

Fishhook

Without A Barb

by Sabrina Li

Act 0

She was born and raised in a small, quiet village surrounded by a forest. All the youths in the village go on some solo missions once they turn 18. With the determined dream of becoming a great explorer, she sets off from the comfortable home and goes on the journey into the forest.

Everything seems exciting. She arranges her life actively. Doing exercise, practicing exploring skills, holding high positivity and motivation to overcome any difficulty she encounters on her road towards a wonderful journey.

One day she spots a black castle and walks in.

It is a fine afternoon in Santa Barbara, California. The weather is turning hot in mid April, claiming the approach of the summer of 2020. Sabrina Li, a first-year Chinese international college student, is taking her afternoon nap in her co-rented apartment on a mattress. The king-sized mattress was left by the former tenants, also Chinese, who didn't pack away many pieces of high-quality furniture and just left these things to them as they moved out. Everything seems to move fast and chaotic during the COVID-19 situation. She herself has never imagined moving out of dorm during the first two years of college before the virus started to spread in America and in-person finals got canceled and Runhan, same year as her and in the Phil major, asked her whether she'd like to join her and her other Chinese friend, Teresa, to rent an apartment during the Spring quarter. The king-sized mattress has some yellow stains on it which could not be wiped out; she simply covers it from sight with the sheet for extra long twin sized beds on where she sleeps. She hasn't bought it a new bed frame, both out of laziness and a feeling that it well fits her wandering status during this ambiguous time. She lives in the living room, which is actually larger and

with enough quietness and privacy since both her roommates stay within their rooms most of the time, and also at a much lower rent. The door next to her bed connects directly to the outside. Together with the lonely mattress and the few things she takes out of luggage, the room often makes her feel that she's free to leave at any moment.

She is quite a perfectionist, who also procrastinates a lot. Like right now, she has a long postponed English paper waiting ahead with accumulated stress. With the nervous yet determined decision of getting hands on it right after her regular nap, she lies down on her mattress with her hands crossed, and her mind starts to draw away into the intermediate state of blankness, as if floating in a calming mist that's above reality.

The loud ringing sound of her phone beside her breaks into the mist. She wakes up with a silent shock, then trying to recall when she turned the silent mode off. Appearing on her phone is an unknown number. This is probably the first call she has received after changing to this new American phone number a few months ago. Both curious who it could possibly be and trying to grab whatever to do before having to face the stressful paper, she picks it up. It is an electronic female voice speaking in Chinese: "Hello, this is a call from the DHL international mailing express. You have a package to pick up, and this is the last reminder. To require more information, press 9."

Sabrina presses 9 because she is waiting for a package of protective clothes against COVID-19 sent by a group of worried Chinese parents including her mom. Her mom sent her several WeChat articles about protective measures against the virus during the flight suggesting that one should wear these clothes which can cover one's whole body throughout the flight in addition to at least two layers of surgical masks. She has booked a flight back to China in June, which might get canceled at any time. There are certain policy differences between flight companies making some of the flights less likely to get cancelled than the others. However, all the news about tensions between the U.S. and China, and the hyper caution against the virus prevailing Chinese media in stark contrast with the easiness of the American

neighborhood, make her reject to filter through the booming information popping up on the phone.

A young male's voice comes from the phone: "Hello, this is DHL Express. How can I help you?" He speaks in a queer kind of cadence, which stops at weird places and stresses every word with a trace of accent, as if mimicking an artificial intelligence.

She feels a little annoyed because it is them urging her to answer the call, but at the same time relaxes when hearing him speak Chinese. She still remembers her few disastrous calls with American line receivers: she either cannot understand their accent, cannot express herself, or the service procedure moves like years pass. Now she explains the situation without any trip overs and expresses how she never received their notification calls before -- *Or maybe, she thinks, it was my American number blocking some calls based on certain rules out of my knowledge.* Just another probable cultural difference.

"Okay, miss, may I know your name and your phone number?"

"Okay, my name is Sabrina Li. My number is 805-***-****." He repeats her words while typing them in.

"Okay, Miss Li. Our registration system recorded you sending a package containing suspicious contents to Guangzhou Baiyun Airport some time ago," *His accent, or is it an accent, is really interesting. Is that the way international line receivers speak?* "which got detained by the Guangzhou custom. An official document has been sent out to us, requiring an explanation."

Wait, what? She sits up on her mattress, letting her back feel the coolness of the wall. "You must get it wrong. I've never sent out a package." As a person totally unfamiliar with the mailing services in America, she must have clear memory if ever sending one back home successfully.

"You're exactly sure?"-- *oh, except for a seven-day free return of an Amazon product which I put to the nearby dropping off station a few days ago, right?* Her head still dazes from the warmth of the weather and the interrupted nap. It's so hard to remember details in daily life.

But could it be, she thinks up something new in her endeavor, due to the long delay of the protective clothing package by the U.S's extra-slow mailing service, the parents or their mailing service have undertaken some informal methods? If that's the case, she does not want to reveal too much before checking with them.

In a professional tone, the line receiver again requests Sabrina to recall carefully whether she is certain that she has ever sent out a package. "Take your time and think carefully."

His tone shows that he considers what they are discussing important and is treating it seriously. *Leaving aside other aspects, the service industry in China is so much better than the U.S. They are so professional in their work.* At the same time, already feeling a sense of guilt after giddily viewing funny and romantic shows online for the past few days, she tries to get rid of the loud images and emotions in her mind and carefully recall.

"Are you sure you memorize it correctly? Because there is a strict requirement in our company that for all packages sent by DHL, the sending person must come register in person with their original ID at our posting station."

"Okay...um, where is the location of your posting station?" He spells the road name patiently for her in his robotic tone. The blue circle on Google map rotates for a few seconds, and it shows that it is near Los Angeles, not far from her location. She startles a little at the coincidence. *How come it's so close to where I'm at when the location could be anywhere in the U.S?* She starts to turn from mere confusion to some nervousness despite the seeming impossibility. *I can be careless at times. Could it be possible that I did send it and forgot about it completely?* Kind of embarrassed by her vague memory but also dare not to just skip over this carelessly - due to its seeming seriousness - she asks more questions.

"Within the packet, there are several credit cards under different names and some other stuff."

"Oh, then that's definitely not me. I never sent out a package like that." As a college student who just opened up her own credit card before coming to college, and barely interacted with the bank, she is not even clear why these cards will be

considered suspicious. Finally she confirms with 100% certainty that she has never sent this out.

“Well...,” the man's tone changes from robotic to emotionally concerned, “then that’s really weird.”

She feels somehow positively surprised at the change of tone. *Finally he’s talking like an actual human! Why should people ever conform to that robotic way of talking?*

“When the sending person comes to our station,” he explains, “our staff will check the original ID card. If you have not been there, your identity information could have been stolen, which should be treated carefully.”

Just as she is feeling unsure what to do next, he offers the direct solution to the trouble: He suggests she call the police and ask them to issue an official document, the “Testimonial for Case Reporting”, to register that her ID info is stolen. *They probably meet similar cases often as an international mailing company.* “Remember,” he emphasizes, “you should ask for two copies, one for the police and one for yourself, so that you no longer need to take responsibility for similar cases in the future.”

She grabs her diary book and turns to the last page to take down the information as he requests. After making sure she takes down the correct information of the official report about that suspicious package, he says “Now, my name is XX and my employee ID number is *****. Did you take them down?” He repeats them once, “If there are any further problems, you can always find me.”

Having been in a sense of lonely insecurity about the probable dark side of society as a freshman college student, she feels touched by how responsibly this person treats his work and how he helps a mere stranger without hesitation, with the tone like a teacher leading a youth to avoid the traps in society.

“Okay, how about I connect you directly to the line of the Guangzhou police office?”

“Oh! Emm, okay.” Sabrina never knows that one phone line can connect directly to another; *Maybe international companies like them have formed a cooperative*

relationship with the police. She feels no reason to refuse this offer since this is an emergent issue and you want to get rid of it sooner than later.

Nervousness creeps in when the line holds up with the awaiting beeping sounds. For the first time in her life, she is going to talk to an actual policeman. She gets up to walk around her room to further awake.

Act 1.1

Once she walks into the castle, a huge cloud of black powder suddenly drops on her.

As an ambitious start-up explorer, she remains composed. She has been prepared psychologically for advert situations. Actually, she feels a little excited. It does feel a little disappointing wandering across all those similar trees and creeks day after day, and she has been thirsty for exciting encounters.

"Stay there and don't move!" A voice in front of her threatens. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she sees a floor lamp speaking to her. "There has been a prediction made years ago, that some ill-intentioned visitors will bring a curse to the castle one day. To warn us in advance, the castle will drop black powder on this person." It hops to proceed and blocks her way. The candle within it swings its orange light.

"What?"

"Hello, this is Guangzhou Province's Police Station."

"Hi, I hope to get a document proving that my ID information may be misused. I received a call from DHL this afternoon..." Being nervous, she is a little at a loss of

where to start when the line really gets picked up, and just puts forward all the information given by the line-receiver explaining what has happened and asking him for two copies of the "Testimonial for Case Reporting."

"Okay. I'm Zhoujin, you can call me Officer Zhou. I'm going to help you with the document, but first you should check whether I am the real police."

Okay, she thinks, though I haven't doubted you, the procedure is necessary.

"Do you have a computer nearby? Go on the safari and put 'Guangzhou Police Station' in the search box. Click on the first link... Scroll to the bottom." He waits patiently after each step. "You see the number of our official phone number? It's right under the 'Address'. Read it while confirming it is the same with the number that I'm calling you from, okay? "

"0-2-0-8-3-8-3-2-9-8-0. "

"Is it the same number?"

"Yes."

"Now may I have your name and Chinese citizen ID number?" Chinese police have a well registered system of all citizens' ID numbers matching their registered information. When going to places with high security standards in Beijing, they ask for her ID number for identification if she does not bring the card with her.

So she offers them cooperatively.

"Are you sure you have your passport with you and have never lost it? And your Chinese citizen ID?"

After she confirms, with much struggle since she did have trouble finding her ID card when she was on her winter vacation back in China, Officer Zhou starts to ask her to think how might her ID info get stolen if she has not lost them ever.

"When are some occasions that may possibly create a chance for your personal information to leak? Who has access to your ID info? "

She actually imagined the talk to be much shorter - simply a reporting and a registration. However it makes sense for the police to try to find out who is stealing information so as to prevent future cases. She is kind of careless in memorizing details of daily life, so it takes her some effort to recall several situations.

"Well... I recently went to the Bank of America to open a credit card... And before I left home after the winter vacation, my mom took my Chinese identity card to change my status in school at the governmental request." She remembers her mom going through much fuss to get through this process. "My college requires my personal info when transferring tuition, and I typed in my information when buying airline tickets on the traveling app."

"And did you write down the specific period of use when giving the bank's crew your passport's copy?"

"Umm... What?"

Officer Zhou seems so speechless about my ignorance that he almost laughs. "Don't you know that when you're giving copies of your identity cards or passports to others, you need to write 'copied version only for use from when to when' and sign your name?"

He criticizes her for being so careless of her information security and then further educates her, at length, of different precautions that one should take to avoid any leakage of personal info: avoid sending images of one's identity card (or its copies) via WeChat, nor use the public wifi in the airport.

"And you don't know about all these?" She has done almost all of the above mentioned activities and feels her face hot. Her concern about the warning of "the Wifi may be insecure" only lasted for the first few times connecting the airport wifi. But to be honest, she does not really care about info security very much, since she has nothing too secret or valuable to steal. *And my parents do it the exact same way. We send our photos of our IDs in WeChat all the time. It's their lack of info-security knowledge passing on to me.* Yet she doesn't feel the need to excuse herself.

"Didn't you get the basic sense of laws in high school?"

Though she knows it's serious, she still couldn't help being amused by Officer Zhou. She finds the officer, like the line receiver, really adorable since they are genuinely worried and care about issues of a youth they've never met. His way of informing her about actions to follow to protect her info security is like an admonishing parent -- well related to the classic image of Chinese police with a sense

of justice: dressed in the handsome black uniform indicating righteousness, with a rigorous but friendly attitude as “the public servant of people”. Just another surprisingly responsible and passionate person for his work.

She relaxes a little though her body is still tense. Then he says: “Okay, before giving you the document and letting you go, let me check with my colleague to verify your personal information. You wait here and don’t hang up the phone okay?”

She agrees though not exactly understanding what he said this was for. At the same time, she feels honored to be allowed to listen to policemen’s inner calls; she is very curious how they communicate in work. *It’s a rare chance!*

He tells his colleague her ID number, then his tone suddenly becomes weirdqueer: “What, she is on the list? ¥3,000,000? You sure? Okay, I will.” She feels something approaching, an omen of her turning from an audience into some involved part of a serious issue. When he comes back to the phone, he becomes ever more solemn and serious. With an interrogating tone he asks her: "Have you been telling the truth throughout our call?"

Act 1.2

Mr. Lamp scrutinizes her. "You sure you aren't that malicious intruder?"

She shakes her head.

"I don't feel like you are either. It would be to dumb for you to walk in and get caught directly like this if you are, wouldn't it?" He makes a face.

He is very talkative, like someone just starting his job in the castle, with lots of passion.

He leads her to a room. "I'll protect you. But you may have to stay here for a while, or else if others in the castle know about the black powder, you'd likely get punished."

"I'll try to find other evidence to prove your innocence, okay? But you must be really honest and cooperative with me."

She smiles, already feeling a great fortune to meet him, "Sure!"

He tells her she is entangled in an international money laundering crime, within which there is a bank card under her name with ¥3,000,000 in it. Completely puzzled, she thinks this charge comes out of nowhere. But he makes her still nervous as if she has actually committed something; she tries to stay calm to not be suspected.