Fear in his heart swelled thick and the confusion in his mind flowed throughout every vessel within his body as a slender arm reached into the sudden darkness and clutched at his stunned face.

The imposing figure wore black robes of fine silk and stared him down with eyes of unbridled hatred. The expression he wore was neutral but his ever tightening grip was a keen emotional indicator.

The boy's head swelled with fear, confusion and unimaginable anguish as a constant stream of blood rushed from a number of orifices.

"Urk—" He almost cried out when it happened. But he realized his throat had been sealed off by an otherworldly power...He couldn't breathe! *He panicked.*

Gaping for air—mind numbing from the pain and fear—the boy clawed desperately at the hand stuck to his head as if it were the limb of a leper.

"Ack—urk—gak!" He wailed to establish diplomacy...The attempt failed. Yet still the pressure from the hand holding him receded within that instant.

"Trash. Not even worth the effort. Come along, Xiaobai."

The young man wheezed through coughs, staggers and a delirious gaze to get away from the imposing figure. He wandered aimlessly throughout the bushes with no idea where he'd even go. But after being given a chance to escape that predicament he dared not to waste it!

Falling to his knees just outside an alley, a ways away from the bushes he'd escaped, with a face of blood, confusion and bottomless fear merging into one big ugly mess of anguish—the boy cried.

"Wha-*keum*! What the hell'z goin on here?" Slurring through rasped speech, accumulated blood and spittle drained from his ruptured pores. The young man felt weak. Incredibly so. His breath began to quicken as the tears began to flow.

“What even is this place?” He held his head firm then clutched the ground, clawing through dust like paper. The pain was unbearable but his will to find an answer was not sated.

Pulling back into an informal seiza, his eyes glimmered at the night sky helplessly. It had ceased to resemble any sight he'd ever known before. The firmament burst open like a flaming wound to reveal a colorful collection of stars swirling around a pitch black darkness like moths to a flame.

Dread!

That feeling overcame his entire being after the grotesque eye shape honed in on his figure. Its sclera was blue, red and an unholy shade of purple rolled into one. It exhibited a pressure that made his heart sink and squirm up to his throat.

“Ah…” His lips began to shiver when it moved around occasionally. Soon, he blinked. It disappeared. And his limbs came to his mouth the next moment with loads of dirt flaking onto his face, into his clothes and leaving a grainy feeling to pester his soul.

The young man felt like he might just die at this rate.

“What…the…f*ck is going on?” He wondered if he'd just seen a real life SCP or was simply hallucinating it. But when the pain kicked in again he was forced to admit the reality of his situation.

NO!

“WHAT THE F*CK IS GOING ON??!” Yelling that again he flopped onto his back, staring absentmindedly at the distorted night sky. *‘Am I dreaming? I must be. It makes sense since I literally just went to bed a while ago.’*

Despite various evidence pointing elsewhere, the young man remained steadfast in his belief. He chalked it all up to a very immersive fever dream in the end.

…He didn't know what he might do to himself if he accepted that it wasn't, afterall.

Dull pain wracked his body and his eyes soon drew to a close. Against his will, he fell into a deep sleep then woke up bright and early the next morning to the sound of roosters crowing in his ear.

When he sat up, a yawn escaped him while he dusted his hands with a smile. He heard shuffling and constant chitters to his left. It was a four eyed white rooster with four legs. It certainly had a unique appearance.

“Ha,” Getting up and brushing himself off, he pocketed his hands and walked over to it casually. The sound it made was annoying so when it crowed again; he kicked it in the head, almost killing it.

‘That's a dream for you. Even roosters use acoustic deception now.’

Just then, his stomach grumbled and he glanced at the rooster; coming up with an idea. Taking it by the legs, he walked through the alleyway into the town at his own leisure as the sounds of industry and various machinery slowly filled the air.

The streets weren't as busy since it was still the early morning so he had time to prepare for what he wanted to do.

Walking around for a few minutes, still with that smile upon his face, he found an area with a dump. The junkyard was filled with rusted irons, broken furniture, old appliances and the like so there was a lot to choose from for the homeless people.

He opened the gate and walked in casually, rummaging through the pile of garbage for pots, knives or even a stove if he could find any. There were a number of weird stains and icky substances scattered about the place so he was careful to avoid those areas since the general stench was bad enough.

“Eugh.” He had no money. *Who was Xiaobai?* His throat tightened so he pushed that thought away and continued his search. If he had no money then all he needed to do was make some. If he got his hands on a printer somewhere down the line he could probably even forge a few dollars after incorporating some modifiers.

He chuckled, *‘Why am I doing so much when this’s just a dream?’*

“Hey kid. Get down from there.” An older man with checkered teeth told him this from inside his guard post by the gate. He yawned impatiently when he was ignored.

The young man kept rummaging through the garbage pile. He fished out a rusted butter knife from the innards of an old toaster at some point.

“Why don't you kids listen?” *shiver*. The old man was right behind him with a steel pipe pressing up against his skull. The cool iron and the suddenness of his arrival made the young man shudder but he calmed himself quickly. The old man’s voice carried annoyance and a threatening cadence with it, “Get outta here before you become another one of those stains over there.”

The young man turned his head slightly in either direction to see dried blood in a number of different pools. He'd originally assumed they were weird oil stains or something.

“I didn't mean to undermine your authority, elder. I apologize for that,” The young man raised his hands slowly with a tired, solemn voice escaping him. He didn't turn around, however. So the old man couldn't face him. “Let me make it up to you.”

“I’ll accept your apology if you get off my darn property.” He poked the youth with the rod and he responded:

“Alright. I'm getting up now.” —with a sigh.

Turning around slowly he scooped up the four legged creature by his feet then carefully descended the mountain of trash and rubble to avoid falling. He talked with the elder along the way.

“How long have you been in this place?”

“30 years.”

“That's a really long time for an old man to be working. You're probably approaching seventy right?”

“68 and counting.” The old man didn't seem really interested in the conversation but he had no issues talking for a while.

“Have you ever thought of retirement?” The young man asked another question.

“With youngin’s like you mucking about, I think about it every other day.”

The youth fell silent for a while, stubbing his toe on a loose, rusty fork and wincing into a hop. *Hiss~*

He seemed to fight the urge to bend down and grab it but because of that he unwittingly hopped his way into a crevice after sliding off a mouldy old sandbag. His chicken fell along the way.

He grunted. *Kafud!* The old man came down and stared at him with indifference.

“Get up kid.” He threw the chicken at his feet and its feathers fluttered about the place. It had been dead for a while now.

Grunting through the pain, the youth staggered to his feet with a wry smile: “I guess you won't shoot me then…”

“If you get off my property in the next few minutes then I won't.” The old man was as straight laced as they came. Even though he had a makeshift gun and could legally end him for trespassing he didn't think to threaten him first. He gave him the chance to leave after a leisurely warning and only after being ignored did he introduce the idea of violence.

The youth regarded him with a strange expression, “How many have you killed?”

“Get out.”

Pursing his lips together, he turned around and walked away from the old man; “You really should cut yourself some slack. It's not your fault they didn't listen; so atoning for their deaths is unnecessary. I'm sure a few would probably kill you if you didn't defend yourself.”

With those words, the youth walked through the gate with a limp and made his way down the street. After gaining some distance he resumed walking normally while suppressing a grin.

Change of plans. Time to find a butcher.

He passed a blue signboard on his way.

Eventually he made it to a crosswalk. The sign was red and no cars were coming from either direction so the youth gingerly stepped across it. A straw hat homeless man was seated by the intersection staring at him wide eyed as he passed by.

The youth ignored him and continued on his way.

Eventually he made it to a crosswalk. The sign was also red and no cars were coming on either side so he quickly made his way across. A straw hat homeless man was seated by the intersection staring at him wide eyed as he went by.

The youth ignored him and continued on his way…he stopped suddenly though, looking back to where he came from. It was the stretch that led him towards the junkyard.

His heartbeat quickened when he realized what was going on. *'I can't actually be stuck in a loop can I?'*

He pressed both palms against his face and sighed. *'Maybe I should just turn back.'*

Following his mind first, he retraced his steps to the blue sign only to realize the distance from there-on was never ending. When he looked in the other direction though, he still saw the crosswalk there. It was like he hadn't moved at all from his spot. The homeless man was now standing on his feet so it was far creepier than usual too.

'What a troublesome dream...'

Intuition told him to go forward so that's what he did while avoiding the gaze of the wide eyed homeless man. However, unlike before, he made sure to take note of every little detail he came across.

When he walked in the distance, he saw the blue signboard again. This time when he read it he saw the number **'0'**. It had a **'1'** just now but now it's been reverted just like the homeless man sitting at the intersection.

He concludes it was because he tried to walk in the opposite direction following the second turn. Folding his arms with the chicken dangling loosely at his side, he tried to organize his thoughts to search for clues.

On turn one the homeless man sat down and he walked. On turn two the homeless man sat down and he walked. Only after he turned around to leave did the homeless man suddenly get up. On turn four the homeless man is now sitting down again.

There were only two possibilities for what might be true.

1) Turning back is the way to leave.
2) Walking forward is the way to leave.

He can't exactly discard the former since he didn't register what number the blue signboard held but he does know that if he's walking and decides to turn around to see what's behind him then the scenery will revert to the beginning of the loop. It happened once so there's no telling if it'll happen again. Ofcourse, he wouldn't ever test it. He just wanted to go about dreaming peacefully.

'At any rate,' he thought, *'When I looked back during the second loop I was suddenly thrown into the third. This means the second loop could've been seen as invalid after I looked back. Looking back in itself is a problem so that's definitely not the way to leave.'*

Walking forward with an idea in mind, the youth crossed the road after looking at both sides. The red sign board had no numbers on it, unlike its counterpart, but it did look hexagonal now unlike the last time.

The young man kept walking forward until he encountered the blue sign again. This time it was negative zero. He shuddered, refusing to take another step forward.

The eyes of the straw hat homeless man had honed in on his presence. He stood a mere feet away from him now. *F*CK! TOO CLOSE!*

His eyes darted around frantically for any signs before he kicked off the ground into the opposite direction. He ran breathlessly down the street and found himself at the crosswalk again.

This time he emerged from the opposite direction. The homeless man sat at the intersection beside him.

"You haven't figured it out yet?"

The young man took a deep breath and a hollow smile journeyed up his face: "You're an anomaly aren't you?"

When the young man looked to the homeless man on his left, he realized no one was there. Lifting his head up, he perceived the blue sign board.

The number **'1'** was written in bold. *It was another loop.*

The concept of negative zero must mean the talking homeless man he encountered was also a participant in the loop in the sense that one of them failing was to the detriment of them both.

Turning back and walking forward were both viable ways to leave.

Turning back without spotting any anomalies before or after walking past the blue sign meant the count would always go down since it was not time yet. Turning back after spotting an anomaly when you passed the blue sign meant the count would also go down.

He frowned. *'If that's true then wouldn't talking with an anomaly mean I failed the loop?'*

It does. But it also doesn't. *The property of positive 0 and negative 0 was essentially the same in nature but different in identity on account of a technicality*. The young man thought for a while and saw that mathematics could be applied to the situation:

'An identity is always true (2(x+3) = 2x+6), whereas an equation is only true for specific values (2x+3 = 7). An "identity" is a statement that two things are the same. Generally, identities are equations; this equals that.

*A "property" is not necessarily an equation, just a statement. For example, the "zero product property" refers to the fact that if ab=0, then either a=0 or b=0. That's a whole conditional statement; it has equations **in** it, but it's **not** just an equation.'*

Following that thought, the youth applied it to the situation:

*'Say the "loop" represents the identity and we, the participants, represent the "property" it would follow that the homeless man and I together equal to 0/-0 but this is only true if any **one** of us is the zero product property, not if **both** of us are.*

Which one of us is the 0 product?'

The young man recalled each of the numbers associated with the loops: 0, 1, 0, -0, 1. It became 1, 0, -0, 1 if he omitted the first turn on account of a technicality.

'This would translate to a 2 by 2 matrix identity. Its inverse is the identity itself so that would mean both of us are the negating property alternatively.

But if I disregard the 1, 0, -0, 1 identity matrix and only consider the 0, 1, 0, -0 then the inverse of the identity would be 0 since this specific matrix is nilpotent ($A^2 = 0$), and no nilpotent matrix (other than the zero-sized case) is invertible.

0 comes before 1 so logically he would encapsulate 0. But if I add the 1 (me) to the 0, then the determinant becomes 1, meaning...'

"I'm stuck in a matrix!" Upon shouting that, the homeless man got up from the intersection and brought a hand to his straw hat, wide eyes like beams of death staring into the young man's soul.

"You've passed." The homeless man's voice was as unsightly as his appearance and dirty checkered teeth. "If you didn't figure it out I'd have eaten you right where you stand."

When his maw opened, a row of yellow and red crackly teeth were the last things the young man perceived before the scene faded away. He stared at the spot the homeless man had been in and suddenly noise from all angles emerged.

The streets were crowded with a sea of unknown people, the road was jam-packed with traffic signals and the chicken in his grasp had started to attract flies due to shitting itself post mortem.

The young man stared at the absurdity of it all, growing numb from the overwhelming sensory experience, "This life could only be a dream," he justified quietly. Those passing by either didn't react or observed him disdainfully on their way to work.

The carcass in his hand was almost as foul as himself so they believed he'd either gone mad or was well on his way down that path.

Across the street, the homeless man stared at him with those same wide eyes but the fear in his heart had already subsided the moment he declared his previous words.

“Excuse me sir, you're disturbing the passersby with your stench.” A patrol policeman interacted with him using a 1 meter ruler, “I'll have to ask that you please take a hike or a shower or…something.”

The young man felt a little helpless seeing this situation. *‘Maybe I shouldn't do what I planned to afterall. This dream is way too wacky to come up with a concrete plan of action.’*

Looking left, looking right, the young man smacked away the ruler poking his side and marched across the road towards the straw hat homeless man. He crouched down next to him and dropped the unnatural chicken at his feet and lifted the man's head.

As expected the homeless man was already dead. The young man had no idea how to react to this information aside from it being dream logic.

To the patrol policeman it seemed like the young man had teleported to the other side of the street and was just standing there staring at him with the dead chicken in his hand.

He walked over to him again, asking him to leave. But before he could make it across the street he realized the red signboard had turned blue and the people on either side were identical. Only the young man was an anomaly.

He felt a hand grip his leg tightly. When he looked down it was the dead homeless man who'd come to life. His wide eyes peered through the straw hat and straight into his soul.

The number on the sign was 3.

The young man got up from next to the corpse but he left the chicken there since he had no more use for it. He wanted to ask the homeless man for information after seeing what he did with the matrix stuff but now he couldn't.

"There is a man waiting for you up ahead. You will find what you need there." The young man looked back to see that the chicken was gone and so was the police patrolman from across the street. Only the homeless man was present. He was no longer dead.

'Ha, dream logic.'

Taking the advice he received, he continued on his way while ignoring the strange looks he got.

Chapter 2

He stopped by a fountain inside the park to wash away the poop whereafter he used the crushed up rosemary he came by to erase the pungent odor from his arms.

After finishing, he sat there and looked around for anybody who'd be willing to help.

"*Rrraf raf*!"

"Xiaobai!"

The youth shuddered at the name and voice. He looked to the left and saw a dog approaching him very quickly and instinctively dodged its lunge.

Unnaturally, it stopped moving mid air despite the increasing animosity it displayed to tear the youth apart.

When he looked up, a hand breached through the light and his body clattered to the ground like a sack of bricks after perceiving the uncanny overlap.

It was the same person!

“Sorry. Xiaobai tends to be a very vengeful spirit. Do you need any help?” Silk robes as black as the night sky and eyes of a deeper onyx was all the young man could see.

He couldn't breathe. His throat felt like an old iron cog that had been thrown into the ocean and rusted. When his body twitched, tensing, it gradually came loose again with a sigh.

A hollow smile appeared on his face. It seemed as real as could be. However, “I'm fine.” *This is all a dream.* “I apologize for my behaviour the last time we met.”

In truth, he didn't remember anything beyond that point nor did he ever want to. In a dream, such things weren't even relevant nor were they possible so that was an even greater deterrent on his side.

Especially with this one being so unbelievably wacky.

The man in robes didn't address the apology: “Do you have a name?”

“Er Liang Bai Kai.”

“Shen Cui er, do you have any family members?” The man in robes basically told him he didn't care about his name.

“Not that I know of.”

The robed man smiled, “Then, come with me.”

They walked a good distance away from the crowd. The young man wasn't sure if this person was who'd be waiting for him, but he couldn't risk getting on his bad side again as that would lead to unnecessary nightmares.

“Do you know who I am?”

“I don't.”

“Do you know who Xiaobai is?”

He looked at the dog.

“I don't.”

“Do you not see him?”

The young man fell silent. All the robed man has been asking were questions that didn't seem important in the grand scheme of things.

“Do you think I'm wasting your time?”

“No…not exactly. I don't."

‘What’s the point of all these questions?’ All he wanted was to get information on what he wanted to do. He didn't really care about anything else.

The wind blew and the young man blinked. He was back at the fountain applying rosemary to his arms. The pungent smell of shit was gradually fading away.

‘The heck?’

He felt his throat tighten.

‘I have to figure out a pattern for this too??!’

Scrunching his face, he cursed internally at the mechanics of this dream. The only pattern he could discern after thinking for a while was the use of “do you” in each of the robed man's questions.

Rubbing out the last of the smell, he decided to flip the script and discard all the “do you” patterns since this dream was too weird to follow any conventional train of thought.

The last time it took him around three to four tries to get the correct answer. If he didn't get it then the homeless man would've eaten him instantly. The robed man would possibly leave his fate up to Xiaobai if he failed this one as well.

‘Need, have, have, know, know, not, I'm.’ he expanded on each of them concurrently: *‘need any help, have a name, have any family members, know who I am, know who Xiaobai is, not see him, think I'm wasting your time. Each of these sentences can be condensed into one after a series of picking and choosing certain words.’*

“Do you need any help? Do you have a name for any family members who know who I am? Do you know who Xiaobai is? Do you not see him and now think I'm wasting your time?”

Saying those words out loud the young man expected to receive a round of applause but all he heard was a distant bark.

“Xiaobai!”

‘Of course it wouldn't be that easy.’

The little dog growled at him during its approach and lunged at his face. He dodged it unwittingly and saw it stop unnaturally in mid air above the fountain.

“Sorry. Xiaobai tends to be a very vengeful spirit. Do you need any help?”

Wearing that same hollow smile that was indistinguishable from reality, the young man spoke, “I don't. Also, I apologize for my behaviour the last time we met.”

The man in robes ignored his apology: “Do you have a name?”

“I don't.”

“Er Liang Bai Kai, do you have any family members?”

The young man's face didn't change when he said his answer, “I don't.” He thought that negating the *‘do you’* questions with *‘I don't’* might be worth a shot.

The man in robes smiled, “Then, come with me.”

They walked a good distance away from the crowd. The young man wanted to see if everything would play out as he expected so he went along quietly.

“Do you know who I am?”

“I don't.”

“Do you know who Xiaobai is?”

“I don't.”

“Do you not see it?”

“I don't.”

“Do you think I'm wasting your time?”

“I don't—” A searing pain gripped his skull as a hand lashed out, crushing it.

The next moment the youth was back at the fountain, sitting with the ground rosemary on his arms. The shit scent was gradually fading away from his nostrils.

His body trembled involuntarily but he forced it into submission with a single, unwavering thought: *‘This is just a dream.’*

The young man realized something very important. More accurately, he'd already figured it was the case, but now he's become sure of it.

This dream had a highly unusual case of wackiness because the concept of *'predictions'* doesn't exist. What you might expect someone to do or to think within a given scenario is not what will happen at all.

Starting with the old man who had taken the lives of many kids over the course of his life, he expected him to feel sympathetic for his situation but instead all he received was a cold indifference. When he tried to pull on his heart strings all he got in return was another warning to leave before he was gunned to death.

Following that experience he wanted to go find a butcher's shop and felt he might happen upon one if he went a certain direction, but, again, he didn't. He saw a homeless man and got stuck in a loop until he abandoned the idea of heading to the butcher's and focused on solving the more immediate problem.

If he was to put a label on it he might call it the law of uncertainty, or the law of inverse rationality; congruent with the actions within a dream. *'Actually, a better name would be the law of dreams.'*

Meaning, the only way to find an answer was to figure it out from the present clues then interpret it in accordance to the degree of wackiness. This required an unconventional thought process beyond the real world.

The old man *didn't* kill him, the homeless man *threatened* to kill him and the robed man actually *did* kill him the second (technically third) time. Why is that?

For the old man he *believed* he would die. He believed the *possibility* of death eventually with the homeless man but not by the homeless man. With the robed man he believed he *would* die first when he didn't and believed he *wouldn't* die when he actually did.

*'Maybe the answer isn't that there is one. Afterall, I **am** expecting it.'*

"Yes, Xiaobai, you are wasting my time with these questions."

When the youth said those words it was suddenly nightfall.

A slender hand reached into the darkness and clutched at his stunned face.

The imposing figure wore black robes made of fine silk and stared into him with eyes of unbridled hatred. The expression he wore was neutral but his ever tightening grip was a keen indicator of his emotions.

The pain and fear swelling inside his heart was overridden by a magnitude of confusion indistinguishable from the first. He clutched at the limb attached to his face as a constant stream of blood rushed down his orifices.

"Ack—urk—gak!" He wailed to establish diplomacy…and suddenly, the robed man complied. His expression changed.

"Congratulations, the trash has now been recycled."

He allowed him to draw breath by retracting his energy and releasing him.

The young man fell to his knees with a thud that had insects skittering like flies throughout the forest.

He held his head while memories he couldn't suppress kept flooding into his brain. The pain was nearly unbearable. So much so he postured like a frightened ostrich and forcefully swallowed a guttural scream.

"MMMM*MMMMMMM****MMMMMMMM*****MMMMMMMMMMMM*!!!!!!!!!"* His eyes watered with his body twisting and turning like a headless snake.

His name was neither Shen Cui er nor Er Liang Bai Kai (he made it up). It was Shěn Jìhán. Son of a dead butcher who owned an abandoned junkyard for 30+ years and died on the street by a crosswalk.

Shěn Jìhán was a victim of unsolicited cannibalism and vowed to kill the old man after failing to stab him with a butter knife when he blocked it with a toaster. He then plotted to kill him by feeding him the rotting flesh of a bipedal chicken he found by his feet on the side of the road one afternoon.

The boy's senses and emotions were heightened to an unimaginable degree due to the blood seeping from his pores increasing his physical and psychological tenderness. He wondered if this was the type of agony Jesus went through while praying in earnest.

Unlike him, Shěn Jìhán could only focus on the never fading agony engulfing his being…he genuinely thought he might die at this rate.

Get up. He forced himself to his feet with the conviction of a saint. Even though his knees were wobbly and his mind was exhausted, he was determined to make it out alive.

He was indeed stuck in a dream. But this dream is a separate reality than the one he'd been in earlier.

Xiaobai had been deliberately erasing and restricting thoughts pertaining to him directly.

First he introduced a deep seated trauma response to the name itself so that when Shěn Jìhán thought or heard of it, his throat would lock up and lead him to ignore anything to do with it under the guise of not wanting to dig up more trauma which in turn led him to believe he was within a dream to cope with the fact that he lacked memories of who and where he was.

To propagate the idea of a dream, Xiaobai went out of his way to overturn each and every one of Shěn Jìhán’s predictions the moment he conceived of an idea to implement. This was done by turning the very things he wanted into things he simply could not attain through any means.

Even going so far as introducing a side quest after the matrix loop with the homeless man. There was an answer for the first matrix which was meant to push the idea of there being an answer for the second matrix implemented by the robed man through his "do you" speeches.

And finally, Xiaobai himself, being the black robed man, used the dog as a misdirection so that if he failed to deduce that it was *his* name then Shěn Jìhán would have been stuck there.

But the dog was never present in the first scene which was a negligible detail considering how fast and traumatic the event was for Shěn Jìhán. The dog itself served another purpose outside the narrative.

Xiaobai intended to kill him. But seeing him deduce the essence of his skill: **"A Dreamer's Rationality"** made him realize he wasn't as useless as he thought. *'This trash used the fake coping mechanism to break down the situation at the end rather efficiently. "*

This sect competition had become far more interesting for Xiaobai. He raised his hand and condensed energy in it.

"Why do you live?" This wasn't the type of question he could answer with silly logic.

Shěn Jìhán groaned and bowed his head, resisting the pain: "To be your loyal dog…and attack your enemies on your behalf."

'So he does know the purpose of the dog.' Letting it dissipate, he turned around and walked away without another word. He knew Shěn Jìhán would've deduced the reason for the police patrolman's existence.

Standing tall and staring up at the night sky, Shěn Jìhán sighed. There were no eyes up there. *He's glad he deduced it was a dream at the start. If he allowed it to become a psychological wedge he would've died without a doubt.*

"So…troublesome." He huffed. *The life of a talentless man was truly beyond misery.*

Chapter 3

Shěn Jìhán frowned. His eyes had opened late in the night involuntarily. He'd been sleeping on his feet the entire time his body was recovering.

Observing the pitch black darkness, uncontested by the stars in the night sky, the young man rubbed his eyes a while to clear his vision.

Only the sound of chirping crickets met his ears. *'Seems like no one else has passed by yet.'* Reaching into his pocket, he fished out a sect token with the characters **"逍遥(Xiāoyáo)"** written on it. It stood for the "Free and Unfettered sect", which, as the name suggests, was filled with a number of free spirits and unlikely couples.

Putting the token back from whence it came, he took one steady step at a time to free up his incredibly tensed muscles while suppressing the will to grit his teeth.

The objective was to find and steal at least 3 sect tokens from the others. That way he would be able to move up from a trainee to a rank 10 disciple.

The token he had came from that very spot in the forest he stood at. Xiaobai simply attacked him the moment he saw him pocket it. He didn't take it because he found he was useful in a sense, but that doesn't mean he'd refrain from hurting him at all in the future.

Shěn Jìhán doubted Xiaobai cared enough to leave him alive after using him for what he needed.

Walking through the forest like a hot potato in a girdle, he found himself by the beginnings of a river. The water there was a deep shade of purple. Upon seeing that he hid in the bushes and waited a while.

"Senior, I have a question." Someone downstream was casually walking upwards. He was fully clothed in black robes like the person beside him.

"Go on."

“Do you think that dog will really kiss the berry?”

“Unless he goes blind such a thing is unlikely. However, giving him a taste won't be much of an issue with the right person on the job.”

Faint water drops trickled out into the river. The two continued talking but their voices were gradually muffed. Shěn Jìhán had slowly crawled away from that spot and relocated elsewhere.

It was a good thing that he did because that area was blown away with a wave of heat the next minute, incinerating the bushes.

“Brother Dong?” The junior's expression was serious.

“Pai Xi.” Brother Dong nodded and Pai Xi formed a unique handsign.

“It's done.”

Some seconds later Shěn Jìhán felt a mosquito bite into his nape and killed it right that instant as he crawled away. He couldn't really see much of anything so doing this was actually to his benefit in a way; despite the inconvenient nature of it all. He patted the spot a few times.

“Get up.”

Pai Xi appeared behind him and fished him off the floor rather easily. Shěn Jìhán could only bite back a sigh. *‘Is he the mosquito I hit? No. He probably swapped out.’*

“How can I help you, senior?” A hollow smile journeyed up the boy's face. It didn't look at all fake.

“We have a task for you.” Pai Xi opened his mouth and took out a small orange vial, “Deliver this to Pai Xu. Tell him it's from me.”

Shěn Jìhán didn't know this person nor the one he sent him to but refusing would be highly inconvenient in this scenario.

He pursed his lip and opened his hand, receiving it carefully. Pai Xi pointed in a specific direction and threw him carelessly onto the ground. Shěn Jìhán protected the vial with his body.

"You have ten minutes." Pai Xi disappeared in that instant and another bug took his place.

He'd set him up for failure but Shěn Jìhán thought of something else.

'I can't find him within that time at all. It's not like he even exists either.' Walking a good distance, he looked around carefully from tree to tree. Soon he found a hole burrowed deep underground. He took a number of stones and leaves and set it atop the opening.

Walking away, he got into a running start—crashing hard into the hole and rousing a number of its inhabitants!

"*ScreeeEEEEE!!*" Mega mice burst out of the hole and frantically spread out in all directions; even up the tree trunk Shěn Jìhán had secured himself.

Within just a few minutes more and more mice crawled out of the woodwork (literally) and infested the place like a plague.

Sonic booms, rocky ruptures, fissures and flames alike brought life to the once still night as the screaming rats charged ahead.

All around him, for 400 hundred metres at most, angered participants roamed. Xiaobai was one of them since he'd been bitten on the leg in his sleep.

Shěn Jìhán adjusted himself according to each skill effect. Pai Xi was confused by the sudden appearance of rats so he activated his skill to find Shěn Jìhán. Since he was hanging onto a treetrunk, when Pai Xi teleported he had no footing and landed right into the mega mice dwelling place, twisting his ankle on the large, uneven and scattered stones.

'Serves you right.'

"UGRAHHH!! MOTHER FU—" a large stone slab slammed into his face from the left. Shěn Jìhán was obscured by the lack of light but he scaled a little higher as a precautionary measure.

Brother Dong and Pai Xi wanted to cow him down first before having him do the actual mission they wanted but they didn't know it could all go so wrong with a few simple movements.

A young woman with a crazed expression and ruffled hair walked out into the open towards Pai Xi. Her eyes were like riflescopes as she pointed her trigger finger at him, conceiving of another stone. This time it was sharp and jagged.

She planned to kill him.

A blast of heat engulfed the vicinity from another direction. It was Brother Dong with a scowl.

"Ye Min…Are you courting death?"

She sliced through the attack with the same sharp stone in her hand.

"I should be asking you that. This buffoon just ruined my night! Is it not fair that I put him in his place?!" Her clothes looked disheveled and her robes were slightly loosened. They seemed hastily put on. Her token was that of rank 9.

Brother Dong sneered, "And you call yourself a cultivator."

"I am your senior. I demand respect." Ye Min levelled him with a deadly glare and he reciprocated with the same.

Skillwise this was clearly a bad matchup. She had him beat in every facet of it. When it came to actual combat, however…

Brother Dong shifted a leg back casually and raised his right elbow above his head with his left outstretched.

Ye Min didn't waste another second, firing off a number of spikes at the youth; who dodged them almost as effortlessly as he employed his heatwaves.

He parried her attacks and when she realized it she clasped her hands together, creating a long stone spire then lunged at him.

Taking a step back, he shifted her wrist to the right and grabbed it mid-motion before landing a devastating elbow to her chin and finishing with a punch straight to the face.

She flipped in place, eyes rolling over as she flopped to the ground. Her robe had loosed fully but he was too disgusted to even kick dirt on her body.

His ear twitched and a boom rang out from behind him; tearing through the forest like wet toilet paper.

“My, my. What a fine scuffle.” A man with white teeth and leery eyes emerged from the shadows. His robes were just like his teeth. “Equality in the name of violence I see.”

“With all due respect, senior, your presence is not required.”

The man gave Brother Dong a strange look, then laughed. Brother Dong collapsed.

Shěn Jìhán’s eye twitched. He was dead. That man had swallowed his soul.

He's—

“Demonic, I know.” The voice in his ear brought a tremor to his lips, “You should've died first. Why are you alive?”

The moment darkness greeted him and a hand reached through it, clutching at his face; immeasurable pain sunk into his skull and he began to convulse before getting ahold of himself mid fraught to scratch at the hand on his head.

"Congratulations, the trash has now been recycled."

That dreadful phrase burned into his memory as his bleary eyes lifted to see the face of the imposing robed figure.

Get up.

"Why do you live?"

'This is not a loop. This is not a matrix. This CANNOT be another dream!'

Shěn Jìhán found the strength to reach his feet again and bowed his head through the searing agony (it was worse than the previous times), "To be…your loyal dog and attack your enemies…on your behalf."

Xiaobai smiled, turned sharply and left the scene. Shěn Jìhán held his ground and looked around the place. No one else was there. He was sure of it.

His eyes closed involuntarily and reopened later that night. He was face first into the ground this time. The toll it took on his body was incredibly overwhelming. If he experienced hematidrosis again then he really might die this time.

Moving his fingers, then his wrist, then his toes and knees, he crawled his way towards a tree and sat himself upright.

He felt unbelievably tired. *He might just give up.*

Get up.

His eyelids failed to shut again. *'Dammit…'*

Taking a deep breath, he coughed to his own detriment. Ignoring the ungodly aches, he looked around the place while thinking.

First of all, he has a token. Second of all, he just escaped a dream world. Third of all, he…

His mind went blank. *'What else is there?'*

It felt like he forgot something important just now…his eyes closed and opened occasionally. By the fourth time sunlight was pelting against his skin.

Hiss. "Mmm…" the sound of cicadas intensified as his chapped lips squeezed shut; desert dry throat itching him.

"Br—er —, he ——."

"Pai —"

Sinking in and out of consciousness, Shěn Jìhán forcefully opened his eyes to see someone lifting the token from his pocket.

"Get up."

When he attempted to move though, his muscles gave out and his eyes began to close again. Cold water engulfed his face and body, jolting him awake. He sputtered incessantly throughout the huffs.

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again slowly while shifting away from the naked beams in earnest as he adjusted to the light.

"Why am I…?"

'I forgot something. ***What is it?****'*

He felt sobered up.

"What's your name?" A person stepped into the light, casting a dark shadow onto Shěn Jìhán's face, as they asked him this.

"Shěn—*cough. COUGH, COUGH—KUAK!*" It felt like a field of blisters had sprouted inside his throat. "Shěn Jìhán," he rasped.

The individual standing before him crouched down out of the light, leading the young man to squint, covering his eyes.

"Junior Shěn is a member of the "武当 (**Wǔdāng**)" sect?"

He nodded, clearing his throat repeatedly. "Yes…"

"Why were you asleep on our sect grounds then?" The crouching individual stared at him as his face slowly came into view.

He seemed familiar, but not really.

"Pai Xu. Don't kill him." Hearing that, Shěn Jìhán looked down and saw a spire of flames hovering just above his stomach.

"Brother Dong, I wasn't aware you were into the business of courting slaves."

Ignoring the words of the man before him, he continued speaking: "Junior Shěn, your life from here-on is forfeit. You only answer to me, Dong Pai Xi, directly."

Flexing his palm, the young man's robes billowed as a sigil of heat emerged. "Send him to the slave quarters. Strip him bare."

It burned into his skin so efficiently that the pain was dulled.

The character Shěn '審' was written along his arm.

"Get up." Pai Xu roughed him up pretty well as he carried out his senior's command. Shěn Jìhán couldn't exactly resist even if he wanted to, so he allowed for everything to be taken away without issue.

Brother Dong had left at some point and Shěn Jìhán was escorted to the required facilities in his makeshift underwear.

Chapter 4

Slam!

The iron doors had bolted shut and roused the other residents of the slave quarters.

Hundreds upon thousands of eyes honed in on him from various angles as he walked into the stable. No slave had a set bed or any sort of belongings to speak of. A lot of them seemed beaten and battered or mentally broken beyond repair.

The things they must have experienced were things Shěn Jìhán would never wish upon even his worst enemy.

No one cared enough to ask who he was since they understood the implications of communication. One person in particular beat the ground like a drum. The rhythm and cadence were wild. He performed terribly.

Shěn Jìhán sat beside him in the hay with his knees close to his chest: "I came from the Wudang sect. How about you?"

Striking up a verbal conversation was not fruitful since the young man kept beating the ground with uncoordinated efficiency.

"I see." Shěn Jìhán ripped out a head of hay and began fiddling with his fingers. He opened and closed them occasionally which drew the gaze of the otherwise unreactive young man who kept beating the ground incessantly even after he stopped.

With a sigh and a shake of the head, Shěn Jìhán withdrew from further attempts at conversation before something suddenly dawned on him.

'It was always two layers.' Sorting some information mentally, he attempted to decipher the code given to him by the young man but was once again without luck.

He thought applying what he observed of the dream with Xiaobai might yield some fruits but as observed, he could not.

He looked at the character along his arm again **'審(Shěn)'** and mentally recited the meanings of the character.

'Trial. When a court hears a case, there are certain levels in the litigation process, such as the first instance (第一 [di yi]), second instance (第二 [di er]), and third instance (第三 [di san]).

Review. Within the context of a trial, a review would be the judicial examination of a lower court's judgment by an appellate court to determine whether it's based on legal errors or significant factual errors that justify a reversal.

...If no such errors are found, the appellate court affirms the decision.'

Maintaining his look of neutrality, Shěn Jìhán applied that definition back to the dream again. This time, his heart trembled with fear.

There was something called a ‘Case Review' wherein a judge or registrar evaluates the prosecution's case before trial *to determine if it can be resolved without a full trial, often involving negotiations to plead guilty to reduced charges.*

Essentially, the entire time, he'd been participating in a case review implemented by Xiaobai who, as a registrar, would act as a liaison between judges and lawyers, and often have delegated powers to hear procedural or interlocutory matters.

Given that the case review had ended on a successful note, which, in this case, meant it was “quashed”*—since it would now be legally considered null and void—*the original claim would be invalidated and lead the ones making a decision into a **de novo** or to set aside a previous ruling (such as a conviction or subpoena).

Pushing the deduction further, Shěn Jìhán came to the not so unlikely conclusion that Dong Pai Xi had been his lawyer as opposed to the man with white teeth, who may have taken the place of a prosecutor.

His eyes soon fell upon the boy next to him and wondered if he might be a witness of some sort or even a red herring curated by the person overseeing this first trial. He dared not think the opposite or question the possibility.

‘Am I being tried for killing the homeless man? Is that why the police patrolman disappeared with the dead chicken? He's using it as evidence of poisoning. It makes sense since the looping mechanism had a side quest which was technically a red herring. Following the nullification of the case review I was told to submit a subpoena that I failed to do due to my counter scheme, or rather, rejection of the proposal by Pai Xu who had attempted to cow me down—seemingly on the orders of Brother Dong—to deter me from that very possibility.

Brother Dong later got his argumentative defense uprooted after failing to address the claims of Ye Min, the alleged witness, before calling Pai Xi back to the stand again in an attempt to remedy the issues he had curated. Which, now that I look at it, was Pai Xi secretly betraying brother Dong rather than him trying to suppress me on his orders seeing as Brother Dong never attempted to hurt me. I presume the first

attempt to burn me by the bush was to represent me trying to convince him to be my lawyer and he initially rejected it but turned around to help me thinking Pai Xu was on the same page.

*Following this, Pai Xi did not do a very good job at helping my case the second time either. In fact, he was already dead in the water by then and despite Brother Dong talking his way out of the allegations against me by Ye Min, the damage done by Pai Xi was too great seeing as he tricked me into hurting him who **is**—the thought to be fictional—Pai Xu.'*

Resisting the urge to face palm himself, he realized that this was a fictional story within a meta-narrative, that had first taken place within a dream.

What on earth had he done for him to find himself in such a situation?

Why are you alive?

"Because I wasn't eaten and killed."

Get up!

Getting up, he realized he'd been sat back down instantly, by an involuntary force. The beating on the ground increased fervently before disappearing as the judge's hammer pointed towards the man seated in the Prosecutor's stand with pearly white teeth.

"Mr Fang Dei, I will not tolerate personal attacks within this court."

"My apologies, your honor. I don't know what came over me."

Dong Pai Xu gave Pai Xi/Pai Xu, seated on the witness stand, a stern look before turning to Fang Dei: "Your honor, I fear the Prosecution may have tampered with the witness's testimony some time prior."

"Objection. Speculation."

Bam! "Overruled."

Taking a deep breath, Shěn Jìhán wore a hollow smile that didn't seem all that different from a real one. *'Dream, fiction and now reality.'*

This truly was a time for the ages. Every word and action he took up to that point contributed to the situation he's found himself in.

'If I fail again...I die after going to jail.'

His eyes wavered but steadied a moment later as he studied the faces of the individuals present.

Excluding himself, the accused, there was a judge, three witnesses, one prosecutor, one lawyer, the registrar, bailiff, a correctional officer and the jury.

'In the context of a story, the presence of a correctional officer implies that I was detained some time before this. Using my previous observations as a meta-context: I'd been detained once during the dream sequence and a second time after attacking Pai Xu. Judging by the fact that I didn't resist back then, the evidence was damning but I was able to call a trial afterwards. This was the first one since the dream sequence was my appeal to the registrar to nullify the case review and the sect competition was me trying and failing to enact a subpoena.

I then got tricked into losing the subpoena proposal by attacking the witness, Pai Xu, who came to me under the alias of Dong Pai Xi to have me stir up trouble with the mega-mice; the jury, who went on to share what I did to those with actual authority and the necessary ammunition to bring me down, White teeth.

Pai Xu made it seem like he was harmless at first but made his malicious intentions very clear later to provoke me to act. That was when he'd been struck by a rock in the middle of the crowd and broken his leg after falling.

Ye Min, the next witness at the stand, did not see anything at all. Everything she argued was from a point of hearsay since she wasn't a direct recipient. Meaning, even though her points were sharp and

passionate, Brother Dong didn't have to address them directly on account of that. He instead pressed the weaknesses in her statements and baited her into his comfort zone rather than actually addressing any claims made against me directly.

Following that,' Shěn Jìhán's eyes settled on Fang Dei, *'**he** appeared and used the strongest points of the witnesses' testimonies to crush all of Brother Dong's counterarguments in one go. He then launched a personal attack on me, asking me why I still live.'*

Eyes zipping to the registrar, he watches Xiaobai diligently sift through the court evidence: *'Ah, right...he still has me under his thumb.'*

"The Defense requests that the Prosecution refrain from participating in any further questioning of the current witness, your honor."

"Objection!"

"Overruled." ***Bam!***, "Request granted."

Adjusting his attire nicely, Dong Pai Xi addressed the witness: "Mr Pai Xu, you claimed the accused had attacked you merely a day after being released from detainment, following his public outburst. Can you verify that claim?"

"Of course. As you can see by the cast on my leg and the bandages on my head, he was particularly violent with me when he lashed out."

Dong Pai Xi continued: "In the accused's testimony he seems to have been coerced by you, who approached him under an alias, and simply reacted in self defense AFTER the coercion attempt and the facade had both been uncovered."

"The defendant was clearly shaken up by your actions so his subsequent outburst was an acute psychological response to that trauma and the immense pressure he felt at the time given his need to secure a lawyer for this upcoming trial; today. In fact, he says you approached him under my name, witness Xu. Why lie? Why even get close to him by using that lie?"

Dong Pai Xi turned a seemingly useless statement into a way for Pai Xu to confess to the alleged crime. But Pai Xu already knew how to respond despite the padded language and the subtle emphasis on certain words.

"*He's LYING*. I never said my name was Dong Pai Xi. I said my name was Pai Xu. Him mishearing or even misremembering what happened isn't my fault. Additionally I approached him with general guidance of how to proceed if he wishes to get through the trial. He lashed out at me afterwards and even got the crowd involved when *he* ATTACKED *ME* in the street!" Slamming a hand onto the stand, Pai Xu grew increasingly irritated with each and every word he spoke, "I detest the fact that I believed in his innocence! Your defendant is a liar and a murderer who should rot in prison for what he did!"

He genuinely seemed like the victim in this scenario. The noise in the court intensified as the jury rallied with him to bring me down.

Bam! Bam! "Order! Order in the court!" It took some time before they all calmed down

"Does the defense have any more questions?"

"No, your honor."

"Would you like to cross examine the witness's testimony with court evidence?"

Dong Pai Xi pressed on with confidence: "Yes, your honor. The defendant is neither a murderer nor is he a liar, your honor. And I can prove it."

"Go on."

Walking towards the evidence, he fished out a bagged rock with blood on it as well as a rusty old butter knife.

“Your honor, first a case for the defendant's honesty. During his life with the deceased, Charles Wray Gardner, his adopted parent, he had been subjected to unsolicited and repeated instances of cannibalism. Finding that his guardian had led a life of immorality with the intent of priming him to do the same, he attempted to escape. He took up this butter with the intent to protect himself from the looming threat and ONLY used it when the deceased tried to grab him. The deceased blocked his reflexive self defense with a toaster.”

Walking around the court with the butter knife held high, Dong Pai Xi spoke highly while exuding an aura of respect.

“Legal standards generally classify a deadly weapon as an object used in a manner *capable of*, and is *likely to* produce **death** or **great bodily harm**. This rounded-end butter knife does not constitute a deadly weapon within the provided context nor is it likely to cause severe bodily damage to the deceased even if it had made contact.”

He lifted the bloody rock next, his expression and tone turning solemn at the sight of red:

“In contrast, this projectile struck the witness in the head hard enough to incapacitate him. According to the defendant's testimony, he was not the one who threw it. He was already surrounded by members of the jury at this time who were frightened by a sudden outburst. The witness was struck only after the dispersion of the crowd.”

“According to witness Xu’s testimony, the defendant was particularly harsh with him at that time, implying he even broke his leg unprovoked. However, the order of events suggests the defendant had not laid a hand on the witness.”

Resting the evidence back at the desk, Dong Pai Xi lifted two fingers while gradually making a round trip within the small area.

“First off, the witness is said to have met up with the defendant after he was released from detainment. Following that, witness Xu conversed with the defendant and later got attacked after a sudden outburst from him, allegedly. Given the fact that the witness was out of detainment under a charge as serious as murder, he **must** have been placed under strict

supervision; which means he could not have gotten his hands on any weapons without it being mentioned by the supervising officer assigned to him."

"Secondly, the defendant has a remarkable history of compliance ever since he'd been charged and arrested. He did not resist when found with the poisoned chicken nor did he resist when he allegedly attacked you. Before that, he went so far as to draw a non lethal weapon against the deceased to ensure he could withdraw safely without actually causing significant harm."

"In conclusion, your honor, the defendant had neither the ability nor the intent to cause harm. I believe he is being framed in this case due to the Prosecution tampering with the witness's testimony."

The court house was silent for a while and the jury was stunned by Dong Pai Xi's performance. Even more so the argument was plausible and convincing enough to cause the judge and registrar to contemplate what had been conveyed.

"The Prosecution may now have his say."

"Your honor," Fang Dei calmly addressed the judge with a nod, "While the Defense has provided a rather well constructed indictment, I must say, the accusations regarding myself and the witness's relationship are…most unsettling."

"Granted, my interactions with the witness, though minimal, did happen; the extent to which he claims them to be is provably false. In fact, I will argue the opposite right here."

Fang Dei pointed to the witness stand then to Shěn Jîhān: "It is true that the attack could be written off as improbable, *given the existence of a supervising officer*, but it is equally plausible that said officer had been bought off or even caught off guard by it all."

"As you know, your honor, for a person to be charged with first degree murder they need to either have done a *premeditated*, *unlawful* or *willful* act of killing." Fang Dei flashed his white teeth, but a sneer was the captivating fleshly frame: "The defendant caused the death of the deceased through methods of poisoning; stuffing the chicken with a deadly amount of rosemary

while using water to dilute the scent and taste. Which is clearly premeditated. Not only that, the defendant was *more than intent* on committing the act. Even going so far as to execute it in broad daylight."

Shaking his head, Fang Dei locked eyes with the still silent Shěn Jîhān, "Why, I dare say the defendant allowed himself to be caught to project the image of an honest man who took the life of a seemingly ruthless monster. Might I remind the court that, at this point in time, the deceased had no contact with the defendant for more than a few years. I doubt he had a clear recollection of his face given his circumstances."

"That said, your honor, this indeed proves that the defendant is not as harmless as the Defense may argue. He is quite cunning. The thought of him leaving a weapon as inconspicuous as a rock in that area before the witness's arrival isn't out of the question given the fact that he has the wherewithal to actively choose a non-lethal weapon—when not applied enough force—to defend himself; which would make him out to be an even greater victim than we may be led to believe by the Defense."

Walking to the middle of the muttering courtroom, Fang Dei slowly turned around to see each and every person present before again facing the defendant who'd been shielded by his attorney's verbal defense.

Fang Dei was determined to pierce through it so Dong Pai Xi could only suppress his frown. Each of his arguments were being broken down one by one. He'd already been on thin ice arguing for a potential positive in a situation where it could be easily flipped into a negative so his distaste could only increase.

"Now, seeing as the defendant's true schema has been uncovered, it is time I verify my relationship with witness Pai Xu." Fang Dei's voice, like the sound of a calming wind, rippled through the court: "I have only interacted with the witness a total of two times. To verify his testimony and to confirm he'd been affiliated with anyone within the courtroom."

Dong Pai Xi ground his teeth and breathed through his nose sharply. "Objection!"

“Overruled.”

The sound of the hammer was like a well timed nail in the coffin as his eyes closed.

“Your honor, I no longer wish to be represented by an attorney.” Those words came from Shěn Jîhān’s own mouth a moment later. Whispers and surprised looks turned into talks of confusion and then delight.

His sudden decision had brought the proceedings to a halt.

Xiaobai gathered that his intent was to dissociate himself from his lawyer in advance to not be implicated by any actions taken without his knowledge.

Not only that, it allows him to actively revise his testimony and even place himself on the witness stand whenever necessary to alter specific information.

The disadvantage of a lack of knowledge didn't apply to him either since he appeared rather well read on the law. Xiaobai snorted…Then his expression turned grim as he caressed the Wudang “武当” token in his pocket.

The character "武" was sometimes used in place of names, but in legal documents referring to courts at various levels, “武" only represents a part of the place’s name (e.g., **Wu**zhi County People's Court). It also means valiant and fierce.

The character “当” when applied to different contexts becomes: When/While/Just at, To act as/To be/To serve, Should/Ought to, To treat as/To regard as/Assume, Pawn or In front of/at.

Together, and within this context, it meant *‘one should know when to be courageous inside the court’*. Essentially he should take action at an opportune time. Being Free and Unfettered “逍遥”, he didn't want Shěn Jîhān acting so quickly after finding out that he was supposed to wander aimlessly “逍” to a far away/remote “遥” area to get an answer via token burial after picking up on seeing someone walking while making sounds (“辶” walk + “肖” sound) then later engaging in (pottery “缶” + cover “冖” + tree “木” = “遥”) a burial.

This connection was unlikely to be seen by others, which is why Xiaobai ensured the code was so deeply embedded into the character's components itself, requiring precise recursion to deduce. Add that to the fact that being placed inside a dream-like state through use of **"Dreamer's Rationality"** was meant to trick Shěn Jîhān into thinking the **"Law of Uncertainty"** only worked *inside* the dream; while also preventing him from realizing its correlation with **"Expectation and Predictability"** and Shěn Jìhán's ability to evade it became that much more noticeable.

The main reason Xiaobai even went to such lengths to bring him to heel; trapping him with red herrings and hiding crucial details that would support his case, was because he needed him to do something very specific later on and couldn't have him going astray too early.

'Did he figure it out...?' Eyes fell upon him but he registered no gaze when he looked around.

"Are you certain?" Asked the judge.

Shěn Jîhān nodded. "I wish to waive my right to an attorney and proceed pro se, representing myself for the remainder of this trial."

"Is your knowledge up to par?"

"Yes, your honor."

Bam! "You may proceed."

Chapter 5

"Get in." ***Clank!***

The prison warden wasted no time shoving the man into his cell and closing it. Shěn Jîhān sighed, shuffling his way towards the bed of Cell 305 where he sat down with his chains jangling.

His arms and legs had been heavily restricted so it felt a bit awkward getting around but it didn't bother him, really.

'Now we wait.'

The trial had ended in a resounding failure after he went *pro se* to defend himself from Fang Dei's arguments. Ofcourse, he was already in an unwinnable position before Dong Pai Xi made an argument for his innocence using the "knife" incident as backup. The outcome didn't surprise him at all to be honest, but it did direct him towards a few helpful conclusions.

1. This was not the real world.

It was similar, but ultimately it didn't satisfy the conditions to make it real. For one, the actions inside the dream and fictional world correlated too well with this one which hints at the involvement of another mind. *Possibly Xiaobai or someone else like White Teeth.*

Everyone he'd seen within the fictional world made an appearance within the Court house. They each took on roles just like him which in itself indicated that they might be in the same situation as him. Shěn Jîhān had already confirmed his suspicions the moment he saw Xiaobai inside the court. They sprouted in the instant he died by White Teeth because of the hints given to him by Brother Dong, Xiaobai and Pai Xu converging into one coherent meta-storyline.

Initially, he'd forgotten those clues but he recovered them just after deciphered the meaning behind the '審(**Shěn**)' character. It's why he resisted the urge to palm himself back then. He realized that he'd pre-emptively forgotten the information on purpose to prevent the answer from being changed due to the **'Law of Uncertainty'** that he had further deduced was really the **"The Law of Expectation, Predictability *and* Uncertainty"** because of the latter two's relation to the former.

'Predictability covers the mind or psychology of a person, which was shown by my failed attempt at manipulating the old man or really executing any plans I came up with beforehand. Uncertainty deals with the mechanics and structure of the world itself; meaning the wackiness of the dream world and later the unnaturally colored river water as well as the involvement of powers attest to this. Lastly, Expectation dealt with the ***concept*** *of the world itself. As in, it is the "why" behind it coming together in the first place.*

To break it down even further, the rule was a privation of Ontology, Epistemology and Conceptualization in itself. So had I gone along "expecting" there to be an answer, that would have been "predictable", and said prediction would be turned into a miscalculated "uncertainty" by the one watching me the moment that thought had conceived in my mind, violating the rule.

Then again, I can't be too confident in the rule adhering to its own laws.'

2. There are more rules to uncover.

He believed this was the case because, according to the information presented so far, the existence of at least two more rules was very likely. The **Law of Expectation, Predictability and Uncertainty** could possibly be a privation of itself, making it a double layered rule.

3. Numbers are significant.

The numbers 3, 2 and 1 were prevalent from the start.

He had 2 encounters with Xiaobai, 2 encounters with the old man/homeless man, 1 (technically 3) encounter with the dog, 1 encounter with the police patrolman.

He looped 5 times out of 6 times when facing the homeless man and looped 3 times out of an indefinite number when facing Xiaobai.

He even experienced the same pain 3 times and looped back once within the fictional world…more clues were there but he had no reason to put them together yet.

He didn't want to raise any expectations about anything and end up messing up. He went so far as to forget the information again just now, knowing that they would come to light again eventually, by his own actions.

4. Xiaobai would definitely save him and Dong Pai Xi indebted to him.

By going *pro se*, he did many things: gave White Teeth what he wanted, gave Pai Xu what he wanted, reminded Xiaobai of his worth and established a useful bond with Brother Dong.

Shěn Jîhān let Xiaobai know he was aware of the true meaning behind the Free and Unfettered sect characters. Xiaobai had given him the Wudang token when he proved his subservience which made the "pawn" definition more prevalent in Shěn Jìhán's mind to put him in a more precarious situation intentionally.

Humans tend to focus less on the positive aspects of things whenever the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them, according to the negativity bias. This leads to higher cases of risk aversion. Meaning Xiaobai didn't expect Shěn Jîhān to have deduced the answer so quickly on account of that and the nocebo effect.

It was a given because Dong Pai Xi had engraved '審(**Shěn**)' on his hand in a situation where he was being discriminated rather than tried for a crime.

The message was for Shěn Jîhān to pick (**cǎi**) "采" the roof "宀" over his head with his own mouth "口". Meaning, he should declare his allegiance inside the court.

Dong Pai Xi's use of "田" for mouth was meant to direct Pai Xu, if he looked deeper, towards the farmland connotation seeing as within this context a slave would usually rear the land so their master could reap the rewards.

Additionally, (**cǎi**) "采", though similar in looks to (**biàn**) "釆", did not share the same meaning. The latter meant "to differentiate" which fit the narrative of a slave in Pai Xu's mind.

Later on, when Shěn Jîhān stepped up as *pro se*, at first Brother Dong was worried he might have to answer to the court for his actions behind the scenes, but after seeing Shěn Jîhān argue him out of any potential penalty for witness tampering, he felt the need to repay him.

Especially since he's seemingly aligned himself with him.

Lastly:

5. Shěn Jîhān wasn't himself.

This was the more controversial aspect of his thoughts but given the fact that the **Law of Expectation, Predictability and Uncertainty** was always active; he may very well be someone else, a composition of himself *and* someone else or a piece of himself trying to be whole again.

The fact that he gains more 'memories' that recontextualizes information within each world means the theory was not half baked from an existential standpoint.

It reminded him of philosophy, in a way. He named a few people in his mind: *'Plato, Gettier, Gödel and…?'* He seemed lost for a moment, then suddenly he realized his world had been flipped upside down (not literally).

Laying on the bed, he stared at the cracked ceiling with the singular fluorescent light and sighed through the taps. The mere thought of not being himself was terrifying. He couldn't be sure of who he was until he provided an explicit proof that had no logical loopholes or contradictions within.

The chains lightly clinked as his arms crossed his chest in a slow X-formation. He sighed…then laughed, covering his face. His heart felt inexplicably heavy at the moment.

"Incredulous." Muttering those words, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The next morning he got out of bed, stared at the wall, and mindlessly tapped out a familiar, unnatural rhythm. It changed drastically every time a sequence ended—he stopped the 7th time as a loud bang sounded from the bars.

He turned his head towards the warden standing there with disgust.

“Out.”

Doing as was told, Shěn Jîhān stepped outside and briefly looked around the place. The others in detention were still inside their cells. He could tell it wasn't any sort of roll call or anything.

“Looks like I'm eating good tomorrow morning.” A bald man rubbed his hands together with a cheesy grin as his eyes flashed with ill intentions.

He wasn't the only one with sights set on the fair skinned man. Some had mistook him for a girl due to how long and smooth his hair was. His features weren't exactly delicate by any means but he was considerably handsome so he wasn't surprised he was being targeted.

In the cell next to him, a man was sweating profusely by the bar. He gave him a look that said something he couldn't exactly ignore.

The warden grabbed him by the bicep and forcefully dragged him away next. Shěn Jîhān had an idea of what was going on so he didn't resist. A while later he was pushed through a door roughly.

The inside of it was marbled. Another guard stood there waiting for him. A bullet proof glass partition was in the middle with Xiaobai seated quietly on the other side. He wore a contemplative expression to hide his irritation. He shifted his hat.

Shěn Jîhān's face lit up. “You came.” The relief in his voice was more than genuine enough to warrant a smile.

After he sat down, Xiaobai spoke slowly.

“Tell me, what should you do?” He went straight to business. Shěn Jîhān tilted his head just slightly before his apparent confusion shifted to inquiry.

“Listen—”

“Then why go pro se?” Xiaobai seemingly found his actions unpleasant.

Clamming up, Shěn Jîhān scratched the table with a dejected frown, “I didn't want a life sentence…” he muttered.

Interlocking his fingers, Xiaobai leaned in closer, “As expected, trash with no purpose has no use even if you recycle it. You will be serving time in a Federal Social Readaptation Center.”

He didn't need to raise his voice for Shěn Jîhān to register the threat. Nodding solemnly, he knew whatever was said here couldn't be leaked or else Xiaobai would leave him for dead.

“A place like that is meant for someone like you who continuously causes problems for himself!” He slapped the glass pane with controlled aggression and retracted his hand immediately, “Behave and they might let you live. Don’t and you’ll die.” Xiaobai scowled.

He showed a picture of a tattooed man in a purple uniform inside his palm. After he got up, Shěn Jîhān wanted to ask some questions to clarify his mission but he decided not to. It was obvious he'd get the cold shoulder since he received even less intel than the last time they met. *He was being watched, obviously.*

Shěn Jîhān confirmed another suspicion of his, however. He felt like this scenario in particular would be a breeze because of that.

His lips pursed together as the warden took him back towards his holding cell and stuck him in. Watching the man leave and waiting a while, he laid on the bed, listening to the faint thumping on the wall in an attempt to lull himself to sleep. Admittedly, the rhythm wasn't as awful as that boy’s drumming so he could at least get some rest.

Later that day all of them were placed inside a prisoner transport vehicle and sent straight towards the appropriate facility.

Shěn Jîhān remained strapped to his seat with his hands and legs still chained up. He saw the eyes of the watchman and prisoners alike drift about languidly. There were 7 of them in the back of the vehicle.

He couldn't exactly talk for anyone to see, otherwise he might find himself dead on the side of the road or even locked in solitary confinement when they get to the prison.

Two people in particular seemed to be communicating with bodily gestures like saccades, yawns, head tilts and even consecutive chain clinks. Shěn Jîhān had only seen one before, however they felt dangerous to him for some reason. He couldn't tell why they all seemed so familiar either.

Suddenly, a man sneezed. The warden walked over and pried his hand open to see if he was hiding anything then turned towards the partition and banged against it. *HARD*.

One of the yawning men turned pale and snarled at the one who'd sneezed just now. He avoided eye contact shamelessly, bringing a grin to the other prisoners' faces. They expected to see bloodshed.

The carrier gradually slowed down and the sound of footsteps increased rapidly before the door swung open with a clang. Shěn Jîhān saw the warden cock his gun and aim it.

Pew!

A bullet rammed through a warden's head. He dropped instantly. This shocked the prisoners and the other guard who was swiftly eliminated with a shot to the dome.

The man that sneezed suddenly gained a bright smile and a devious look, "C'mon, we gotta go." The warden stooped next to him to unlock his chains.

“H-hey, get these offa me too!” His accomplice, who'd seemingly been left in the dark, pleaded for the man's help when he got up. Many others chimed in to see if they'd get lucky as well.

“How does helping any of you benefit me?” The warden ignored their pleas and jumped down out of the vehicle, slinging the bodies into the back of the carrier afterwards.

The sneezer crouched next to one and proceeded to swap clothes as well as disarm him. His former accomplice was anxious, “You told me you knew a way to get me out!”

“That's true.” He zipped up his pants, buckling the belt, “I don't remember saying *you* would leave with me though.”

The anxious man bit his lip in anguish, “I-I’ll pay you more! 200 thousand!”

“If we're to leave alive, you have to listen to me regardless of what I say.” came the counteroffer,

“Fine!” He agreed to the man's terms without question.

Hostering his baton and gun, the sneezing man took the keys away from the warden and walked over to my seat, tossing it at my feet.

This confused the anxious man: “Hey, is this a joke? What're you—”

Pew! The warden took him out.

“So annoying…”

The sneezing man continued speaking, “I trust you know what to do.”

I nodded and began unlocking my chains and unstrap myself. During this time the other prisoners were completely silent. They didn't want to end up like the anxious man.

Too bad for them, that would've happened anyways.

The warden swiftly took them out and holstered his gun. I adjusted my changed clothes with a huff seeing as the uniform reminded me of the police patrolman's attire inside the dream.

I had dressed both of the bodies with my and the sneezer's clothes then strapped them back to the seat after disfiguring everyone's faces. If ever they were found, doing an autopsy would be required to even issue a search order seeing as they wouldn't know who to search for until then.

Besides the warden that is.

Chapter 6

Jogging through the blistering heat while wiping sweat away occasionally, I continued down the tar road with my accomplices. My hair would make us a target so I had to cut it and attach it to one of the deadmen using the sticky properties of their blood to hold it together.

I made sure to bash two heads in, in particular, and ripped out large patches of hair so that no one could tell them apart at a glance, leaving no choice but to wait for an autopsy report to confirm any of our identities.

It was early in the morning that we arrived at a gas station not too far out. Usually, in any sort of prison break, making a trip to a place like this was sort of mandatory while also a frequent cause of a chase given the fact that officers patrolled these places many times during the day.

This one was far out from the city so the likelihood of that happening, though low, wasn't improbable. I pocketed my hands after leveraging off a tree and slowed down considerably as we tread through the woods. The warden noticed my actions and reached for his gun, then refrained, so I lowered my eyes to the ground with a smile.

"I don't have a weapon."

The sneezer didn't look at me as we approached the area, "Is it concerning?"

"It seems so," His eyes fell upon the warden, then back to the path in front.

"He can't run." He spoke to him then addressed me with a head jut, "Our supplies are behind the counter."

With a nod, I squatted down and rubbed my hands in the soil to get rid of the remaining blood, however I was nicked by a sharp rock in the process. Seeing this, I took that same rock and punctured my palm with a ruthless stab; swallowing the pain with a wince. My stomach churned as blood coalesced and dripped like lava from my hand.

It was still functioning since the stone didn't come out the back, so I threw the rock a distance away after pressing the hand into my knee and lathering it with blood. The warden, being trigger happy, seemed to understand what I was conveying and walked a few paces in the direction I threw the rock.

The sneezer looked at me with a frown when a shot echoed through the woods. A punch *crashed into my jaw* and I wailed so loud you'd think I got clapped with a shotgun.

Frantically bursting out of the woods with a hurried limp and a tearful expression; my head swivelled back and forth between the gas station and the forest in unnerving intervals.

"**G-*ahah*!**" I collapsed with a holler; "Help—-"

Another shot smashed into the ground and splintered after grazing my thigh. Fighting to my feet while screaming for help, I voluntarily buckled my knees: "SOMEBODY—***PLEASE***!"

Movements inside the gas station's convenience store paused when I approached the entrance and rattled against it with a push: tumbling through with heavy, discordant sniffles and a multitude of dry coughs. Self induced stress doused my body in sweat as my eyes flickered around the spacious interior.

Aside from the reception desk there were 9 cashier counters lined on my right, a snack area and three paths leading deeper into the store (stairs to the left, path in front, counters to the right). The lights were off yet the place was illuminated as though that weren't the case. A silence so deep and eerie would make any man rather face what greeted them out there instead of in here.

The most intriguing aspect of this was the fact that nobody was in sight. *They aren't hiding either.*

It's practically impossible to do so in the little time it took to open the door. Something supernatural was at play.

I shuffled backwards with a worried expression while looking around. However, when I turned to leave, something all too familiar happened to me again.

A loop? I could still see the inside of the store. There was no door behind me. I couldn't get out.

A figure slipped through the far back of the store before I could fully register its presence.

Is it the old man?

Wiping my forehead while gently soothing my leg, I limped further inside with a deep breath. A wall with items like mosquito zappers, generators, flashlights, bulbs and solar lights was to my immediate right. There seemed to be no issue with them so I took up a kerosene lamp and the necessary oil along with it.

After turning it on I ventured into the store quietly. Hiding away could mean they identified me as some sort of threat. The reason for why may be due to the circumstances of my appearance.

PakPakPak!

A dull thud invaded my ears. I turned to where I came from. *I was back at the entrance again.*

"HELP—"

That voice belonged to me. *But I wasn't talking.*

I heard the entrance rattle and looked to see a body pressed against the door like a tired old druggy.

It was a man with short hair in police attire. His bloody thigh followed the same pattern as my own; only significantly more gorey: with visible bones held together by burnt flesh, clothes and a thin layer of vastus lateralis and rectus femoris muscles.

A chilling realization gripped me when the agony on his face turned even more ugly the moment we locked eyes.

I flicked off the kerosene lamp and rushed through the store like a headless goose; knocking over items and falling over myself like a pathetic stumblebum. Dousing my shirt in oil as the lamp broke under me and pricked me with shards, I hobbled towards the far back of the store and hid behind the stoves to peek out.

When the man pushed the door open, no light came in. In fact, **nothing** came in at all.

The door closed with a slow shuffle as tense darkness consumed the entire store. The faint crinkling of glass alerted me to untoward movement as I blinked rapidly and fell onto my rump—a sound passed over me.

SHUP!

Something stuck to the wall. ***It dug into it***. *Is it an axe?*

I gingerly backpedalled from the scene before stuttering to my feet and running in the direction opposite the wall—

RAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

My body SHOOK and I fell to my knees involuntarily. I blinked. Light had returned along with my strength and soon, confusion washed over me.

To my left and right were a number of aisles, counting up to 12, with a variety of items ranging from glass cups to igloos and appliances for the house. My head tilted when I fell into an informal seiza. The sickly smell of kerosene thinned the scent of my blood with my shard peppered chest glistening in the light.

My memory cut off completely when I took up that lamp.

…Everything between me touching the door to this moment has been erased. Why?

I resisted the urge to scratch my head and stared at the ceiling for answers that couldn't be seen for obvious reasons.

Why am I here?

A cold, bloody hand trailed down the side of my face and I jolted while moving it away. That palm, with layers of fleshy tissue torn through by a single, ragged thrust, tingled as a slight musty feeling fell over me due to sweat and dirt mixing in.

Judging by the trajectory and my physiological reaction, I could say this was definitely done with the intent to kill, or rather, the desire to inflict as much pain as possible onto my body. The evidence on my knee indicates the wound was given by…me?

*…The F*ck?! Am I possessed???*

This can't be real. Why would I hurt myself?

The smell of drying kerosene made my stomach churn at the sight of the thickening web of blood within my gouged palm. Redness stuck to my face like cold gel in the middle of winter as a worried look overtook me.

I…stabbed myself?

What did it?

A rock?

Why would I lather my knee with blood—was I acting? I stabbed my left hand. The weaker hand; which is ironically more dominant. This means I was forced into a situation where I had to seed control to another party that seemed to have me within the literal palm of their hands, intending to take my life if I wasn't willing to show my resolve and willingness to sacrifice myself.

Why else would I go so far to sell a lie?

I'm here to get something I forgot.

Is it supplies?

Why?

My thigh has a cut and my face has been experiencing a constant dull ache. My clothes stink of kerosene and my bloody palms are crusty and dirty. I have a small tree branch in my pocket and tiny pieces of glass hitched into the pant's fabric.

I need them to run away from someone.

Who that may be is contingent on the fact that I found myself in this situation on account of another person's orders. This means the person with hold over me, despite me wanting to escape, wasn't the one intending to kill me. Someone else was with them and that is the reason I got this small cut from a sharp object.

What cut me?

I'm wearing a police uniform, but I have no form of identification. These are not my clothes. I stole them from law enforcement—I was locked up?

*Wait…The f*ck…?*

I escaped from prison? No. It doesn't explain why I'm being pressured by someone into going for supplies.

Does that mean we escaped together while being transported?

We can't have overpowered them on our own so that means we had a helper inside the transport. They're a guard. A warden is likely given that they must have had some form of contact before and during our shipment.

This person is trained and highly skilled. Espionage may be a strong suit. Are they a mercenary? A friend of my oppressor? Or a contracted killer meant to take me out?

Danger.

I don't know—all I know is he must've taken out the other guards as well as any convicts not needed in their plan.

This means he and the oppressor led me away into forestry, presumably the woods. A trained, smart person would cover their tracks well so that the police would have a hard time figuring out where they were headed or planned to go afterwards.

They might have disfigured some bodies and tampered with DNA deliberately.

I got a hold of the branch discreetly. He had no need to trust me and I would never try it openly without being sure I would live.

This must be where I gouged my palm and executed a strategy to attain the supplies. I'm sure the oppressor had no intent to kill since he allowed me to live this long. But the dull ache indicated that I'd been hit with intent to inflict pain, likely on his command.

Did I get cut during the act or when faced with an actual attack? My mind says the latter and my gut stands for the former.

…Maybe both are true?

The kerosene is way fresher than the wounds and is in a place that's incredibly hard to miss. I fell on it, judging by the splash pattern. It was crushed beneath me either because I tripped or was pushed onto it.

Why would I need a kerosene lamp? It might've broken around five minutes ago considering the dampness and extreme pungency. To break a lamp like that, I'd need a pretty hefty fall. Unlike a sudden fall, if I was pushed, then my entire body weight would not collide with the glass container unabashedly and I'd be able to stop myself from getting so soaked.

My movements were sporadic. So I fell.

*This means the **danger** is with me in the darkness.*

*My main objective is to escape this place with the supplies. I am still in **danger** even if I have no memory of it.*

Far sounding footsteps came into my ears. They increased with the occasional bout of mumblings and a sudden explosion in activity began as people motioned towards and around me while paying no heed to my situation.

They had eyes like dead fish, the look of stoic men as well as the posture and gait of trained models. The only anomaly beyond the obvious hive-like behaviour would be the fact that their hands did not leave their sides to emulate any sort of dynamic movement. It was completely stationary. As soulless as their hearts.

When an eye dropped to see me, everyone else stopped in place to fix me with that same, deep and empty gaze. I felt like an alien within a crowd of sparrows as an inexplicable pressure to conform to their demands washed over me.

Get up,

I was compelled to my feet when a helpless feeling waltzed through my veins.

Each of these eyes felt as though they didn't actually want to see *me* standing here; but rather someone else.

Someone who may have understood them and did as they commanded.

Why do you live?

Why do people let the desires of others cloud their judgement or dictate their actions in life? Honestly, I don't know.

All I can say is I wasn't eaten up by these desires and seemed to have broken free of the shackles placed around me by these *'others'.*

I have become the central focus for a reason unrelated to the *me* standing here, at this moment. But rather to *me* they wished to see some indeterminable time ago.

I refuse to be smoldered by their flames.

My blood and the stench of kerosene brought a uniquely disgusting feeling to my chest as I opened my mouth to ask a few simple, yet somewhat unnerving questions to those surrounding me.

"How long will you mimic others?"

Their faces didn't change.

"How long will you try to keep me here?"

Their eyes didn't move and their hands didn't shake.

"Don't you know I won't let you change me so easily?"

When they saw my defiance, their lips could only ***quiver.***

—***HHHHHHHH!!!***

My knees buckled as something swung overhead within the pitch darkness. Memories of a moment between these breaths flooded my mind in that instant, and I rolled into an aisle of glass items where I threw a number of them onto the floor after hurling some towards my unseen attacker.

They shattered upon impact and no sound escaped him.

He retaliated with a punch I could barely perceive due to my eyes adjusting to the lack of light. It clapped against my arm and rammed me into a shelf with a cough, shattering more glass as I stumbled into another aisle to grab some bug spray; spilling a bucket of paint along the way.

I can't know where the attacker's coming from unless there are sound related cues due to the simple reason that my eyes haven't fully adjusted—light flicked on and off in an instant and brought me back to a state of near blindness.

Thankfully, I now know that the perpetrator has made it onto a shelf and am able to dodge the incoming strike.

Unfortunately my plan has been exposed, leading me to change it drastically.

Dropping the spray can and hurrying backwards, a loud thud alerted me to the fact that my opponent had landed harshly. After a *skrt!* I blocked what felt like a rising kick meant for my ribcage with an elbow to follow through with a leg grab.

I aggressively pulled him off balance and went to stomp where his other ankle might be located; only for him to counter it in the sudden flicker of light with a flash of paint in my eyes.

Closing them and moving my head away caused me to step on his knee instead. He grabbed that leg of mine and hit me with a dose of bug spray as soon as my eyes opened again, forcing me to shut them once more.

A kick rammed into my shin, dropping me to a knee; and giving him a chance to trap me in a triangle lock—instantly, I shifted weight to my toes and lifted my head out of reach while swatting away a grasp.

When I tried to shake out of the hold, the perpetrator slid away after pushing against my thighs, intending to create a wide enough gap to get a proper hold on me. I stuck close and forced him to lather himself in paint, reducing how much power he could generate from his position.

I shook my shoulders and his legs loosened enough for me to get out and pin his left knee to his forehead while he fluttered about the damp floor.

Light flickered, and his deep look of agony made a sudden resurgence.

He seemed to scream with a lack of sound when I dug through the wound on his thigh with my fingernails.

Light flickered again and I stood behind a glass counter serving a customer.

Chapter 7

A day and a half worth of memories melted away like butter as a blue light pervaded my view; a woman looked at me and I asked a question: “You alright, miss?”

The lady contorted her face in anger. She was confused,

“What?”

Her yellow shirt had a MedChem logo and a smartwatch was on her hand with a smartphone on my transparent countertop. She wore red rimmed glasses and blue jeans; contrasting my black attire that had nothing else of note. Not even a logo.

Should I know this person?

“Looks like you really needed help if you came to me,”

She snatched the device and hissed her teeth before I stopped her from leaving with a grab and a half hearted chuckle,

“You’re a joker, you know that?” She speaks English well, but I can tell it isn’t her main language.

“I’d say you’re one too, but that’d be disrespectful.”

She scowled when I leaned in to see the rest of the store more clearly. There were four counters in view through the slope; all tagged ”CLOSED” despite light bleeding through the glass panes and pointing towards it being early morning.

The store’s not open yet so it’s likely she’s an employee or at least someone with special privilege.

Seeing gadgets like phones, tablets and wireless speakers inside my counter’s display, I assumed she wanted something to buy, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Why don't I have a logo like her? *What does she want?*

Since her answer was to walk away just now, I can’t ask her to repeat herself as it may happen again. Speaking in a way that probes while not giving any intel on my lack of knowledge is the best I can do for now, honestly.

My smile faded into a sigh, head propping onto my palm at the same time; “I don't think it would make too much of a difference. But that’s just me.”

The woman’s scrunched face grew a bit tighter at that: “…Forget it. I’ll just do it myself.”

“Don’t recommend that either.” My response was spontaneous, “If you’re more likely to fail on your own, then even if asking for help doesn’t change much, it still is an advantage.”

*[**SIDE QUEST (2)— Hold Eye Contact For 5 Seconds.** ✔️]*

“Chuh,” She waved me away and opened the phone with swift taps, pulling up a screen filled with information from a chain of emails. It read: I Find You. Run. Murderer!!!

*[**SIDE QUEST** (new!)— **Learn her password**]*

A breath left my mouth in the form of a muted chuckle, “My time is of the essence, so keep it short and snappy; who’d you kill?” she scowled and rolled her eyes.

“Keep talking like that and see if I don’t snap your neck. I killed nobody.”

“Then why are they after you?” Her lips pursed as her shoulders rolled.

“I don’t know,”

So that’s what she wanted to ask me. I took a moment to gather my thoughts,

“Since this guy’s really stalking you as you say then you should change your number first,” I took the device from her and placed it behind my counter to then retrieve a different one from the showcase afterwards, “Changing the phone itself is a good idea too so I recommend thinking up a new email to use as well as *who* to interact with from now on.”

[QUICK TIME EVENT — *Discover what was asked of you.*
Deadline: *2 Minutes*

Failure: ***Asphyxiation through Involuntary Acid Reflux and an Anxiety Attack***
Success: ✔️]

She frowned as I went to say these few words: "If you need to do business through it, then that's fine. Just know that ***this*** guy advised you not to." I pointed to myself with a jolly pair of thumbs while showing multiple rows of teeth. *I almost died just now so I gotta be more efficient with all this gamey stuff going on.*

"The phones have the same specs so you don't really have to worry about adjusting either." I stated that matter-of-factly."

She shook her head in resignation after taking the time to think about it, "I *really* have to do all that just to stop him?"

"Oh there's more, but yeah. Essentially."

"..." She took the new phone off my hands and entered settings.

*[**SIDE QUEST** (new!)— **Learn her password ✔️**]*

After setting up her new phone, she left it in my hands and told me: "Keep it. I'm buying it next fortnite."

"Alrighty then," I took it off her hands and stashed it behind the packaged printer on the single shelf behind me, "So what'll you do in the meantime?"

When I asked that question her dejected face caused her glasses to droop just slightly, "Sit at my station or walk the floor. Not much besides that."

"Tuuuff," I held back a laugh and she seemed visibly irritated by it, "No phone for a day in this economy? If I was you I'd just end it. Honestly, a whole week of straight waffling ain't for me."

She stared, straightfaced and unflinching, "Yuh know seh yuh disgust mi."

Jamaican. MedChem.
This place seems to be a supercenter, but although those typically do have a pharmaceutical department, the layout of this place doesn't seem to allow for that anywhere.

There are 8-9 aisles visible from where I'm standing and each of them have items starting from mirrors, picture frames, essential oils, baking items, appliances (2), and kitchen items (3). These aisles are further split into 3 departments since I perceive brooms as well as paints further down the first isle, for example.

That means this place is predominantly filled with home and office supplies. Had pharmaceuticals been an important addition then it would be someplace really eye-catching.

She's either a representative for the company who's promoting her goods on the floor or she's a worker here. What department does she man exactly?

"Hey, haters gonna hate." I did the 'absolute cinema pose' with a quirky smile. When she tried to grab me, however, I backed away.

"Keep your hands off the merchandise please."

*{**SIDE QUEST** (new!)— **Ragebait her into hitting you**]*

"Kuh you to nuh," She snorted, eyeing me up and down, "Which part of you is expensive?"

I continued laughing, "Don't you see this face? It's priceless—"

"—ly ugly." She finished,

I wagged my finger at her playfully. "Azalia. You know that's a lie."

Confusion overcame her features; "Azalia? Alva, yah mad out?"

Now I was confused. *That is not my name.*

*[**HIDDEN QUEST (1)— Discover your Identity and Business Status before she walks away** ✔️]*

*[**MAIN QUEST— Stay In Character:*** In Progress 🔄*]*

I observed the quest list in the corner of my eye for a moment. I'd already done 5 in under eight minutes. *From the looks of it, even though these quests seem random and incredulous, they play a role in whether or not I can properly audit any information to get out of this situation.*

For example, if I hadn't chosen to anger her first there's a possibility she would not have revealed my 'name' to me which would have caused me to fail that hidden quest and die due to lack of efficiency.

It's a good thing I decided to fish for information beforehand or I might've lost my life without reason.

There are more hidden quests to discover. My identity as the tech savvy person known as *'Alva'* has been discovered and is now to be properly implemented. As for my actual name, I'll figure it out soon enough.

"Probably," I chuckled with a shrug. "But I don't really see a difference between the two of you, so."

"Yute," She held a mocking grin, "Yah sample eno."

It was difficult to figure out what that phrase meant, but the context was doing some heavy lifting here which I truly appreciated. *'Sample'*, in this case, meant I was being both funny and annoying since a sample of something tends towards the overall quality or traits of that product.

She called me a joker for that reason. A joker is what I am to her.

My 'identity' seems to tie into this joker concept when I look at it from another angle. The meaning of a 'joker' has to do with the role, psychology and appearance of my person. I feel it.

The role of a joker is to be a wildcard. The psychology of a joker is to be funny, annoying or incompetent to those watching. The appearance of a joker, or rather, the character called 'The Joker' is a green haired man with pale white skin and blood red lips who prances around in a purple suit all day.

From the looks of it my character is one that is witty and unpredictable. Those are my core traits.

"Suh yuh seh," Attempting the language after reordering some of her words, I shrugged, "Just watch yourself, alright? We don't know who the stalker is yet so don't go talking to any strangers."

Suddenly, I smacked my head like I recalled something relevant, "Oh riggght, you make a living off helping people. Tuff," Her brow twitched when I stifled a laugh, "Just go home and leech off—*cough*—live off a yuh man in the meantime."

Her face was distorted for a moment, "Ey, sekkle."

"Ha, dat yuh need fi do."

With arms spread like John Doe's, she questioned, "Yaa laugh?"

While sporting a smirk, my eyes remained locked with hers, "No….Pfft-"

"Him a laugh to star—weh dat fa?" A question with a surface level connotation was all she could muster with that amused veneer.

WHAM!

She caught me *on the jaw* with a ruthless punch.

*{**SIDE QUEST** (4)— **Ragebait her into hitting you** ✔️]*

"AHHH!!" Clenching my teeth, I clutched my face, "Chuh—FAH*HHH!*"

“FuckA,” She laughed her heart out and turned to leave, “Dah gurl ya nah fi depend pon nuh man…Brite.”

For some reason she looked fulfilled after making me feel some pain.

*[**HIDDEN QUEST (2)— Get her to leave without worries✔️**]*

As expected from a woman who exhibits a prideful and self reliant nature, she packs a punch. *At least I know a bit more about myself because of that exchange.*

Alva is a Jamaican, which increases the odds of my being in the country.

This sudden change in environment, from that forest, must mean something more if my encounter with White Teeth brought me here.

The law of dreams, or what I’d like to call the Law of inverse rationality is evident in both my actions and her reactions to my words. My prediction, from the general flow of our conversation and understanding of her personality, should have led her to reveal her name, not the one belonging to ‘Alva’. However that first show of controlled aggression behind a jolly veneer was useful information as it shows she is the type of person to cover up her true intentions, if she can help it, to get back at those who she thinks has wronged her.

Deducing that the other Hidden Quest was to make her head home was possible due to the existence of the law and the fact that I’ve done my part from earlier. The nail in the coffin was the need to bait such a decision through use of my own personality quirks. Or rather, those belonging to Alva.

The fact that she must hit me after the successful ragebait implied she must gain a level of satisfaction from it emotionally. The bait itself was a way to steer her mind from the stalker situation even though she seemed unphased when asked why someone would be after her.

She is prideful and independent, however she is ultimately in a precarious situation where a man of unknown origin is hunting her.

Taking her original phone from behind the printer, I soothed my cheek while unlocking it and scrolling through her emails. I made sure to cover the camera with tape and muffle the speaker with a finger as I sifted through her files.

Going up against such a man the best option is to let him think you're somewhere you actually aren't, at least for a day; so you can prepare for his arrival properly.

There are downsides to this plan, however those can be filled during the course of this day.

I observed her personal Uber ride history next to see where she frequently calls for a cab or requests for it to go, pinpointing her likely home location within a few minutes.

Walking out of my little area, I trod through the store, down the aisle that housed the mirrors and sure enough there was a table with pharmaceutical items between the third row of the first and second aisles.

[SIDE QUEST (1)— Discover her Identity and Business Status ✔️]

According to the phone, her name was Kayla Myer. She works as a MedChem representative for the Azan supercenter store and was required to be there by 9:00am the latest. Everyday she sends a photo of her presence whenever she signs up.

In the event she doesn't, her supervisor gets angry and argues about it; which is reasonable when considering the fact only she knows anything remotely in depth about the products. Any missing items, unaccounted for, or otherwise will be taken out of her salary and she will be reprimanded in that case.

Only the photo part doesn't seem all that necessary, it isn't enough to deem the man a suspect though.

Alva doesn't interact with her outside of work either; which is a relief.

Stopping by the desk while skimming a list on her phone, I read the label of each item and matched the relevant descriptions to the products.

It wasn't long before finding what I wanted.