the same techniques, his movements were far more nimble than those of his father.

“You know how too?” Yu Yao asked softly.

“I taught him when he was little!” Old Yu said with a mix of pride and wistfulness. “Can’t believe he still remembers.”

Yu Wen rolled his eyes and grabbed the other ropes, spending only a few seconds per knot. He soon finished prepping all the ropes.

“Here, grab one end and fling it over. Like how they do it in the movies.” Yu Wen tested a rope and distributed them to the others. “You need to aim well.”

Never one for academics, Yu Wen excelled at darts, slingshots, and balloon bursting instead. When he played catch-the-horse with the still-fit Old Yu during his childhood, he rarely missed. Along with his decent looks, these skills helped him get girls in high school.

Old Yu weighed the rope in his hand, mulling, “Let’s snare the legs first and throw off their balance. They aren’t as scary as the arms...”

Yu Wen muttered, “Too bad there aren’t any heads to rope

and swing into them.”

As they talked, everyone suddenly fell silent for a few seconds, realising they were actually strategising on how to attack the exam problem.

“Screw it,” Old Yu said through gritted teeth. “One step at a time. Worst case, we run!”

Before You Huo knew it, a loud thud resounded from above his coffin lid. He knew the mud had been cleared, and blades were raining down. Sixteen cleavers struck the coffin lid in a downpour, sending wood splinters flying. The nails wedged into the corners quickly loosened, and the battered lid split open, allowing fresh air to pour in.

You Huo stretched his neck and wrists before shoving the half-open lid off and jumping out. He snatched a cleaver and got ready for a fierce fight, but the onrushing ghost arms and legs halted midway, their blades swinging uselessly through the air.

After a closer look, You Huo realised they were all being held back by rope, thwarting their rampage.

“Huo!” Yu Wen and the others leapt out from behind the trees.

You Huo grabbed the ropes, tying the stunned pale limbs into secure bundles and confiscating their weapons.

The turnaround happened almost in an instant. Though victorious, they were all beaten up. Yu Wen and Chen Bin were plastered with mud from wrestling the undead limbs, and their faces and necks were scratched by the undergrowth. Old Yu had

dislocated his shoulder after crashing into a tree.

As You Huo carried the ropes back, Yu Wen called out in worry, “Huo, your hand’s bleeding!”

Crimson dripped from his forearm to his hand and fingertips, staining the ground with a vivid red—an alarming sight.

“It’s fine. Just a scratch.” You Huo shook his hand, flinging the blood to the ground. The wound was long but shallow, likely from grazing a blade during the earlier scuffle. He took off his muddy jacket and dabbed messily at the cut with the inner lining.

“Don’t be reckless. At least treat it properly.” Old Yu chided, grimacing as he reset his dislocated shoulder.

“It’s already clotted.” The blood quickly congealed into a trail on his arm in the winter chill. You Huo showed him dismissively, clearly unwilling to address it further. Old Yu couldn’t fight with his stubborn nephew. After making his uncle mad, You Huo was about to leave, but he looked up and met the invigilator’s eyes. “What’re you looking at?”

Qin Jiu’s gaze swept from You Huo’s arm to linger on the ear stud. He had just suffocated in the coffin and lost some blood, so his face was paler than usual. Even the firelight couldn’t warm his pallor, reflecting off his ear stud with a blinding glint instead.

“Nothing,” he said, holding up the scarf. “I was going to be a caring invigilator and offer you a temporary bandage, but it looks like you don’t need it.”

You Huo’s lips parted slightly, but before he could respond, Qin Jiu rewrapped the scarf around his own neck. You Huo’s

eyes swept across the front of Qin Jiu's shirt. In the biting winter chill, the wind felt like knives cutting across their faces, yet Qin Jiu's collar hung open with two buttons undone, giving him a careless look. You Huo watched as the invigilator tucked the scarf into his coat collar, snugly against his neck.

Strange guy, he thought. Over the past few days, he'd noticed Qin Jiu didn't seem bothered by the cold, yet he was always bundled up in a scarf—though never properly worn, only symbolically covering his chest.

Finally, You Huo looked away from the scarf. "I can throw the jacket away, but if the scarf gets dirty, I'll have to clean it before I return it. Do you know how hard it is to get bloodstains out?"

Qin Jiu smiled. "Not really. I don't often get injured."

You Huo fell silent, the provocation hitting him like a bus. His face hardened as he turned to leave, but Qin Jiu suddenly asked, "Are you that determined to save the system a reward? What if those severed limbs had arrived any later? You'd have suffocated instead."

I'm not an idiot, You Huo thought, but he let out a cold snort and said, "You tell me."

Their failure to answer the question yielded an unexpected bounty. Seizing the opportunity, they led the herd of rampaging limbs deep into the woods. The thick mist still shrouded the air, but the group was prepared. They chewed on the aged tea leaves from the houses, which seemed to have an energising effect. Though the taste was unpleasant, it combated the dizziness.

After about half an hour, the desperate limbs finally slowed down. In a clearing surrounded by overgrown grass, they flailed and clawed at the black mud, trying to burrow inward. Under the firelight, something in the depths of the mud reflected a dull gleam.

“What’s that?”

“Looks like a gravestone.”

Cautiously, everyone approached. You Huo brushed the mud aside with his foot and squatted down. “Bring the fire closer.”

Yu Wen and the others approached with their torches to light up the object. It was a flat gravestone with a photo of the deceased, the cause of death, and an address—written not in Romani but in a language they understood.

Name: Zhao Wentu

Examinee ID: 860511-12091327-745

His friend, Villager Delta, erected this gravestone in his memory. May he rest in peace.

At the bottom was the dedicator:

Delta of House 4, Chasu.

A damp, chilly wind whistled through the trees, the only sound in the deathly silence. Everyone’s faces were pale as they studied the gravestone. The deceased examinee in the photo had intense features, full of vigour. The longer they stared, the more familiar he seemed. Add some stubble, let the hair grow shaggy, and swap his clothes for dirty, smoke-stained ones, and he would look exactly like the madman villager who claimed he had seen 001. House 4, Villager Delta’s address, was that crazy

madman's home.

"I'm confused..." Chen Bin murmured, pointing at the gravestone. "What's going on here?"

You Huo didn't answer immediately. He walked a few steps and brushed away mud from two other areas excavated by the limbs, revealing a second gravestone.

Name: Chu Xiaonan

Examinee ID: 860575-04221703-1124

I will always miss you.

Erected by: Beta of House 2, Chasu

The photo showed a solemn young woman with an oval face and a high ponytail. Though she wasn't smiling, she appeared fresh and determined. Imagine her hair loosened, wrapped in heavy scarves, clad in a thick ankle-length winter coat, with chapped pale lips and dull eyes... and she became the woman chipping ice by the riverside every day.

The examinees' faces grew grimmer. After a pause, they began digging through the mud themselves. A third... a fourth... a fifth gravestone... The more ground they cleared, the more gravestones emerged. They recognised other familiar faces among the dead: the two other riverside villagers and even the village chief.

Chen Bin was pale. Now, even without confirmation, he understood what was going on. Those seemingly dazed villagers were once examinees themselves. The so-called Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta hadn't always been NPCs of this village. They had once had names and identities of their own.

You Huo squatted before one gravestone, gazing outward.

The woods stretched endlessly in every direction. They couldn't possibly dig all night, and even if they did, they still wouldn't get a fraction of the way through the forest. There was no way to know how many souls lay beneath the earth.

"How could this be?" Old Yu whispered in dread. "Why did they turn into villagers? And... and there are so many graves... how are there only eighteen households if all these examinees turned into villagers?"

"There's something over here!" Yu Yao called out suddenly. She knelt before Zhao Wentu's grave, holding a transparent waterproof bag.

"Where did you get that?" You Huo walked over.

"It was buried here." Yu Yao pointed to the ground. Her pregnancy made it difficult to move, so she dug inch by inch along Zhao Wentu's gravestone until she uncovered the bag. Inside were a pen and a leather-bound journal.

"These must be Zhao Wentu's belongings," she said.

You Huo opened the bag and took out the notebook. Pausing briefly before opening it, he glanced down at Zhao Wentu's smiling photo and asked, "May I take a look?"

His voice was so low that it was just a casual mutter no one else caught—except the invigilator following him. Qin Jiu's gaze flickered as he studied You Huo. Meanwhile, the young man on the gravestone kept smiling.

A quick flip confirmed it was Zhao Wentu's diary, more specifically, his exam record journal. You Huo skipped over his past sessions and went straight to the pages for this session.

Day 1 Foreign Language. Sunny.

Terrible luck this time! We got Romani!

Hardly anyone speaks it, yet this weird system decided to test us on it. Well, maybe not completely hopeless since one of my new teammates had some exposure to it.

I suspect she's being modest. She translated the listening comprehension quite fluently. She immediately wrote down Dark Widow's name too. Very impressive! She also said "Luludi" means "flower"—that it's such a lovely name...

Alright, no comment.

Apart from her, my other teammates seem unreliable (hopefully I'll eat my words soon). Maybe my expectations are too high after having an amazing teammate in the previous exam—a rarity.

The villagers said entering Dark Widow's house requires drawing cards (thanks to my ex for introducing me to tarot and engraving the entire deck's meanings into my brain. I've never imagined it would actually prove to be useful). But I foolishly drew the Hanged Man...

We spent the afternoon locked in her house, stitching dolls. The handicrafts nearly drove me mad! I only managed to make one hand and one leg the whole afternoon. I'm a little worried and unsure of her intentions, but surely, there must be nothing good.

It's 9 p.m. now, time for bed. Wish me sweet dreams.

P.S. This village is super creepy.

Day 2 Foreign Language. Cloudy.

Two people died. One had all four limbs chopped off because of the dolls.

I knew stitching dolls would be trouble. Not doing it means death, but if you stitch the most, you also get slashed. So much blood spilt, and the person vanished... How is that any different from death?

The poor guy was quite young, still in high school, it seemed. Just met him yesterday, but I remember him saying his father's surname is Lin, and his mother's is Tang, hence he's called Lin Tang. Sigh...

The scene was too grisly, and I don't want to recount or record details.

The other death was from forced confining for answering a question incorrectly. We got the second listening problem wrong, but how? I don't understand...

The girl translated Dark Widow's story about the previous village chief being too wicked. He ostracised her for years, deeming her profession too ominous. He drove her family to ruin, killing her husband and child (I suspect he had them murdered, after which Dark Widow killed him in turn?). She claims she buried her entire family in the woods to the east and became obsessed with doll-making—since dolls can convey all emotions in her tribe's beliefs—as a way to commemorate her loved ones.

The girl answered “the woods to the east of the village” and even added “graveyard” just in case. Yet that was marked wrong!

I don't get it. It made me want to check the area myself, but the villagers strongly warned us not to enter the woods. They seem terribly afraid of that place. After yesterday's lesson, we unanimously agreed today to stitch only the left arms; that way, nobody would stitch any more than the others.

It's 8 p.m. now, time for another meeting to discuss possible answers. Wish me sweet dreams.

P.S. I still find this village creepy, especially the villagers. The girl said the Romani inscription on the boundary marker means "Dark Land". Dark represents misfortune and death, fitting for the Dark Widow's name. This is truly a "Land of the Dead".

Day 3 Foreign Language. Cloudy.

Another teammate died. Again. Because of the dolls. Stitching an equal number was useless because it's the cumulative total that counts. This means I've already stitched two arms and one leg!

The only good thing is that we answered today's question correctly.

Dark Widow's prayer letter was quite long, and the girl could only understand part of it. Through educated guesses, we deduced the black-clothed doll looked sort of like Villager Alpha. The prayer said to knock three times, announce "I have a gift for you", and not deliver it to the wrong person. We followed the instructions, and the door opened, but Villager Alpha went crazy upon seeing the doll... Whatever, I won't detail the blood and violence. Too tiring. Just glad to be alive.

We discussed some more in the day and decided to keep our total number of stitched limbs equal.

It's 8 p.m. now, time for another meeting to discuss possible answers. With our dwindling numbers, we can hardly call this a "meeting" anymore.

Day 4 Foreign Language

Another one died. With equal stitching totals, the slashing became randomised. And something scary happened...

Villager Alpha's house has a new occupant. It was Lin Tang, who had died on the first day. I'm so sure it was him, not just a lookalike. Even the moles match perfectly. Like the other villagers, he seemed dazed and was chipping ice with an iron bucket. The most disturbing thing is, he didn't recognise us or remember his own name. He claims his name is Alpha, that the previous owner left, and the house became vacant. He just moved in today to settle permanently.

Could it be... receiving a doll meant release for the villagers? The examinees who lost limbs then replace them?

It's 7 p.m. now. Only three of us remain.

I fear... I may not survive this session, despite being mentally prepared for death each time. Facing reality is still heartbreaking. I hope the girl can last another day at least. She's been through so much this session. If there's even a one-in-a-million chance of us passing... I hope to meet her again someday, somewhere, and to reintroduce myself properly in a not-so-stupid way.

Yeah, I'm just dreaming.

Day 5 Foreign Language

I was chopped, yet I live.

I have hands and feet, but they feel strange, like cotton stuffing. If this even counts as living...

I can't quite recall yesterday's events anymore. While I still can, I need to dig a grave.

Hope I'll remember who I am once it's finished. Sweet dreams to her.

My name is Zhao Wentu.

My name is Zhao Wentu.

The journal ended abruptly, with the last entry showing signs of incoherence. On the reverse side of the page, "My name is Zhao Wentu" was scrawled repeatedly, the writing growing clumsier towards the end. The final line contained only "My".

Reading Zhao Wentu's diary sent chills down everyone's spine. It was clear that Zhao Wentu had erected his own gravestone. Before creating it, he repeatedly wrote his name, struggling to remember it a little longer, but the moment he wrote "rest in peace" on the gravestone, he'd become Villager Delta, his memories erased. Perhaps in rare moments, he might feel a fleeting sense of not belonging, a vague familiarity with certain visitors. Yet he could never articulate the reason, so he became the village's notorious madman.

When the severed arm was chopping people up, it said that

obedient visitors could live, and naughty ones must die. But could this be called living? The missing limbs were like a curse. The afflicted examinees transformed into villagers, eternally bound to this village in the mountains and known only as Alpha, Beta, Gamma, or Delta. Only when a new examinee delivered the correct doll to them could they finally die. It's no wonder the villagers feared Dark Widow so much—they were all once examinees themselves. It's no wonder they avoided the woods—their own graves were there.

You Huo finished reading the final page, expression blank. He stuffed the diary back into the waterproof bag, planning to rebury it, but he quickly changed his mind.

“Let's go,” he said, holding the bag.

“Where?” The others, still processing their emotions, looked at him bewildered.

“I'm done with this exam. We're delivering those dolls tonight.” You Huo's words said “Deliver dolls”, but his expression screamed “Blow up the exam site”.

Their previous experience taught them that the mini-questions didn't necessarily need to be completed. The non-critical ones could be skipped as long as the examinees accepted the consequence of not answering—scoring no points when grading came. They also knew that there were three ways to end an exam: total annihilation, stalling until time ran out, or answering the critical question ahead of time. The critical question for Hunter Alpha was finding that tableware set. Here, it was the reading problem of delivering the dolls and finding the way

home.

Until now, Yu Wen and the others assumed doll delivery would be a lengthy process, like what Zhao Wentu's diary described—everyone huddling together and making educated guesses to match the dolls to the recipients. It was a painstaking daily grind until completion. They never imagined their Mr Coattail was so impatient as to try and finish in one night. *Eighteen households in a single night? What a ridiculous joke.*

It wasn't that they doubted You Huo's capabilities. They were just completely unsure how that was even possible.

It was late at night by the time the group got back to You Huo's house. The living room remained as they had left it, but the water on the coffee table had gone cold, and the edges of the dry bread had turned white, making it look even less appetising. Only the fire in the furnace was still burning brightly.

You Huo walked around the sofa and suddenly asked, "Where's the sack?"

"Sack? What sack?" The others didn't understand at first.

As You Huo was about to say, "The one with the dolls", he noticed 001 nodding at the furnace. Everyone followed his gaze. The grey sack was on the woven rug by the furnace. One doll had fallen out onto the floor right next to the flames. If the fire flared up, the doll would be easily caught in it.

"How did it end up here?!" Yu Wen hurried over and picked up the bag and doll.

You Huo pointed to the sofa. "It was there before. Who moved it?"

The others looked at each other, unable to answer.

“When we realised you’d been ‘coffined’, we just grabbed the ropes and rushed out,” Old Yu said. “Maybe someone misplaced it in the panic?”

But as they carefully retraced their actions, no one could recall touching it. Could the dolls have moved on their own? The thought was so eerie that no one dwelled on it.

Yu Wen muttered, “If one gets burnt and doesn’t match the set, we’re doomed.” He picked up the doll by its leg. “It was so close. Look, there’s a scorch mark here.” He turned the doll over. “And here, and half this outfit—”

“Those two marks were already there before,” You Huo interrupted.

Yu Wen was startled. “Huh?”

This doll was one of the four Dark Widow had added last. You Huo had noticed the burn marks on it then.

“So, it narrowly escaped being burned before?” Yu Wen held up the doll. “Poor doll! Could that be a clue? Who in the village has been burned?”

“Zhao Wentu,” Yu Yao spoke up.

The others turned to look at her in surprise, even You Huo.

Yu Yao felt a bit uneasy under their gaze. “Uh... Villager Delta.”

She felt bad calling someone a “madman”, and while blushing, she added, “I might have a slight case of OCD. I always notice if people’s clothes are dirty. His sleeves and sides had lots of ash, and the back was scorched too. Not necessarily from being

burned, but I thought... maybe.”

Her voice trailed off as her face flushed. She fell silent, embarrassed.

“That makes sense!” Yu Wen studied the doll. “If those marks do exist, it must be him!”

You Huo nodded. Immediately, the others felt reassured. It was like a struggling student getting confirmation from the top student that an answer was correct. In Zhao Wentu’s diary, they thought one of the dolls resembled Villager Alpha, which is why they gave it to him. Therefore, the key to giving the gifts was finding the similarities between the dolls and the villagers. Each doll represented one villager.

“It suddenly feels like I’m playing a game,” Yu Wen said, cradling the bag in his left hand and shaking one doll with his right. “Guess Who I Am?”

“Then guess.” Old Yu pointed at him. “Put them down and quit messing around!”

They lined up the dolls and sat in a circle around the sofa. After staring at them for a minute, they gave up. *What was there to guess?!*

Except for Zhao Wentu’s doll, which had obvious burn marks, the others had no distinguishing features. Any differences were negligible—their common trait was that they were all ugly. A few stitched lines were supposed to be eyes and a nose, a piece of cloth wrapped around for clothes. If you hold these up to a villager and say, “This looks like you”, wouldn’t the villagers just get offended?

“Any birthmarks or anything?” Chen Bin asked awkwardly, raising his hand. “Can we... take the clothes off?”

“Not like a doll’s got a say in anything.” Old Yu frowned. “But even if we find a birthmark under the clothes, could we strip the villagers to verify?”

Chen Bin fell silent. Though the words were rude, Old Yu’s logic was sound. Moreover, so many villagers never left their homes. They had no idea what they looked like. According to Zhao Wentu, the only way to get them to open the door was to knock three times and say, “I have a gift for you.” But once the door opened and before the villager could retreat inside, the correct doll had to be presented—no mistakes allowed. Everyone stared at the dolls in silence, once again stumped by the ultimate exam question. What the hell were they supposed to do now?

“What time is it?” You Huo suddenly asked.

Simultaneously, the examinees looked at him, then at the invigilator. Qin Jiu checked his phone. “Two o’clock in the morning. As long as it’s before dawn, it still counts as tonight. You have five and a half hours left.”

“That’s enough,” said You Huo.

“Are you sure?” Qin Jiu asked.

You Huo drank some water and hummed in affirmation, sweeping the dolls into the bag. He scanned the room and pointed to a few items. “Rope, knife, cloth strips. Bring anything handy.”

“Oh... okay.”

The group gathered the items. But as they followed You Huo

to the door, they were still confused about what the plan was.

"Wait, what are we doing?" someone whispered.

"Kidnapping the villagers," You Huo stated.

Suddenly, Qin Jiu let out a low chuckle that made the hairs on their necks stand up.

"Take your laughter somewhere else," You Huo said, turning his head away with a stern face. Then he addressed the others, "Don't block the way. Are you coming or not?"

They exchanged glances. "Yes... yes, let's go."

Soon, the examinees stood before a small house. The sign on the door read: House 4.

Knock-knock-knock. You Huo called out, "I've got a gift for you."

Everyone held their breath, waiting. Soon, they heard a rustling sound behind the door, like fabric dragging across the floor as if someone was shuffling. Recalling Zhao Wentu's diary, they remembered him describing having arms and legs, yet they felt soft like cotton. It was both unnerving and saddening.

With a creak, the door opened. Zhao Wentu poked his head out, his face weathered and expressionless, with streaks of white hair at his temples gleaming dully in the moonlight. His hollow eyes fixed unblinkingly on You Huo.

"What gift?" he asked, his voice slow and slightly detached.

You Huo took out the waterproof bag and the scorched doll. "A diary, and a doll representing you. You are Zhao Wentu."

The moonlight cast long shadows on Zhao Wentu's face. He stood motionless for a long time before a flicker of light finally

entered his eyes.

“Zhao... Wen... tu...” He examined the crude doll, repeating the name slowly, his speech rusty from disuse.

“Zhao Wentu...” he murmured again. For a while, he simply stood there, muttering the name over and over before abruptly bursting into raucous laughter, doubling over.

“He’s not going mad again, is he?” Old Yu said with concern.

Zhao Wentu didn’t hear him. After a fit of laughter, he began wailing loudly before snatching the gifts, shoving past You Huo and the others, and sprinting into the woods until he vanished from sight.

“Does that mean... he’s released? Where’s he going?”

“No idea.” You Huo didn’t seem to care as he turned to leave.

In a blink, they stood before another house: House 1, the home of Villager Alpha, whom none of them had ever seen. Everyone exchanged nervous glances, hesitant to speak. How could they deliver the right doll to someone they had never met? Just hand over the bag and say, “Pick one”?

As the other examinees considered retreating, You Huo had already knocked on the door. “Open the door. I’ve got a gift for you.”

Well, too late to back out now. Everyone watched numbly as the door opened to reveal an unfamiliar face.

“What gift?” the villager asked.

Without a word, You Huo flung a rope around the man’s neck and swiftly tied him up.

Villager Alpha looked beyond confused, and the other ex-

aminees were dumbstruck. You Huo didn't lie when he said he planned to kidnap the villagers!

You Huo tossed the loose end of the rope to Yu Wen. "Don't let go, or you'll be in trouble."

Yu Wen gripped the rope tightly, still stunned as he faced the bound Villager Alpha.

By the time the group came to their senses, You Huo was already at Villager Beta's door. They watched in silence as You Huo raised his hand and knocked ominously.

"Open up. I've got a gift for you."

And just like that, Old Yu found himself holding a rope too.

Half an hour. It took them only half an hour to round up the entire village. All nineteen villagers from the eighteen houses. Aside from the deranged Zhao Wentu, the rest were now bound and tethered to ropes in their hands, including the village chief and his elderly mother. This was surely the most outrageous "greeting" Chasu had ever received. Following You Huo's instructions, the examinees herded the villagers to the riverside.

"What next?" Old Yu asked.

You Huo took out the bag, dumped out all the dolls, and pushed the large pile towards the villagers. "Dark Widow's gifts, delivered."

The villagers stared in shocked silence.

"This... actually works?" The examinees' jaws dropped, but then it dawned on them. The exam problem never specified they had to deliver the dolls individually.

A tense silence fell over the riverside. Then, all at once, all

the villagers erupted in madness. Those nineteen dolls were like hands tearing apart the illusion of peace. The villagers began shrieking and thrashing, their strength increasing tenfold in their deranged state. Breaking free of their bonds, they charged forth, attacking anyone in sight. This madness was different from Zhao Wentu's condition. No one had expected this, and they were overwhelmed. Although armed with knives, these were meant more as deterrents. They certainly couldn't bring themselves to harm the villagers, knowing they were once examinees too.

Amid the chaos, a rustling came from the woods—the scrabbling sound of countless creeping limbs closing in from all sides. You Huo looked back, eyes widening. This time, the ghostly limbs emerging were not just a few nor even a dozen. Every severed limb and mangled corpse buried under the soil throughout these woods during the exam's long history had clawed its way to the surface. This disruption could only be described as an upheaval of the entire exam grounds.

Screams filled the air as the group struggled to escape the grasping limbs, fleeing in blind panic.

“Lure them into the woods!” You Huo shouted.

“Into the woods? Why?!”

Even as they questioned, the group started herding the ghostly limbs towards the trees. They were pushed to their limits, running faster and harder than they ever had before in their lives. The icy touch of cleavers reached out countless times from behind, grazing their faces and scalps. That terrifying feeling of

“just barely escaping” was more frightening than anything.

Soon, the churning tide of severed limbs scattered them all through the woods. You Huo leapt over a fallen trunk, quickly scanning the dense trees as he combed through all the information. Ever since Zhao Wentu had run into the woods, You Huo had been pondering one question: *What constituted “release” in this session?*

According to the diary, receiving the dolls meant release, but that was Zhao Wentu’s interpretation as an examinee who could only see part of the picture. He saw that giving Villager Alpha a doll made him disappear the next day and assumed cause and effect. Now, it seemed there was a missing link. Otherwise, they would not be pursued so relentlessly by these cleaver-wielding limbs. Some further act must be required to appease these limbs’ resentment and allow those examinees to truly “rest in peace”.

You Huo pondered this issue intently. Then it struck him—that doll was scorched by fire. Why did that doll, and Zhao Wentu himself, show repeated signs of burn damage? Why had the villagers insisted the custom in Chasu was burial and prohibited cremation? Tracing it back, he could only find one explanation: Being buried kept them bound to this place. Cremation was the true release.

You Huo spotted an area ripe for ignition. *This is it*, he thought. *Lure the limbs here and set them ablaze. Perfect timing.* He halted and reached into his pocket to pull out a lighter, planning to toss it onto the dry brush.

He furrowed his brow. His pocket was empty. It was gone.

He grimaced. He must have lost the lighter amid the earlier chaos.

Sometimes, a single second's hesitation could bring death. In that brief pause, countless pale limbs surrounded him and blocked his path. Worst of all, a sleep-inducing miasma hung in the air.

As the limbs leapt into the air, You Huo's fingers raced across a tree trunk, scribbling rapidly. He didn't even have time to think about what he was writing. When he suddenly realised he might not have written "001", flames burst forth among the lunging limbs.

Like a spark landing in hot oil, the fireball exploded the moment it hit the ground. The tangled undergrowth here proved more combustible than anything. In an instant, the boundless forest became an ocean of fire. Countless pale limbs jutted from the blazing inferno, only to crumble into ash and collapse soundlessly.

You Huo squinted against the glare, his pale eyes reflecting the flickering light. His gaze travelled past the leaping flames to a figure further back. There stood 001, tossing an empty petrol can into the pyre. The flames burned brilliantly, illuminating his approaching form. A smug smirk played on his lips, brimming with vitality, a stark contrast to his usual bored indifference. The exam site was engulfed in the inferno he had created, every last shambling corpse consumed by the blaze. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

In this instant, 001 appeared less like an invigilator and more

like an unrestrained examinee. His arrogance, coupled with an effortless, feral intensity, was an undeniable appeal for many. Although they had only known each other for a few days, You Huo felt an inexplicable certainty take root. He sensed that at this moment, 001 was being truer to his real nature, and paradoxically, that made him far more attractive.

Qin Jiu stopped in front of him, pulling a lighter from his pocket. "I found this by the river. Seems like one of the less disciplined examinees had been carelessly littering."

You Huo's face fell immediately. *I must've gone mad just now. He's not attractive at all.*

Qin Jiu flicked the lighter, watching the flame jump to life, then snuffed it out and snapped the lid on. "No claimers?"

You Huo grabbed it back and scoffed. "Can't help but provoke, can you?"

Qin Jiu chuckled. "I could say the same about you."

You Huo's face stiffened. As much as he didn't want to indulge the man, after a few seconds he still asked, "This fire... was your doing?"

"Maybe, or maybe it was a spontaneous combustion." When You Huo rolled his eyes, Qin Jiu laughed again. "Who else here has time to start such an inferno? Since you insist on asking the obvious, I had to come up with a fresh answer."

"How kind of you," You Huo said mockingly.

"You're welcome."

"But seriously, where did you find the time? You were with us when I was delivering gifts by the river."

“Oh, that honour goes to the ‘Severed Limb Parade’. It wasn’t crazy enough to chop the invigilator today.” Qin Jiu surveyed the area. “You guys scattered faster than rabbits, vanishing into the woods in the blink of an eye. I got bored, and every door stood conveniently open, so I thought I’d do a little touring and borrowed a few cans of petrol along the way.”

“You poured a ring of petrol around the trees?”

“That’s a safe but stupid method.”

You Huo’s brow furrowed. He only said it as a suggestion, not to imply that he would’ve done that. However, the invigilator’s comment felt pointed, especially since he glanced at You Huo when he uttered “stupid”. The insult seemed deliberate.

Savouring You Huo’s sour expression, Qin Jiu baited further. “Mind you, stupid methods can be quite effective, though a tad dull for my tastes.”

You Huo found them boring too, but he didn’t voice this.

Qin Jiu continued explaining, “I couldn’t be bothered going in a circle, so I simply doused any limbs I passed with petrol.”

Then, like dandelion spores dispersing in spring, those severed limbs would carry the fuel far and wide. Qin Jiu poured petrol on the limbs outside the house where he found the cans, using up eleven and a half of the twelve cans. By then, the limbs realised he was a blight to be avoided. In keeping with the philosophy of “waste not”, he carried the last half-can into the woods.

You Huo couldn’t resist asking. “Doesn’t pouring the oil beforehand count as breaking the rules?”

“Predictive ability is a prerequisite for any invigilator,” Qin Jiu said. After so many years, he could forecast with exceptional accuracy which examinees would call for what intervention at which moment, a degree of preparation that was quite common among invigilators to ensure readiness when such inevitable situations arise. Qin Jiu pulled the assistance card from his coat pocket and held it between his fingers. He waved it in front of You Huo. “With this card, how could I be breaking the rules?”

“Are you saying the card’s been used?” You Huo asked, puzzled. “That’s impossible. I didn’t write ‘001’.”

“Didn’t write it?” Qin Jiu chuckled, thinking the young man was too embarrassed to admit it. “If you didn’t write ‘001’, how would I be standing here now?”

“Who knows?” You Huo retorted.

Qin Jiu narrowed his eyes. “If not ‘001’... then what did you write? It couldn’t have been my name, right?”

As if I’d know your name, you narcissist. You Huo thought. “I forgot,” he said stiffly. “I was in a hurry. Anyway, it wasn’t you. If it had been, why hasn’t the card changed at all?”

As they spoke, the card suddenly sparked and burst into flames before turning into ash in Qin Jiu’s hand. A crow perched on a nearby branch and croaked:

“Examinee You Huo received one assistance card. One has been used. Zero remains.”

You Huo was now convinced the stupid exam just wanted to settle personal scores.

Qin Jiu opened his hand, letting the ashes fall through his

fingers. “See, the system confirmed it.”

Confirmed, my arse. With an exceptionally handsome yet stony face, You Huo gripped his lighter and turned to find the other examinees.

Behind Qin Jiu, the tree You Huo had used to write showed a cracked bark. A faint grey smudge marked where fingers had hastily written. If the invigilator had been closer, he would have seen two letters: Gi. But as he noticed and began to move closer to inspect, someone suddenly burst out from the inferno, stumbled to a halt, and stared unblinkingly at him.

The man’s face was weathered, and his clothes were tattered. Despite his dishevelled state, his eyes shone like stars in a winter sky. It was none other than the madman Zhao Wentu. When the examinee-turned-villager finally spoke, he sounded confused. “Qin... Jiu? Qin Jiu?”

Qin Jiu started, frowning. “You know me?”

The invigilator watched Zhao Wentu teeter between newfound clarity and a dream from the past. The madman smiled, momentarily resembling the vibrant young man from his gravestone photo. “How could I not? We finished three sessions together. You might not remember me, but I remember you. What brings you here?” He sighed softly. “Where’s that invigilator you didn’t get along with? Is he not here?”

“Which one?” Qin Jiu pressed his voice low.

Zhao Wentu stepped closer and also lowered his voice. “Invigilator A, duh.”

Hearing that title made Qin Jiu’s brow twitch. He didn’t un-

derstand how he felt about it.

Zhao Wentu continued. "Weren't you always unlucky, ending up in the same exam site as him? Is he not here this time?"

Qin Jiu nodded so as not to wake the man from the dream.

"It's been a while. How many sessions have you finished? Do you think you'll be able to get out?" Before getting an answer, Zhao Wentu whispered, "I guess that's a stupid question. You'll pass without issue. But me... I can't." He turned to face the raging fire. "I can't make it. Even if I did, what would be the point? I'm barely human anymore."

Zhao Wentu stood there, watching the fire and trying to remember this moment. Finally, he pulled something out of his jacket. "I should go. Will you keep this safe for me?"

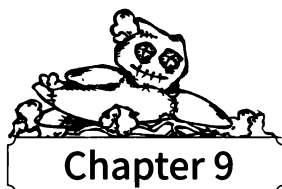
Qin Jiu looked at the waterproof bag the man handed him. Inside was the intact diary, along with a dusty phone.

"I remembered I'd hidden this for so long." Zhao Wentu pointed to the phone. "I don't want to disappear completely. At least these will bear witness to my existence."

Qin Jiu nodded. "Yeah... I will."

Zhao Wentu sighed in relief. "My name is Zhao Wentu. I am Zhao Wentu..." He laughed, turned, and threw himself into the flames.

Qin Jiu stood there, clutching the waterproof bag, bidding farewell to a friend who had become a stranger. Only when the fire got dangerously close did he finally pocket the items and move on.



Q in Jiu soon heard voices. It was You Huo and the examinees gathered together.

Thanks to the invigilator setting the fire just in time, no lives were lost. Everything except for the small clearing where they stood caught fire. Perhaps the system had grudgingly left them this space so they could hear the exam results. Crows from all the houses flew over and perched in lines on the remaining dead branches. As Zhao Wentu's figure vanished, they cawed in sync:

“Attention. Due to irreparable damage to the exam site, this session has been terminated.

“This session consisted of two sections. Part 1: Listening comprehension. Three questions. Fifteen points total.

“One. What is Dark Widow's first and last name? Five points. Two. Where are Dark Widow's family members? Please find them. Five points. Three. How many people are in Dark Widow's house? Five points.

“Part 2: Reading comprehension. Two questions. Twelve points

total.

“One. Help Dark Widow deliver gifts to the villagers. Nine points. Two. Find the way home. Three points.

“Points earned. Part 1 Question 1: 5 points. Part 2 Question 1: 9 points. Part 2 Question 2: 3 points.”

Chen Bin was stunned upon hearing such scores. When he found his wits again, he had a burning question: “When did we find the way home? I thought there wasn’t one.”

Yu Wen swept his arm out. “Once the fire dies down, there won’t be any trees left. No trees means everywhere is the way home!”

While Chen Bin processed his shock, the system continued:

“Examinees scored 17 points total, 12 points more than average. Total time taken: Two and a half days, seven days and five hours less than average.”

Another high score! Another early completion! And they blew up the exam site! Just as the group was about to cheer, the system reluctantly added.

“Exam site permanently damaged. 5 points deducted. Final score: 12 points.”

You Huo tutted.

“Invigilator to be penalised.”

Qin Jiu scoffed.

The examinees’ attitudes towards 001 had shifted. After all, he’d saved their lives by burning down the exam site. They had always equated him with the system and saw him as their adversary. Now, it seemed... that it wasn’t the case? At least, not

entirely. Learning that invigilators could be punished caught them off guard. However, the system evidently treated this as an internal matter and offered no further details.

The crows' beaks opened and closed. Finally, they added: *"Even after deductions, the total score exceeds this session's average. Reward: Examinee You Huo will receive one chance at the random draw."*

From the last exam results, the examinees knew that if they scored above average or if someone showed outstanding performance, they would earn a reward which would go to the highest scorer. You Huo earned nine points for gift delivery, so this was expected, but the exam site had been destroyed. The system seemed furious, yet it still issued a reward. Was the system bugging out?

Everyone was baffled, Chen Bin in particular. He'd never imagined that even with penalties and deductions, their score would still be above average!

Ding. Qin Jiu's phone received a notification. Without another word, he pulled out the same old deck of cards.

You Huo watched as the cards spread out, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Admiring my hands? You've been staring for a while," Qin Jiu teased.

You Huo couldn't believe the invigilator didn't care about his own punishment and was still in the mood to tease an examinee. Seeing You Huo grumpy was probably the only source of amusement in his otherwise dull workday.

“Or are you worried that I might cheat?” Qin Jiu asked.

“You tell me. Maybe you’ll slip me a full set of black cards.”

“Relax. The rules won’t allow it. In exams, rules are supreme.”

Qin Jiu winked. “Believe me, if it weren’t for this restriction, the system would give you a whole deck of graduation cards to choose from.”

It suddenly occurred to the others why the system kept rewarding You Huo despite its anger. Turns out it wasn’t madness but an attempt to rid itself of a troublemaker. Alas, its hope was quickly dashed. With his “legendary luck”, You Huo casually drew an “affirmation” card.

Model Student, keep working hard

Note: This affirms the examinee’s intelligence, stamina, and morals. You are a kind and excellent examinee. Keep it up.

Silence fell over the exam site as everyone wondered who this was mocking. Only the crows flapped their wings, announcing in a mechanical voice: “*One chance used. Random draw concluded. Congratulations.*”

They said “congratulations”, but it sounded more like “go to hell.”

“You want to keep the card, or should I hold onto it?” Qin Jiu asked.

As if the card was valuable. You Huo rolled his eyes and walked away.

Once all rewards and penalties had been settled, the crows took flight from the dead tree, circling a few times before diving

into the sea of fire and exploding into bursts of flame, completing their final task.

“Holy...” the group gasped.

The fire raged for a few more seconds before suddenly vanishing. It all happened in the blink of an eye, leaving everyone stunned. No one knew how long Chasu had existed or how many examinees’ lives it had claimed. Now, only scorched earth remained.

Old Yu scanned the area. “Everything’s burnt black. I can’t really see a path. Is this the one with gravel?”

“Doesn’t matter, let’s just leave. Every direction’s a path now.” Yu Wen turned to Yu Yao. “How are you doing?”

The woman had struggled the most to dodge the ghastly limbs. They were too numerous and aggressive, and she disappeared before anyone could pull her away. When the others found her, she was curled up behind some thorny bushes, covered in dirt, her clothes torn. Thankfully, she wasn’t in mortal danger. She had been sitting by a broken tree root since then, wrapped tightly in Maximilian’s oversized jacket, only her pale face visible. She looked frail, almost invisible.

Seeing their concern, she whispered, “I’m fine. Really.”

“We must get out of here. Come on, I’ll carry you.” Yu Wen crouched in front of her. The teenager treated her like his sister. Maybe it was because of their shared surname or Yu Yao’s gentle demeanour.

“It’s okay, I can walk.” Yu Yao patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t be stubborn,” Yu Wen said. “With your belly, it’s a

miracle you've made it this far. You barely got out alive, and you're still saying you can walk? Who are you kidding?"

Yu Yao was about to protest, but she bit her lip and looked down upon hearing this. "Well... let me know if you get tired halfway."

"Sure, sure. You can carry me then, okay?"

Yu Yao smacked him on the back of his head, making him chuckle.

For a moment, doubt flashed through some of the others' minds: *Could a pregnant woman really be okay after all this?* However, they were too exhausted from running for their lives to think much of it. Any thoughts quickly turned to concern for Yu Yao pushing herself too hard.

The gravel path that Old Yu had noticed was indeed the way out. They trudged through the scorched landscape for ages before finally reaching the edge of the exam site. A road cut across their path. A rusty sign nearby read "Intercity Coach"—just like when they had arrived.

No sooner had they gathered beside the sign than the same old battered minibus swerved towards them. Even the driver was the same. He leant against the door, watching them climb in with disbelief.

Old Yu couldn't resist a jab. "You alright, sir? It's like you've seen a ghost."

The driver didn't respond right away. He stood by his seat, counting heads. After the third count, he finally spoke up. "I've driven this bus for nearly three years, only dropping people off

but never picking them up. This is the first time anyone's come back alive for a second ride."

Old Yu retorted, "Speaking of that, you weren't very nice. You played mute the whole way here and only warned us not to enter the woods at the last minute. If we weren't rebels, you'd be driving a hearse right now."

The others nodded in agreement.

"I wasn't playing mute," the driver said gruffly. "Passengers on this bus are destined to die, so why should I waste time on chit-chat?"

No one could argue with that.

"As for the woods... I have to say that to every group. It's a rule I can't break. In exams, rules are supreme."

It was the second time they had heard something like that today. Suddenly, everyone became curious about him.

"Hey... are you an NPC?"

The driver didn't respond.

"But you're different from those other NPCs like Dark Widow and the villagers," Yu Wen said. "They live in the exam site and have to follow the storyline. You know the exam rules, so what type are you?"

The driver mumbled, "You've been to the service centre, haven't you? Met with the hotel manager and the shop owner? I'm about the same as them."

"I see." Yu Wen pressed on. His cousin had actually given him this mission. "Then you must know what these exams are about, right? Can you tell us? We've done two now, but I still don't un-

derstand. There must be a purpose, right?"

The driver stayed silent, and they unfortunately got no answer. The driver glanced in the rearview mirror and lowered his cap. "I don't know. Stop asking. Save your questions for the service centre. Discuss with other examinees, not me."

Yu Wen shrugged at You Huo, mouthing: *Another one who won't spill the beans.*

You Huo wasn't surprised. The driver's lips were tight, and his expression was tense. His dark, lean arms gripped the wheel as he observed the rearview mirror.

"Are you being monitored too?" You Huo asked suddenly, leaning on the card reader beside the driver. "Like the invigilators."

The driver nearly swerved the minibus into a tree. He slammed on the brakes and glared at You Huo. "What do you mean *like* the invigilators? I *was* an invigilator!" He let out a scoff, clearly upset.

Everyone was shocked. "Then how'd you end up as a driver?"

"Made a mistake."

"But you said you were the same as the hotel manager and shop owner..."

"They're former invigilators too. What's wrong with that?"

"Is that what happens when you make a mistake?" Yu Wen couldn't help asking.

"Not always," the driver answered. He wanted to explain that they were only reserve invigilators, and the penalty varied by rank for official ones. However, he felt it wasn't worth elaborat-

ing, so he lost interest and clammed up.

The driver stopped speaking, but You Huo thought of 001, who was about to be punished. He wondered where he would end up. You Huo imagined the invigilator's face on the driver, the hotel manager, and the shop owner. Anyone he'd seen, he mentally went through them all. He couldn't decide who had it worse—001 or those people—and snickered at the thought.

The driver thought You Huo was mocking him, so he shooed him away angrily. "Get back! Sit down and sleep! Don't distract me, or we'll all die."

You Huo stared at him momentarily before silently slinging his backpack over his right shoulder and moving to the last row.

The journey felt endless this time. The minibus rocked back and forth for over four hours. To make matters worse, the driver seemed to have ill intentions, driving as if he were drunk. The constant swaying and lurching made everyone feel faint.

When You Huo awakened, gloominess filled the windows. Yellow and white lights blended, stretching from nearby into the distance. At first glance, it looked like a city's scattered nightlights. He squinted for a while, thinking he was back in reality and that everything prior had just been a dream during the car ride, but the driver's shout snapped him back to "reality".

"Everyone off! We're at the service centre."

The examinees got off and stood there, dumbfounded. A street lined with tall buildings and shops stretched before them. The structures looked dated, like department stores from the last century. The shop windows were grimy while the light from

the street corner cast halos on them. It was like a forgotten alley in a city.

"This is the service centre?" Everyone grabbed onto the driver before he could get back on the minibus.

"Let go of me," The driver grumbled, shaking off their hands. "Yes, it's the service centre. Can't you see the hotel here?"

The minibus was indeed stopped in front of a hotel. It looked like a typical budget hotel sitting on a street corner, but the place was deserted. Actually, the whole street was deserted.

"The service centre can change?"

"Where's the inn? Where's Madam Chu? We were just starting to get along with her."

"Madam Chu? Chu Yue?" The driver's dark face reddened slightly in the light, but the tint vanished. "You've met her? She's still at that tiny service centre, right? There are five in the country, and they rotate regularly."

"In the country?" You Huo asked. "Are there exams abroad too?"

The driver pursed his lips. He was reluctant to say more, but for Chu Yue's sake, he finally said, "Of course. A foreigner's standing right next to you, isn't he? Besides, the subjects include Foreign Language, so of course there are exam centres abroad."

The examinees, who had just finished a Romani exam, stared at him silently.

The driver fell quiet. "Your case is... rare."

You Huo looked around. The tall buildings were lit up as if full of occupants. "Can we choose a service centre?"

The driver answered, “Usually it’s random. Each of the five places has its own unique—”

You Huo thought of their previous one and barely recalled anything special about it. “Unique rundown charm?”

“Well, Chu Yue’s place is a bit...”

You Huo stared hard at the driver.

“... rundown,” the driver conceded. “That might be the only one without any perks. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been sent there as punishment...”

“The other places have advantages. Chu Yue’s is Service Centre 1. Number 2 is like a military base, full of weapons—everything you can and can’t imagine. It’s heaven for some examinees. Number 3 has a casino as its landmark. Lucky folks can try for a graduation card. Number 4 has lots of food and fun. You can forget about exams for a while there. This is Number 5.”

You Huo frowned, sensing bad news. “And the advantage here?”

“The shop’s pretty cheap.”

“How much cheaper?”

“Anywhere from 10-50% off.”

The examinees were dead silent.

“Honestly,” Chen Bin blurted, “I can’t afford to lose even 0.1 points.”

“Funny you say that,” the driver said. “Most examinees are the same, so getting this place is pretty unlucky...”

You Huo, known for his misfortune, turned and walked away.

Regardless, Service Centre 5 was better than the last one.

They wouldn't call this place "bustling"—unless they were being sarcastic—but even the screening process was stricter. The automatic glass doors were equipped with scanners, and a red light swept over each examinee as they passed.

As always, You Huo let the rest of his ragtag team go first and leant against the door until everyone else had gone in. However, the alarm went off as soon as he stepped inside.

The receptionist shot up, craning her neck. "What do you have on you?"

You Huo stopped. "What do you mean?"

The others looked, confused and wary, at the receptionist, who waved You Huo over. "Come here, please. I need to check your bag."

You Huo tossed his backpack on the counter, unzipped it, and raised his thin eyelids. "What are you looking for? Be my guest."

His face up close was striking. The receptionist's blush went from her face to her neck. "Um... you can check yourself. Can you recall if you've brought anything from the exam?"

Everyone was perplexed.

"No way," Yu Wen said. "That awful place had nothing worth taking. Who'd be idiotic enough to bring souvenirs?"

His words made her chuckle. "Sometimes, things try to sneak out with examinees. It's happened before and nearly caused deaths here. That's why we started checking as a precaution."

Well, our last service centre didn't check, everyone thought, but since the alarm went off, they couldn't be unreasonable. They

just nodded, deciding not to give the receptionist a hard time.

The fact that they were being reasonable prompted her to tell You Huo, “I know you didn’t mean to. No one would do this on purpose. Just check if anything dangerous sneaked in—”

Without looking, You Huo pulled something from the side pocket of the backpack. “This?”

She didn’t know how to explain this away. His quick draw made it clear he knew exactly what he had.

You Huo shot a look at Yu Wen, who shrank back, scared. Just moments ago, he’d called his cousin idiotic! Unbelievable!

“Huo... why did you take one of Dark Widow’s dolls?” he mumbled.

“It was right there.”

Yu Wen grimaced. *Right there? So you just took it?*

It was indeed one of the dolls. Not the one he’d stitched, but the original from the bottom rack with a bellflower pattern on its ankle. After days of torment, the doll gave everyone else chills. Yu Yao and Chen Bin looked especially green. Who would’ve thought the big shot would take a souvenir?

You Huo asked the receptionist, “Is it against the rules?”

“Not exactly. We just want to keep examinees safe. If you really want it though, you may keep it.”

You Huo took the doll back.

The receptionist was stunned. *Well, that was bold.*

The blush disappeared from her face as she tapped the keyboard furiously. She then handed out a stack of cards. “You have five days here. Your room numbers are on the cards. Please don’t

mix them up, or you'll disturb the others. The restaurant's on the top floor, open 24/7. For supplies or gear, check the shops. On your last day, the department store has the best deals from 7 to 10 in the morning. Don't miss out if you need anything."

You Huo flipped his card over. As expected, it matched the format from the small inn last time.

Examinee: You Huo

Examinee ID: 860451-10062231-000A

Completed Subjects: Physics, Foreign Language
(2/5)

Total Pts: 27

Yu Wen scratched his head, looking at his own card. "This scoring system's weird. You answered the most questions, but we've all been given the same number of points."

You Huo had bought a few items before, so he had the lowest total score after two sessions. He pocketed his card without a glance. "Doesn't matter."

"Not every exam is like that," Chen Bin chimed in. "At least one out of five is scored individually. Whoever earned the points gets them. I had one like that."

"How did that go?" Yu Wen asked.

Chen Bin's face fell. "I got three points."

The shocking information kept everyone silent during the lift ride.

Their rooms were conveniently located just one floor below the restaurant. While they searched for their room numbers, Old Yu suddenly said, "Wait, that's not right."

“What’s not right?”

“We gave all the dolls to the villagers. If you brought one back, doesn’t that mean a villager missed out? Why did we get full points?”

“There was one extra,” You Huo replied.

“Huh?”

You Huo held up the doll. “This one doesn’t match any of the villagers.”

Everyone started to speak before noticing the tattoo on the doll’s leg. “We didn’t see this when we were matching dolls to villagers. We couldn’t have missed such a distinct pattern.”

You Huo stated, “I didn’t put this one in.”

“But Dark Widow gave us this too?” Yu Wen asked.

You Huo nodded.

“That’s so strange! There were eighteen households, nineteen people including the village chief’s mum. Why would Dark Widow give us twenty dolls? Can’t she count? Was she trying to confuse us?”

You Huo squeezed the doll’s leg. “Maybe we missed the person this one belongs to.”

Everyone froze at his words. Who could they have missed? They had accounted for all eighteen households. The exam system had even marked them correct. Who else could have been at the exam site?

After a moment, it hit them like a ton of bricks—of course, the examinees themselves.

Yu Wen shuddered. “Huo, stop with the ghost stories. It’s

late.”

The group eyed each other warily as if anyone could be the ghost. Then, they noticed You Huo staring at someone to his right.

It was Yu Yao. She'd found her room first and was opening the door. It was warm in the hotel, and she had taken off Maximilian's oversized coat, revealing her torn clothes. Her shirt was ripped at the shoulder, and the legs of her trousers were frayed at the hem. Her pale ankles were exposed in the bright corridor light, revealing a bellflower tattoo to the right that perfectly matched the one on the doll's leg.

Yu Yao froze, her face ashen. The others looked even paler.

“Yu Yao... what's happening?” Yu Wen's voice shook.

Yu Yao trembled, casting her gaze on the floor. After a long pause, she looked up at You Huo. Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying. Even now, her voice was still gentle. “When... when did you find out?”

You Huo's expression didn't change, still looking sleepy and bored. “Me? I suspected it during the first session and confirmed it just now.”

“The first?” Yu Wen panicked. “What made you suspect it?”

“The problem said thirteen people would be at the feast. How many people were there?”

Yu Wen counted on his fingers silently. “Thirteen!” Then, it hit him. “Wait, no. Thirteen examinees plus Hunter Alpha make fourteen... so one didn't count?”

Everyone looked at Yu Yao, their faces turning from pale to

grey.

“Yu Yao... What the—” Yu Wen wanted to say, “What the hell are you?” but as a boy who had just turned eighteen, he softened his words at the last second. “Who are you?”

Yu Yao gripped the doorknob tightly and sighed. “Come in, I’ll explain. Let’s not do it out here.”

But who’d be daring enough? Of course, You Huo was the first to nod, while everyone else was hesitant. Soon after, they all gathered in her room.

Yu Yao sat in a chair and stared at the doll for a long moment. Finally, she said, “I lied earlier. That wasn’t my first session.

“I was an examinee years ago. I was very unlucky. My first session was the Romani one we’ve just finished. I was in... Zhao Wentu’s group...”

She explained that she’d known some Romani and translated for her peers, making her the girl mentioned daily in Zhao Wentu’s diary. Of course, she hadn’t known that at the time. After Zhao Wentu died, only two examinees remained—her and a middle-aged man. That night, a severed arm came as expected. They were after the man, but in panic, he pushed Yu Yao in front of him, sending her to a gruesome death by the blade.

“I remember him begging, ‘Take her, not me.’ The arm missed and took several swings. The scene must have been... very awful,” Yu Yao said, sinking into her memories.

No one could bear to listen anymore. “So, you...”

“You’d think I’d be buried in the woods or become a villager, right?” Yu Yao said. “I thought so too, but maybe I was lucky.”

She recalled being so upset about Zhao Wentu's death that she cried all day. She even searched the woods for his traces, hoping to erect a grave at least. But she found nothing. Instead, she came across a card.

"What card?" You Huo asked.

"Like the ones the invigilator had you draw. One was just lying in the woods."

"What did it say?"

"Retake once," Yu Yao said. "After I... was chopped, the card worked, but only halfway, since I found it and didn't properly earn the reward."

"Halfway?" the others asked in confusion. "What does that mean?"

"I didn't become a severed arm or a villager, but I also didn't fully come back to life to retake the exam either. I floated down the river, and Dark Widow found me."

You Huo remembered the village chief mentioning Dark Widow's work with the dead, and how she once pulled a girl from the river and dragged her back in a bamboo basket.

"Despite starting as an examinee, I'd somehow become part of the exam site. Dark Widow did her voodoo magic on me, and it worked. She made a doll of me using her dead daughter's hair, and with it, I returned to life just like the villagers. When I woke up, I was already like this, pregnant. Dark Widow said that she hid her daughter inside me."

Yu Yao's story made everyone's hair stand on end. They quickly realised something. "You understood her?"

“When I was part of the exam site, yes,” Yu Yao said. “But after I left, I couldn’t understand Romani anymore. I even forgot what I used to know. It never came back.”

“You left?” You Huo asked. “The driver said he’d never picked anyone up.”

“Do I count as a person? I don’t even know,” Yu Yao said.

She was like a bug in the system, stuck between being an examinee and an NPC. She hadn’t left by bus but on foot, wandering through countless places before stumbling into another exam with a group of examinees. Maybe it was the system’s doing, or something else. Her memory grew worse. She forgot much of her life before the exams, only remembering that some had hurt her while others had protected her.

“I didn’t know what to do, so I sometimes helped examinees,” she said. “Until one exam, I saw the man who had gotten me killed.”

Yu Wen couldn’t hold back a curse. “Seriously?! He didn’t die?”

“I later learnt that he’d had an exam exemption card from the casino,” Yu Yao explained. “He tried that Foreign Language exam, hoping to pass by chance. When he realised it was too hard, he used the card.”

That made Yu Wen even angrier. “Fuck that! He had the card and he still got you killed? What happened to him after that?”

“He was bad at exams but good with using dirty tricks. And lucky at gambling,” Yu Yao said. “I heard he managed to get two extension cards from the casino. Each buys a time of two years,

so he hid in the service centre for four years. When he couldn't get more, he had to start taking exams."

"Have you found him?"

Before Yu Yao could answer, You Huo said, "He was in that session, wasn't he?"

Everyone else was stunned. Yu Yao nodded.

"Who?" one person asked.

"The guy who became Hunter Alpha," You Huo answered.

Yu Yao finally let out a sigh. "I've been meaning to apologise. The system often overlooks me. That rule violation... it must've missed me and blamed you instead because you got ink on you. It's happened before. I've been trying to make it up to you."

"Don't worry about it," You Huo replied. The penalties hadn't affected him anyway. "But why didn't you tell Zhao Wentu who you were?"

Yu Yao was silent for a long time before letting out a bitter laugh. "I've changed. My face is different now, maybe because of Dark Widow's daughter. I look like a young girl just out of her teens. He wouldn't recognise me. And I don't know if I'm alive or dead. I... didn't want to disappoint him."

Without knowing her current condition, at least Zhao Wentu died with some satisfaction, having recalled his name and memories. He was beyond suffering now, leaving all his regrets in his diary. Only his readers would ever know.

Yu Yao shared more information. She told them the exam covered any subject imaginable, from ancient to modern, from East to West. Each session was based on a specific topic, which

might not be hard, perhaps even simple, but the system always found ways to take the examinees' lives. Exam sites varied in capacity, and examinees were assigned randomly with no fixed group.

As a bug in the system, Yu Yao was the only free examinee who could choose her exam sites. That's how she ended up in the Physics session with Baldie, who killed her, and the Foreign Language session with You Huo and Yu Wen, who had helped her. She used her unique status to help her teammates, albeit discreetly, as she had done in Chasu.

"Those crazy limbs have a pattern when choosing targets," Yu Yao explained. "They prioritise those who've stitched dolls over those who haven't."

She explained that she became a *de facto* villager after Dark Widow had revived her. The ghastly limbs instinctively ignored areas where she was present.

Only Liang Yuanhao and Chen Bin had stitched dolls on the first day and decided to stay behind in the house alone, so the limbs went straight to them. The limbs should have targeted Chen Bin on the second night, but he was with Yu Yao, so they (foolishly) went after You Huo instead. Then You Huo stitched sixteen dolls on day three, making him the prime target on the third night. Additionally, Yu Yao stuck close to the others, so the limbs had a clear goal and went completely berserk.

Chen Bin, shocked to learn he'd brushed shoulders with Death twice, thanked Yu Yao sincerely. He felt compelled to ask, "Why didn't you tell us all this?"

Yu Yao shook her head. "I look like I'm pregnant. People wouldn't follow my advice if I acted strangely or knew too much. They'd be suspicious, wary, and even see me as an enemy."

Everyone fell quiet. Try as they might, they couldn't argue with her logic.

"But you're all special, really," Yu Yao said earnestly. "From the start, you've shown nothing but kindness. You've offered me money, taken penalties on my behalf, lent me clothes, and become my friends. I used to feel like a wandering soul in the exam. Now, I sometimes feel alive again, thanks to all of you. That's why I decided to tag along, helping wherever possible." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "But that was before. You probably don't want me around anymore, and I understand. If I were you, I'd be uneasy too."

Leaning by the door, You Huo chimed in. "It doesn't matter who I'm with in an exam."

Yu Yao started.

"Yeah!" Old Yu and Yu Wen piped up too. "Stay if you want! We're not bothered. You've never hurt us."

"Oh, right," Yu Wen said out of curiosity, "Yu Yao isn't your real name then, is it?" Otherwise, how could Baldie have not reacted to the name during the first session?

Yu Yao blushed like a tomato. "I'm sorry I lied. You seemed so kind, I borrowed your surname. This is my real name."

She flipped over her hotel card and pushed it forward. It read:

Examinee: Shu Xue

Examinee ID: 860575-02091318-1127

Completed Subject: Foreign Language

Total Pts: 12

“*Shuxue*, as in ‘maths’?” Yu Wen laughed. “Your parents have the same awful naming taste as mine. I got made fun of for sounding like ‘language arts’. Looks like it doesn’t matter if our family names are different. I’m your brother from another mother.”

Yu Yao—now Shu Xue—laughed as well. “I once met someone whose name sounded like ‘physics’. We should all become sworn siblings.”

“But... why does it say *one* subject completed? And why aren’t the points cumulative?”

“It’s always been like this. Each service centre only shows my last session and score.”

“Huh...”

While everyone else was still digesting this information, You Huo got to the crux of it. “So you can never finish the exams?”

“No...” Shu Xue said, smiling. “But I’m happy if I can help you all make it through.”

You Huo thought, gaze downcast, then placed the doll in front of her. The villagers had found release with their dolls. Would it be the same for Shu Xue?

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I used to pick this doll up every day in Chasu, but nothing happened. Maybe it only works for villagers...”

“This is different,” You Huo said.

"What is?" Shu Xue looked puzzled.

"The exam problem said it had to be given by an examinee." You Huo bent down, pushing the doll closer to her. "I'm giving it to you now."

Shu Xue stared unblinkingly at the doll representing her and was overcome with dread.

You Huo glanced at her clenched fists before picking up his backpack. "It's your choice to take it or not. I'm tired. Good night."

Again? Everyone wanted to ask. Again? How is he tired again?

As You Huo left, the rest felt it was time to go too. They said their goodbyes and returned to their rooms.

For the next few days, Shu Xue didn't leave her room except for meals in the upstairs restaurant. The others did pretty much the same.

They explored the area for the first couple of days, but this service centre was eerily quiet. The streets were empty, and although many buildings had lights on at night, no one answered when they knocked. It all appeared to be for show. The external restaurants were too expensive, and the department store's discounts were limited.

You Huo got dragged out a few times before he'd had enough. He locked his door, hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign and then slept to catch up on what he had missed during the session.

The five-day break passed just like that. On the fifth morning, just before 7 a.m., all the examinees gathered in the hotel lobby.

You Huo, having slept well, wasn't grumpy for once. He came

downstairs with his earbuds in and saw Shu Xue, who looked unchanged after hiding away for five days. He glanced at her pregnant belly and took out his left earbud. Before he could start the conversation, Shu Xue spoke first.

“I thought about your offer. I want to finish one more session with you guys, so I asked Yu Wen to keep the doll for now. I’ve heard the difficulty of sessions varies, and the third one’s usually tougher. I’m worried, so I can take the doll after you guys pass this one.”

Never one to meddle in another person’s business, You Huo simply nodded and put his earbud back in.

At 7 o’clock sharp, the examinees entered the department store. The building had eight floors, packed with everything imaginable—pretty standard for such an establishment.

“Good god, there’s even jewellery?” Yu Wen marvelled at the display cases. “Why even put them out? What a waste of space. Which idiot would buy this stuff?”

No sooner had he spoken than his cousin picked up a men’s watch and tossed it into his trolley.

Yu Wen quickly backpedalled. “Watches don’t count! They’re useful!” ...*provided the exam site’s clock broke, that is.*

The department store was bustling today. Even hotel staff and restaurant owners from the neighbourhood were shopping. A long banner hung from the ceiling: “Weekly Discount! 7-10 A.M. Up to 50% off for select items. Today is 13 December. The 12th and 13th customers get a chance to win an additional discount. 90% win rate. Discounts on top of discounts!”

You Huo never had great luck. He ignored the banner and took the escalator to the first floor. His previous jacket had been ruined while he was in the coffin, so he grabbed three new ones after browsing the first and second floors.

Yu Wen watched nervously. He felt compelled to remind him. "Huo, take it easy. Why do you need so many jackets?"

"Just in case." Just in case he broke the rules again. Who knew what might happen?

After shopping for clothes, he hit the food sections for instant meals and canned goods. He then glanced down from the sixth floor. Despite the discounts, most examinees were just window shopping—no way they would buy anything! Few were actually checking out. Seeing no queue at the cashier, he headed for the escalator, his full trolley drawing hard stares from everyone he passed.

As You Huo reached the ground floor, he was surprised to see the till suddenly brimming with people. Curious, he approached and quickly realised why. A tall man in an ash-grey shirt stood at the till, the fabric stretching across his broad shoulders as he leant against the counter. You Huo stopped short and rolled his eyes. He'd recognise that silhouette anywhere. Who could it be but 001?

Around the invigilator stood a circle of examinees, mouths hanging wide open as they stared at his trolleys. Plural. This big shot was so big he needed two!

The cashier was dumbly counting the items, lips in a tight line. You Huo slowed down but still made it in time to hear the

cashier ask for confirmation.

“Are you sure you want... four tops, four bottoms, and two coats?”

“Yes.”

“And *all* these cans of beef?”

“Yes.”

“And this watch—”

“Yes.”

The cashier gulped. “And this suitcase—”

Qin Jiu tapped on the counter, his patience wearing thin. “Everything. Just ring it up, please. How much do I owe you?”

As the cashier rang up his items, Qin Jiu glanced back, noticed You Huo, and raised his eyebrows with a smile. “Morning. Finally caught enough Zs?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Buying supplies and gear.”

You Huo gave him a once-over and said coolly, “Since when did invigilators need supplies? Don’t you have your own house on-site?”

Qin Jiu hummed. “Sure, as an invigilator. But as an examinee, I have to do a little something at least.”

You Huo snorted. Two seconds later, he looked up. “Say what? Who’s the examinee?”

“Me.”

You Huo was taken aback. “Why?”

“The system thinks I overdid the assistance. My penalty is to be an examinee for a round.”

The penalty was related to the assistance card, which meant it had to do with him, so You Huo asked, “How long is a round?”

“It’s five subjects according to the current format. Just like you, I must pass them all.”

“Okay.”

You Huo thought about saying something but wasn’t sure what. He started to put his earbuds back in, but Qin Jiu spoke again.

“I don’t get to choose the subjects, since it’s a punishment. I must follow an examinee. I could’ve chosen one, but I’m lazy, so I went with the default...”

You Huo paused, earbuds in hand. “Who’s that?”

Qin Jiu grinned. “Don’t look so sour. It’s the rules. I provided assistance to you as the card dictated, and now that I’m being penalised for that, you’re not off the hook either.” He took off his glove and casually held out his hand. “Be nice to your new fellow examinee.”

You Huo wanted to shove the shopping trolley into his face.

As the conversation came to an end, the cashier finished ringing up the items. Qin Jiu pointed to the shelf behind the cashier. “Oh, and get me the...”

The cashier tried to help after a moment of silence. He pointed to each item on the rack. “What do you need? Cigarettes? A lighter? Booze?”

“Ah,” Qin Jiu sighed, lowering his hand. “Force of habit. I felt like I should buy something else, but I don’t know what. Never mind.”

The cashier nodded and stated the total. “That’ll be... 19 points.”

The other examinees nearby were gobsmacked. All their points combined probably wouldn’t even reach 20, and this guy spent 19 all at once. The most outrageous part was when Qin Jiu told the cashier to “Grab something random from the back rack to round it up.”

Round it up? What kind of madness was this? The cashier was also gobsmacked. He was also a demoted reserve invigilator but didn’t recognise the one in front of him. He’d seen many invigilators and had heard of 001, but Qin Jiu had been on sick leave during his time on the job. Besides, as the lead invigilator, Qin Jiu didn’t participate in every exam.

“Sir,” the cashier explained patiently, “you’re our 12th customer today. That means you can win an extra discount through a draw, so... rounding up won’t matter. It might end in an odd number after the discount.”

“Oh? A discount?” Qin Jiu asked.

“Yes, it’s on the banner.” The cashier pointed up. “The 12th and 13th customers today are the lucky winners, but I’ll have to ring both your orders before you can draw a prize together.”

“I see.” Qin Jiu glanced at the banner, then turned to You Huo with a smirk. “Come ring up, lucky winner.”

You Huo was not amused. He was sure that with that kind of attitude, the man had had his teeth knocked in. You Huo pushed his trolley to the till and unloaded his items.

The cashier paled again. *What was this, a shopaholics’ conven-*

tion? He muttered inwardly as he tallied up You Huo's purchases.

"Two coats, two instant noodles, two canned beef... and a watch."

Hmm... where have I seen this? The cashier glanced at the two of them but kept quiet. He bagged everything and rang up the total.

"That'll be 5 points." Fearing You Huo might also ask to "round up", he quickly grabbed a wooden box from under the till and began the presentation: "You'll be drawing from here. There are one hundred tickets inside. The best prize is a 90% discount—only five of those. But it's okay. We've got fifteen 70%-off, thirty 50%-off, and forty 20%-off. It's a great deal; I'll cut my head off if you can find a second service centre offering anything as good as this."

You Huo, as uninterested in discounts as in the cashier's head, asked, "That's only ninety tickets. What about the rest?"

"Well... there's five 10%-off tickets, three 5%-off tickets, and two full price tickets. But think about it. 10% off is still okay, and it's as rare as the 90%-off. The 5%-off? Only three of those. And the full price? Just two." The cashier leant in. "What's the chance of that though, right? There are fewer of those than the 90%-off tickets! I've seen people win 90%-off, but never 5% or full price. Our goal is to help you save. Every point counts. Your life depends on it, after all."

You Huo cut him off. "So, just take one?"

The cashier deflated, his enthusiasm wasted. He wilted as he

spun the box towards them to show them the side with explanations. “Also, to increase examinee interactions, there’s another rule: you draw for each other. Your prize goes to him and his to you. This rule is pretty well-known in the system, but maybe you’ve never heard of it.”

“I have, vaguely,” Qin Jiu said. “The general opinion is that your boss is an asshole who wants to sow hatred among the examinees.”

“Well, with such a big discount, how can it be so easy to get? Come on, I love this part! It’s so exciting! This will decide your relationship. It’s a make or break for your friendship.” The cashier shook the box and gestured for them to proceed.

Moments later, Qin Jiu drew “5% off” for You Huo.

Then You Huo repaid Qin Jiu with a “full price”.

There’s a kind of bad luck called mutual harm. There’s a kind of relationship where neither lets the other off. Today, the cashier and examinees witnessed both.

In the end, Qin Jiu still made the cashier round up his purchase.

“Where’d you get the points?” You Huo asked when he saw him take out a card.

“The system gave them to me.”

You Huo balked. The man received points even though he was being punished! What kind of “punishment” was that?

“Do you know what this means?” Qin Jiu asked.

“What?” You Huo replied.

“Most sessions have entry requirements. For example,

first-timers are grouped in one session, while those who've taken two exams are placed in another. The difficulty varies. The system giving me points means that all three of your upcoming sessions have prerequisites. The more sessions you've taken, the harder they get. The system's given me free points for two reasons: one, to follow the rules and ensure that I enter the same exam site as my chosen examinee, you, and two, to maintain the difficulty level so that I'm not with first timers."

You Huo noticed Qin Jiu was more open about system-related matters now that he'd been demoted to an examinee. He used to avoid these topics and even received warnings. Seizing the opportunity, You Huo asked more questions. "How many points did it give you?"

"They said it's based on my lowest single-subject score as an examinee. Who knows if that's true."

Don't you even know your own lowest score? It's obvious on the card. What's there to doubt? You Huo thought.

The disgraced invigilator held up his card which looked like that of any other examinee, displaying basic information. The only difference was that the examinees' exam IDs ended in numbers, but his ID ended in two mysterious letters.

Examinee: Qin Jiu

Examinee ID: 86010-06141729-Gi

Completed Subjects: 2

Total Pts: 20

Noticing You Huo's confusion about the "Gi", Qin Jiu explained, "The system simulates IDs for invigilators being pun-

ished.”

The system assigned nicknames at the end of examinee IDs to distinguish invigilators. Qin Jiu’s should have been “Gin”, but a typo left it as “Gi”. He used to know this, but his damaged memory had erased that fact. Now, no one could say for sure whether it was a genuine mistake or a prank by the invigilator who had entered it.

Watching Qin Jiu spend all twenty points compelled the cashier to ask out of disbelief, “Got a grudge against yourself?”

Qin Jiu chuckled and said “See you tonight” to You Huo before leaving the service centre.



Chapter 10

That night, the hotel checked the examinees out automatically right on time. Street signs had appeared out of nowhere, and they followed them to an intersection, which, to nobody's surprise, was a T-junction. They walked to the centre, and the landscape behind them quickly blurred, hidden by thick fog. Each of the three streets had a sign that listed an untaken subject: Language Arts, Mathematics, and History. The same old security booth stood in the middle of the intersection.

As the speaker crackled to life, Qin Jiu emerged from the fog with his suitcase right on cue.

"I've never seen such a laid-back examinee..." Yu Wen whispered to You Huo. Then he realised his silliness. "Oh wait, there's one right in front of me. Forget I said anything."

Qin Jiu stopped beside the group.

The speaker finished repeating the same basic rules, then paused for emphasis before finally getting to the point:

"We're implementing a surprise reform to the exam. The new

system will use grades A, B, C, and D based on the global percentile. The top 10% get an A, the next 40% get a B, the following 25% get a C, and the rest get a D.”

“Fuck me...” Yu Wen had dreaded exam reforms for three years in high school. He silently cursed the speaker. However, the announcement continued:

“Current scores will be converted to grades, which will be recalculated after each session. Moreover, we are adopting an elimination system. Examinees graded D are eliminated, while those graded C must retake the session. Retakes will take place at the original exam site with modified questions. Examinees graded B or higher in the retake can proceed to the next session, while those graded C must retake again. Those graded D will be eliminated.

“Updating examinee scores now...”

The screen outside the booth lit up, displaying the converted grades in a few lines:

Yu Wen: A

Yu Yiguo: A

Maximilian Rico: A

These three had benefited from You Huo’s help and didn’t spend many points, so they held the highest rank.

Chen Bin: B

You Huo: B

Chen Bin’s grade was thanks to Mr Coattail, but Mr Coattail himself dropped a grade due to shopaholism.

Shu Xue: C

She would probably be C permanently.

Qin Jiu: D

Zero points, and all his own doing. Nothing more to say.

The speaker remained silent after displaying the grades. Maybe Qin Jiu's score had shocked it into silence.

You Huo stared at the screen. "Which idiot calculated these results?"

The speaker remained silent. Everyone turned to look at him, confused. "What's wrong?" one of them inquired.

You Huo turned to Shu Xue. "Your exam card shows you've only taken one subject and scored 12 points."

Shu Xue nodded, humming quietly.

"I don't know the average score for a single subject," You Huo continued, "but if I recall correctly, the average for the Romani exam was 5 points. Even if other sessions were easier, how would 12 points in one subject rank as C? This must be a joke."

The system continued to play dead. Clearly, it didn't want to answer, but faced with You Huo's mockery, it finally updated the screen:

>Examinee Chen Bin: Completed Maths, Language Arts, and Foreign Language. Total Pts: 22. Rank: 49%. Grade: B. Calculation correct.

>Examinees Yu Wen, Yu Yiguo, and Maximilian Rico: Completed Physics and Foreign Language. Total Pts: 30.5, 31, and 31. Rank: Top 2%. Grade: A. Calculation correct.

>Examinee You Huo: Completed Physics and Foreign Language. Total Pts: 22.25. Rank: Top 11%.

Grade: B. Calculation correct.

>Examinee Shu Xue: Completed Foreign Language. Total Pts: 12. Due to a detected anomaly in the data, the total has been reduced by 50% to ensure fairness in case of fraudulent activity. Eligible Total: 6. Rank: 52%. Grade: C. Calculation correct.

>Invigilator Qin Jiu: Calculated based on records of Examinee You Huo. Two subjects completed. Total Pts: 0. Rank: Last place. Grade: D. Calculation correct.

Qin Jiu was speechless. The stupid piece of machine could have just used percentages for rankings, but it had to emphasise “last place”.

Shu Xue’s face went pale as the screen displayed the grade calculations. No one knew what to say to comfort her. Honestly, it was surprising that she could travel freely across so many sessions. Indeed, a smart system wouldn’t let a bug exist for long. You Huo suspected the sudden reform was to justify ranking Shu Xue as a C so she would be stuck retaking the same session, trapped there forever. It was a form of imprisonment.

Before he could snap out of his thoughts, Qin Jiu spoke.

“Fine, punish us,” he said to the security booth, gripping the handle of his suitcase. “One C and one D. What was the penalty again? Oh, right,” he continued, feigning remembrance. He pointed at Shu Xue. “She needs to retake her last exam. That was the Romani site, wasn’t it? Send her there.”

The speaker remained silent.

Shu Xue froze, but everyone else perked up. *That's right! The site was destroyed! How could she retake it?*

To further insult the system, Qin Jiu added, "As for an eliminated examinee like me, don't bother. I can go back to where I came from."

The speaker remained quiet. If the system were human, it might have lost its mind on the spot. Bringing 001 here for punishment only to eliminate him before the exam? Was it all for nothing?

Suddenly, the speaker crackled to life again, announcing:

"Due to data anomalies and site malfunction, the regulations concerning examinees graded C and D will be suspended for this session. Instead, they will have 5 points deducted from their starting total. All examinees will participate in a new session. Check the screen for details."

The screen updated immediately.

Examinee Shu Xue will start the next session with
1 point.

Invigilator Qin Jiu will start the next session with
-5 points.

Shu Xue sighed with relief, but Qin Jiu wasn't sure how to feel.

Below these lines, three words slowly scrolled across the screen:

Keep up the good work!

Fuck that encouragement.

After “comforting” all the examinees, the speaker finally announced:

“Examinees, except for Invigilator 001, have the right to choose the order in which they proceed. Please make your decision within 30 seconds.”

A ticking countdown echoed through the intersection, ratcheting up the tension.

“Which one?” Old Yu gulped. “But... choosing the same subject doesn’t guarantee we’ll be on the same exam site, right?”

Drawing on his experience as an invigilator, Qin Jiu explained, “Many factors are involved in assigning examinees: total points, selection timing, difficulty of previous sessions, team history... Basically, it’s all luck.”

“If it’s all luck, then let’s just pick one and hope for the best,” Yu Wen said.

Chen Bin warned, “I’ve taken Maths and Language Arts... I suggest avoiding them if possible. Look at my measly ten points from those two.”

No one was keen on Maths anyway. It seemed more complicated than the others.

“So, history?” Yu Wen suggested. Everyone, including Chen Bin, had not taken it yet. At least they wouldn’t be abandoning anyone with this choice. Plus, it sounded easier.

“Maybe we’ll be thrown into some dynasty as part of a historical event?” Yu Wen mused. “As long as it’s not a brutal period in some war-torn era, we should be fine. We all know a bit of history, right? We won’t be completely lost.”

“How much do you remember?” You Huo asked.

Yu Wen scratched his head. “Um... that there are the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s quite a lot, Huo! Those are the key ones,” Yu Wen said defensively. “I focused on the main points when studying Chinese history. It’s more efficient. I remember other stuff too. I can probably make something up; just don’t ask for specific years or who did what and when.”

The countdown ticked louder as time ran out.

“Let’s go,” You Huo said, turning to Qin Jiu. “How about you?”

Qin Jiu raised an eyebrow. “Do I even have a choice?” He chuckled. “Whatever. I’ve long stopped believing there’s a difference between subjects.”

The others were taken aback, but then again, it made sense. As an invigilator, what exam subject hadn’t he seen? Difficulty levels probably meant nothing to him now.

With the last few seconds ticking on their tails, everyone followed the path marked “History”.

You Huo stepped through the thick fog.

As the white shroud cleared, the scene beyond the intersection finally became clear. It was a dock. But calling this place a dock was generous. It was more of a stone platform about eight metres square, with low metal railings on either side. Beyond it stretched an endless expanse of seawater. A wooden ship was

moored nearby. Of all things, a kerosene lamp hung from its tall mast. You Huo eyed the lamp and the ship's design with suspicion, a sense of foreboding creeping over him.

An old sailor, wearing a grey shirt and black vest, rolled up his sleeves and tossed something down. You Huo had to squint to recognise it as a long rope ladder. It was damp and reeked of mildew and age. The sailor stood at the ship's rail with a hand on his waist, tugging on the sail rope. He waved impatiently at You Huo. "Hurry up, you two. Don't dawdle. I'm on a tight schedule."

You two? Just as You Huo frowned in confusion, he heard the wheels of a suitcase stop beside him.

"Tsk," Qin Jiu looked up, displeased. "I hate exams on ships."

"I hate exams anywhere." You Huo matched his tone.

"Hurry up!" the sailor shouted again.

"Wait a bit," said You Huo.

"For what?!" the sailor snapped. "There's no one else. Just you two. I'm on a tight schedule. Get your asses up here!"

You Huo started, and Qin Jiu let out a soft "ah". "Looks like they had terrible luck this time. Didn't get put into this session with us."

The others aren't here? What will happen to them? You Huo thought of the others, and his brow furrowed with concern.

Under the sailor's constant nagging, You Huo and Qin Jiu boarded the small wooden vessel, and it left the stone platform behind as the dirty sail shifted to catch the wind. By the time You Huo steadied himself on deck and looked back, the plat-

form had vanished into the fog. Their lone ship sailed awkwardly on the sea.

Suddenly, tinkling music filled the air. You Huo looked towards the source of the sound. He spotted a crude music box in a wooden crate near the sailor. It looked unfinished. After the eerie music stopped, the same old system voice spoke:

"All examinees have boarded at their respective locations and are en route to the final exam site. The exam will begin in 30 minutes. Subject: History. Topic: World History. Global Maritime Trade in the 16th Century. We wish everyone the best of luck."

You Huo mused, *it was never going to be about the Chinese dynasties, huh.*

The sailor adjusted the sail and wiped his hands on his trousers. He jumped down from the helm, gaze sweeping between You Huo and Qin Jiu. "Strong young men like you watching a weak old bird like me struggle with all the work? Shame on you."

His muscled arms, however, were twice as thick as an average person's. Hardly "old and weak".

Qin Jiu smirked, "Must be one of those steroid chickens."

This irritated the sailor, but he couldn't come up with a comeback, so he just glared at Qin Jiu. "Stop standing around! I hate when young folks cross their arms and look down their noses. It's all for show!"

You Huo, caught in the crossfire, said, "Just tell us what you need help with."

The sailor kicked a section of the deck. "The hinge is rusty. I

can't open it by myself. Help me out, or you'll get soaked when the waves hit!"

Fine. Without thinking, You Huo stomped to test the deck's strength, but he accidentally stepped on Qin Jiu's foot. You Huo stared at him.

"Are we playing footsie now, Mr Examinee?" Qin Jiu said.

"I was checking the deck. Why d'you put your foot in the way?"

"How interesting. I was doing the same," Qin Jiu tested a few spots with his foot. "Not bad. It's hollow underneath, and these places are uneven, we can—"

You Huo jammed one end of an iron hook that he had grabbed from a pile of random objects into a gap between the uneven planks. With a snap, wood chips flew everywhere. The sailor backed away silently. You Huo stomped down hard on the slanted hook, and the deck split open with a crack. Qin Jiu reached into the gap, his hands housed in black leather gloves as always, and yanked it up. An entire section was lifted, and the rusty hinges clattered about. The deck section turned out to be a trapdoor. Beneath it, stairs led down to the cabin. Oil lamps were hung about, illuminating partitioned bunks.

You Huo, hook in hand, glanced at the other man. It had been a while since he'd met someone who could match his pace. However, the sailor's face was purple with shock and anger. The sailor opened his mouth and was about to give instructions, but You Huo patted him on the back with a nod. "Show us the way, please."

The sailor glared at him and shut his mouth.

The three men went below deck and closed the broken trapdoor. The cabin warmed up instantly. The carefree sailor paid them no mind, entering one of the small compartments and slamming the door right in their faces. His thunderous snores echoed through the ship in less than a minute.

You Huo eyed the filthy bedding in the compartments and chose a chair in the cabin instead. Qin Jiu joined him moments later, pinching his nose against the stench. He didn't enjoy the smell either. Even so, he didn't forget to tease You Huo. "What's the occasion? You're still awake."

You Huo shot him a look. "How about I pin you to the bed and let you get some 'fresh air' for half an hour?"

Qin Jiu chuckled. "Sure, but I might have to share the pleasure with you."

You Huo was annoyed. *Fuck off.*

"What do you remember about 'Global Maritime Trade in the 16th Century'?" Qin Jiu rested an elbow on the table while playing with the lamp flame and making it waver.

Pleased with their smooth teamwork on the deck, You Huo replied, "The Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch."

Having taken no history classes since Year 11 because he wasn't a humanities student, You Huo's knowledge of the subject was limited. He recalled the three European powers playing an important role in maritime trade. The reason? He vaguely remembered something about the Renaissance and spices. The Dutch had also invented a whole new financial system. That was

all he remembered, but...

“Does it matter what we remember?” You Huo asked. “Will the system actually test this stuff?”

“A one in a thousand chance if we’re lucky,” Qin Jiu replied.

You Huo scoffed. “Yeah, right.” Wasn’t the system’s nature obvious by now? It always tested what the examinees didn’t know. Even if it tested familiar topics, it would twist them beyond recognition.

This ship that had picked them up was small. Just a few minutes into the journey, the sea began churning. It felt like they had just left a simulated ocean and finally entered the real one. The waves were now fierce and wild. Thunder rumbled through the thick wooden hull. Flashes of lightning occasionally lit up the cracks of the trapdoor. The ship rocked violently. Even You Huo, who never got seasick, felt awful. Qin Jiu looked equally miserable. Despite the extreme discomfort, they both fell asleep at the table, oblivious to their surroundings.

You Huo woke up to a bone-chilling cold. His eyes snapped open to a gloomy sky.

Sky?

He sat up and realised he was no longer in the cabin of a grimy ship but on a large black rock coated with ice. Qin Jiu lay next to him on the relatively flat surface. They seemed to be by the sea. Behind them was a rocky island on the coast of which were moored about twenty wooden ships. Most were small and shabby like the one they had ridden. Three were much larger.

One of the big ships was close by. You Huo could see it had a narrow deck but a massive body, like an overstuffed dumpling. All the lamps were out. The bow and masts were frozen over. They had clearly been docked for some time, neglected.

You Huo nudged Qin Jiu. It was strange he'd woken up, but not the invigilator.

After being patted twice, Qin Jiu squinted awake. At first, he didn't notice anything unusual. This was enough to show that he wasn't bothered by the cold at all. As he sat up, rubbing his eyes, he muttered sleepily, "Morning..."

You Huo wanted to slap him. "Why don't you get a feel of the wind before you keep talking like that?" You Huo moved aside, letting the icy blast hit Qin Jiu with full force.

It worked instantly. The invigilator snapped awake. He stood up, shielding his eyes as he looked around. As far as he could see, there was nothing but churning white ice and snow, like a polar landscape.

"This is our destination?" Qin Jiu frowned.

"Yeah." You Huo pointed. "There's an island behind us."

Qin Jiu looked around. "Let's check out the island then."

Moments later, You Huo, Qin Jiu, and his suitcase stopped outside a rock cave on the island. Someone had weighed down a piece of grey canvas to mark the entrance. They thought it was snow holding down the canvas, but up close, they saw an eye peeking out.

Qin Jiu squinted, creasing his brow. "Arctic hare."

The hare, long dead, was frozen to the canvas. As You Huo

leant in for a closer look, the system's voice emanated from the hare:

“Attention. All examinees have entered the exam site. This is a large-scale exam site with thirty-six examinees. Based on departure docks, you have been divided into eighteen pairs. The combined total of each pair determines the grade at the end of the session. Grading is based on participation and behaviour. There will be no answer cards or ‘correct’ answers. Extra points can be earned or lost. After the session, pairs graded C will retake the session. Pairs graded D will be eliminated. The initial totals for each pair are as follows.”

The sound of chiselling echoed through the cave. Names of the eighteen pairs appeared on the smooth rock above the hare's head in a blink. Names were paired with bars beside them showing combined totals. Higher totals meant longer bars and higher grades. The list was arranged from highest to lowest.

You Huo scanned it. The top pair had 42 points. Then 40, 39.5, 35... and so on. Midway down, he spotted Shu Xue. She was paired with an examinee named Wu Li¹. They had 26 points total, ranking 12th, currently at a C. No other familiar names appeared. Old Yu and Yu Wen must have been assigned elsewhere. Perhaps in the session on Chinese history as they had wished.

As for You Huo and Qin Jiu... Their names were second to last. Instead of improving their rank, 001 dragged their total

1. A close homonym of “physics” in Mandarin Chinese.

down to 17.25 with his negative total, keeping them firmly in grade D.

You Huo's face was colder than the Arctic hare's. Qin Jiu met his gaze and shrugged. "Thanks for the help, star examinee. At least we're not dead last. I'll work hard to make you proud."

Not only You Huo, but the dead hare also couldn't stand such shamelessness. It rudely cut in: *"Scores update in real-time. For questions not related to the answers, please inquire with invigilators 021, 078, 154, and 922."*

You Huo glanced at Qin Jiu when 154 and 922 were mentioned.

"Why do you look so pleased hearing their ID? They're invigilators too." Qin Jiu asked.

"Pleased? Do you need the address of the nearest optometrist?"

The hare spoke again. *"Attention. The exam is beginning. The exam question will now be played."*

"In August 1596, three Dutch merchant ships became locked in by ice off the coast of Novaya Zemlya, Russia. They have been stranded here for eight months, with fifteen days remaining until the ice melts. Examinees, please assist the crew in returning home safely."

"Requirements: Ensure no crew members die. At midnight, the lowest-ranked pair will bear the responsibility if any deaths occur. If more than two crew members die in a day, each subsequent death will be assigned to the lowest-ranked pair at midnight the next day until all deaths are accounted for."

You Huo recalled the Chasu villagers, his mood darkening.
*Take responsibility for the crew's deaths? How? Die in their place?
Be buried with them?*

Suddenly, he felt two taps on the back of his hand. He lowered his gaze to find it was Qin Jiu.

"Stop looking at my hand and look at the cave entrance," Qin Jiu said, pointing.

You Huo looked over and saw some people emerging from the cave. They wore thick, grey tunics with brown wool vests. Some had dirty pelts wrapped around them. All looked European. Gaunt and expressionless, they slowly carried several people out.

"What's happening?" You Huo's heart sank as he saw the people being carried. Their eyes were closed, faces ashen and lifeless. Two of them were even stiff. The leader, seeming to understand the question, turned to You Huo and Qin Jiu and said stiffly, "Eight seamen, dead."

Qin Jiu whispered, "This is bad. Eight crew members, dead from the beginning."

The last-ranked pair wouldn't be enough to cover the "responsibility". They were next in line.

When You Huo and Qin Jiu entered the cave, all eyes turned to them. Despite the gloomy evening, the cave wasn't dark. A few oil lamps on the floor cast circles of light, around which sat many people.

You Huo scanned the space. Men and women, mostly young with a few middle-aged, huddled around. Unlike those who car-

ried out the bodies, these people wore various clothing: down jackets, leather jackets, coats, and sweaters. One even wore scrubs. He counted thirty-four people—most likely the other seventeen pairs of examinees.

Besides the person in scrubs, You Huo spotted a familiar face. Shu Xue waved at them, her eyes bright. She patted the space beside her, gesturing for them to come over. You Huo nodded and started walking towards her, but Qin Jiu interrupted.

“One moment.”

Then, under everyone’s speculative gazes, he brought his suitcase into the cave. The other examinees lost it. Noise erupted, one voice rising above the rest.

“Is he on a business trip or what? It’s the third session, and he’s still lugging that thing around. No wonder they’re second to last!”

Silence fell abruptly after his last word.

The early arrivals had done self-introductions, so they were aware of each other’s rankings. When You Huo and Qin Jiu walked in, everyone in the cave knew that the sacrificial lambs had arrived. Now, thinking it was one thing, but saying it out loud was another, especially with the two of them standing right there. It was incredibly awkward.

The slip had come from a young man, probably around Yu Wen’s age, sporting a head of permed ash-grey waves. He lowered his head, cleared his throat, and whispered to his companion, “Crap, I got carried away...”

You Huo acted as though he hadn’t heard. Qin Jiu, a step be-

hind, just smiled, amused.

"I was scared I'd lost you!" Shu Xue whispered. "I was so happy to see your names on the list."

"Oh?" Qin Jiu joked. "My partner here isn't happy. Just look how pissed he is."

"Let me introduce my partner," Shu Xue said, gesturing to the woman in scrubs. "This is Dr Wu. She's a neurologist. You've probably seen our ranking. She's amazing."

You Huo glanced only briefly at Wu Li again. She was slim with a plain face. Even in this chaos, she looked neat and clean. Only her hair seemed out of place—short and messy, as if hastily cut.

Wu Li wasn't chatty or outgoing. Her gaze was intense, almost scrutinising. She silently "interrogated" You Huo for a while before moving her gaze to Qin Jiu. Finally, she nodded. "Hello." Then, without waiting for a reply, she looked away.

Shu Xue remembered the men's ranking and grew anxious. "Did you hear the exam rules?"

"Crystal clear," Qin Jiu said.

"And you saw the bodies they carried out?" Shu Xue's face fell. "Eight crew members..."

This meant that a few hours later, by midnight, the lowest-ranked pair would face the consequences if rankings didn't change.

Shu Xue quietly introduced the others. Nearby, the unfortunate pair at rock bottom, Chen Fei and Huang Rui, sat in a daze. Surprisingly, the young man with ash-grey hair and his

partner ranked first with 42 points. He was called Di Li², barely eighteen, just like Yu Wen.

You Huo noticed the ranking, which was also visible on the interior wall. “Where are they?”

“Who?” Shu Xue looked confused.

“The captain, the sailors. The people from the merchant ships.”

“In there.” Shu Xue pointed behind her.

You Huo followed her finger to another opening connected to a separate space that he had noticed. A weak fire flickered inside, its light barely visible on the walls, ready to go out at any moment.

“It’s more sheltered from the wind and warmer,” Shu Xue explained. “The captain and crew are inside. We counted thirty-six before you arrived, the same number as us. Now... only twenty-eight are left.”

“How did those eight people die?” You Huo asked. “Injuries or starvation?”

“The crew said it was a mix. Cold, hunger, and some had been sick,” Shu Xue replied.

“It’s too cold here,” another examinee chimed in. “They need food to maintain body heat, but supplies are low, so they’re constantly starving, and their immune systems get weaker.”

“So we need fire and food to keep them alive until the ice melts?”

2. A close homonym of “geography” in Mandarin Chinese.

“Exactly.”

“No, medication first,” Wu Li interjected.

“Sorry?”

Wu Li continued. “The crew’s sustained wounds from animal attacks.”

Shu Xue gasped. “There are predators here?”

Everyone glanced nervously at the cave entrance.

“I don’t know,” Wu Li stated flatly. “But the dead likely succumbed to infections on top of the cold and hunger, because their wounds couldn’t heal. The rest are in a similar position. Without medical attention, none of them will make it.”

Her scrubs added credibility to her words. The rest of the group exchanged glances and deflated. “We might manage fire and food, but where can we find medicine?”

“On the merchant ships,” Di Li suddenly said.

Everyone stared at him. “What?”

Di Li explained, “I think it was from 1596 to 1597, a Dutch captain—Barentsz, if I’m not mistaken. His ship got stuck somewhere in the Arctic Circle. Eighteen men survived on an island for eight months. They hunted for food, used furs for clothes, and burned parts of the ship for warmth. Their cargo had food, clothes, and medicine, but they didn’t touch it. In the end, eight crew members died, but they delivered the cargo intact the next spring.” As everyone was still processing the information, he sniffed. “It was on a test in my second year of high school.”

Di Li and Yu Wen, both fresh high school graduates, showed

the spectrum of human memory. While Di Li recalled a second-year question, Yu Wen only remembered the names of the most recent dynasties in Chinese history.

"I thought of that question immediately after coming here," Di Li continued saying, "but it's not the same situation. The numbers are different, eight of the crew died in my test question. We don't know how many will die here. We should first check if there's medicine on their ships."

"There is," a voice with a thick accent replied.

You Huo turned to look. The sailors who had taken the bodies away were returning. The reply had come from one of them, a man with a flat-top hairstyle. He coughed and stared at Di Li with cold eyes. "We have medicine aboard, yet it's cargo. None may lay a hand upon it."

"We don't want to either," Di Li said. "But it could save your lives! Don't you get it? You'll die without it."

"And what if we die?" Flat-top snapped. "You do insult us."

Di Li thought, *Well, you are threatening us...*

In the meantime, the other sailors gathered around to face Di Li.

Di Li's partner tried to ease the tension. "We won't touch anything. It's your ship. How could we take your stuff without permission? We were just worried about you."

Some sailors muttered words, coupled with their expressions, that seemed like a warning.

"What did they say?" one of the examinees asked.

Flat-top answered sternly, "'Tis said that we shall ne'er use

the cargo, not a single needle. Such is the rule passed down through the ages. He who doth break it stands against the fleet. We fear not a duel with such a man.”

Everyone looked anxious and wary. *Who the hell wants to duel you? No one! Accidentally killing one of you means one of us would have to take the blame.*

“Alright, alright. We won’t touch anything. We’d be furious too if anyone broke your rule!”

After venting his anger, Flat-top was exhausted. He nodded to the crew. “*Laten we gaan.*” He was probably the first mate, since the crew followed his orders without question. They lined up to squeeze through the narrow opening. At the back of the line, Flat-top stopped to emphasise to the examinees: “We reckon the cargo twice daily. Should anything be found wanting, we shall inquire of you. That medicine is scarce, and we know the quantity that we possess. You cannot deceive us. You must step over our dead bodies to lay hands upon them.”

While the examinees tried to process the restriction, two loud clicks came from somewhere in the cave. Everyone looked around to see Qin Jiu in front of his conspicuous suitcase. He pulled out a box.

“Good thing I stocked up.” He placed the box in front of Wu Li and nudged it towards her with two fingers, gesturing for her to open it.

Wu Li blinked, then opened the box. Everyone craned their necks to see inside. The box contained three neatly arranged medicine packs: ibuprofen, antiseptic, and paracetamol. A bot-

tle of multivitamins was also tucked in the corner.

You Huo glanced at it. “Experienced, huh? Mister ‘I don’t often get injured?’”

“922 gave me a shopping list before I went to the service centre. I don’t need it, and he doesn’t know anyone else. Maybe he had you in mind, just in case.” Qin Jiu didn’t hesitate to throw his subordinate under the bus.

Inside the brightly lit cabin of a ship at sea, 922 sneezed eight times in a row.

Invigilator 154 grabbed some tissues to wipe his own face. “If you’re sick, can’t you go on deck?” he grumbled. “The ventilation is poor here. You’ll infect us all.”

“I’m not sick. Someone must be thinking about me.”

Invigilator 154 rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right. Maybe a ghost.”

“Speaking of ghosts...” Invigilator 922’s face scrunched up as if he’d sucked on a lemon. “That troublemaker’s in this exam. Do you think we’ll have to see him again?”

Invigilator 154 pondered. “No way, not with the boss around. If I’m not mistaken, they’ve been paired up. How could he break the rules with an invigilator as his partner?”

“Oh... good point.”

When the examinees first arrived, the crew treated them like unwelcome guests and always met them with sickly expressions. Who wouldn’t appear pale and irritable after eight months on a frozen island? However, after the examinees offered medicine,

the crew's attitude shifted. To show their gratitude, they invited the examinees to share their fire. Everyone moved into the inner cave. It was a tight squeeze, with the examinees filling every inch of available space.

First Mate Flat-top put a finger to his lips. "Shh. The captain's been on night watch. Let's not wake him." He pointed to a figure in the corner. There was a middle-aged man curled up far from the fire, leaving the warmth for his crew. He slept facing the flames with a frown. The firelight only emphasised his sunken cheeks and sharp cheekbones, doing nothing to improve his ashen complexion.

Di Li studied him before whispering curiously, "The captain? Is his name Barentsz?"

The crew exchanged odd looks.

"What?" Di Li felt a bit nervous. "I just—"

A young sailor gasped and said something in Dutch, which the first mate translated as: "How know you that? Are you a warlock?"

Di Li grinned, showing his canines. "I'm a werewolf."

"Werewolf?" First Mate Flat-top drawled. "I know not if you tell lies... Be you a warlock or a werewolf, you had better beware. You may be safe here, but in the town, you would be burned at the stake."

Di Li's smile froze on his face.

Meanwhile, Wu Li gave all the crew members a basic check-up. Fourteen were wounded, including First Mate Flat-top and Captain Barentsz. She hated being watched while working, but

she made an exception for You Huo and Qin Jiu for the sake of the medication they provided. Besides, she needed someone to hold down these backward sailors who didn't believe in modern medicine.

Case in point, the ibuprofen came in a box of twelve injectable vials and came with only one syringe and needle. Without the luxury of single-use supplies, Wu Li would have to sterilise the needle over the fire between uses. As soon as she screwed on the needle, several crew members backed away, murmuring in suspicion. No sooner had they taken two steps than You Huo blocked their retreat, leaving them looking desperate.

"What's the problem?" Wu Li asked, frowning.

The crew looked at her as if she were there to butcher them, not save them.

First Mate Flat-top explained, "They find your practice weird. Normal doctors do not use that to spray water."

Wu Li paused while removing air bubbles from the syringe. "Spray water?"

Sensing her annoyance, First Mate Flat-top quickly added, "It's my way of wording, don't take offence."

Wu Li wasn't appeased. "How do the 'normal' doctors do it? I'd like to hear."

The crew chattered, miming actions and making *whap-whap* sounds.

First Mate Flat-top summed up: "They do whip the sick with a long, thin stick."

Dr Wu looked even less impressed.

“They do what?” Shu Xue asked, having not caught it.

Qin Jiu was more succinct. “Beat them to death.”

“How concise of you,” You Huo said sarcastically.

Qin Jiu smiled. “I know.”

The crew continued gesturing.

“Bloodletting is also popular,” the first mate interpreted. “Many doctors practise that.”

Dr Wu had heard enough. “Please help me restrain them,” she told You Huo and Qin Jiu. “I can’t manage alone.”

Shu Xue was about to step forward to help, but Wu Li, without turning, said as if she had eyes on the back of her head, “You sit back down.”

Shu Xue, the fake pregnant woman, was dying of boredom.

The sailors tried to flee when they heard they were to be pinned down. The other examinees quickly jumped in to block their escape. Qin Jiu pulled out his leather rope while they tried to reason with the crew. He made a loop and caught a sailor’s hands in a blink. He worked with practised ease, forming a knot every three seconds. Soon, he had seven sailors bundled up for Dr Wu. As he reached for the eighth, a slender and defined hand intercepted him. It was You Huo. With his fingers pressed together like a knife, the young man swiftly knocked out the remaining crew with precise strikes to their heads. Flat-top the Translator was the only one spared and left gaping in shock.

Wu Li stared at the sailors bound up and the sailors unconscious on the floor, and was barely able to keep her composure. She sighed and began disinfecting the wounds of each crew

member and administering the ibuprofen.

You Huo noticed something odd about the injuries. Some were gashes, and others were dark bruises on the backs and arms. The bruises had clearly been present for a while, since they were starting to look frighteningly green and purple. These weren't claw marks or bites, but in the Arctic region, shouldn't the attacks have come from polar bears or wolves? What could have caused these injuries?

He questioned the first mate, who sighed. "We know not."

"What do you mean?"

The man began recounting. "Not more than a fortnight ago..."

They had gone ice fishing and caught a school of fish. They ate their fill—a rare treat on the island. It was their lucky day. They gathered around the fire after eating, sharing hopeful stories to boost morale. Somehow, they all fell asleep mid-conversation. Then they woke up with the fire gone, and the cave plunged into pitch darkness. A scream pierced the darkness, right next to First Mate Flat-top.

"Praise be to God, mine hands did move swifter than mine thoughts," he said. "I reached forth and did grasp van der Does by the ankle. Something so immensely strong was dragging him forth from the cave that despite all of us pulling with great effort, we could scarcely maintain our hold. We were nearly drawn out ourselves."

The struggle continued until they got the fire going again. Suddenly, whatever had been pulling let go, and they all tum-

bled into a pile.

“On the morrow, we bore bruises upon our skins where we’d been touched. Henceforth, we keep the fire ablaze day and night, whenever a soul be in the cave. We take turns watching, yet even this proves lacking. We find a larger fire provides greater safety, thus we did double our use of firewood. It doth consume rapidly, and we have run out of firewood and started burning parts of the ship’s deck, which ought to have lasted until snowmelt, yet now, we shall be without firewood ere the day’s end.”

“No,” Wu Li interrupted. “The fire can’t go out, not even for a minute.”

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Medicine isn’t a cure-all. They need to maintain body temperature. If the fire goes out, the cave will get cold in minutes, and the shots will have been for nothing. We need a big fire and more fuel. Fires should be lit in both caves to maintain a healthy temperature.”

“It all makes sense, but it’s easier said than done,” an examinee said. “I looked around when I first came. This island is mostly rock.”

“We might have to use the merchant ships, then,” Di Li suggested. The information from his high school test question was all he could think of, and he fixated on the wood from the ships.

First Mate Flat-top panicked. “*Nee!* We must not lay hands upon the cargo! Ne’er will we commit such a shameful act! Captain Barentsz said he’d feed the fish with his body if we lost the

goods. I'm of the same opinion."

"Not the cargo!" Di Li quickly reassured him. "I know the cargo's more important than your lives. I spent a whole year writing essays on this topic. I meant the decks!"

"We can't break the deck any further," the man emphasised. "Lest the ships be rendered useless. The cargo would be ruined if exposed to the elements. We'd still have to cast ourselves into the sea."

Di Li gawked. *Why are you so fixated on dying?*

"Not even one plank?" someone tried to bargain.

"No," the first mate said firmly. "It's too little to burn, at any rate."

The flame in the cave, no larger than a fist, flickered and shrank even more.

"This is bad. It's about to go out," Di Li said. Despite his youth, he believed that his position as the top-ranked examinee meant he was destined to take on a leadership role. He stood up and brushed off his trousers. "Let's split up. Some of us will search the island for branches. The rest can go with this old—"

First Mate Flat-top frowned.

"I mean, this gentleman to check the crew's ships again. What if we find something that we missed before? Every bit helps."

The older examinees indulged the teenager, and his suggestion did make sense, so they followed his plan. Dr Wu would stay to tend to her patients.

Shu Xue had prepared a list of excuses to join the search party. She wanted to follow You Huo and Qin Jiu, hoping to help where she could. After all, they knew she wasn't actually pregnant. However, the two big shots lingered at the back of the group and stopped her before she could leave the cave.

"I'm going alone," You Huo said.

Qin Jiu glanced at him. "What a coincidence. So am I."

You Huo grunted. He nodded towards the cave entrance. "Go ahead, then."

Qin Jiu pressed his tongue to his cheek. After a few seconds, he squinted and acquiesced. "Fine."

After Qin Jiu left, You Huo turned to Shu Xue.

"Are you sure you don't need help?" she asked gently. "Finding firewood in this situation will be tough. Everyone's busy, and I feel useless just sitting here. But I can stay with Wu Li if it's for the best."

"It won't be tough," You Huo corrected. "Might break a rule or two, though."

He then waved her off and turned to leave. At the cave entrance, he looked back. "Stay here and keep an eye on that guy's suitcase... There's lots of food inside."

Shu Xue nodded.

Under the dimming sky, the ships employed by the system to transport the examinees were neatly arranged in a circle, a short distance from the three merchant ships mentioned in the exam problem. According to the rules, these ships would only

set sail once the session was completed, carrying each group of examinees away from the exam site. Until then, no one should have been present. Yet, the tall figure of someone who had just claimed he was going for a walk alone climbed up a ladder and threw himself aboard one of these ships. He strutted to the helm and hunched over, searching for a useful tool.

You Huo was looking for the metal hook he had used to crack open the trap door. He could have sworn he'd left it in this spot, but it was nowhere to be found. After a fruitless search, he lost patience. He grabbed a dagger slightly longer than his hand and prepared to get to work. He ran his fingers along the cracks in the planks, then raised the blade to pry them open. Out of nowhere, he heard cracks from below deck.

Someone's here?

You Huo frowned. He walked over and nudged the trapdoor open with his foot. He expected to see the old sailor watching over his own ship. Instead, he found Qin Jiu holding the missing metal hook. The invigilator tossed aside a pried-up plank, which clattered onto a small pile of similar boards.

Qin Jiu swung the hook over his shoulder and looked up at the newcomer. "What a coincidence, star examinee. Came to explore the system's ship too?"

You Huo stared at him, unimpressed. He crouched by the trapdoor, still holding his dagger. "You know you're an invigilator, don't you?"

Qin Jiu laughed from the bottom of the stairs. "Am I? Maybe. But I'd say I'm more like your accomplice, don't you think?"

You Huo gazed down at him for a while before finally turning away with a snort of laughter. “Fine.”

Half an hour later, the other examinees returned to the cave, one group after another. Their findings were meagre: two bundles of wet branches and three planks salvaged from the deck. That was it, and it was clearly not enough.

As everyone brooded in silence, the examinee closest to the entrance suddenly shot up.

“What’s wrong?” The group tensed up.

“I heard something... Wait, I’ll go check!” He dashed outside.

Less than a minute later, he came sprinting back. “Holy sh—” He cursed, gasping for air in large breaths.

“What is it? Out with it!”

“The two in the second-to-last place!”

“Yeah?”

“They’re back with a huge pile of dry wood, right outside!”

“A huge pile? How? Where from?” Before Di Li could finish his questions, he was already dashing outside.

The examinee shouted after him, “They ripped it off the ships! They tore apart the system’s ships!”

What? Di Li froze in his tracks.

Thirty-four examinees rushed out of the cave only to be immediately stunned by the pile of wood nearly as tall as a person. Before they could close their gaping mouths, the dead hare sprang to life:

“Warning: inappropriate behaviour detected. Examinees You Huo and Qin Jiu have dismantled the system’s ship, Invigilators

have been notified. Invigilators 021, 078, 154, and 922 are en route."

As soon as the announcement ended, You Huo dropped the plank he was holding and told the approaching Di Li to get the pile inside. Then he walked away, dagger in hand.

Directly across from the cave entrance, a desecrated ship was moored. The missing sections along its hull confirmed it as the victim of their dismantling. You Huo was heading straight for it.

Di Li called out after a moment of shock. "Wait! What are you doing now?"

You Huo didn't even hear him.

"What's he doing now?" Di Li asked his partner. "The invigilators are on their way. Shouldn't they wait here? Write an apology or something like that? See if they can get off easy? Why are they heading for the ship? To apologise to it?"

"No idea. Can't keep up with these young folks' logic," replied Li Shu, who was thirty-five. "Let's hope we can reason with the invigilators when they arrive."

"Right," Di Li said. "You work in law, don't you? Do you think you can talk them out of trouble?"

"Do I work in law? Son, I'm the best attorney money can buy. I can talk a dealer down on a used car."

"Sorry... what's the difference between a lawyer and an attorney?"

Li Shu chuckled. "You'll find out soon enough—what was that sound?"

A loud thud of wood planks hitting the ground distracted

him. Everyone stopped to look for the sound. You Huo was just behind the railing of the dismantled ship, tossing more planks overboard. Behind him, the mast suddenly tilted, bringing the sail down with it. The crash made everyone flinch and squeeze their eyes shut.

When they looked again, Qin Jiu appeared by the broken mast. He took the dagger from You Huo, swiftly cut the ropes, and kicked the mast, sending it rolling off the deck. You Huo ducked away from view. When he reappeared behind the railing, he started throwing more wood overboard. Chairs, tables, crates... even a damn kitchen cabinet.

Impressive. The thirty-four examinees stood, stunned, like a row of emperor penguins. This wasn't remorse or an attempt to apologise. This was a full-on "we've already broken the rules, so we might as well go all the way" approach. If it could burn, it was coming off that ship.

Just then, the invigilators' white ship appeared on the horizon. Four figures stood at the bow. In full view of everyone, Qin Jiu waved at the invigilators before throwing the ship's wheel overboard with a crash. The examinees could only keep gawking.

Di Li turned to Li Shu. "So... you can talk down a dealer?"

"About that..." Li Shu sighed. "Not even the best attorney can get them out of this one."



Chapter 11

Invigilator 922 stared straight ahead, his lips barely moving.
“I’m seasick.”

His partner 154 stayed silent, so he continued. “Terribly seasick. Can’t stand. Maybe I should rest below deck?”

“Shut up,” 154 hissed. “I’m sick too.”

Invigilator 922 noticed the new colleague 078 looking confused. “Don’t mind us, we’re not sick. You don’t get it now, but you will soon.”

Invigilator 078 stretched his neck and adjusted his sunglasses, saying calmly, “Difficult examinee? I’ve seen them all.”

Invigilator 922 glared at him.

“Invigilator 001 doesn’t count. I meant anyone other than him.”

Invigilator 922 scoffed.

Invigilator 021, the fourth invigilator, was a tall woman with shoulder-length hair, one side tucked behind her ear. Her large ear studs swayed in the ocean breeze. Her sunglasses were even

bigger than 078's. "I heard someone's legs were spaghetti for ten minutes in the cabin at the thought of apprehending 001."

Invigilator 078 kept quiet, of course.

When the bow of the white ship bumped against the one being stripped for everything it was worth, You Huo tossed down the last item and dusted off his hands. He eyed the white ship as a gangplank was extended from it, and the four invigilators approached.

"What's their ship made of?" You Huo inquired.

Qin Jiu chuckled as he picked his way across the intact parts of the deck. "You're not thinking of dismantling that too, are you? If you are, count me out. I do have subordinates on that ship." Then he immediately turned to the four approaching invigilators. "Bringing us fresh firewood?"

Three invigilators visibly blanched, while 021's reaction was hidden behind her oversized sunglasses.

"Are all four of them under you?" You Huo asked, his pale eyes scanning the group.

Qin Jiu shook his head. "Not quite. The two with sunglasses work under 009."

"There are other lead invigilators?"

"There are." Qin Jiu explained, "Ten, to be precise. Invigilators 001 to 010, each leads a unit. Other invigilators are randomly assigned to one. In this country, it's mainly me and 009. The others oversee different regions."

"Do you have a bad reputation?" You Huo suddenly wondered.

Qin Jiu raised an eyebrow. "Who says?"

You Huo's gaze settled on the lone woman. "She seems to have a bone to pick with you."

There was no point in talking about 154 and 922, as they were Qin Jiu's subordinates. Invigilator 078 had removed his sunglasses upon boarding and nodded politely towards Qin Jiu with the expected formality of an invigilator. But 021 was different. She showed no sign of removing her sunglasses or displaying any courtesy.

Qin Jiu looked at her. "A bone to pick with me? I can't tell."

Probably because you're blind, You Huo thought.

"Even if she does, it's not due to my reputation," Qin Jiu continued. "I heard she was originally assigned to Invigilator A, but he disappeared before she joined. Then she almost ended up in my unit, but I was on sick leave, so she went to 009. Maybe she's heard some rumours and is subconsciously wary of me?"

He thought about it some more, then smiled. "We're not close, though, so whatever."

Not even curious about someone who almost became your subordinate? You Huo found Qin Jiu very strange. As the lead invigilator who ranked as number one, Qin Jiu was an integral part of this absurd system. Yet his words suggested he disliked the system and avoided being deeply involved with it and the other invigilators.

Invigilators 154 and 922 stood facing Qin Jiu and You Huo, their faces scrunched up like they had both swallowed lemons. Who would have thought? What goes around does come

around, and every dog has its day. Their (temporarily) former boss was now at their mercy, but he didn't look the least bit upset. Actually, he was smiling. Invigilator 154 couldn't think of any other reason for this terrible predicament other than karma for having stolen sweets from babies.

The silence stretched on for so long that 078 couldn't stand it any longer. He glanced to the left. His colleagues 154 and 922 seemed to have their mouths sewn shut. He looked to the right... and realised it was best not to mess with 021. He cleared his throat and said stiffly, "Ten minutes ago, we were notified that you two dismantled a system ship used for transporting examinees. You damaged the deck, furniture, mast, helm, stairs..." His lips quirked, and he continued, "We need you to board the invigilators' ship."

You Huo hummed in agreement. "What's it going to be this time?"

Invigilator 078 turned to his colleagues. Invigilator 922 mouthed, "Repeat offender."

Invigilator 078 had to take a moment to process everything before saying, "This is your first violation of this session. According to the rules, it's three hours of time-out. But you're not new to this, are you? I hope you're mentally prepared."

He then ushered everyone onto the gangplank and brought up the rear. A few steps in, he heard the repeat offender ask 922, "Have you brought any food?" He stumbled and nearly fell into the sea.

"No! There's no food, and I haven't brought any beef. This

isn't a canteen. You can't just order food!" Invigilator 922 wanted to avoid the troublemaker like the plague. He practically flew down the gangway. "I'm so seasick I could puke," he said before running off like his pants were on fire.

Invigilator 154 finally spoke up. "Boss, I hate to say it, but an hour ago, 922 and I swore up and down that as long as you were around, well... a certain somebody would be on best behaviour. Look at me." He pointed at his belly. "I'm stuffed to the brim with humble pie."

Qin Jiu shrugged. "Bad influence, I guess. He corrupted me."

"A certain somebody" wanted to ask, *Know you no shame?*

Invigilator 154 shot his boss an incredulous look, then scurried away before his poker face broke. Now, two out of the four invigilators had made their escape, leaving 021 and 078 to escort the rule-breakers below deck.

The invigilators' ship adhered to tradition. While its exterior was painted white for easy identification, its interior matched the exam site's style. The ship had three levels below deck. The top level mirrored the examinees' ships, with compartments facing each other. Each had a bed, a desk, and a chair—resting quarters for the invigilators during the exam. After all, like the examinees, they had to spend their days at sea until the session was completed. The rooms marked for 154 and 922 were locked, telling their colleagues to keep the troublemaker far, far away.

The middle level housed the dining area and kitchen. A roaring fireplace made the cabin oppressively warm. Qin Jiu un-

wrapped his scarf and held it in one hand.

“Do you want me to put that away?” Invigilator 078 asked, attempting small talk.

“No, thanks.”

Conversation over.

Invigilator 078 glanced at 021, who remained silent behind her sunglasses. She clearly had no intention to speak. He sighed inwardly before leading the two violators further down. The lowest level was cramped, with just a few sealed rooms and a narrow corridor. He opened the first door.

“In you go,” he told You Huo. “She’ll let you out when time’s up.”

The layout of the time-out room was the same as the previous ones: a table, a chair, and little else. Mirrored walls created an illusion of endless space. You Huo entered without hesitation, closing the door himself.

Invigilator 078 stared at the door, then opened the second room for Qin Jiu.

“Erm...” Before he could say more, Qin Jiu walked in.

Invigilator 078 coughed awkwardly. “I’ll come by in three hours.”

The door creaked shut. Darkness enveloped the room.

The next moment, sunlight flooded in. Qin Jiu squinted, adjusting to the light. When he opened his eyes, he found himself standing in the midst of ruins, a space significantly larger than the time-out room, surrounded by twisted, broken fences. Within the perimeter were rusted cars, scattered machinery, and

severed cables.

Of course, he couldn't miss the long metal pipes and steel rebars right beside him. If he sat on the pipes with a leg tucked in, removed his coat, and splashed some blood over his shirt, it would bring the scene from his memory to life.

Qin Jiu stood before the pipes, his eyes downcast. His fingers twitched. He rewrapped his scarf, tucking it into his coat collar like a gentleman and concealing the front of his shirt. For a fleeting moment, a thought appeared. *This feels right.*

According to that distant, hazy memory, he'd been wearing a scarf, either black or grey, which concealed all the bloodstains on his chest. That person stood before him while he sat on the pipes. He might have appeared exhausted but otherwise unscathed. That was how it should have been, but there was no one else in the simulation created by the time-out room. No Invigilator A stood before him.

Qin Jiu walked along the fence. Far beyond the ruins stood the same windbreak forest. Tall branches reached for the sky. Occasionally, birds would startle and fly off, disappearing further into the trees. On the other side, just as far away, a grey fog lingered in the air, smelling of gunpowder and explosions.

As an invigilator, Qin Jiu knew the time-out room better than anyone. It was designed to make people face their worst fears and repeatedly relive their most terrifying moments. He used to believe this without question, since countless examinees had lost control of their bladders here. Even examinees-turned-invigilators like 154 kept a safe distance from it.

But now, he suspected it might have been blown out of proportion. A fenced area containing ruins, a forest, a quiet environment—what was there to be afraid of? Of course, “fear” could extend to many things. Standing here, seeing the ruins and the windbreak forest, he did feel a sense of emptiness. As if... he might never be happy again.

But that was far from fear.

He always thought that fear had nothing to do with him. He had assumed if he ever entered the time-out room, he would see either a blank space or the room as it was. Now, this scene was truly curious. What had Invigilator A done to him to make the time-out room display this?

Qin Jiu searched the ruins for clues, but after twenty minutes, he found nothing. He figured it must have been limited by his own memory. The room couldn’t show more than what he remembered, since it could only embellish his subconscious.

On the second floor of the invigilators’ ship, 922 sneaked out of his room. With You Huo in time-out, he went to the kitchen to fry up the smoked chicken and lamb chops he’d prepared.

When a delicious aroma filled the air, and one side turned golden and crispy, he finally recovered from the shock of catching his boss breaking the rules. He squatted down, searching for clean plates in the cupboard. When he looked up, he saw 078 enter, sniffing the air.

“It’s great to be working with you guys,” the senior invigilator said. “I even get better meals. No wonder 021 chose this group.

Has she worked with you before?”

“Wash these if you want to eat,” 922 replied, handing him four plates. “She chose us? Maybe she came to see our boss in time-out...”

“Surely not,” 078 said. “Who could’ve known that 001 would break the rules? Maybe she just wanted the thrill of supervising 001? When the system offered choices of exam sites, she decided super quickly. Well, that’s just her style, I guess.”

Invigilator 922 hummed, serving the chicken and lamb onto the cleaned plates. “Where’s Miss Decisive now? Tell her the food’s ready.”

“In the surveillance room.”

“She’s *where*? What’s she doing there?”

“Surveilling, duh.” 078 was just as stumped. “Wait, don’t you monitor the time-out sessions?”

The junior invigilator shook his head. “Not really.” Which was an understatement. They *never* watched.

Each invigilator station had a surveillance room with screens showing the time-out rooms. What examinees experienced would appear on these screens. No rule existed mandating the time-out sessions be monitored. In practice, this meant “monitor” for other units but “ignore” for Qin Jiu’s unit. Under 001’s leadership, the surveillance room would be either locked and unattended, or the monitors were simply turned off.

With invigilators from two units working together, everyone had their own habits, and 922 wasn’t bothered.

“So what’s your plan?” he asked. “Take turns eating? Or bring

her plate to the surveillance room? These are best eaten hot and crispy. They're not as good cold."

"I'll take hers over," 078 said. "She's always like this, but I don't eat in there. I've got a weak stomach. If I see anything gory, I might just puke. Are you and 154 sure you don't want to watch?"

The junior invigilator stood holding his plate, his mind in turmoil. He was dying to know what his boss would face in the time-out room, but in the end, self-preservation won out over curiosity. He shook his head. "Nah, I'll go call 154 for the meal."

In Unit 9, invigilators monitored in shifts. Invigilator 021 would work in the morning, and 078 would take over in the afternoon, so he hadn't yet seen what the examinees were experiencing.

"Your dinner, Miss Decisive." Invigilator 078 froze when he entered the room. "Why are you standing?"

The woman was at the control desk. She turned upon hearing his voice. "Sitting too long is bad for your figure."

To each their own, thought 078.

"What did you just call me?" she asked, moving on from the topic.

"Miss Decisive. 922's nickname for you. Fitting, I think." He put the plate down on the counter. "He fried the chicken, and I boiled some vegetables for you. Are you gonna... stand while you eat?"

Invigilator 021 pulled out a chair and sat down. She finally wasn't wearing sunglasses and let her sharp, beautiful eyes show.

She cut a small piece of chicken and looked at her colleague before eating. “Shouldn’t you go eat? Or are you waiting to clear my plate?”

It wasn’t the first time they had met, so 078 was used to her bluntness. He replied peacefully, “I’m going, sure, but I just wanted to see what the time-out rooms look like. I’m curious about what 001’s doing—”

He looked up to see only one screen lit up. The camera, positioned at an angle from the top of the room, displayed rubble and ruins. Qin Jiu was leaning against a relatively clean metal table, reading a book. Invigilator 078 almost stuck his face into the screen, trying to confirm what he saw. The demoted invigilator was reading a book... or looking at a leather-bound notebook, for all he knew. Either way, there was none of the usual panic or commotion in the time-out room.

Invigilator 078 finally managed to say, “He’s having a damn tea party in there?”

Invigilator 021 slowly chewed a piece of chicken and gave a small “hmpf” without looking up.

“What about the other one?” he asked. “Why’s only one screen on?”

Miss 021 was very strict about not speaking while eating. She pointed with a dark red nail to the bottom right corner, indicating that he should look there. He then stuck his face into the screen again and wondered if he’d gone blind. It was pitch black.

“What’s his deal? Scared of the dark?”

Invigilator 021 wordlessly switched on night vision. Now, he could see clearly. The examinee who should have been in “time-out” was sprawled over the table, fast asleep. When he listened closely to the speaker, he could even hear steady breathing. He was gobsmacked. One reading, one sleeping—what was the point of time-out, then? Were they mocking the invigilators or the system?

“Never mind, I’m going to eat...” He was so offended that he was hungry. He quickly headed for the dining room.

As the surveillance room fell silent again, 021 swallowed her vegetables and finally looked up. Her beautiful eyes fixed unblinkingly on the screen.

Five minutes later, just as the three other invigilators dug into their lamb chops, 021 came up.

“The monitors are broken.” The way she carried her plate and cup, she looked a bit pitiful.

Invigilator 078 gulped down a mouthful of meat. “Huh? How? Weren’t they fine just now?”

“I accidentally knocked over my cup, and the water went all over the control panel,” she explained. “While cleaning up, I might have hit the power button or something.”

“What should we do?” Invigilator 078 asked. “Report it to the system?”

She wasn’t very keen. Understandably so. Invigilators preferred not to bother the system.

Invigilator 922 spat out a bone, breaking the tension. “Look, man, we’re in the middle of the sea. No need to report. Those

monitors don't really matter anyway. Time-out is the system's hands-off zone. The room itself is punishment enough, and there's the privacy rule, which the system respects. Our unit never monitors them. See? The red light isn't even on."

Invigilator 078 wanted to argue, but watching a man read and another sleep wasn't exactly worth it. It might even drive him crazy, as it would only add fuel to his chagrin. So he settled back into his seat and surrendered to the allure of hot, sizzling lamb chops.

With no monitors to watch, 021 and 078 ate their fill and began chit-chatting just like Unit 1 invigilators. The four of them sat by the fire, talking and eyeing the clock on the wall, eager to send off the two big-shot troublemakers.

Meanwhile, in Time-Out Room 2 at the bottom of the ship, Qin Jiu turned another page. He wasn't reading a book but rather the diary Zhao Wentu had given him. He had kept this diary close but never read it until now. This was because the time-out room was a special place. It was the only area in the entire exam system with security cameras. In other words, everywhere else—the invigilators' quarters, exam sites, service centres—the system was omnipresent and aware of everyone's actions. The time-out room was the only exception. According to the earliest rule regarding privacy, there were no invisible eyes here, only visible cameras. Turn those off, and it became the most private spot available. Of course, access was restricted. Only rule-breaking examinees could enter, and invigilators could only come in when escorting them.

During this rare moment of privacy, Qin Jiu had read through nearly half the diary. It chronicled every session Zhao Wentu had taken part in and every noteworthy person he'd met. Qin Jiu found among its pages his own name... and Invigilator A's.

Maths Day 2. Rainy.

Yesterday was pure madness. Even now that I've calmed down, I still can't wrap my head around it. What did I do to deserve being dragged into this kind of "exam"? (because I know I wasn't a bad bf. It was an amicable breakup.) I'd rather drop out and retake the college entrance exam ten times over than deal with this crap! At least failing maths in that exam wouldn't get me burnt alive.

Oh, there is a silver lining, I guess. We've got this amazing guy in our group named Qin Jiu. He's the reason we're still breathing, but he's always testing the boundaries. It's nerve-racking. Actually, the whole team is on edge, except for him. I hope he keeps it together. God, please let him keep it together. (I'd grovel at his feet in person, but that's too scary, so I'll do it here in my diary. *Kneels.*)

It's 10 p.m. Here's to hoping for an uneventful night for the whole team. Good night.

Maths Day 3. Rainy.

Today was intense and terrifying. One of our teammates nearly got burnt alive, but Qin turned the tables and burnt the

monster instead. (Does he have no fear?) Honestly, it was thrilling to watch. A real last-minute save. I felt like I died and came back to life.

But then Qin got hauled off. (There goes our only hope!) Yeah, this crappy exam actually has fucking invigilators. Anyway, Invigilator A took Qin away for breaking the rules. The craziest part? Qin didn't seem to care at all. He even teased the invigilator.

BTW Invigilator A is insanely young. I bet he's not much older than me, maybe even a year or two younger than Qin? But, man, his presence! When he showed up, everyone froze. (Though that might just be because he's an invigilator. Everyone was scared to move, except Qin.)

Apparently, the punishment for breaking the rules is time-out. Qin says the real torture is probably just sitting still in a room until you're bored to death. (Sounds fishy to me. How scary can sitting still be?) Anyway, I hope he keeps it together. This session is supposed to last 12 days.

It's 9:30 p.m. Long live Qin! Here's to not getting burnt tomorrow. Sweet dreams to me.

Maths Day 4. Sunny.

A little six-year-old girl almost died today because she was forced to take this sick exam for some fucked up reason. She gave Qin a candy. In return, he helped her take down a whole hall of exam problems. But Qin overdid it. The hall collapsed, and he was taken away again.

Invigilator A was as ice-cold as usual, but he looked pissed off. (Damn, under Qin's influence, I can't even get nervous anymore when seeing invigilators. Not sure if that's good or bad.) I bet if this happens a couple more times, Invigilator A and Qin will end up blacklisting each other.

BTW as a military cadet, my instincts tell me this invigilator must have served in the army or at least in something similar. Doesn't that make him and Qin sort of colleagues? So why are they at each other's throats? The scary thing is, Qin said next time he's in time-out, he'll stir up trouble for the invigilator. (Since he can't see this, I'm calling it a stupid choice.) I can't tell if he's serious. He always talks like that. I hope he hasn't gone stir-crazy.

It's 10 p.m. Sweet dreams to me.

Maths Day 5. Sunny.

Holy shit, we finished the maths exam...

But as soon as we left the exam site, Qin got taken away by the invigilator. I don't know which one to worry about more. Whatever. I just hope I run into Qin in the next exam.

Zhao Wentu's entries detailing his first exam session read more like a "Qin Report" with Qin Jiu appearing more often than Zhao Wentu himself. Maybe it was because they were in so much danger, and Qin Jiu was so outstanding that he became the most noteworthy character.

Still, his prominence was only relative since Zhao Wentu's

diary lacked detail. It wasn't enough to paint a clear picture in Qin Jiu's mind. Sometimes, though, Qin Jiu felt an odd sense of familiarity. He thought that if he read a few more entries, he might remember things he'd forgotten.

Qin Jiu read on. However, Zhao Wentu mentioned him less frequently in the following days. The others went to the service centre after the maths exam, but Qin Jiu didn't join them, since he was with the invigilators, being punished...

His name didn't appear again until several pages later.

Service Centre Day 5. Sunny.

I had the same feeling when I woke up this morning. Pulling back the curtains and seeing high-rise buildings outside made me feel like I was just sleeping in on a day off. This service centre is too misleading. I'd rather they dump us in the middle of nowhere. At least then I wouldn't fall for it and then be depressed all morning.

They say there's more than one service centre. We lucked out and got the one that resembles a bustling city. This morning, Li even found a game room right next to where we're staying. A real one with mahjong and poker (it sounds ridiculous even as I write it). In this world of killer exams, they actually put a game room in our service centre. It's surreal how mundane it feels.

Li found three others to start a mahjong game. I can't believe them. There's a cybercafé across the street, but you don't see me firing up a gaming PC. Anyway, I don't know how to play mahjong and didn't want to watch, so I left. They were still playing

when I went down for dinner at around 5 p.m. They hadn't even eaten lunch. Looked to me like they wanted to get lost in the moment. It's a bit unsettling when you think about it, but I get it.

I felt restless after dinner, so I wandered around taking vlogs with my phone. The fact that the service centre allows phones is the only comfort. It's just bullshit that we can't connect to the outside world. Who knows if these videos will turn to static when I pass the exam and return to the real world? After all, I've caught an invigilator on camera. I spotted Qin with Invigilator A near the shops. My heart skipped a beat when I panned over to them with my camera. How do I put this? Seeing those two together felt like knives could start flying at me at any moment. (I'm so bad with my words—how am I going to pass the Language Arts exam?) Qin was smiling, but... it was hard to describe. There was no mistaking it—those two were at war with each other. Invigilator A didn't stay for too long. Thankfully, he didn't see me recording, otherwise he would've slapped me with a violation!

Later Qin said his punishment was over, so Invigilator A had to take him back to the service centre according to the rules. Apparently, Invigilator A drove, and he wasn't too happy about it. Qin told me they took a few detours through deserted areas. (It's true there's a lot of empty land around here, but I can't help thinking Invigilator A might've been trying to get rid of him.)

Qin and I went to the shops at night. I bought a folding knife for protection. He brought so many items that they filled a

small suitcase. We were worlds apart. I'm here for an exam, and he's on a business trip or holiday. How can two people be so different?

Anyway, these distractions improved my mood a bit. I don't know if I'll be in Qin's group for the next session. Either way, I hope I'll improve. I've trained in the army. I just lack real experience.

My diary entries are getting longer. More free time means more thoughts, I guess. A few of us have discussed topics like who created this system, what its aim is, or why we are here. We can't figure it out. Li says it's pointless to dwell on it and that we should focus on staying alive. But I want to understand. How can you truly live if you don't know what you're doing it all for?

It's midnight now, another day closer to the next session. Here's to us all having good luck, staying alive, and figuring everything out. Goodnight.

This diary entry spanned several pages. Qin Jiu pressed down on the crease of the notebook. His gaze lingered on one line, a hazy image flashing before his mind's eye...

It was nighttime. A black car stood before him. Streetlights reflected off the windows, outlining the silhouette of someone inside. He couldn't recall the time, place, or the car's full design, but for some reason, the image in the window was crystal clear in his mind. He had leant on the car roof, bent down, and tapped the window. His intentions? He didn't remember. To tease? To pick a fight? To provoke? In any case, he'd waited

and waited, but the window didn't roll down. Instead, the horn beeped once. What did that mean? A retort from the person inside? A request to take his hand off the car and get lost? Or something else entirely? He had straightened up. The person drove off without sparing him a glance.

The memory flitted by like a bird in flight. When he reached for it again, he could only grasp the final image: him, arms crossed, leaning against a streetlight, watching the car driving away.

Meanwhile, in Time-Out Room 1, You Huo's fingers, resting on his nape, suddenly twitched. He jolted awake from a dream that was instantly forgotten. Rubbing his neck, he sat up and surveyed his surroundings through half-open eyes. Darkness. Not the darkness of a lightless room but the absolute blackness of blindness.

Thanks to his injury, he was acutely sensitive to this distinction. He had lived in the latter for nearly a year while recovering in a care home. A year felt like an eternity being blind and having suffered memory loss. He would often fall into long silences, afraid of asking foolish questions. He would also be lethargic and sleep for hours, avoiding the uncertainty of fumbling in the dark so as not to feel weak. He would have hated that. Eventually, it became routine.

The doctor said he'd become detached emotionally, that his expressions had decreased in intensity, and that he rarely showed curiosity or confusion. But he didn't buy it. He just hadn't met the right people. If eight invigilators were summoned and sur-

rounded him—or just 001—he would be a whirlwind of emotions.

Now, though, he felt a flicker of confusion. In his last time-out, nothing had changed in the room. Why was he suddenly blind after a nap this time? Was this supposed to be his greatest fear...? What kind of stupid algorithm would come to the conclusion that he feared blindness? And if he truly did, why hadn't previous time-out sessions affected him?

You Huo stayed sitting in the darkness before lying back down on the desk with an impassive expression. The time-out room was silent aside from his own breathing. He blinked a few times in the darkness before pressing his face into the crook of his elbow and drifting back to sleep.

In the cabin, the clock ticked forward another notch. For the invigilators, the three-hour time-out passed in the blink of an eye.

Dong. Invigilator 078 jumped from the sofa at the sound. "Come on, let's go get those two... Hey, where's 021?" He stopped mid-sentence once he realised she wasn't on the second level.

"That's strange. She was just on the rug playing on her phone," 078 muttered in confusion. Miss Decisive might have been in the toilet. At any rate, she wasn't one to miss deadlines, so he headed downstairs alone. At the bottom level, he saw 021 standing by Time-Out Room 1, pushing the door open a crack.

"There you are!" he said. "I wondered where you went. You

usually wait for the bell. Why so eager this time?”

She glanced at him. “I was getting water and saw it was about time. I didn’t bother sitting back down just to stand up again.”

Invigilator 078 nodded, not suspecting anything. “Alright. You get this one, I’ll get 001. See you in a bit.”

She nodded and pushed into You Huo’s time-out room.

Invigilator 078 watched her close the door behind herself, finding it odd to bother closing it for such a quick task. It only took a few seconds to get someone out. Wasn’t it more work to close the door and open it again? But he would never say that to 021. The lady had a temper as bad as she was pretty.

Invigilator 078 opened the door to Time-Out Room 2. The scene of the ruins was fading, leaving the room spotless. No conflict meant no bloody mess to clean. Invigilator 001, who had been punished, wasn’t reading anymore. He was fiddling with a black mobile, his eyes downcast.

“Wh-what are you doing?” 078 asked, frowning as he approached.

“Perfect timing, I’ve got a question.” Qin Jiu looked up and spoke as if they were friends.

“What is it?”

Qin Jiu waved the mobile. “It’s a model from many years back. I can’t turn it on. Can you fix it?”

Invigilator 078 stared back. *Come again? Are you asking me to fix your phone?*

Qin Jiu did come again. “Can you?”

“No, I can’t. I don’t know how to,” 078 said, exasperated.

“Why are you suddenly messing with a phone during time-out?”

“A friend gave it to me before passing away. I want to see what’s inside.”

Invigilator 078 simply gestured to the door. “Please.”

Or in other words: *Get out!*

In the next room, 021 stood by the desk, repeatedly poking You Huo’s shoulder with a dark red nail. The darkness receded as the lights in the room flickered on. She stood beneath the light, muttering, “You told me yourself that if you were ever eliminated from the system, and the system’s still running, I should pull you back in and wake you up.

“So. Wake. Up. Chief. Invigilator.” She punctuated each word with a poke. Her expression remained as blank as always, but her tone was much more emotional than usual.

After a long series of pokes, You “Hard to Wake” Huo finally stirred. He scratched his head and sat up, stretching his back. Squinting, he looked up, the light glaring off his pale, handsome face.

Invigilator 021 was about to speak when the door behind her creaked open.

“Ready? Let’s go,” 078 said, peeking his head in.

Invigilator 021’s lips twitched as she pulled out her large sunglasses and put them on. Resisting the urge to yank her colleague’s head off, she coolly replied, “Just leaving,” with a raised chin.

It was late at night, and the sea suddenly became choppy. The small ship rocked as it headed back to port.

After leaving the time-out room, 021 stopped trying to talk to You Huo. Everything seemed the same as when they had boarded. Miss Decisive strode through the cabin in her large sunglasses, ignoring everyone except to torment 078 at every opportunity. The junior invigilator had no idea what he'd done wrong this time, but given her usual temper, he didn't think much of it. Occasionally, 021 would steal glances at You Huo through her sunglasses when no one was looking. She wondered if he'd heard what she'd said in the time-out room, but he showed nothing with his blank expression.

He was talking with 922... Or rather, You Huo sat on a sofa while the invigilator talked.

"Look, staring at me won't help at all," 922 said, hands up. "The waves are big, and I don't have that kind of power to make the ship stop rocking."

"Isn't this the invigilators' station?" You Huo asked.

"The environment of the invigilator station has to match the exam site. If it rocks, we rock. No special treatment." Invigilator 922 pointed at the table. "Look at 154. He's as green as bile. If we could steady the ship, don't you think we would've?"

The invigilator in question stood by the table, face ashen. He opened his mouth to agree, but his expression immediately changed, and he bolted off.

"Poor guy's gone to puke again," 922 said. "Even motion sickness patches don't help."

The ship gave another violent rock. Invigilators and examinees alike looked queasy, except for 922. Despite having com-

plained the most about being “seasick”, he was as steady as an old sea dog even as the waves turned the deck into a seesaw. However, the old sea dog was wary of You Huo, fearing he would be tricked into saying stuff he wasn’t supposed to say. He tried to deflect by subconsciously channelling the conversation to Qin Jiu.

“Boss, you know how shabby this ship is...” He turned to find Qin Jiu, who he knew better than anyone, had gone into the kitchen like it was his own house. *What are you up to now...?*

Moments later, Qin Jiu came out with a plate of oranges. He didn’t sit in a chair made for sitting. Instead, he perched on the armrest next to You Huo, towering over him.

“I risked stealing these from the kitchen,” said Qin Jiu as he found a comfortable position and offered You Huo the plate. “I’d be happy to share with a fellow examinee who was stuck in time-out.”

Yeah, fucking “risked”.

“No thanks,” You Huo refused flatly. He was feeling uneasy from the rocking ship.

Qin Jiu picked up a slice. “Did you know medieval sailors often got scurvy? The ones in the caves might have the same issue. We might too if we stay long enough. It causes black spots and loose teeth. One bump and all your teeth may fall out.”

When You Huo didn’t say anything, he kept going, “And then—”

You Huo wordlessly took three slices.

Invigilator 922 watched helplessly. Never would he have

imagined his boss switching sides. And what could he do but let them eat?

His mischievous boss continued to tease the examinee. “Congratulations, you’ve escaped Death’s clutches.”

The examinee responded by handing him back three pieces of peel.

Invigilator 922 couldn’t take it anymore. If they were already snacking, he might as well fry up two more lamb chops. He didn’t want to upset his boss or the troublemaker, so he would rather make everyone happy. Besides, he’d planned to secretly feed his boss anyway.

Q: Was there a rule against examinees eating a quick meal in the invigilation area?

A: No.

After all, when the rules were made, no one had imagined examinees would come out of time-out unscathed. With that thought, 922 busied himself in the kitchen guilt-free.

It took them half an hour to reach the land. Before leaving, You Huo thanked 922 and asked if he had any spare food, cooked or raw.

What the hell? the invigilator thought. *Is this guy asking for takeout now? Is dine-in not enough?*

As he made to reply, the red light on his finger finally lit up with a series of warning beeps.

“See? There’s the warning,” 922 said, showing his finger. “Your task is to keep all the Dutch sailors alive, including providing

enough food. If I let you take food back, I'd be helping you cheat. Since when did the invigilator help solve the problems?"

Bingo. You Huo had indeed wanted to take some meat back for the crew. However, given the system's warning, he didn't push it. Breaking the rules himself was one thing, forcing others to do so was too much. Besides, after two sessions, he'd grown to like 922.

The ship wasn't docked near the cave but at the far end of the island. You Huo and Qin Jiu decided they would take the chance to explore on the way back, so they went along a faintly marked path around the island, one after the other, their footsteps crunching in the snow. According to Di Li's description of his test problem in high school, they were inside the Arctic Circle. Unlike islands in temperate regions, this one was a frozen wasteland of ice and snow stretching as far as the eye could see, except for the stone cave.

This side of the island was eerily quiet. Dark clouds covered the sky, leaving only a star or two faintly visible. Even the roar of the ocean was muted, perhaps by a massive, screen-like reef. When Qin Jiu glanced up at the horizon where the sea and sky met, You Huo asked, "Is there something special about the time-out room?"

"What do you mean?" Qin Jiu blinked. In a moment, You Huo passed him, his tall figure half-melting into the night. The invigilator raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," You Huo looked back and asked quietly, "Are you coming?"

Qin Jiu caught up unhurriedly. “You’re trying to get me to break the rules. As a star examinee, you should behave—”

“You’re full of shit.”

Qin Jiu chuckled.

“Haven’t you been demoted to an examinee? How can you possibly break invigilator rules?” You Huo eyed the man’s wrist. Qin Jiu wore a watch there, conveniently hiding the warning light. The red light hadn’t lit up since he entered the exam as an examinee.

“I can talk a bit about examinee-related things,” Qin Jiu said. “What the system doesn’t allow and what it doesn’t even want mentioned are off-limits.”

You Huo squinted. Though the utterance was vague, it revealed something crucial: the time-out room was special due to the system’s configurations, and the system didn’t want anyone to discuss it. But what exactly about it was so sensitive? It was either confidential or a bug.

For a while, they walked in silence, Qin Jiu just behind You Huo, with only the crunching of snow under their feet.

Finally, the invigilator spoke in a low voice, “I’m curious.”

You Huo didn’t look back, simply waiting for him to continue. However, Qin Jiu did not. You Huo stopped and turned to face him with a resigned look. “Spit it out.”

“Did you really see nothing in the time-out room?” Qin Jiu probed.

“Mhm.” You Huo wasn’t about to admit what he’d seen. He didn’t want anyone, especially Qin Jiu, to think he was afraid

of the dark. "I heard you spent three hours reading a book and trying to fix a phone?"

"Who told you that?"

"Your dear 922."

Qin Jiu made another mental note about his subordinate. "It wasn't a book. It was a diary. Both the diary and phone belonged to Zhao Wentu."

You Huo blinked. "Zhao Wentu?"

"It's a shame you'd left when he burst out of nowhere," Qin Jiu said. "You could've seen him lucid, well, lucid enough to remember his own name. I suppose that's some consolation."

"So he did know you."

Qin Jiu gazed at the horizon, his breath forming misty clouds in the night air. "We were on the same team when I was an examinee. I don't remember much, though. That's why I flipped through the diary to try and jog my memory."

It was so long ago that Qin Jiu had last been an examinee, so naturally, You Huo didn't think he remember much from those times. After all, despite his frequent smiles, he wasn't very enthusiastic about the people or events in his life.

"Remember anything?" You Huo asked casually.

"Not much about what's written in the diary, but it did bring back other memories."

"Like what?"

"Invigilator A, for instance."

You Huo was still interested in Invigilator A and waited for him to go on.

Qin Jiu finally said, “Just some unpleasant, trivial incidents.”

“Pretty surprising you’d give thought to trivial stuff like that,”

You Huo remarked out of the blue.

Qin Jiu raised an eyebrow. “Do you do this often?”

“Do what?”

“Siding with someone you don’t even know, like Invigilator A, just to annoy someone else, like me?” Qin Jiu said, dragging out his words, feigning thoughtfulness. “Honestly, it’s a bit immature.”

You Huo scoffed, pulling up his collar to cover his mouth and chin. He strode forward, eyes fixed ahead. “It’s my mouth. I’ll say what I want.”

The Arctic wind was fierce enough to crack a stony face. Neither of them felt like talking in the biting cold, so they walked in silence. Without conversation, the rocky island felt eerily quiet, just like when they had landed. Something seemed missing.

After a few more steps, it hit You Huo—there was no sound of waves. The roaring sea they had heard throughout their voyage had vanished once they reached shore.

“What’s wrong?” Qin Jiu asked, noticing You Huo’s sudden stop.

“The sea’s frozen over. How did the invigilator ship make it here?”

According to the exam problem, three Dutch merchant ships had been forced to stay on an island in the Arctic Ocean for eight months because thick ice prevented them from sailing. First Mate Flat-top mentioned that their ships had reinforced

hulls, but the ice here was far too thick and endless for any ship to plough through. However, the invigilators' ship had sailed smoothly at a decent speed. You Huo was kicking himself for not realising it sooner.

"Does the invigilators' ship have special ice-breaking equipment?" You Huo asked.

Qin Jiu was a 1.9-meter-tall walking encyclopaedia when it came to exam sites and procedures. With a knowing smirk, he replied, "Why? Planning to sneak aboard and steal some gear?"

You Huo didn't bother denying the truth. "Is that not allowed?"

"It's not that," Qin Jiu explained. "There's nothing to steal. That ship doesn't need any. Think about it, we would've heard the ice cracking on the way here. Invigilator 922 said that the ship had no special privileges, but that's not entirely true. Its ability to sail is a privilege. The ice melts and turns to water wherever the invigilators' ship passes without the use of any ice-breaking equipment. Haven't you noticed by now? The system is quite accommodating when it comes to helping invigilators catch examinees."

You Huo wondered if the crew members could quickly pack up and set their sails to follow the path of the invigilator ship. He walked to the edge of the coast, lost in thought.

Qin Jiu read his mind. You Huo saw him turn on his phone's flashlight and sweep it over their landing spot. "Don't bother. Look, the ice had already reformed behind the ship."

Indeed, the illuminated area showed an unbroken expanse of

white ice as if it had always been there. You Huo sighed, abandoning the idea.

The ship and invigilators were safe for now.

Everyone back in the cave was as busy as bees.

The wood that You Huo and Qin Jiu salvaged from the system ship formed a massive pile. It was enough fuel for the rest of the session. No one was about to waste this hard-won resource. Using whatever tools they could find, they split the lumber into smaller, more burnable pieces and stacked them in the driest corner of the cave. The uninjured sailors knew what had to be done and joined the examinees in setting up fire pits. They had to ensure the cave would be warm enough and well-ventilated, and that the pits would not collapse. Once all the fires were lit, the inner and outer caves suddenly became warm and bright. The flames thawed frozen hair and clothes. Even the ghastly wounds began to regain colour. The mood noticeably lifted. Everyone gathered around the fires to rest, finally relaxing.

Several seriously injured sailors, including the captain, were still unconscious. Wu Li checked their temperatures and wounds every half hour while Shu Xue diligently assisted her. The swollen belly made Shu Xue look harmless, and her gentle demeanour quickly helped her befriend the others. Even the serious Wu Li spoke more to her than anyone else.

During a break by the fire, the doctor asked Shu Xue, “Do your two friends suffer from neurological diseases?”

Shu Xue wasn’t sure how to interpret it. The professional’s

question was polite but sounded like an insult. "I've never heard them mention anything like that. Why do you ask?"

"Some of their behaviour made it seem possible," Wu Li explained.

Shu Xue considered it. "I haven't known them for very long. We've only had two sessions together. Maybe you could ask them yourself?"

She couldn't see any signs of illness in You Huo or Qin Jiu. They were strong and capable, unlike people who were affected. Besides, neurological diseases couldn't have been that common, could they? What were the odds of both her new friends having one? It seemed unlikely to Shu Xue, but she wasn't a medical expert. Wu Li must have had her reasons for asking. Shu Xue didn't want to jump to conclusions about You Huo and Qin Jiu. Though... there could have been serious signs she overlooked.

Wu Li rubbed her hands together, finally feeling all her fingers. "Let's keep an eye on them. It might just be my professional paranoia acting up."

When You Huo and Qin Jiu returned to the cave, everyone had settled into shifts for rest. Some were already asleep by the fire, snoring softly, while most slept fitfully, tossing and turning. Shu Xue looked exhausted, nodding off in a corner while hugging Qin Jiu's suitcase. As the two men approached her quietly, Shu Xue rubbed her eyes.

"There you are," she said. "I was thinking it's been over three hours, and I was worried something had happened. I wanted to look for you, but they wouldn't let me."

First Mate Flat-top pocketed his watch. “ ’Tis perilous by night. We could not ask you to tempt such fate. Now that all are gathered, let us make fast the entrance.” He called over a sailor to help set up barriers using the fire pits. “Seek rest ere long, lest you might not rise from slumber when trouble stirs in the dark hours.”

At the words “might not rise from slumber”, Qin Jiu gave You Huo a meaningful look.

You Huo sat against the wall and stretched his legs. “I’ll keep watch.”

“Did you get enough sleep in time-out?” Qin Jiu asked. “If not, I don’t mind taking the first watch. I’m worried that you’ll fall asleep halfway through your shift and become harder to wake than I am.”

You Huo glared at him. Under his intense gaze, Qin Jiu mimed zipping his lips and closed his eyes, though he was still fully clothed.

You Huo leant his head against the cave wall, his gaze sweeping across the cave before settling on a specific spot. Two men huddled there, shivering slightly. Their enlarged shadows on the wall quivered along with them. Their faces were as pale as parchment. One nervously chewed his nails, his expression filled with dread.

You Huo recognised them as Chen Fei and Huang Rui. With only eleven points, six less than You Huo and Qin Jiu, they were dead last. They had tried their best, searching for branches and boarding the merchant ships, but their efforts yielded little suc-

cess. At midnight, they would likely be the first to face punishment for the sailors' deaths. No one knew what the punishment entailed or how they were supposed to "take responsibility", but it was sure to be terrifying. It might even cost them their lives. They were just counting down the seconds, waiting for the guillotine to fall.

First Mate Flat-top's pocket watch ticked quietly, marking the exam time. At 11:57 p.m., a bell suddenly rang out through the cave.

The sleeping examinees jolted awake. One of them even sprang up, his hair a messy bird's nest, shouting, "Is it exam time?"

It was Di Li. He looked around in confusion, then sat back down, rubbing his face. "Damn... I thought I heard the school bell. Thought I was late for the uni entrance exam."

"It wasn't your hallucination."

"There really was a bell. Scared me half to death..."

"Why'd it ring now? I hate that sound."

Others chimed in with their complaints.

Qin Jiu was pinching the bridge of his nose when You Huo nudged him.

"Hm?" He looked up.

You Huo pointed at the cave wall. "The system's recalculating the scores."

As he spoke, the dead hare's eerie voice echoed through the cave: *"Attention. Two minutes and twenty-one seconds until midnight. Recalculating today's scores."*

“Examinees triggered two scored events today. One, treating the crew members’ injuries. Two, finding fuel to keep the cave warm.

“Scores breakdown: Treating crew members: 6 points total. 2 for finding medicine and 4 for treatment. Keeping the cave warm: 8 points total. 5 for finding ample fuel, 1 for chopping wood, and 2 for safely starting fires.”

The scores on the cave wall began to shift. Qin Jiu and You Huo gained 7 points and jumped from 17.25 to 24.25 points, climbing four ranks for providing medicine and fuel. Shu Xue and Wu Li gained 4 points for medical treatment, moving up two spots. Di Li’s group only got 1 point for fuel since the amount they found wasn’t “sufficient”. Most of the others earned 2 points for chopping wood and starting fires. Not much, but better than nothing.

Chen Fei and Huang Rui tried their best. They gained 4 points, bringing their total to 15, but they were still in last place. They collapsed on the ground, faces blank in sheer terror.

Then, the dead hare spoke again:

“Point additions completed. Calculating point deductions.

“Points were deducted once today due to a violation of exam rules. One system ship has been rendered non-functional and is not repairable. Due to the severity of the consequences, 10 points will be deducted from the violating examinees.”

The points on the cave wall changed instantly. You Huo and Qin Jiu’s total was brutally halved, dropping from 24.25 all the way down to 14.25. As a result, their net score for the day was -3 points, firmly securing them in last place and bumping Chen Fei

and Huang Rui up to second-to-last.

The other examinees were stunned. Chen Fei and Huang Rui were the most shocked by this sudden turn of events. They couldn't even react. Chen Fei had been ready to mourn his fate with waterworks, but now he didn't know what to do. Crying didn't seem appropriate, and celebrating seemed even less so. He stared blankly at You Huo and Qin Jiu, mouth agape.

Everyone had seen them as beacons of hope that afternoon. Now, that hope had managed to snuff itself out in just a few hours.

Under the gaze of thirty-odd examinees, You Huo muttered through gritted teeth, "Since when did the idiot system deduct points like this?"

"You called it an idiot to its face, so it got back at you by taking your points." Qin Jiu found You Huo's whisper amusing, so he whispered back, "It's not uncommon. Didn't you lose points in your first session for messy handwriting?"

"Yes, only two."

Luckily, his voice was low. If the other examinees had heard the word "only", they might have felt dizzy and physically sick. Most of them had struggled all afternoon to gain less than three points—and that was considered "climbing up". Meanwhile, these two were on a rollercoaster ride.

Qin Jiu said, "There's a difference between messy answers and dismantling ships."

"Was Hunter Alpha's death not serious?" You Huo countered. "And for that, points were given, not taken."

Qin Jiu fought back a smile. A demoted invigilator was still an invigilator. He looked at You Huo's calm profile and gestured for him to come closer. "I think I need to give the rebellious star examinee some special attention or a little extra lesson."

You Huo sighed. "Go ahead."

"Messing with the exam problem and messing with the exam system are completely different," Qin Jiu explained. "Ideally, you want to avoid both."

You Huo only looked blankly at Qin Jiu. That was rich coming from an invigilator who messed with everything.

Qin Jiu saw his expression and cleared his throat. "In theory, you shouldn't mess with either. But if you must choose, challenging the exam problem is better. The exam system's on a whole different level... because you'd be challenging its authority."

"Authority, right." Upon hearing this, You Huo scoffed. On what grounds could this stupid system, which pulled in random people and sent them to an arbitrary death, claim authority?

"Don't sneer at me." Qin Jiu said, gesturing around. "The system's everywhere. You can spit at the scoreboard or anywhere really if you'd like, including that hare."

The dead hare stared back with its lifeless eyes.

"Will it take ten more points for cursing? Fine by me," You Huo said.

The dead hare kept staring.

"It won't go that far." Qin Jiu chuckled. "Didn't you pat the crow on the head in the last session? It didn't dock your points

then, so go ahead, curse all you want.”

The dead hare continued to play dead.

You Huo gave Qin Jiu an odd look. “You’re defending it?”

He then immediately regretted it. As an invigilator and a part of the system, of course Qin Jiu would defend it. However, his words revealed that he had unconsciously placed Qin Jiu on his side against the system. You Huo didn’t even know when this shift happened. He frowned slightly before saying, “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“Too late. I heard you.”

You Huo wiped all emotions from his face.

“If you’re really curious about something, we can discuss it later.” Qin Jiu winked with his right eye. “Might give us something to talk about next time we’re in time-out.”

You Huo blinked, processing the information.

Qin Jiu continued, saying, “Anyway, the system follows its own rules. Challenging the exam problem isn’t as serious as challenging the system itself. Killing Hunter Alpha only results in a penalty but no loss in points, but damaging the system’s ship is different. The system keeps a very detailed ledger.”

You Huo eyed him. Then he raised another objection. “Destroying the exam site is worse than dismantling a ship, isn’t it? But last time, it only cost five points.”

“You may have forgotten, but please allow me to remind you,” Qin Jiu said, pointing to himself. “It was only five because someone else shouldered the other half. And that someone’s talking to you now.”

When You Huo held his tongue, Qin Jiu continued, “Honestly, I’ve been waiting for a thank-you, but some examinees can be so oblivious to such courtesies.”

Still, You Huo didn’t respond.

“No worries,” Qin Jiu added. “I can be very patient with certain things. A few more days won’t hurt.”

Finally, You Huo’s beautiful eyes flickered. He replied coolly, “How wonderful. I don’t mind waiting either.”

It was Qin Jiu’s turn to choke on silence.



Chapter 12

The two people who were going to face punishment remained oddly calm, even chatting casually, while everyone else worried about what was to come. Di Li looked on, utterly confused. “They’re discussing life and death, aren’t they? How are they smiling about it?”

His partner, Li Shu, observed closely. “Well, only one of them is smiling...”

“Does that change anything?”

“Not really.”

Di Li finally understood how these two had ended up with their scores. As a long-time exam-taker, he was hyper-sensitive about points. Losing even one point would hurt, so watching the rollercoaster ride made him ache from head to toe. He briefly felt a small impulse to give them some of his points if the system allowed, but then, he realised that no matter who he gave points to, someone would always end up in last place. There would always be someone to face punishment. Seeing You

Huo and Qin Jiu plummet to the last place made him uneasy. Would he have felt better if it had been Chen Fei and Huang Rui instead? No, he wouldn't. No matter who stood on Death's doorstep, it would bother him. He wouldn't be comfortable if anyone in any pair stood on the brink of death. In the end, everyone had a heart. It was this damn system that never showed any humanity.

Before anyone could recover from the scoring rollercoaster, a cold gust swept through the cave. The ship's crew, who had dozed off sitting by the wall during the dead hare's announcement, jolted awake.

First Mate Flat-top rubbed his arms and asked the crew members beside him something in Dutch. A sailor muttered something back and headed out. Then, the first mate turned to the examinees. "Whence cometh the wind? Hath one moved the fire pits at the entrance?"

Another gust blew through, damp and salty. This time, many examinees noticed. A chill ran down their spines. With the outer cave entrance open, it was normal to have some wind, but how could such a briny wind turn two corners and reach the inner cave? Any dampness should have dried up after passing the fire! Everyone looked around frantically, searching for the wind's source. Their fear grew.

Suddenly, someone cried out, "Wait, I hear something!"

The group froze. "What is it?"

"Listen carefully! Don't make a sound!"

The examinee had his eyes darting around wildly, suspiciously

eyeing every angle. He pressed a finger to his lips, frozen in that position. As his eyes made a second sweep, there was a sudden whoosh, and several fires went out simultaneously. The cave plunged into darkness, making it impossible to see. Shouts and screams erupted almost immediately, and the panic reached a peak.

“Quiet,” You Huo snapped. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and flicked it open.

Click. A small flame flickered to life, barely illuminating the darkness, but it was better than nothing. You Huo and the flame instantly became the focal point. Thirty-odd examinees and the crew members, now awake, huddled around him. Being packed together was far from pleasant. You Huo was jostled and nearly stepped on Qin Jiu’s feet.

First Mate Flat-top suddenly spoke, “It’s upon us once more... We do not fall asleep, the fires do extinguish, and then the vile monsters do assail us.”

His words struck fear into everyone. The cave fell silent as people froze in place.

Then an eerie sound broke the silence, like rubber being pulled and twisted—a creaky noise that raised hairs. There was also a sound that echoed through the cave, like water dripping from somewhere high.

Plop.

Di Li felt something wet hit his face and touched it.

Plop.

A droplet splashed onto You Huo’s eyelid, making him

squint. As he blinked to get rid of the feeling, a hand gently grabbed his wrist. Qin Jiu lifted You Huo's hand to get the lighter higher and move it around.

"Up there," he said.

The others looked up, following the dripping water. Hanging overhead was a creature that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere and silently taken over the entire ceiling. It had pale, fleshy skin and vine-like limbs sprawling in all directions. It twisted its slimy head and two large, jet-black eyes to stare at the group below. Then it opened its gaping maw. *Whoosh*. A damp, salty burst of air swept over them, and the lighter went out.

This time, no one screamed. In moments of true terror, there is no time for screaming. Only suffocating dread filled the cave.

Di Li's mind went blank. When he could finally make a sound, he realised something was missing beside him.

Two seconds later, it hit him—You Huo, who had been pressed against him, was gone. But not just You Huo. He groped around in the darkness and found Qin Jiu's spot empty too. Others soon noticed the same thing. A buzz of confusion erupted in the cave.

"Where are they?"

"They're gone! They're really gone!"

"You Huo? Was that his name? Qin Jiu?"

No response came. As panic spread, the dead hare's voice rang out:

"Attention. Unfortunately, eight crew members passed away on this day. According to the exam rules, at midnight, the low-

est-ranking team must take responsibility for these deaths. If that is not enough to account for the deaths, this will continue the next day, and so on.

“Shipwrecked sailors aren’t the only residents of Novaya Zemlya. A native resident is unhappy because its prey on the island and in the water have been eaten by the crew over the past eight months. It’s been hungry for days, trying to fill its belly. Until today... Today was its lucky day. The dead sailors would have made a good meal, but the first mate hid the bodies, ruining its plans for a scrumptious dinner. No matter. The newcomers looked just as tasty.

“So, it took them.”

The hare then added in its monotone voice:

“Remaining examinees, you may collect the bodies of your companions two hours later. We wish everyone the best of luck.”

Just like the appearance of You Huo in the coffin in Chasu, the abduction happened without warning and defied logical explanation. In the blink of an eye, their surroundings changed, giving them no time to react. At least the crew had a chance to struggle as the monster dragged them away. For the examinees, this process was skipped entirely.

When You Huo opened his eyes, he was no longer in the cave. He couldn’t figure out where he was, because he was face-to-face with the monster’s mouth. At least, he assumed it was a mouth. A huge, gaping hole blasted him with a salty, fishy wind. His feet dangled in the air while something was wrapped around him. The enormous, pale-rimmed hole pulsed closer, about to engulf him.

It was utterly disgusting. Clearly, the system would stoop to any level to punish examinees, no matter how awful. As he was engulfed by the monster, You Huo heard Qin Jiu cursing the system under his breath.

“Hey, star examinee, li—” Qin Jiu began but was cut off by a click.

You Huo flicked the lighter open, and a small flame sprang to life. They were indeed inside the monster’s mouth, surrounded by slick whiteness and standing on something soft and fleshy. However, this wasn’t the buccal cavity. The genuine article loomed just steps away, ringed with tiny, sharp teeth and reeking of an even fouler stench.

“There’s a pack of cigarettes in my pocket,” You Huo said to Qin Jiu, his face darkening. His arms were tightly bound above the elbow, and he couldn’t reach his jacket pocket. He could only turn sideways. As the maw inched closer, a hand slipped into his pocket. You Huo tensed. He was starting to regret this suggestion. Having someone else’s hand in his pocket felt oddly intrusive.

Luckily, Qin Jiu was quick. He’d already withdrawn his hand before You Huo could urge him to.

Then You Huo heard the box being fiddled with. “You’re fucking kidding me. Are you seriously taking the time to unwrap something right now?”

The teeth were practically in his face. He rarely spoke in such a tone, and his frustration made Qin Jiu chuckle.

The rustling stopped. You Huo held out the lighter as Qin Jiu

thrust a handful of cigarettes forward. The creature's teeth parted slightly, grazing their skin, cold and damp. A disgusting smell filled the air.

Fuck. You Huo tilted his face away and held his breath.

The pale limbs of the monster wrapped around its freshly engulfed food, making it look like an old woman's gummy mouth.

Time seemed to freeze. Each second felt like a year. After what seemed like ages, smoke began to seep out. The creature quivered, trying to hold it in. Finally, after what felt like an aeon, it couldn't contain itself anymore. Like a tuberculosis patient, it coughed and spluttered. Then, with a violent retch, it vomited.

As he landed face-first, You Huo stuck out his hands to break his fall and came into contact with a jumble of hard objects that scattered as he touched them. He even sliced open his palm on a sharp edge, but there was no time to care. He ignored the cut, quickly finding cover and signalling Qin Jiu over. They ducked behind what felt like a piece of furniture.

After three tries, You Huo's lighter finally flickered to life, although it was dimmer than before. He raised it and swept it around. The weak flame revealed their shelter: an old, rusted cabinet. It was so rusted that its lock had fused with the door, but traces of familiar patterns remained—similar to those on the lid of First Mate Flat-top's pocket watch. They saw algae-covered wooden floors, cabinets, and crates all around them. There was a half-collapsed staircase that led to nowhere and even a grimy porthole cabin window.

They were in a long-abandoned ship, but they didn't know

where. You Huo peered around and spotted two large rocks piercing through the ceiling and the floor. He imagined the ship being tossed by massive waves, flipped, and impaled on the two jagged things. Around the rocks was a pile of aged and yellowed human bones, like a collapsed sandcastle with skulls nestled among them, their empty eye sockets staring blankly at the two men. These must have been the objects they had landed on.

As You Huo leant out to look, his right hand pressed into a puddle of icy liquid that had collected under the cabinet. The cold shot straight to his head, and he was suddenly overcome with *déjà vu*. The tilted cabin, jagged rocks, and scattered bones... even the suffocating stench. He'd been there before, peering out from this exact spot. The water had been colder then, and the walls had been coated in monster slime. The stench of decay and rust had been even stronger, enough to make him gag. He had pressed his fingers to his nose, lips pursed, refusing to take a breath, when someone tapped his shoulder.

"Hey, Chief Invigilator. Got a cigarette?"

"What?" You Huo started, turning his head.

Qin Jiu was behind him, touching the porthole glass and leaving three fingerprints. Then he touched his fingertips. "What 'what'?"

"Did you say something?" You Huo asked.

"Me? No."

You Huo frowned, then relaxed. His face returned to its usual blank expression.

“What, is the smell so bad you’re hearing things?” Qin Jiu chuckled.

“Mhm.” You Huo looked away, turning back to survey the cabin. As he shifted his position, trying to dismiss the thought, his fingers brushed against something short, wedged in the gap beneath the metal cabinet. Frowning, he picked it out and held it up to the flame. After a moment of scrutiny, he realised it was an unfinished cigarette.

He recalled something from days ago. Or was it weeks? At the service centre by the mountain, that feisty inn manager Chu Yue had mentioned that some exam sites weren’t thoroughly cleaned and that traces from years past might still linger there.

Not far away, the monster that had choked on smoke was lurking behind a stone pillar. It was so massive that its full form was unclear. You Huo knew it would soon recover and attack. He should focus and prepare to strike back at the right moment. Yet somehow, he found himself lost in thought, staring at the stale cigarette butt. He tried to recall the words he had just “heard” but didn’t remember them all. He hadn’t caught all the words, nor could he place the voice. He had no idea who had spoken, but as the words faded and he looked at the cigarette, he felt inexplicably sad.

Snap.

The sound was next to You Huo’s ear. He could tell it was intentionally soft to avoid either alerting the monster or startling him. He blinked, turning his head.

Qin Jiu lowered his hand. “What’s got you so lost in

thought?”

“Nothing.” You Huo shook his head.

The lighter sputtered and died, plunging the cabin into darkness. Only Qin Jiu’s eyes held a faint gleam. You Huo’s fingers twitched around the cigarette. It was *déjà vu* again. He turned to stare at the monster. Then he blurted, “Do you smoke?”

The random question caught Qin Jiu off guard. “Why?”

“Well...” You Huo realised how silly the question was. The sense of *déjà vu* disappeared, leaving him feeling foolish. He’d never seen Qin Jiu buy cigarettes. Besides, asking someone that out of the blue was weird. He felt stupid for even bringing it up.

“Never mind, forget it,” You Huo said, his tone back to its usual lazy drawl.

Qin Jiu was about to speak but stopped. He tapped You Huo on the shoulder twice, a silent warning.

Behind the stone pillar, the monster had finally recovered from its coughing fit. It began to move silently. Its body was glowing faintly, or perhaps its unnatural pale flesh just stood out in the darkness. With the faint glow, You Huo could see its movements very clearly. One of the monster’s massive eyeballs peeked out from behind the pillar, swivelling in all directions. Its body, large enough to fill half the cabin, rose and fell with each breath. Countless limbs tapped the wooden floor in time with its breathing. It looked like a mutated octopus, its limbs resembling tentacles covered with suckers. It was just far uglier than any octopus You Huo had ever seen.

Disgusted, he held his breath.

The ugly octopus stretched its tentacles further. Its huge head tilted out from behind the pillar, and its eyes rolled to follow. Suddenly, one tentacle shot out. Like a gecko's tongue catching a mosquito, it lashed out towards a spot in the cabin.

Crash! A stack of wooden crates toppled over. The one hit directly by the tentacle splintered into pieces. Unfortunately for the monster, no one was there. It tilted its head to the other side, its eye following the movement. It was carefully searching for its prey. The cabin fell silent, except for the squishy sounds of the creature's movements.

You Huo felt another gentle poke on his shoulder. He turned to see Qin Jiu holding out his palm, revealing a rotten cork. Qin Jiu made a gesture that he instantly understood. Then the invigilator raised his free hand, counting down with his fingers: 1, 2, 3. As the third finger went up, You Huo tossed the cigarette butt. Simultaneously, Qin Jiu threw the cork in the opposite direction.

Whoosh whoosh. Two tentacles shot out at incredible speed, each in a direction, whipping up a breeze in their wake, while the ugly octopus stayed in its spot. A wooden cabinet took the hit and toppled over, landing at an angle against the stone pillar and forming a triangle. On the other side, a pile of human bones was knocked apart, pelvis, skulls, and tibias flying everywhere. Some even landed near You Huo's feet.

You Huo found himself staring at a skull. It must have belonged to a crew member or an examinee from previous sessions—a head with flesh and blood. He reached for a bone but

then grabbed some nails and wood chips. Without a word, he began throwing them out, one by one, in different directions. Each time he threw something, a tentacle shot out to catch it—one item per tentacle. The monster was excited, never missing a beat.

You Huo suddenly understood why people enjoyed playing fetch with dogs.

Qin Jiu was doing the same on his side. The three fell into a strange standoff. The men remained still, and the ugly octopus didn't move its body either. Only arms and tentacles were in motion.

In just a few minutes, the cabin was reduced to ruins. Tables, chairs, and cabinets lay scattered and broken.

Still no sign of the two prey. The ugly octopus was puzzled.

You Huo and Qin Jiu peeked out, satisfied with the chaos they had created, and took a break.

As silence fell, the monster's eye began to swivel again. Its body settled into a slower rhythm. It was calmer now. It was in no hurry. It was playing with its food. These humans were being tricky, but the monster didn't mind a game of hide-and-seek with food before dinner. A little chase always increased its appetite and made the meal more satisfying. Prey that fought back tasted better. Fear made the meat too flabby and less enjoyable to chew.

Also, it preferred not to devour everything at once. It was better to take a few bites, play for a few hours, and then have a few more bites. Maintaining a bit of hunger made each bite

more fulfilling, and it wasn't worried about its prey escaping. No matter how they ran, they would be delivered right to it again at midnight. Terrified, desperate, and resigned—a deliciously complex flavour.

You Huo had no idea what the ugly octopus was thinking. He just saw it press its mouth shut, contract its mouth muscles, and then smack its lips a few times. Streams of drool leaked out, glistening in the dim light from the porthole. You Huo felt disgusted. The monster's drool made the cabin smell even worse as soon as the drool hit the ground. You Huo held his breath and closed his eyes...

He couldn't take it anymore. Without looking back, You Huo nudged Qin Jiu several times and then silently counted with his fingers: 1, 2, 3. He hunched over and sprang into action. Qin Jiu moved at the same time, not letting him down.

The ugly octopus became visibly excited as over a dozen tentacles lashed out in rapid succession. Wherever there was the sound of movement, tentacles struck. If one wasn't enough, it used two. If two failed, it tried three.

The chaotic cabin, deliberately created by You Huo and Qin Jiu, worked to their advantage. As one ducked behind a rock, the other vaulted over the stairs. When one pressed against a metal shelf, the other slipped under the tilted wooden cabinet.

Within two minutes, You Huo came to a stop behind one of the jagged rocks with a handful of the octopus's thin, pointed tentacle tips. Qin Jiu crouched on the stairs, the other rock at his side, the remaining tentacles pinned beneath his feet.

As for the ugly octopus, its tentacles were split into two groups, tangled in a maze of debris and stretched taut by the two big shots. Its massive head had sunk lower, splayed out in an awkward split.

“Have you got your rope?” You Huo asked Qin Jiu.

“Sadly, I wasn’t allowed to bring anything from my time as an invigilator,” Qin Jiu replied, scanning the room. He grabbed a length of rope from the staircase corner and examined it. “This might work. Was probably used for the sails.”

He tossed the rope to You Huo, who caught it and immediately tied the tentacle tips together in a ponytail.

“You’re really...” Qin Jiu began. *Such an interesting person. So cold and stiff, yet so creative in every way.*

You Huo put down the ponytail and looked up, expressionless, waiting for him to finish the sentence.

Qin Jiu hummed. “Witty and amusing,” he amended. At the same time, he found another piece of rope and tied the tentacles under his feet into a second ponytail. Now, the ugly octopus had pigtails, and it was bewildered.

Qin Jiu propped himself up with one hand and hopped down the stairs. The bound tentacles hung limply from the side, appearing lifeless.

“Can we eat this?” he asked, examining them.

“No.”

Qin Jiu looked surprised. “Really? It’s practically calamari to me.”

You Huo gave him an incredulous look. Qin Jiu thought he’d

say something like "Are you mad?" but the bigshot only said, "The head's too ugly."

At this moment, the octopus's head suddenly ballooned. It geared up, and with a series of snaps, the bound tentacle tips broke off. Free from restraint, the creature retracted all its limbs. Its pale, massive body shrank and squeezed into a crevice in the wall. In the blink of an eye, it had slithered away, leaving behind its discarded pigtails.

Cutting its losses? You Huo mused. *Fair enough.*

He lit his lighter again and walked to where the ugly thing had disappeared. Several wooden planks were broken, revealing a hole less than a metre wide. Through it, he could see jagged rocks and deep crevices. The salty smell of the sea wafted through, accompanied by faint sounds of waves.

Qin Jiu whistled softly by the porthole. You Huo looked over.

"It's gone," Qin Jiu said, tapping the glass.

Beyond the porthole was the Arctic. There were rocks on one side and water beneath a layer of ice on the other. The abandoned ship must have been on the island, just stuck in a tucked-away spot they hadn't noticed—You Huo concluded as he joined Qin Jiu by the window. In the distance, a pale shape flashed through the water, eager to put distance between it and the ship. In an instant, the sea returned to its quiet, mysterious state.

"I don't," Qin Jiu suddenly said.

You Huo straightened up, surprised. Qin Jiu was leaning against the porthole, watching him. "Weren't you asking if I

smoked?”

You Huo hadn't expected him to remember.

“Why did you ask?” Qin Jiu asked again.

“No reason... Just found a cigarette butt and thought I'd find who lost it.”

Qin Jiu raised an eyebrow, recalling the mouldy object. You Huo walked away.

The cabin was a mess. They scoured the “battlefield” in search of useful items among the broken crates and fallen cabinets. They discovered candles, a storm lantern, and a compass. There were even badges, a pocket watch, and a rusty box that bore medieval designs. You Huo lit the lantern, finally giving his lighter a break. They adjusted the compass and followed the draft coming through the ship's hull to search for an exit.

A group of examinees entered the cave, holding their torches and exchanging information.

“Any luck?”

“We went over there and searched the coast for half an hour. No sign of the monster.”

“What about... bones?”

“No, nothing.”

“Phew. That's good. No news is good news.”

They had been terrified when You Huo and Qin Jiu disappeared. When even the pregnant Shu Xue grabbed a torch to go out and search for them, the others couldn't just sit around. They formed teams and went out.

But they found nothing after an hour of searching. “No bodies mean there’s still hope,” they said, though they knew how slim that hope was. A gloomy silence fell over the group. Everyone was sighing.

They hadn’t even finished sighing when two figures appeared at the mouth of the cave. The very men they had nearly given up for dead ducked in, carrying two bundles of tentacles, an iron box, and a storm lantern.

While everyone stared in disbelief at the two revenants loaded with goods, one of them glanced at the score wall and muttered in front of the dead hare, “What, no violations this time?”

The hare might have died a second time if it could. *You know you’re supposed to AVOID breaking the rules, right?*

There was a field of strange rock formations on Novaya Zemlya. Numerous jagged rock “towers” created narrow passages barely wide enough for a person to squeeze through. Most examinees steered clear of this place. The sharp rocks and icy, slippery ground were a recipe for disaster. Plus, the wind pushing through the narrow gaps was strong enough to blow a man silly, not to mention that it sounded like a wailing ghost that came and went.

It was enough to make the faint-hearted pee themselves, but two figures were stumbling through the rocky maze: the pair Di Li and Li Shu.

Both guys were a bit compulsive in behaviour, and it was especially visible when they were searching. They felt compelled

to check and walk over every path, uneasy at the thought of missing even a single spot, which was how they ended up in this eerie place. To speed things up, they had split up, each taking a different path, weaving through the stone forest side by side.

Di Li squinted, fighting against the stinging wind as he trudged on. Then he heard it—a strange noise coming from behind. At first, he dismissed it as just the wind, but after a few more steps, he reconsidered. The wind howled, its cry drawn out in an eerie rhythm. But beneath it, Di Li heard something else... footsteps approaching.

Just an echo, right? Di Li tried to reassure himself. He lightened his steps, gripping the rock as he inched forward. To his horror, he heard the footsteps behind him quicken. *Maybe it's just Li Shu?* He told himself again. Plucking his courage, he called out, "Li Shu!"

"Geez, you scared the hell out of me!" His partner answered from the adjacent path, somewhere slightly ahead of him. "What's the matter?"

Di Li froze, then spun around. The oil lamp on his hand creaked and swayed, casting flickering shadows behind him.

But there was... nothing there.

Li Shu waited for a response from the adjacent path, but all he heard was silence. Di Li went mute after calling his name, which worried him.

"Di Li!" he hollered. "What's going on?"

Still no answer. Only the howling wind responded, whipping his face. Li Shu's stomach dropped. He quickened his pace,

steadying himself against the wall. “Di Li, you okay?”

Finally, a sound from the once-silent gap next door cut him off. Di Li’s voice rang out, passionate and oddly enthusiastic: “Prosperity! Democracy! Civility! Harmony! Freedom! Equality! Justice!”³

What the hell? Li Shu barely had time to think before he lost his footing and slid forward about half a metre, only stopping when something snagged his pant leg.

“Damn kid, always trying to scare me,” Li Shu muttered, half-annoyed, half-amused. He tried to push himself up, grabbing onto what he thought was a rock, but as he did, a tingle shot across his scalp. His fallen lamp rolled, flickering twice before going out with a soft “puff”. In that brief moment before it extinguished, he saw what he was holding...

It was a hand. A hard, greenish-grey hand jutting out from the ice and snow. Worse, in the bone-chilling cold, he could feel a slight tug at his palm. He was petrified.

Thus, two enthusiastic voices were heard bouncing off the rocky walls: “Patriotism! Dedication! Integrity! Friendship!”

Di Li and Li Shu scrambled back to the cave. Their voices reached the others before the two men even got there.

“We found them!” Di Li gasped. “Quick! Grab anything you

3. Prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship: These are the core socialist values promoted in China. Chinese netizens often jokingly recite these values to “ward off” ghosts or supernatural entities in spooky stories.

can—torches, shovels, knives—we gotta break through the ice and start digging—”

They burst into the cave, only to come face to face with You Huo and Qin Jiu.

“The hell?” Di Li sputtered.

“Digging the hell?” Qin Jiu’s gaze swept between the two, scanning them up and down.

Di Li stood there, dumbfounded. His eyes widened. “Y-you... w-weren’t you...” He pointed outside, then back at the unharmed You Huo and Qin Jiu. Finally, he realised the massive misunderstanding he and his partner had made.

Li Shu had been too scared to look closely at the frozen hand he had touched. He had assumed the monster had worked faster than expected, leaving the bodies frozen under the ice in just over an hour. Then the two decided to rush back to gather people and tools to retrieve their companions’ remains. Instead, the two “dead” men had returned on their own. Not only were they unharmed, but they had brought back souvenirs.

Di Li was left speechless, shaking his head in disbelief. He dusted off the snow and huddled by the nearest fire. After warming up one side, he turned himself over, and a thought suddenly struck him. “Wait—if you’re back, whose hand did Li Shu grab then?”

“What hand?” You Huo asked.

Di Li and Li Shu shared their creepy encounter.

Qin Jiu nodded towards the inner cave. “Remember? The crew stashed some bodies around here.”

“Oh—that’s right!” Di Li smacked his forehead. “Look at me, my brain must’ve frozen out there. I’m not firing on all cylinders.”

Others chimed in as well. “Right, the exam did mention the first mate hiding the dead crew.”

You Huo couldn’t quite grasp the first mate’s logic. Maybe the crew was afraid the monster would eat the bodies, so they buried them under the snow, blending them with the wintry ground to make it harder for the creature to reach them. But the spot where Di Li and Li Shu had gone wasn’t that hidden if they could have stumbled across a dead hand by accident. But after all, it was the crew’s business. They had their own foreign and feudal customs. Perhaps it wasn’t just about concealment but also about honouring sailors’ traditions.

Everyone crowded around to see what You Huo and Qin Jiu had brought back. There was a compass that looked like it might still work—probably left behind by some poor guy from a previous exam.

“Not much use knowing directions on this island for now, though,” someone sighed.

“How can you say it’s useless? The final task is to get the crew back home, isn’t it?” Di Li believed that everything had a purpose and was a bit of a hoarder, always keeping things for a rainy day. “What, are we supposed to navigate without a compass? Use our fingers instead?” Realising his tone was too harsh, he added, “Sorry, I’m not trying to pick a fight.”

The examinee replied, “I said ‘for now’. We obviously can’t

use it immediately. It's not like we're sailing tomorrow."

No one argued further. He was right—they still had thirteen days until the thaw specified in the exam. They had a long wait ahead. At this thought, the group's spirits sank once more.

But their excitement surged back as they turned their attention to the pigtail-like tentacles. Both scared and curious, they gathered around, staring at the two large bundles of tentacles, asking, "These... what are they for?"

Di Li, an avid gamer, suggested, "Are these some kind of loot from a boss? Do they have special powers or healing properties?"

Qin Jiu rummaged through the woodpile, picked out two pointed sticks, and said roguishly. "Property of being food."

What? Everyone hurriedly stepped back. They still remembered how, an hour ago, the monster had lurked on the ceiling, glaring down at them menacingly. *Who was he trying to scare to death?!*

Their reaction was entirely expected, but Qin Jiu didn't even raise an eyebrow to acknowledge them. He just skewered the two bundles of tentacles with the sticks, quickly set up a make-shift grill and started roasting them over the fire.

The flames danced lazily over the tips of the tentacles. A mouthwatering sizzle slowly filled the cave, the sound alone enough to make stomachs growl. Everyone's resolve was faced with the unprecedented test.

You Huo wasn't exactly starving, having grabbed a quick bite on the invigilator's ship. Plus, he had his own stash of canned

beef and instant noodles. While it wasn't as tasty as 922's freshly made cuisine, at least it was edible. So when Qin Jiu started grilling the "calamari", he was completely unfazed. He was more curious about when the system would decide to flag this as a violation than interested in the knock-off calamari.

The sizzle of meat being cooked kept drilling into his ears. He frowned and glanced at Qin Jiu before moving to the outer cave. After that, he stood with his hands in his pockets, staring at the score wall, pondering. The grotesque thing had been sent by the system to punish them, so it must have been part of the system. As part of the system, would it tolerate the treatment of being harvested by examinees, no, by *someone* to make barbecue? Knowing how it had behaved in the past, probably...

The tentacles began to curl. You Huo sighed as his thoughts drifted back to the sizzling sound. He realised the score wall wasn't far enough from the barbecue spot. Qin Jiu was still in his peripheral vision. You Huo didn't need long to decide to move outside the cave again. From this angle, the demoted invigilator doing his disgusting deeds was blocked from view—not even a hair was visible.

Outside the cave, the wind shrieked as it whipped his face. Nobody would come here unless necessary, especially at night, so it was just You Huo and the frozen hare, toe-to-toe with each other. He bent down to gaze at the hare, and the hare also gazed at him.

Qin Jiu said the system had eyes and ears everywhere in the exam sites, not just a few birds and bunnies playing spy. So, where

are those so-called eyes and ears? How do they—

Then the smell of grilled “calamari” rudely interrupted his train of thought. And his stomach rumbled.

Qin Jiu sat by the fire with one leg bent, casually turning the skewers. The tentacle-like strips curled and changed colour as they sizzled. Some parts turned glossy while others became a crispy yellow. The mouthwatering smell of grilled seafood wafted through the cave, wearing down even the most stubborn of examinees. Firstly, they were truly hungry. Secondly, if they ignored the memories of the monster, these things could really pass for calamari!

One by one, the examinees drifted over, gathering around Qin Jiu. Soon, the crew also joined in, and even the previously comatose captain managed to drag himself up. After starving for so long, their stomachs had shrivelled up, but that didn’t stop them from indulging themselves. A sense of merry relaxation filled the cave, chasing away the shadows of the struggles.

You Huo resisted the temptation of the “ugly” food for half an hour, nearly freezing at the cave entrance. Just as he was about to stand up, the hare suddenly spoke:

“Attention. After many days, the crew finally had a satisfying meal. The condition of a bonus reward has been met. The thawing of the ice, originally scheduled for two weeks later, will now take place in two days. All examinees should seize this opportunity to send all the Dutch sailors home.

“Note: The sea will thaw only once. Miss it, and you’re on your

own. Additionally, one pair of examinees has earned a six-point bonus."

On the score wall, You Huo and Qin Jiu's scores jumped from 14.25 to 20.25. The dramatic rise resulted in Chen Fei and Huang Rui falling back to last place and nearly fainting in fear. You Huo frowned at the hare, which fell silent and played dead after announcing the bonus points. This was nothing like what he'd expected.

A shadow loomed over him—it was Qin Jiu, who had sneaked up on him. "Is my cooking that terrible? You'd rather freeze out here for 32 minutes than come inside."

If it were genuinely bad, would I have had to hide out here? You Huo thought.

"Or would you rather have roast hare than grilled calamari?"

You Huo blinked. *Will a dead hare really be better than fake calamari?*

"Need some help? I'm quite the generous type." Qin Jiu offered his hand.

You Huo remained seated, eyeing the outstretched hand. "Think we'd get in trouble for roasting the dead hare?"

Qin Jiu widened his eyes. Would they? Mr 001 wasn't sure, but that wouldn't stop him from suggesting they try.

Five minutes later, two fresh violation notices pinged on the invigilators' ship. Familiar names, familiar faces. Invigilators 078, 154 and 922 stared in disbelief.

"Any chance we can still put in for a transfer?" 078 groaned. Of course, he knew; fat chance of that happening. He tapped

the violation notices on the table. “You two know 001 well, and you’ve dealt with this examinee before. I just want to ask... How many violations can they rack up in these fifteen days of the exam?”

Invigilator 154 shook his head. “No idea. By the way, the thaw’s been moved up. It’s in two days now, not fourteen anymore.”

“Oh, right! How did I forget that? Two days!” 078’s eyes lit up briefly, then dimmed. “But two days is still a long time...”

“They’ve managed two violations in about half a day. At this rate, two days is four half-days, so they could rack up eight violations.” He counted and grew increasingly hopeless. “I just can’t wrap my head around what they’re thinking. What’s going on up there?”

Invigilator 922 was equally desperate. “Maybe they’ve digested dinner and are coming for a midnight snack.”

Invigilator 078 slumped in his chair. “I used to think this gig was a cakewalk. The examinees are supposed to be scared stiff of putting a toe out of line. If someone accidentally violated a rule, the rest would be walking on eggshells so that there wouldn’t be a second violation.”

“Yeah...” 922 sighed, hit by nostalgia. *That used to be our life before we ran into You Huo.*

“I’ve worked with other units before,” 078 said. “On paper, a four-person team should be a cakewalk.”

“True.”

“How the hell did I end up with you guys?” 078 continued.

“Yeah.”

Invigilator 021 slammed her cup on the table.

Invigilator 078 froze. He’d forgotten that she was the one who had picked this team. Could he afford to offend the princess? Of course not. So he backpedalled quickly. “I’m sorry.”

Outside the cabin window, night had fallen. The sea was a frozen wasteland for miles, except for the churning waters around their little ship. As they set sail, the vessel lurched, sending waves of nausea through 154. He slumped back in his chair, willing his stomach to settle. His colleague 922 went upstairs to get motion sickness patches, and 078 headed below deck to prepare the time-out rooms. Invigilator 021 picked up her sunglasses from the table and wiped them.

Invigilator 154, who was lying motionless, blurted, “You’re really planning to wear sunglasses to pick up examinees in the middle of the night, miss? Careful you don’t fall overboard.”

Invigilator 021 stopped, narrowing her eyes at the other invigilator across the table. He was still leaning back, eyes shut tight, his face a mask of discomfort.

“Who do you think I am?” she retorted.

She had only meant to wipe the fog off her sunglasses before putting them away. Wearing them in the evening could be excused as protection against the wind. After all, she always seemed a bit delicate, so no one would have questioned her motives. However, wearing them at night would have raised suspicions, even from someone as dim as 078.

But 154... he seemed unusually sensitive? Her beautiful

eyes didn't waver as she carefully studied the gentlemanly colleague across from her. He happened to sit up at that moment. He looked at Miss Decisive, about to speak, but he sprang up, clamped his hands over his mouth, and bolted for the toilet to vomit.

Invigilator 021 frowned. *Is my face really that nauseating?*

Soon, the white ship docked on the island. Four invigilators lined up on the deck, bracing themselves against the biting wind. Invigilator 078, always one for formalities, pulled out two slips of paper. He began reading the violation notices: "A short while ago, we were informed that you two roasted the system's announcer here... Were you guys really that hard up for a snack?"

"We didn't eat it," Qin Jiu replied from below with an extremely infuriating grin. "Just cooked it for fun. No need to finish reading. Throw down the ladder so you can get out of this wind. Unless you find it refreshing?"

Invigilator 078 blinked slowly. *The nerve of this guy! If it weren't for your violations, we wouldn't be freezing our butts off in this godforsaken wind.* But he bit back the retort. After all, this was 001—to some extent, a figure who only existed in hearsay and legends, someone 078 couldn't afford to offend.

Invigilator 021 kicked the ladder down the port side to let the two men climb aboard. Her sunglasses were off, and she did her best to maintain her poker face, but when You Huo stepped onto the deck, her eyes still lit up. Unfortunately, he walked past her as if he hadn't noticed a thing, heading below deck just like

last time.

Well, shit, she thought. *Looks like he didn't hear a word I said last time.* Though it was expected, she still couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. Her face was a mask when she was happy, but when she was pissed off, it was an open book. This made her other three colleagues fear offending her.

As 078 and 021 herded the two VIP troublemakers below deck, the former leant in close to the latter, his voice barely above a whisper. "How about... we switch? Last time I was with 001, it was really too awkward. This time, could you possibly—"

He looked up and met 021's particularly cool gaze. He shut up, thought for a moment, then whispered, "Alright, alright, forget I said anything. I know you can't stand that guy. After you." He then stepped aside to let her through to Time-Out Room 1.

You Huo walked into the time-out room. Before the door swung shut, he noted it looked the same as ever, not yet plunged into darkness. One table and one chair with floor-to-ceiling mirrors on the walls. This time, he didn't pull out the chair to nap. Instead, he took a few steps and stopped in front of one of the mirrors. In the mirror, he watched 078 give a quick nod to his colleague before heading to Time-Out Room 2 next door. Qin Jiu followed behind him, looking up and meeting You Huo's eyes through the mirror. He gave a wink and brushed past 021.

Then 021 entered Time-Out Room 1 and closed the door, hands behind her back. The room went dead quiet. In the mir-

ror, You Huo watched the cool Miss Decisive lean against the door. She tucked her hair behind her ear and took a deep breath, preparing to speak.

“I heard what you said last time,” You Huo said.

Invigilator 021’s breath caught. You Huo turned his torso slightly, his gaze falling on her. This was completely unexpected. She’d been considering how to start and how to explain everything clearly in the short window they had. She wanted to convey the key pieces of information, if not everything. She’d come up with an outline, but You Huo’s sudden statement left her at a loss.

“Sit down?” You Huo pulled out a chair and turned it towards her.

This brought her back to reality. She shook her head. “No, we don’t have much time. The time-out room starts working a minute or two after the examinee enters. If I stay here, then I’ll be the one in trouble.”

She then recalled her rehearsed speech and began a rapid fire. “You once said that if you were deregistered and eliminated, the system’s first action would be to erase the memories you have of your years here. It seems that’s come true. I know you’ve got a million questions, but just listen for now.

“You must be very curious about this exam system, but I can only give you a quick rundown. It was created years ago, originally intended to be used by organisations such as the military to screen special talents. The exams are comprehensive and difficult, designed to assess all aspects of the candidates, who are

all high-risk individuals—like double-edged swords that can cut the user if not handled properly.

“At first, it picked a number of top-notch instructors to supervise the candidates. These guys were the cream of the crop, mostly ex-military types from all over the world. They had to be tougher than the candidates to keep them in line. Later, the system started calling these instructors invigilators to fit the theme of an exam. You’d entered way before me or anyone on this ship. You were one of the OG invigilators, head of the group, ranked A.

“Later, the system started bugging out. Well, you can see with your own eyes. The individuals pulled into the exams are getting stranger and stranger. You have seniors and school children and even pregnant women! I still don’t understand its selection criteria. Long story short, the whole thing’s gone off the rails.

“I took the exam very early, before the system became like this. We went to the same military academy; you were a few years older. Of course, you didn’t know me, and I’m probably gone from your remaining memories. Anyway, you oversaw a few of my sessions, and thanks to my efforts, we got to know each other. By the time I became an invigilator, the system had bugged out, but I couldn’t leave. The system keeps an even tighter leash on us invigilators than on the examinees, since we become part of it. Invigilators have always been divided into units. I was meant to join yours after my reserve period, but the incident happened before I could.

“The system scrubbed everything about that accident, and

digging up info was mission impossible. I'd just transitioned from reserve invigilator at that time and couldn't help you directly, but I know you were trying to destroy it. You knew it was a long shot, but you went for it anyway. You left me an order, saying the system might deregister and eliminate you. In the case that happened and the system continued to exist, I was to bring you back in and 'wake you up'. To be honest, I was pretty shocked you trusted me with the mission. I'm not exactly Superwoman, and it took me a while to get you back in the system.

"But... I've done it. As you commanded."

As the time-out room began to dim, 021 spoke faster and faster. Except for that last line. Silence fell over the room again after her explanation.

You Huo sat on the edge of the table, his gaze fixed on some point in empty space. He looked lost in thought. He was always like this—his expression was always cold when he was quiet. He never betrayed his emotions, good or bad, making him an enigma.

Finally, he looked up at 021. "Thanks."

She felt a lump in her throat. She took a deep breath and, for the first time, allowed herself a genuine smile. "So, after all that, have you recalled anything? Any flashbacks?"

"Not at the moment."

Invigilator 021 looked disappointed but quickly recovered. "That's okay. You will eventually."

You Huo nodded. The time-out room was getting darker.

"I need to go," 021 said. "I know you've got many questions.

I'll try to create opportunities for us to talk. Just... work with me, okay?" Then she recalled this bigshot's usual behaviour. "I mean, just don't work against me."

As she gripped the doorknob, You Huo spoke, "One more question, and I need a favour from you."

Invigilator 021 turned. "What's the question?"

"When I was an invigilator, how was my relationship with the guy next door?"

"Erm..."

"What's with the face?"

"Ugh, don't even get me started on that nuisance. Just thinking about him gives me a migraine. You two... you two were like oil and water. Rumour has it he was the one who threw a wrench in your plans and caused the whole mess. Let's skip this topic, or you'll recall the bad instead of the good. You just said you needed my help with something. What is it?"

"Can the time-out sessions be combined? Help put me next door."

Invigilator 021 was gobsmacked. *What the actual fuck?*

TBC



*The tilted cabin, jagged rocks,
and scattered bones...*

He was suddenly overcome by d'èyà vu.

*He'd been here before,
peering out from this exact spot,*

Then came a tap on his shoulder.

"Hey, Chief Invigilator, got a cig?"

S\$ 25 SGD
FOR
MATURE
READERS

