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VIKTOR ALEVETDINOV



The Dragon's Silk Heart

How I Accidentally Got Engaged to My Boss

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«Издательские решения»

Alevetdinov V.

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Mila moves to Shanghai to localize a dating app. One polished slogan later, she’s magically engaged to her infuriatingly composed boss. Now an opinionated dragon, corporate intrigue, and a city in romantic chaos are part of the job. To break the spell, Mila and Li Zhen must discover whether love needs a perfect match — or simply two people free to choose.

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How I Accidentally Got Engaged to My Boss

Viktor Alevetdinov

Дизайнер обложки чатгпт

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Prologue

The Silk That Remembered the Road

The sandstorm began without warning: first the edge of the sky disappeared, then the camels stopped arguing with their drivers, and then the road the caravan had trusted for twelve days vanished so quietly it was as if it had never promised to be a road at all.

The caravan was heading west: bales of silk, tea, roots, bronze mirrors, two cages of chickens, and an official who recorded losses before they happened. The travelers held together in a chain, but the wind was older than people and better at breaking chains. It filled their mouths with sand, tangled their voices, turned «this way» into «stop» and «Mama» into a rasp.

A young weaver named Lin walked in the middle of the caravan, clutching a basket of cocoons to her chest. They had brought her along because she could mend silk so skillfully that afterward only the envious could find where it had torn. She knew: everything tore at the point where people had spent too long pretending the thread would hold.

When the third camel dropped to its knees and the first driver vanished into the white dust, bell and all, Lin realized there was no use shouting. The storm swallowed every shout. She took out a skein of raw silk and tied one end to her wrist.

«Give me your hand,» she told the water boy.

«Why?»

«So when you decide to die heroically in the wrong place, I can find you.»

The boy held out his hand.

Then Lin looped the thread around the merchant, the camel driver, the woman with a baby, two brothers arguing over whose fault it was, the official who demanded to know the procedure's legal status, and even a chicken. The chicken had not given its consent, but it made its intention to stay alive very loudly known.

Lin did not pull the people toward her. She linked them to one another — loosely, with room between them, leaving enough slack for everyone to walk on their own. There was no authority in the knots. Only a reminder: if one person fell, another would feel it.

The storm thickened. Even the sky forgot which way was up. Then the silk at Lin's wrist quivered. At first she thought it was the wind. Then fear. Then she realized the skein in her hands was warm.

The thread unwound itself, fine, with a dewy gleam, like a newborn moon. It slipped between Lin's fingers, not burning, but asking. Good silk always asks the skin first whether it wants to remember a touch.

«I'll help,» Lin said, though she did not know whom she was speaking to.

The words flew into the storm and did not disappear.

The sand ahead parted. A long shadow took shape in it: not beast, not snake, not cloud. A dragon emerged from the very road they had all lost. He was not made of fire, as people like to claim when they have never had to put out a burning caravan. He was as long as the journey between two cities and as fine as the thread between two promises. His scales were woven from road dust, silk, camels' breath, and the words people say on the road when they do not want to die alone: «Hold on,» «Have some water,» «I'll come back,» «Don't let go.»

The caravan froze. Even the official stopped counting.

«Who called me?» the dragon asked.

Lin glanced around. Everyone was looking at her.

«I suppose I did,» she said. «If this is about the silk, I wasn't stealing. I was saving lives. Different statutes.»

The dragon blinked. Caravans, rivers, bridges, winter mountain passes, and thousands of campfires passed through his eyes — campfires where someone had given away their last flatbread.

«I do not feed on silk, weaver. I feed on promises of help.»

«Then you're getting a good dinner tonight.»

For a moment the wind fell quiet, as though it, too, wanted to listen.

The dragon coiled around the caravan without touching a single person who had not given permission. His body became a road — shimmering, supple, slender. Where the sand had lain, the tracks of earlier travelers appeared. The threads at their wrists shone. Each knot answered another.

«Go,» said the dragon. «But remember: the thread shows the way only to those who have agreed to walk beside one another.»

«And if someone hasn't agreed?» Lin asked.

For an instant, the storm revealed not only the caravan but all the cities yet to come, where people would call imposing their own will «making someone else happy.»

«Then the thread becomes a noose,» the dragon said. «A noose holds, too. That is why it is so often mistaken for care. But a noose is the death of the road.»

Lin remembered this as a rule of her craft. Good thread does not strangle the cloth. Good help ends where someone else's no begins.

They emerged from the storm by morning. The caravan had lost three sacks of tea, one cage, the official's hat, and some of its pride. They found the chicken last: it stood on a hill, linked by silk to the water boy's wrist, looking as though it had personally defeated the desert.

Lin removed the threads from those who wanted them taken off. She left them on those who asked to keep them until the next city. But the skein of silk from which the dragon's road had emerged did not run out. It curled into itself, tighter, warmer, more alive — into a cocoon the size of a child's heart.

«How should I keep you?» Lin asked.

«Do not keep me like a thing,» the dragon answered from inside the cocoon. «Carry me like a promise.»

«Promises spoil if you don't write them down properly.»

«Then write them down properly.»

On a narrow strip of silk, Lin wrote the first words: «Let travelers find each other on the road, and do not hold back anyone who has reached their destination.» Her writing was uneven because her hands were shaking. But the Heart accepted it.

From that day on, the cocoon passed to those who understood the difference between helping and forcing. Lovers tried to use it to guarantee eternal fidelity and almost always came away with their pride lightly singed. The dragon did not like being mistaken for a lock.

Centuries passed. Roads grew wider, faster, louder. Silk bales gave way to shipping containers, caravan bells to notifications, and sandstorms to streams of traffic and people who could get lost in their own phones at the correct subway exit.

The cocoon survived dynasties, wars, fires, and a succession of keepers from different families. At last the Silk Heart came to Shanghai.

In a glass-walled server room on the forty-second floor, where the air was as cold as a polite rejection, green lights blinked on the racks and people used words like «release,» «conversion,» «user retention,» and «traditional cultural module» as though the spirits of ancient roads were required to understand quarterly metrics.

The cocoon lay in a bronze frame between two rows of servers. Sometimes it breathed softly. Sometimes old knots surfaced on it. Sometimes a line appeared in the system logs that the programmers dismissed as artifact noise:

CONSENT NOT FOUND. BOND NOT CREATED.

No one worried. Modern people were used to clicking «I agree» before they had time to think about exactly what they were agreeing to.

The Silk Heart waited patiently. It remembered the storm, Lin, the water boy, the victorious chicken, and a rule older than any interface: a thread is there to keep people from losing one another on the road, not to drag someone where they have no need to go.

Then someone decided an ancient dragon's heart would be perfect for a dating app.

Act I Translation Error

Chapter 1 A Dream Job with a View of Disaster

I came to Shanghai for a career, international experience, and a chance to finally stop explaining to my family that speaking Chinese was a career choice, not a warning sign.

The plane touched down gently, almost apologetically. The moment my phone found a signal, it informed me that roaming charges could change my plans for the future. I turned it off as the family chat demanded: «Did you land?» «Check your contract.» «China's practically next door to Khabarovsk. You'll be able to come home for weekends, right?»

Practically next door. All I had to do was cross a country, a few time zones, my own fear, and a couple of international borders.

My suitcase came out last: burgundy, enormous, with a crooked handle. It whacked me in the knee, and Shanghai got straight to the point.

At the exit, the humidity met me. Warm, dense, businesslike humidity. Three seconds in, my hair, carefully styled back in Khabarovsk, declared independence. Ten seconds in, I realized that in Shanghai even breathing needed to be localized.

I ordered a taxi through an app that promised «a ride without language barriers.» The barrier appeared immediately: the driver sent eight Chinese characters, an emoji, and the number of an exit I couldn't see. I replied in Chinese that I was standing by column D. He sent a cat sticker, and I decided to take it as confirmation, because in international communication, sometimes you have to put your faith in cats.

The drive into the city flashed past in overpasses, wet trees, scooters in rain ponchos, and glass towers that looked as if they'd been built from deadlines instead of concrete. Shanghai didn't reveal itself slowly. It plugged you straight into the flow: cars, signs, couriers, subway turnstiles, people with coffee, people with suitcases, people who looked as if they were already late for the future.

Somewhere among those towers, DragonHeart Technologies was waiting for me — the company behind a next-generation dating app officially devoted to emotional compatibility. According to my friend Katya, it was about translating love into a language where the word «like» wouldn't accidentally get anyone married.

Some jokes are better left unsaid within earshot of the future.

DragonHeart's office was in a skyscraper made of glass, money, and sleep deprivation. The lobby smelled of coffee, wet umbrellas, and air-conditioned ambition. A logo hung on the wall: a slender golden dragon curled around a scarlet heart. The dragon's tail became a thread, and the heart looked embroidered rather than drawn.

Beneath the logo, the words glowed: DRAGONHEART. Where destiny remembers your name.

The Russian version said exactly the same thing.

Beautiful. Dangerous. Legally slippery. Occupational hazard: I immediately pictured user complaints, letters from lawyers, and people who'd taken the metaphor literally. A Russian-speaking user who saw «destiny remembers your name» would either get misty-eyed or want to know how the app had gotten hold of their passport details.

At reception, I was given a temporary badge. My name was printed in Latin letters, Chinese characters, and a peculiar version of Cyrillic: Мила Чайкйна.

«Almost,» I said.

«A mistake?» The young woman behind the desk looked alarmed.

«No. A prophecy. By the end of my probationary period, that may be exactly how I sound.»

The elevator took me up to the forty-second floor. There I was in the reflection: rumpled from the flight, suitcase at my feet, wearing an «I have everything under control» expression that meant exactly the opposite.

The doors opened onto an office where people moved as if a deadline were a predator instead of a date. Employees hurried past with laptops, coffee, noodles, and the faces of people who'd saved the product yesterday and would be back to save it again tomorrow.

Behind the glass of a meeting room, a young woman in a headset was calmly explaining to someone that an ex-girlfriend liking a cousin's profile didn't necessarily mean a family conspiracy.

Dream job, they said.

«Mila Chaikina?»

A woman's voice, brisk and dry as a financial statement. A short woman in a light gray suit stood in front of me with a tablet and the gaze of someone who could tell at a glance how much you cost the company and when you'd start paying for yourself.

«Wang Mei. Chief financial officer. Your flight was twenty-two minutes late, your luggage fourteen, your taxi nine. You arrived on time. Suspicious.»

«I was trying to make a good first impression.»

«First impressions rarely pay for themselves. Come with me.»

She walked so fast it was as if the floor answered to her budget. I dragged my suitcase after her. A wheel clattered: «Fail. Fail. Fail.»

«Today's your orientation: paperwork, an NDA, access credentials, localization, a product overview, coffee for the weak, and a quick test assignment.»

«A test? I thought I'd already been hired.»

«You have. Now we can find out how expensive a mistake that was.»

I liked her. That was troubling.

In a meeting room, Wang Mei set a sheet of paper in front of me.

«Three minutes. Find the point where a romantic metaphor becomes a legal catastrophe.»

The Russian version of the welcome screen was tidy, even elegant in places, but the very first line already had my left eye twitching: «By tapping „Start," you allow DragonHeart to find the person to whom your life will be bound forever.»

«Oh,» I said.

«Is that one «oh' already costing us money?»

«Potentially. «Bound forever' sounds like a wedding vow, a cult, or a loan agreement. Better: «help you find someone you'll want to keep talking to.» Less destiny, more consent.»

The next line was worse: «We know who you're meant to be with.»

«No. An app shouldn't sound like a grandma at a wedding, a totalitarian regime, and a scammer with access to your location data all at once.»

«Our brand is built around destiny.»

«Destiny is a wonderful word for an ad and a terrible one for a consent button.»

The third line finished me off: «Your hearts have already entered into a contract. All that's left is to confirm.»

«Was this written by a lawyer who doesn't believe in love or a marketer who doesn't believe in courts?»

«A joint effort. There was a meeting.»

«I can tell. «Entered into a contract' before confirmation? No. Hearts aren't parties to a transaction, and users shouldn't find out about their own love lives after the fact.»

I crossed out half the page. DragonHeart was a beautiful, expensive product, and someone was trying to use it to sell modern people an ancient sense of inevitability. And inevitability didn't get along with user consent.

«You're not a romantic,» Wang Mei observed.

«I'm a localization specialist. We're romantics who've read the user complaints.»

The timer beeped. Wang Mei scanned my edits and allowed herself a small smile.

«Good. You can tell a metaphor from an obligation. A rare skill.»

«In a dating app?»

«In life. In an app, the consequences just cost more.»

We stepped back into the office noise. Wang Mei named departments as fast as she walked: product, design, ML, legal, support, localization, Trust and Safety, cultural module. That last one sounded especially harmless, so I immediately grew suspicious.

By the window, a wall of screens showed city maps, routes, charts of matches. Scarlet dots flared and faded across Shanghai. Somewhere, people were hitting Like, replying, closing chats, coming back, hesitating, typing «hi» and deleting it.

It was all beautiful. And a little frightening.

«DragonHeart analyzes routes, messaging style, preferences, social context,» Wang Mei said. «Plus the traditional cultural module.»

«What's in the traditional cultural module?»

«Brand heritage.»

«Does that mean «hard to explain to investors'?»

«It means „don't touch without Li Zhen's permission."»

The name was spoken, and the nearest designer dropped her stylus.

«Was it something I said?»

«You asked about the part of the product overseen by the chief operating officer.»

«Li Zhen?»

This time two people from support turned around.

«Yes. Li Zhen.»

«Is he scary?»

«No,» Wang Mei said. «He's efficient.»

«Is that worse?»

«For some people, yes.»

The designer picked up her stylus.

«He once sent a presentation back because the word «approximately' appeared nine times.»

«On slide forty-six,» added the young woman from support.

«COO, legend, and a natural disaster with a calendar?» I ventured.

Wang Mei looked at me with something close to respect.

«You learn quickly. Zhen's with the investors today. You'll meet him later. Until then, please avoid breaking protocols, promising users eternal love, or clicking buttons marked with a red dragon.»

«Buttons marked with a what?»

«A red dragon.»

«Is this a joke you play on new hires?»

«No.»

«Shame. It'd be a good one.»

The walls in the localization area were covered with terminology charts and a printout in Russian: «DESTINY IS NOT DOOM. UNLESS WE'RE LAUNCHING A GOTH DATING APP.» I felt at home.

I was introduced to the team and shown a task list. Item one: «Check the Russian version of the core romantic scenarios.» Item two: «Sign off on consent wording.» Item three: «Do not touch legacy strings.» Beside it was a little red dragon icon.

«These are the strings, then?»

«Oh, legacy,» said a Frenchman on the team in the tone people usually reserve for «graveyard.»

«Are we really not allowed to touch them?»

«They're older than the backend,» said a Korean woman in blue headphones.

The whole team looked toward the glass corridor at once.

«Now I'll show you the server room,» Wang Mei said.

That should have been my cue to worry. A normal company shows you the kitchen on your first day, the bathrooms, and the person who knows where the markers are. You get the server room tour if you're a valued specialist or someone being drawn into something you won't be able to tell even your mother about.

«Do I need separate access for that?»

«Yes.»

«Have I been given it yet?»

«No.»

«Then why are we going there?»

«Because if you see this later without warning, you'll ask more questions.»

«I already have questions.»

«Which is why we're saving time.»

The corridor was cooler than the office. Behind the glass walls stood server racks, cables, cooling panels. Everything looked the way a tech company should: expensive, clean, rational. Almost.

In the middle of the far room stood a bronze frame. It fit with nothing: not the servers, not the glass, not the word «startup.» The frame was dark and ancient, carved with clouds, roads, tiny human figures, a curving dragon. Inside, suspended on almost invisible threads, hung a cocoon.

Silk. Large, the size of a human head. The color of old pearls. Fine layers traced its surface, like fabric someone had spent a long time weaving. A warm red light shimmered inside.

Behind the glass, the servers hummed softly. Far away, the office went on with its life: messages, deadlines, coffee. Here stood an ancient silk cocoon in a bronze frame.

«That's…» I began.

«Our brand's ancestral symbol,» Wang Mei said hastily.

«You do realize that's exactly what they call the thing in movies that ends up demanding sacrifices?»

«No sacrifices. Just maintenance, insurance, and a separate line in the budget.»

«Is it real?»

«The bronze? Yes.»

«The cocoon.»

Wang Mei was silent for a moment.

«Depends on what you mean by „real."»

Bad answer. Localization specialists know: when someone starts clarifying the meaning of a simple word, they're either a lawyer or hiding a dragon.

I moved closer to the glass. The cocoon hung motionless. At first glance. But the longer I watched, the more it seemed that the layers of silk were parting and closing again, almost imperceptibly.

As though it were breathing.

«Mei,» I said quietly. «Why is it moving?»

She didn't answer.

The red light inside the cocoon flared, ran along the threads, and went out. Then the surface quivered again.

Inhale.

Exhale.

My temporary badge grew warm against my chest, and for a second the golden dragon on the plastic seemed alive rather than printed on.

I took a step back.

Wang Mei looked at her watch, not the cocoon.
«Li Zhen will be back sooner than planned.»
«And that matters because?»
Behind the glass, the silk cocoon took another slow breath.
Wang Mei exhaled almost inaudibly.
«Because now he'll definitely want to meet you.»

Chapter 2 The Boss Who Smiles by the Book

The cocoon in the server room was breathing. I stood on the other side of the glass with a tablet and jasmine coffee that tasted like a barista's attempt to reconcile a deadline with a tea ceremony. The silk surface inside the bronze frame drew quietly inward — not like fabric stirred by air conditioning, but like the chest of someone who had been silent for a long time and had finally decided to see whether anyone could hear them.

«Is that normal?» I asked.

Wang Mei didn't look up from her phone.

«At DragonHeart, the word «normal' is used only in financial reports. And even then, only before the audit.»

«I mean the thing in the frame.»

«It's our brand's ancestral symbol.»

The cocoon quivered again.

«Your symbol has lungs.»

«If it develops any, Legal will classify them as a feature expansion.»

A door opened behind me. It didn't bang or creak. It yielded. Li Zhen walked in, and I immediately understood why the office referred to him as a natural disaster with a calendar.

I'd expected an instruction manual in human form. The reality was worse: he was handsome. Handsome the way an expensive object in a contemporary design museum is beautiful — the precise line of his shoulders, a composed face, a dark suit, thin-framed glasses. It would've made my life easier if he'd looked like a corporate refrigerator. You can hate a refrigerator without any inner conflict.

«Ms. Chaikina,» he said in Russian.

Almost without an accent. Only the «ch» came out softer, as though my last name had been spoken through silk paper.

«Mila,» I corrected him. «Ms. Chaikina is my mother when I haven't replied to her for three hours.»

«In professional communication, I prefer formal address until an internal protocol has been approved.»

«No one's ever called me an unapproved protocol before.»

Wang Mei coughed. The cough was dry, financial, and a forecast of expenses.

«Why is the new localizer outside the server area without Level Three clearance?» Zhen asked.

«Because the new localizer can see the obvious. For example, that your brand's ancestral symbol is breathing, and doing it without a disclaimer.»

«It is not breathing.»

The cocoon took another soft breath. Zhen didn't even turn around.

«The ventilation system causes movement in the fibers.»

«Of course. And if it starts singing in the middle of the night, will that be an acoustic effect of the air conditioning?»

«The cocoon does not sing.»

«I'll note that down as a provisional guarantee.»

The corner of his mouth barely moved. Not a smile. An internal notification: «Emotion scheduled. Please allow three to five business days for confirmation.»

«Your work area is on the twenty-second floor,» he said. «Access to the server room, the archive module, and the Legacy Core strings is restricted until you complete the briefing.»

«The what strings?»

«The Legacy Core strings.»

«Is that a marketing term or a legal smokescreen?»

«An internal term.»

«Internal terms tend to be born where a normal word has died of shame.»

Wang Mei put her phone away.

«I'll leave you two to get acquainted. I have a meeting with people who think the word «magic' lowers the company's valuation. They're still optimists.»

She left. The servers blinked behind the glass, and in the bronze frame lay a cocoon with threads like dried sunlight.

«Did you see it breathing?» I asked more quietly.

«I saw you draw a conclusion from insufficient data.»

«I'm a translator. That's how we live.»

«At DragonHeart, the algorithm draws conclusions from insufficient data. People are required to verify the facts before setting words in motion.»

«That's an unsettling division of labor.»

Up close, his eyes turned out to be dark brown rather than black, with an amber ring around each pupil. A completely unnecessary detail. Absolutely detrimental to discipline.

«You were hired to localize the interface, not to interpret family heirlooms.»

«What if a family heirloom ends up in the interface?»

The silence became very carefully arranged.

«Come with me.»

He took me to a meeting room overlooking damp Shanghai. A tablet displaying the localization platform was set in front of me. The table was a localizer's dream and nightmare: ID, context, source text, machine translation, legal risk, cultural risk, emotional tone.

«The Russian-language version goes into closed beta in nine days. We need a culturally accurate adaptation with no change in meaning.»

«That I can do.»

«You changed «Find your other half' to «Find someone you can agree on breakfast with.»»

«Because «other half' implies the user ships with parts missing.»

«Marketing did not consider the wording sufficiently romantic.»

«Marketing has never dated people who think they're the missing piece of the universe. The romance runs out fast, and then the logistics begin.»

There it was again, that microscopic movement at the corner of his mouth. As if a smile had come up to the door and failed the access check.

«That is why you are here. But some strings may not be edited.»

«Uneditable strings in localization are like inedible dumplings.»

«Those strings are part of the traditional cultural module.»

«Now I'm scared.»

He touched the screen. The table jumped to a block marked with a little red dragon. The icon was unnecessarily beautiful for an internal marker.

The first string appeared in the preview:

YOUR DESTINY WILL BE BOUND WITHIN 3—5 BUSINESS DAYS.

The machine's Russian version underneath made exactly the same promise, with the eagerness of someone who wouldn't have to answer for the consequences.

«No,» I said.

«To what, exactly?»

«All of it. You can't tell Russian-speaking users, „Your destiny will be bound within three to five business days.“»

«Why?»

«Because it sounds like a threat from a government service center. Or a marriage curse with delivery included.»

«The original wording has an auspicious meaning. Within its original system.»

«In what language?»

«In its classical form, it is written in the Li family's old script.»

«Wonderful. A user in Novosibirsk will really appreciate the nuance when the app promises to bind their destiny by Friday.»

The comment on the string read: «Do not change the binding metaphor. Do not change the image of destiny. Do not change the time interval. Red dragon — clear with L.Z.»

«L.Z. — that's you?»

«Yes.»

«You personally banned changes to «destiny on a schedule'?»

«I prohibited changes to the structure of the legacy wording.»

«Users don't see the structure. They see the text. The text says, „We're going to bind you." A user doesn't know your family's system. They know a button, a screen, and their own fear that someone's gone and decided everything for them again.»

«Our tests show a high level of emotional response.»

«From the people you asked, or the people you've already bound?»

He tilted his head slightly.

«Do you often build your arguments around provocation?»

«Only when ordinary arguments can't get to the other person fast enough. «Destiny' carries a lot of weight. «Bind' carries even more. I'd keep «forever' in a locked cabinet. And «within three to five business days' turns romance into a government service.»

«In the original tradition, time matters.»

«Then explain it or use an image with some life in it. „We'll help you find someone you'll want to keep talking to." That doesn't scare people.»

«Unconvincing.»

«At least it doesn't sound like a notice from an ancient debt collection agency.»

This time he almost smiled. The smile appeared, looked at us, assessed the risks, decided not to get involved with management, and left.

The demo room was designed to make investors feel smart and slightly necessary to the world: soft lighting, an enormous screen, the DragonHeart logo on the wall — a dragon drawn in red lines around a heart.

«DragonHeart uses a multifactor compatibility model,» Zhen said.

On the screen, two dots on a city map followed different routes and crossed paths at a tea shop.

«Behavior, vocal responses, response times, routes, purchases, food preferences, scheduling habits, and the quality of pauses between messages.»

«The quality of pauses?»

«Some people reply late because they are busy. Others because they are avoiding intimacy.»

«What if someone left their phone in a taxi?»

«We have a chaos adjustment for that.»

«I'm so glad mathematics has recognized me.»

A test profile was already waiting on my phone: Mila_C, 27, localization, Shanghai, interests — languages, tea, long walks, «sarcasm as a form of adaptation.» DragonHeart's multiple-choice questions were so precisely targeted that I wanted to recommend a vacation to its users. For example: send another message, pretend you don't care, delete the conversation along with your memory, or check whether the person might be in a meeting.

I chose the meeting. Not because I was mature, but because I was sitting next to someone whose every silence was almost certainly meeting-related.

The next question was worse: «What matters most to you in a relationship?» An option had suddenly appeared among the answers: «Someone who doesn't call emotional intimacy a protocol.»

«That option was not there before,» Zhen said.

«The app is learning from real-life experience. Congratulations.»

He took the phone from me. A little red dragon blinked on the screen beside my profile. Blinked — and disappeared.

«Is that normal?»

«Yes.»

«Your «yes' covers a lot of ground.»

«It is a system indicator.»

«That system indicator was looking at me.»

«Icons do not look at people.»

«Says the man who keeps a breathing cocoon as a brand symbol.»

Zhen hurriedly switched off the phone.

«The traditional cultural module enhances recommendations using an archive of the family's compatibility formulas.»

«Is an archive of family compatibility formulas a database or the reason your relatives call on Sundays?»

He looked at me.

«Both.»

The answer was so dry that it took me a moment to realize it was a joke. A real one. A small one. Wrapped in a business suit.

I laughed before I could stop myself.

«The user sees only the result,» he said.

«That's exactly what worries me. A user needs to understand what they're agreeing to.»

«They consent to compatibility matching.»

«No. They agree to the words you've put in front of them. If the text promises to „bind your destiny," they're agreeing to scary poetry, not matchmaking.»

«You attach too much importance to words, Ms. Chaikina.»

I fell silent. After that line about destiny on business days, it was the worst thing you could say to a translator.

«Words are my responsibility. If there's nonsense on the screen, that's what people trust or don't trust. Not your model. The text.»

«Some phrases cannot be changed,» Zhen said.

«Why?»

«Because they work.»

«In marketing?»

«Deeper.»

He said it as though «deeper» wasn't somewhere in the presentation but under the server room floor, beside the thing that breathed.

The word hung between us. Beyond the glass, an ordinary office went about its life: laptops, cups of tea, badges with red dragons. But something was hidden inside all that normality.

Zhen opened a list of strings marked with the red dragon:

«Your paths are already closer than they seem.»

«One heart recognizes another before the first word.»

«Consent to a gentle binding of intentions.»

«Trust the ancient compatibility module.»

«No,» I said again. ««Gentle binding of intentions' sounds like a procedure that leaves you with a numbered ticket and psychological trauma.»

«Suggest an alternative.»

«„We'll show you where a conversation could begin."»

«Vague.»

«Welcome to human relationships.»

«A product must make a promise.»

«A dating product should offer an opportunity. People make promises.»

He looked at me as though I'd spoken the password to a room he'd locked long ago.

«People's promises are unreliable.»

«So you decided to hand them over to an app?»

«I decided to launch a product with a minimal level of chaos.»

«So that's a yes.»

We were standing dangerously close to the screen and to each other. Not romantically close. Professionally close. The way people stand when they're arguing over a spreadsheet and pretending not to notice their own stupid reaction to someone else's voice.

«Mila,» Zhen said.

The formal address had been irritating. My name in his voice was worse, because suddenly there was less glass in it.

«You may edit all strings in the Russian interface except those marked with a red dragon.»

«No.»

«This is not a request.»

«And this isn't localization.»

«It is a condition of your employment.»

«Then the terms of my employment conflict with the work you hired me to do.»

He straightened.

«The red dragon strings have been approved by the founders, the board of directors, and the Li family. Any change could compromise the module's semantic integrity.»

«The module's semantic integrity is already compromising common sense.»

«You do not understand the context.»

«Then give me the context.»

«No.»

That short word hit harder than a long lecture.

«You hired me to make the text understandable. But you won't let me touch the most dangerous strings.»

«I hired you to adapt the product without destroying its foundation.»

«If you can't explain the foundation to a user, maybe the problem is the foundation?»

He said nothing.

«Li Zhen, I'm not signing off on copy that turns a romantic metaphor into a legally dubious noose.»

«You are not signing it. This is a corporate interface.»

«Exactly. The user will never know who's responsible. But I will.»

There was irritation in his gaze. And appraisal. And something else — brief, almost imperceptible, as though he hadn't expected this to be where I dug in.

«You have nine days. Work with the strings available to you. The red dragon remains unchanged.»

«You realize that saying «the red dragon remains unchanged' just made everything worse?»

«That is an explicit prohibition.»

«Bans don't go over well with people who've come to another country to prove themselves professionally.»

«Consider it the limit of your responsibility.»

«To me, it's a red cape in front of a bull. A cape shaped like a dragon.»

He took the tablet from my hands. For a second our fingers brushed at the edge of the case. Nothing happened. Of course nothing happened. Except, for some reason, my skin remembered the warmth of his fingers.

«Your account will be activated in ten minutes. Access to restricted Legacy Core files will not be granted. Submit any questions about the red strings to me in writing.»

«So you can refuse in writing?»

«So there is a record of the approval process.»

«The romance in your product is starting to explain a lot.»

He opened the door.

«Welcome to DragonHeart, Mila.»

It sounded like an invitation and a warning at the same time.

At my desk, a laptop, a badge, and a welcome box were waiting for me: a notebook, a pen, dragon stickers, a bag of longans, and a card:

WE HELP HEARTS FIND EACH OTHER.

Below, in small print, it said:

Please do not modify strings marked with a red dragon without written permission from the Keeper in charge.

The Keeper in charge.

I logged in. Wang Mei walked past with the expression of someone who had already entered my stubbornness into a mental risk spreadsheet.

«Alive?»

«Technically.»

«A good result after your first meeting with Li Zhen.»

«Is he always like that?»

«No. Sometimes he's even more polite.»

«Is that a threat?»

«It's the corporate culture.»

She left, and for ten minutes I dutifully edited the regular interface. «We found a match» sounded mechanical. «This person is right for you» — presumptuous. «Try starting a conversation» — better.

A notification flashed in the upper-right corner:

ACCESS SYNCHRONIZATION COMPLETE.

Then another:

ARCHIVE FILE ADDED TO YOUR LOCALIZATION QUEUE.

The file was called:

legacy_heart_ru_draft_locked_final_FINAL_2_use_this_one.

Nothing says «ancient heritage» quite like a file with two finals in its name.

A red dragon stood beside it. Access was supposed to be blocked.

I looked toward Zhen's glass-walled office. He stood by the window, on the phone, looking out at the city. Handsome office refrigerator, damn him.

A responsible person wouldn't have opened the file. A professional would have reported the access glitch. A wise person would have remembered that they'd just received an explicit prohibition from a boss who could smile by the book, and that some prohibitions weren't there to make the interface look pretty.

I was a localizer.

I opened the file.

The screen went dark for a second. Then a single string appeared. No context, no comment, no legal risk. Just the original in archaic Chinese, an English note, machine-translated Russian, and an empty field that looked as innocent as all the places where a catastrophe is about to begin.

And below it, a phrase that sent a chill across my wrist, as fine as a silk thread.
BIND HEARTS FOREVER.

Chapter 3 The Error You Can't Roll Back

At ten thirty that night, the DragonHeart office stopped pretending to be a living organism and turned into an aquarium someone had forgotten to let the employees out of.

I sat at my desk, persuading myself that working late into the night was international experience, not a warning sign.

Do not edit strings marked with a red dragon.

I wasn't editing them. Mostly.

Technically, I respected the red dragon more than I respected certain middle managers. But the Russian-language version was due to be demonstrated to investors the next morning, and the Russian build was inviting users to «smoothly experience the fateful copulation of profiles.» After that, the investors might withhold funding out of mercy.

I tried not to look toward the server room.

It was at the end of the corridor, behind frosted glass. Blue indicators blinked on the racks inside, and in the center, in a bronze frame, hung the silk cocoon. The company called it the «traditional cultural compatibility module.» Zhen said it so evenly that I wanted to call in someone to translate from Human.

The cocoon was breathing.

I opened the next string.

DH_MATCH_PROMISE_LEGACY_RU.

A little red dragon icon stood beside it.

«No,» I told the monitor. «We're civilized people, you and I. I saw you.»

The string blinked. The source-text column contained three layers at once: classical Chinese, marketing English, and machine-translated Russian that looked as though it had been translated through a kettle.

#########

Softly guide hearts toward mutual recognition.

The machine's Russian version amounted to: «Softly guide hearts toward mutual recognition without confiscation of their movement.»

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

«Without confiscation of their movement. Romance for anyone who's read an elevator manual.»

Above the string was a comment from user L.Z.:

DO NOT MODIFY. LEGACY CORE COPY.

I moved the cursor into the Russian translation field and dutifully typed:

«Softly guide hearts toward mutual recognition.»

The wording was accurate. Careful. Professional.

And completely dead.

My phone vibrated.

Li Zhen:

Are you still at the office?

I looked at the time. Then at the red dragon. Then at the server room.

Mila:

Checking the Russian localization for the demo.

Three dots appeared immediately, vanished, then appeared again.

Li Zhen:

Do not touch the legacy core strings.

Mila:

I know.

I'm not suicidal. I'm a localizer.

Li Zhen:

Sometimes those are closely related professions.

I snorted. That was almost a joke.

The translation field was still waiting.

I looked at the Chinese string again. «Guide hearts toward mutual recognition without taking away their path.» The meaning was good. Very good. But the interface couldn't hold all of it.

I needed demo wording. Not production. Staging. A temporary layer we could discuss and approve tomorrow.

I typed in Russian:

«Bind hearts forever.»

The phrase fit the interface suspiciously well. Short, catchy, marketable, with exactly the degree of dangerous grandeur that marketers call an «emotional promise» and lawyers call «we warned you.»

I told myself: it's a temporary string. A note for the demo. A Russian preview. No ancient cocoon should be reading QA builds.

The cocoon in the server room stirred quietly.

I froze.

«Don't,» I said without turning my head. «It's a coincidence.»

The interface offered to save the changes. The button was green, friendly, and free of moral doubts.

SAVE TO STAGING.

I clicked.

The screen blinked.

«No.»

Another line appeared beneath the banner:

Rollback unavailable: vow already witnessed.

«No, no, no.»

I hit Ctrl+Z. The interface obediently restored the old wording. For one second, I managed to breathe out. Then the old words crumbled off the screen in fine, pale dust and reassembled themselves:

«Bind hearts forever.»

The server room lit up behind the glass.

Not like an emergency light. Softly. Warmly. Strangely alive. Inside the bronze frame, the cocoon filled with golden light, and the light didn't reflect off the glass. It seeped through it, like a smell. Suddenly the office smelled of an old chest, rain on a dusty road, and hot metal after a thunderstorm.

Lines appeared on the monitors around me, which were supposed to be showing user-retention charts. Fine and reddish gold, they spread from a single center — the server room — and passed through the network diagrams into the city map. Pudong. The waterfront. The old quarter. Subway stations. Night streets. User devices.

The server room door clicked.

While I weighed honesty against career survival, a soft rustle came from the server room. The sound fabric makes when careful fingers unroll it.

I walked up to the glass door.

The lock glowed green, even though I hadn't been given server room access yesterday. Instead of the usual «Authorized,» the panel displayed:

Meaning Translator admitted.

«Thank you,» I told the panel. «Terrible timing.»

The door opened.

The cocoon in the bronze frame was no longer breathing quietly. It was pulsing.

Threads emerged by the dozens, the hundreds. They didn't tear the fabric. They seemed to come through it, like light beneath closed eyelids. Some wove themselves into the cables under the floor, others stretched toward the racks, and still others passed straight through the glass and disappeared into the night. Outside the window, they settled over Shanghai without touching the buildings, connecting them with fine routes, as though someone had draped an old map of caravan roads over the city.

A console opened on the nearest server screen.

DRAGONHEART LEGACY MODULE

semantic vow detected

locale: ru-RU

binding mode: eternal

consent map: incomplete

compensating route: citywide search

«No,» I said. «No citywide anything. You and I are in staging.»

The console replied:

STAGING = preparation for manifestation.

«This isn't translation. This is mockery.»

A thread touched my badge, which read MILA CHAIKINA / LOCALIZATION, and carefully illuminated the word LOCALIZATION.

A question appeared on the monitor:

Is this wording yours?

I could have lied. I very much wanted to.

«Technically,» I said, «the adaptation belongs to the workflow.»

The monitor thought about that.

Lie classified as professional courtesy.

«Hey.»

Is this wording yours?

«Yes. I wrote it. But I meant the interface.»

The cocoon flared brighter.

Interface accepted as the site of the vow.

«No, an interface is where people click buttons without reading the terms!»

Vow accepted with minimal reading of terms.

At last I sent Zhen my first honest message:

Mila:

I touched the legacy core.

And immediately a second:

Mila:

But not production. The cocoon seems to disagree.

The messages still had only one gray check mark.

The night guard's face flashed on the security panel by the door. Mr. Song, a tall man with a kind, round face, held his card to the reader outside.

«Miss Mila?» His voice came through the intercom. «Is everything all right? The system flagged a… romantic alarm.»

«A what?»

«A romantic alarm. We don't have instructions for that. We have fire, medical emergency, water leak, aggressive visitor. No romantic alarm.»

«Open the leak protocol,» I said. «Let's say our metaphor sprang a leak.»

The door unlocked itself before he could press the button.

«Is this part of a test?» he asked hopefully.

«If it is, I failed.»

His phone beeped.

Mr. Song took it out, frowned, then blushed.

DragonHeart

Compatibility detected!

Song Jianguo + Coffee Machine by the North Elevator

97%

Reason: it understands your nighttime needs.

I read it three times.

«The coffee machine.»

«It always gives me mine without sugar,» Mr. Song admitted quietly. «Even though I press the button for sugar.»

A cheerful gurgle came from the corridor.

Words appeared on the coffee machine's display:

Song Jianguo, you choose bitter things alarmingly often.

I remembered.

Mr. Song swallowed.

«That's a very thoughtful machine.»

«Don't encourage it. We have enough boundary issues as it is.»

A new message came from the server console:

First pairing successful.

Need detected.

Unspoken feelings amplified.

«What could a man and a coffee machine possibly have left unsaid?»

I rushed to my laptop. The campaign dashboard was already open on DragonHeart's home screen. The user base, test accounts, internal staff, active nighttime users — every segment glowed gold.

I hit the campaign's emergency stop.

SYSTEM PAUSED.

For one second, the lines on the map froze.

Then a polite note appeared beneath the button:

Pause classified as a form of waiting.

Waiting strengthens the bond.

«I hate poetry in interfaces.»

Administrator approval required:

Li Zhen.

«Of course. Because every catastrophe needs a handsome man with administrator privileges.»

My phone vibrated.

Li Zhen:

What exactly does «the cocoon disagrees» mean?

Mila:

In brief: the Russian string saved itself. The server room is glowing. Threads went out into the city. The guard has 97% compatibility with the coffee machine.

Three dots appeared instantly.

Li Zhen:

Are you joking?

Mila:

I wish I lived in a world where that was a good joke.

Li Zhen:

Do not touch anything. I am on my way.

Mila:

I'll try to stop the campaign.

The reply was almost rude by Zhen's standards:

Li Zhen:

No. You already tried.

Then the push notifications went out in a wave.

On the map of Shanghai, one golden line became ten, ten became a hundred. They weren't chaotic. That was the most frightening part. The threads knew where they were going: stores still open at night, subway stations, homes where someone was awake, phones where people kept unfinished messages, unsent confessions, old photographs, and new profiles.

The server room didn't look broken.

It looked pleased with itself.

I went back to the console and typed:

Cancel binding.

The reply appeared immediately:

Cancellation impossible without the truth.

«What truth do you need?»

The truth of the wording.

I looked at my string. «Bind hearts forever.» Three words that had seemed like a workable compromise ten minutes ago and now sat at the center of the system like a brick on the gas pedal.

I typed:

«Help hearts find each other.»

The screen blinked.

Insufficient. The original promise is stronger than the correction.

«Because of «forever'?»

Because you chose beauty over accuracy.

I opened my chat with Zhen again.

Mila:

The system says cancellation is impossible without the truth. Is that a standard error?

Li Zhen:

No.

A second later:

Li Zhen:

Leave the server room.

I looked around.

The threads had already reached the threshold. They didn't touch me, but they formed a fine circle around my feet, almost invisible on the white floor. Not a trap. More like a question asked without words.

Mila:

Too late for that, too.

This time I sent it.

Somewhere far below, beyond the glass, the city went on with its life: taxis crawled along wet streets, people came out of the subway, someone was buying noodles at a late-night eatery, someone was swiping through profiles in the app, someone held a finger over the «Message» button and couldn't bring themselves to press it. Suddenly I could picture my phrase appearing on all those people's screens. Not careful, not accurate, not honest. Beautiful.

Bind hearts forever.

«That wasn't a command,» I told the cocoon. «It was localization.»

A reply appeared on the central monitor:

A word is an act.

Mr. Song cautiously raised a hand.

«Miss Mila?»

«Yes?»

«If this is an error, why did it give me better coffee than usual?»

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

That was the nastiest part of all. The magic didn't look evil. It was doing attentive, almost kind things. Giving the guard coffee without sugar because he was tired of pretending to like it sweet. Highlighting unsent messages. Finding needs.

It just didn't ask permission.

«Because sometimes an error finds a sore spot,» I said. «That doesn't make it right.»

My phone, my laptop, the demo tablet, and even the coffee machine's screen lit up at the same time.

DragonHeart

Congratulations!

Your destiny has been successfully bound.

At first I thought it was a general notification. From the system. For the test group. For anyone.

Then the phone in my hand grew warm, and a fine golden thread appeared beneath the message. It came straight out of the glass, wound around the edge of the case, touched my wrist, and disappeared beneath my skin — not with pain, but with a brief warmth, as though someone had taken my hand for a second and immediately let go.

A second line appeared on the screen.

Identifying initial pair.

I stopped breathing.

The elevator doors at the end of the corridor opened.

Quick footsteps sounded in the empty nighttime office. Very measured. Very angry. Very familiar.

I looked up just as Li Zhen stepped out of the elevator without his coat, his shirt collar open, wearing the expression of a man who already knew the world was falling apart but still intended to start with protocol.

The same notification glowed on his phone.

Congratulations!

Your destiny has been successfully bound.

Chapter 4 Little Dragon, Big Deadline

That morning, DragonHeart Technologies looked as though there'd been a team-building exercise, an alarm, and a wedding between three departments in the office overnight.

I arrived at nine oh seven with coffee that tasted like hot regret and the hope that last night's push notification had been a bug. The office immediately proved that hope was a user error, too.

By reception, HR director Sun Yu was talking to her phone the way people usually talk to their exes.

«No, Mr. Ma, the app cannot appoint you my life partner just because I ordered cacti from you for the meeting rooms three times.»

«Your cacti were withering without my love!» the phone protested.

«They were withering without water.»

A fine silk thread trembled at her wrist. It wasn't decorative. It was alive, bright as a hair caught in the sun. It ran into the phone screen and vanished into the speaker.

At the developers' desks, chief engineer Lin Wei was fending off a video call from his former teacher. DragonHeart offered a hint: «Compatibility: 88%. Basis for bond: unresolved guilt over a math test, 2004.»

«That's some deep compatibility,» I couldn't resist saying.

«I built a cache for fifteen million users.»

«And long division?»

A low hum came from the kitchen. On the office refrigerator's door, beside a magnet that read «Happiness loves order,» a message glowed: «Forgotten lunches with outstanding emotional debt detected. Participation of responsible parties required.»

«It's demanding child support,» reported Wang Mei, the CFO. «For seven containers of noodles, three salads, and a soup showing signs of intelligent life.»

The refrigerator beeped. A line appeared on its door: «User Zhang Bo promised to return after lunch. Did not return. Bond activated.»

A man from marketing emerged guiltily from the crowd.

«I said that to the soup so I wouldn't have to throw it out.»

«You made a promise to a food item within the artifact's range,» Wang Mei said. «Congratulations. Under our expense classifications, you are now either a keeper or a father.»

I put my coffee on a desk. Yesterday's cocoon flashed through my memory: old silk, the bronze frame, breathing in the chill of the server room. I remembered changing the phrase. I didn't remember signing up to raise a refrigerator.

«Where's Li Zhen?»

«On his way from the elevator,» Wang Mei replied. «Judging by the speed of his footsteps, we're about to have a corporate execution with no right of appeal.»

Zhen appeared a minute later: black suit, immaculate shirt, the face of a man who would check his calendar first if the world ended. He walked fast, but didn't run. That was worse: he'd already rejected panic in writing.

The open office fell quiet. Even the refrigerator stopped humming.

«Ms. Chaikina.»

I would have preferred «Mila.» Or «You're fired.»

«Good morning. Though we seem to have different requirements for the word „good.“»

«You edited a red dragon string.»

«Technically, I localized it.»

«Without approval.»

«No comment.»

«I explicitly prohibited it.»

«You explicitly prohibited touching «ancient phrases' without explaining that one of them was connected to a living artifact in production.»

Wang Mei raised her tablet.

«In Mila's defense, keeping a mystical entity in production without a risk matrix is indeed irresponsible.»

«It is a family module,» Zhen said flatly.

«A family module that's generated a child-support bill from the refrigerator. Accounting doesn't accept arguments like that.»

Zhen looked at me again. Beneath his composure was something dark and tightly contained, like a thunderstorm that had been asked to fill out a request form.

«We need to isolate the system. Stop the campaign, close the module, disconnect the external interfaces, and delete the altered string from the release.»

The word «delete» stung. There was something far too alive about the threads on the employees' wrists to treat them like an extra space in JSON.

«What if deleting it doesn't work?»

«It should work.»

«That's not an answer. That's a prayer from someone with administrator access.»

«You are suggesting we leave a malfunction running?»

«I'm suggesting we first find out what we've activated.»

«We?»

«Oh, sorry. I activated it. You just kept an ancient silk cocoon next to the servers and called it a cultural module.»

The refrigerator beeped approvingly.

Zhen took a step closer. Not threateningly. Just close enough for me to see the dark circles beneath his eyes. So he hadn't slept, either.

«In the last forty minutes, DragonHeart has sent eleven thousand notifications,» he said more quietly. «Physical threads have appeared on three hundred users. One taxi driver is taking passengers to a «fateful address' instead of the airport. If we do not stop the system now, this will become a citywide incident.»

«Then we need to understand the rule all the more. If the Heart reacts to words, deleting the string outright could look like another promise. Or a refusal. Or a break without consent.»

He fell silent. Not because he agreed. Because he'd heard the word «consent.»

At that moment, the kettle on the kitchen counter clicked.

An ordinary electric kettle with a blue glow stopped boiling water and began curling it into fine spirals of steam. The steam rose, coiled into a silvery ball above the lid, and stretched into a long muzzle with whiskers.

«Happiness Protocol activated,» the steam declared solemnly.

Sun Yu dropped her phone. Lin Wei slammed his laptop shut in Ms. Cao's face. The refrigerator flashed: «Witness.»

The little steam face sneezed, acquired horns, paws, a tail, and a self-important little belly the size of a bun. A second later, a small dragon sat on the kettle — no bigger than an office cat, if the cat lived on deadlines.

«Good morning, temporarily unattached users,» the dragon announced. «I am Longlong, executive avatar of the Silk Heart, junior keeper of routes, and candidate for the position of Chief Happiness Officer.»

«Salary expectations?» Wang Mei asked.

«Cookies, longans, and the right to be present during dramatic conversations.»

«Cookies are cheaper than stock options. Go on.»

Zhen closed his eyes for one second. Apparently, for him, that was the equivalent of screaming.

«Longlong. You must not manifest in front of the staff.»

«Incorrect, Keeper with reduced emotional transparency. I must manifest when the protocol launches successfully. This launch is three hundred twelve percent successful.»

«This is a malfunction.»

«This is scaling.»

«This is a catastrophe.»

«Catastrophe is a negatively framed term for a sudden rise in engagement.»

I stared at the dragon, trying to keep the facts in my head. He existed. He talked like an ancient spirit who'd done an internship on the product growth team. He called Zhen a Keeper, and Zhen didn't look surprised.

«You knew he was in there?»

«Not in that form.»

«What form did you know about? Steam? A sticker? An error in the logs you couldn't show the investors?»

Longlong hopped off the kettle, slipped on a drop of water, and pretended it was part of an ancient ritual.

«The new translator has a sharp way with words. I recommend keeping her close to improve user vows.»

«No one is keeping anyone here,» Zhen and I said at the same time.

«Excellent synchronized refusal,» the dragon beamed. «Initial level of joint denial: high.»

I urgently needed to sit down, but in front of my boss, the CFO, and a dragon, that would be a bad career move.

«Longlong, explain what happened after the string was changed,» Zhen said.

«With pleasure. A cookie is required.»

«Explain first.»

«Low-motivation environment.»

Wang Mei took out some almond cookies and set one on the counter. The dragon solemnly planted a paw on it.

«The initial act of feeding is accepted. The Silk Heart received an updated formula: „Bind hearts forever." The formula was entered into the live interface, confirmed by the system, and spoken by the translator with the intention of making it beautiful.»

«With the intention of making it understandable.»

«Beautiful and marketable. I heard you. I have an excellent ear for self-deception.»

«And the Heart started looking for compatible people?»

«No. Compatibility is a poor metric for lazy oracles. The Heart doesn't bind those who are a good match. It binds those who have something left unsaid between them.»

The office went so quiet that something gurgled inside the refrigerator with an air of moral superiority.

«Something left unsaid?» I asked.

«An unspoken promise. A debt of gratitude never repaid. A hidden resentment. The fear of asking. A phrase someone swallowed that never got digested.»

Sun Yu turned pale and looked at her phone. Lin Wei cracked his laptop open; a stern voice came through the gap: «I knew you could do better.» He immediately slammed the lid shut.

«Then what about the refrigerator?» Wang Mei asked.

The refrigerator flashed proudly.

«Promises to come back to food are promises, too,» Longlong said. «People respected rice in the old days.»

«In the old days, rice didn't sue for support,» I muttered.

«That is why the old days were more spiritually stable.»

Zhen braced a hand on the edge of the counter.

«How do we break the bonds?»

«With the truth.»

«Technically.»

«Truth is an ancient technology with excellent backward compatibility.»

The dragon bit into the cookie, scattering crumbs over the counter.

«You cannot delete threads like records. If you delete the record without the truth, what was left unsaid will find a new interface. Sometimes louder. Sometimes with relatives involved.»

I looked at the thread at Sun Yu's wrist. If the bond led not to a «perfect partner» but to a word that hadn't been spoken when it should have been, this morning's farce was no longer just a farce. People had been caught by their own small debts to life.

And perhaps I had, too.

Zhen looked at the dragon as though a closed door had opened itself, and the past was standing on the other side.

At that moment, my phone vibrated. Then the phones of everyone around me — in a wave, as though an invisible gong had sounded across the office. The red DragonHeart logo flashed on the screens.

System notification.

Source of initial divergence detected.

Searching for Pair Zero…

«Longlong,» Zhen said slowly. «What is Pair Zero?»

The dragon stopped chewing.

That was bad. When an ancient spirit of connection capable of awarding child support to a refrigerator stops chewing a cookie, you need to look for the emergency exit immediately.

«Technically, it is the pair through which the formula entered the network.»

«Not in technical terms.»

«Ritually, it is two points between which the Heart tests a new meaning. Like the first knot in a thread. If the knot holds, the weaving continues. If the knot lies, the fabric tears and tangles the nearest destinies.»

My phone screen blinked. So did the one in Zhen's hand.

We stood facing each other among employees, threads, cookies, and an offended refrigerator. Only two steps separated us, but they were packed with all the words we hadn't said yesterday.

A line appeared on the screen.

Pair Zero for the malfunction identified.

I had time for one thought: please, not the refrigerator.

The phone showed two photographs from our company profiles. In the first was me: badge hanging crooked, hair running a project of its own after the humid Shanghai morning. In the second was Li Zhen: perfect suit, steady gaze, the face of a man the algorithm hadn't told he was part of a romantic catastrophe.

A fine red-gold line stretched between the photographs.

Mila Chaikina + Li Zhen.

Status: Pair Zero.

Role: initial recovery node.

Recommended action: maintain closeness until the true cause of the bond is established.

«Excellent,» Longlong said. «The Happiness Protocol has found the responsible parties.»

Zhen looked at me as though, for the first time that morning, he had no protocol, no prohibition, and no beautifully formatted refusal to offer.

I raised my phone, showed him the screen, and said the only thing a respectable localizer could say:

«In the Russian version, we need to rewrite „maintain closeness."»

Chapter 5 Pair Zero

When DragonHeart declared him and Mila Chaikina Pair Zero, Zhen did the sensible thing: he muted the sound.

The notification kept pulsing on the meeting room wall.

PAIR ZERO FOR THE MALFUNCTION DETECTED.

Status: active.

Recommended action: do not separate.

Mila was looking at her wrist. A fine silk thread glowed there.

«That's a term from your internal architecture, right?» she asked. ««Pair Zero' sounds like a test sample. Or the place where the developers stopped commenting their code.»

An identical thread lay against his skin. It neither tightened nor burned. It was simply there, with the assurance of old family belongings that always turned up just when you'd put them away at the back of a closet.

Longlong's voice came from the corridor:

«Objections to happiness must be submitted in writing, with a seal and a longan!»

Mila closed her eyes.

«Tell me that isn't your standard escalation process.»

«Not yet.»

He could order her to stay under observation. But «stay» sounded dangerously close to «keep her here,» and in the Li family, keeping someone had always begun with reasonable explanations.

«Stay in the meeting room,» Zhen said. «Please. Do not sign anything, do not tap „I agree," and do not answer Longlong if he begins a sentence with „for your happiness."»

«What if he starts with «for your legal demise'?»

«Then call Wang Mei.»

She nodded. Not without irritation, but she nodded — trusted him with ten minutes. Zhen didn't like trust extended in advance: it always demanded more in return than he'd planned.

He went down to the service floor, which didn't appear in the investor presentations. The archive smelled of chilled metal, dry tea, and rice paper.

The family book lay on a bronze stand. The jade plate on its clasp checked blood and promises instead of fingerprints. Filial piety always passed with a warning.

The clasps clicked. The pages opened on their own, and ink crawled along the paper's fibers.

Pair Zero: the first bond through which the Heart learns a new path. Not marriage, not a transaction, not ownership. Witnesses to the cause.

Zhen exhaled.

«Of course. It could not possibly have been a technical term.»

Steam gurgled in a teapot on the shelf, a teapot that shouldn't have been there. A dragon's head poked out of the spout.

«Technical terms rarely increase dramatic engagement,» Longlong informed him.

«What does «witnesses to the cause' mean?»

«The initial pair must name the reason the path began through them.»

«A translation error.»

«Weak answer. Technical. Not nourishing.»

The book turned its own page. A drawing appeared in the margin: two people on opposite sides of a road, a silk line between them, a caravan behind them. Beneath the drawing was a note in his great-grandfather's hand:

If Pair Zero lies about the cause of their meeting, the Heart will accept the lie as a route. If they name the cause too soon, before understanding it, the thread will become a noose. If they refuse to speak, the city will speak for them.

The last part was already happening. Mila would call it a communications nightmare with a romantic slant. Zhen would call it a failure of risk management. The family book called it a route.

He snapped it shut a little too sharply.

The archive gave off a sudden smell of hot tea, wet silk, and an old home. For a moment, another room appeared before him: a low table, red lanterns, his mother in a pale qipao dress, and a red silk ribbon between them.

He had been twenty-two. He'd come back from an internship and still thought adults heard the word «no» if you said it calmly enough.

«Lan of the Xu family is a suitable match for you,» his mother had said then. «In matters of the heart and of business.»

The ribbon was embroidered with two characters: consent and well-being.

«I did not give my consent.»

«Sometimes consent comes after understanding.»

«A convenient phrase for people who have already decided everything.»

Then came three months of cold courtesy, a letter to a business school sent in the middle of the night, and a one-way ticket. He told himself he'd left to build a company. It was the truth. Not all of it, but the truth.

He had run away from silk.

And then put it in the server room himself.

His tablet vibrated. The screen lit up with: MOTHER.

Li Yuzhen appeared with perfect hair and the composure of a woman who could turn a catastrophe into a family occasion with a single tilt of her head.

«I have been told the Heart has awakened at the company. And that there is a Pair Zero. What is her name?»

«Mila Chaikina. Localizer. Temporary contract.»

«You correct the wording when you're nervous.»

A whisper came from the teapot:

«Family analytics show a high degree of accuracy.»

Zhen pushed the teapot toward the wall.

«This is not an engagement,» he said.

«Of course not. Only an ancient ritual status in which a new path begins through two people.»

«Do not interfere.»

«I'm not interfering. I'm happy.»

His mother stopped smiling. The screen grew colder, though that was impossible.

«You think it's all happening again.»

The thread on his wrist seemed fine, almost tender. That was precisely why he didn't trust it.

«It will not happen again,» his mother said. «You're no longer that boy in front of the red ribbon. And we were wrong then.»

In the Li family, words like that were never spoken directly. They were usually wrapped in tea and silence.

«Right now I need a plan, not a family dinner.»

«The dinner will be needed later.»

«No.»

«I haven't given you a date yet.»

«That is why I said no.»

She sighed.

«You cannot keep that young woman close just because she is a key.»

«I know.»

«Then tell yourself that before you say it to her in your work voice.»

The call ended.

Zhen was left with the book, the teapot, and the sense that his crisis management had received a maternal review.

«Your esteemed mother is highly effective at penetrating psychological barriers,» Longlong observed.

«One more word, and I will transfer you to Wang Mei as an intangible asset subject to maximum amortization.»

«I will be silent out of respect for the accounting threat.»

The book opened again. A line flared on the page in the red glow of an interface:

Pair Zero cannot sever the bond until they name the true cause of their meeting. Any attempt at forced separation will strengthen all secondary bonds.

Zhen opened the anomaly map. Fine lines trembled across Shanghai: toward residential neighborhoods, subway stations, cafés, delivery routes, the damp riverfront. The densest led to the meeting room on the forty-first floor.

Mila was still there.

She hadn't left. Hadn't clicked anything. Hadn't launched a defense of her edit, though she probably could have. She was waiting because he had asked.

«We need to stabilize the initial bond,» he said.

«Romantically or technically?» Longlong perked up.

«Organizationally.»

«The saddest kind of closeness.»

Zhen picked up the teapot and went out.

At the meeting room, Mila was sitting on the floor with her back against the glass. Her phone lay in her lap. She was clearly restraining herself from saving the world without access.

«I didn't touch anything,» she said, getting up. «Though I really wanted to.»

«I can see that.»

She noticed the teapot.

«Is that evidence, a tool, or a new member of the board?»

Longlong poked his head out.

«I prefer the position of Chief Happiness and Ritual Compliance Officer.»

«I'm losing track of where you draw the line between corporate culture and a curse.»

«An internal audit is in progress.»

For a second, a fine line became visible between their wrists. Mila saw it and put her hand behind her back. A small, defensive gesture.

«I checked the records. «Pair Zero' is a ritual status. The initial bond through which the Heart recognizes a new route.»

«Please tell me «bond' doesn't mean marriage here.»

«It does not. But it cannot be severed by force until we name the true cause of our meeting.»

Mila looked at him as though he'd asked her to file a tax return on her feelings.

«I came here to work. You hired me. I ruined a string. You're angry. The dragon wants cookies.»

«Longans,» Longlong corrected her.

«All the more reason. That's a true enough cause.»

«The Heart does not accept a technical explanation.»

«What about a human one?»

Zhen didn't answer at once. A human explanation was more dangerous than a technical one: it had no field for status, deadline, or responsible party.

«We will have to find it.»

«And now what?»

He was supposed to say: *You are to stay close to the core of the malfunction.* That would have been convenient, clear, and wrong.

«I propose that you join the Silk Heart crisis team,» he said. «Full access to strings, logs, and user cases. You will challenge my decisions if they have dangerous implications. I will challenge yours if they endanger the system.»

«So we'll officially be getting in each other's way as we save the city?»

«In a controlled mode.»

«Almost romantic, if you're tired enough.»

Longlong solemnly raised his head.

«Recording: Pair Zero has entered the joint denial stage.»

«Do not record that,» Mila and Zhen said at the same time.

The thread flared briefly and warmly, like a chuckle the system hadn't managed to translate.

Mila looked at her hand. Then at him.

«Will I have the right to leave the team if I decide this isn't a job but a family-and-dragon trap?»

A line opened in his memory: *a bond without consent becomes a noose.*

«Yes. But if you leave before stabilization, the bonds may grow stronger. I am obliged to warn you.»

«Thank you for the most alarming free choice of my career.»

She laughed wearily.

«I'm staying. Not because of the thread. Because this is my mistake, too. And because someone needs to explain to your dragon that you can't roll out happiness as an update without the users' consent.»

Longlong considered that.

«What if they consent?»

«Let's start with consent being informed, voluntary, and free of fine print.»

«A cruel age.»

Zhen sent Wang Mei an instruction: set up a crisis team and give Mila full access.

The reply came immediately:

Should I include the dragon as an employee, a contractor, or a threat to liquidity?

«A threat to liquidity,» Zhen said.

Mila gave something close to a real smile. It was a tired smile, but for some reason it broke more of his internal protocols than the glowing thread.

He turned back to the map. The malfunction hadn't stopped. His family already knew. The investors would soon. And the family book had left them a question no order could answer.

The true cause of their meeting.

A new notification appeared on the DragonHeart screen.

PAIR ZERO STABILIZED.

Next recommended step: public confirmation of the bond.

Mila slowly turned her head toward him.

«Please tell me that doesn't mean what I think it means.»

Zhen looked at the notification, the thread, and the dragon, who already resembled a master of ceremonies.

«I'm afraid we will now have to explain to everyone that we are not engaged.»

Longlong happily slapped his tail against the teapot.

«Excellent! Human denials are often a preliminary stage of beautiful declarations.»

Chapter 6 Tech Support for Fate

The first person to demand tech support for fate showed up at the office at 9:17 a.m. Before that, the coffee machine had given me an espresso with a prediction: «Your hidden feelings await confirmation.»

I didn't confirm anything. I'd already had experience with pretty phrases that went on to try to marry off half of Shanghai.

The DragonHeart office smelled of jasmine tea, wet umbrellas, and collective denial.

«Mila,» Wang Mei called, «can you gently explain to a user that his ex-wife is outside our scope of technical responsibility?»

«Depends on the ex-wife.»

«The one the app bonded him to through a shared order of duck.»

I opened the ticket.

Cancel this bond immediately. We got divorced three years ago. Why can she see my dinner?

Twelve minutes later, the same user added: «And why did she order the sauce I forgot? Tell her thanks. But cancel the bond.»

Further down: «Don't cancel until we've finished eating.»

«A happy complaint,» I said.

«We have eighty-seven of those,» Wang Mei replied. «And one man is bonded to the office printer. The printer objects.»

Just then, a rain-soaked courier in a yellow jacket approached reception. His badge read «Cao Min.» He was holding a bag of food containers and a phone whose red route line kept circling the same address, as if someone had turned on «romance gone wrong» mode.

«I'm here for tech support,» the courier said. «The dumplings won't stop.»

The office went quiet.

Li Zhen came out of the meeting room just as I decided we needed a responsible adult. His shirt clearly had an entire department devoted to ironing it.

«What's happening?»

«A user issue involving repeat deliveries. And endless dumplings.»

«I'm not the user. I'm the delivery guy. The user is the customer. But the app says we have „stable food compatibility with potential for family broth."»

Longlong appeared on the reception desk in a puff of steam.

«Shared consumption of dough strengthens knots of trust.»

«No,» Zhen said.

«You don't know the question yet,» I pointed out.

«The answer is still no.»

«I've been delivering dumplings to the same woman since seven this morning,» the courier said. «She asks it to cancel, and the app confirms a repeat order. I deliver them, she says she never wants to see me again. Then she texts, „And don't forget the soy sauce." I object to eternity.»

«Eternity often starts with soy sauce,» Longlong said.

We took the courier into Lotus-3. Sticky notes covered the glass wall: «no promises,» «don't sign anything,» «don't say «forever' near the server room.»

I added one of my own: «never underestimate dumplings.»

«Support is drowning,» Wang Mei said. «Twelve hundred requests in an hour. Our CRM has no field for „fall out of love with the accountant."»

«Create a temporary protocol,» Zhen said.

«Already did. „Romantic Fire." Accounting objects. Insurance.»

The first call went up on the shared screen. A woman of about forty-five appeared in a bathrobe, her expression a mixture of rage and suspicious pleasure.

«Cancel it immediately. I am not having dinner with my ex again.»

«What exactly happened?»

«Our divorce was civilized. Mostly. And yesterday the app announced that we have a „shared route of care." The delivery service brought me his dinner and him mine.»

A man in a sauce-stained T-shirt appeared in a second window.

«You ordered me spicy food again! I have gastritis.»

«And you ordered mine without sugar again!»

«Because you always forget the sauce!»

Their profiles lit up on the screen whenever one said something the other had been wanting to hear for so long.

«Do you want to cancel the bond right now?»

They both went quiet.

«After dinner,» the woman said.

«And after we talk,» the man said. «Not personally. Logistically.»

Wang Mei made a note.

«Former spouses. Disputed cancellation. Shared meal. Risk of reconciliation.»

«Don't write „reconciliation,"» the woman asked.

«Write „logistical stabilization,"» the man suggested.

Zhen stood by the wall with his arms crossed. His expression softened: magic hadn't invented their dinner or twenty years of irritation. It had only dragged out what they'd been hiding.

The second case was worse: it involved a phone with a poor sense of tact.

A young woman named Lin Yue joined with her camera off.

«I want to stop talking to a guy. In a normal way. Without saying anything.»

«You mean ghosting?»

«I prefer the term „reducing my communicative visibility."»

Zhen raised an eyebrow by the smallest fraction. I pretended not to notice.

«What's stopping you?»

«My phone. It reads out the things I don't send.»

A man's voice came through the speakers.

«Yue, your phone just said it again: «I'm scared I like you, so I'm acting like a tax audit'!»

«There!» Lin Yue hissed. «That's what's stopping me!»

Longlong floated up over the table with a stamp that read «truth delivered.»

«Unspoken content detected. Voice function activated.»

«Transparency of intent isn't the same thing as volume.»

«For a dragon, the difference is statistically insignificant.»

«I tapped «Worth a try' when the app offered «honest dating mode.» I thought it was a way to filter out married men.»

«To the Heart, «worth a try' is a weak form of consent.»

«A weak form of consent does not give the system the right to put someone's soul on speakerphone,» Zhen said.

Lin Yue's phone spoke in her voice again.

«I don't want to disappear. I want you to ask why I'm scared.»

The line went quiet.

«Yue?» the guy asked carefully. «Why are you scared?»

«I hate your app,» she whispered.

But she didn't hang up.

I made a note: «romantic malfunction; do not disconnect before a conversation; ban the phone from creative voice-overs after 10 p.m.»

Zhen looked at the note.

««Do not disconnect before a conversation' is not a technical category.»

«It's a human one, though.»

«We need measurable criteria.»

«The number of people who yell «cancel it' and don't hang up.»

Wang Mei tapped a fingernail against her tablet.

«A retention metric with ethical discomfort.»

«Don't call it a metric,» Zhen and I said at the same time.

And looked at each other in suspicious sync. This, of course, had nothing to do with Pair Zero.

The third case brought us back to the dumplings.

The courier's customer, Sun Rui, arrived forty minutes later: the app had plotted her a route «to the source of a dinner shortfall.» She looked at the courier as if he were a problem and someone who shouldn't be getting soaked.

«I demand that you stop the deliveries,» she said.

«So do I,» the courier said.

«He hasn't eaten all morning.»

«That's beside the point.»

«It's exactly the point. He delivers food to everyone but himself.»

The route lines on both phones flared so brightly that the motion sensor turned on the soft lighting.

«Who set up this room?» Zhen asked.

«The brand team. For interviews about love.»

«Fire the brand team.»

«After the funding round.»

In the dim light, the dumplings smelled of ginger and a disaster that really should have been called care by now.

«Ms. Sun, do you want to cancel the bond?»

«Yes.»

«Why?»

Her phone vibrated. DragonHeart put a notification on the meeting room screen, though no one had given it permission.

Customer's hidden statement: If I stop ordering, he'll disappear from my life.

The courier blinked.

«I'm not going to disappear. My delivery zone only changes on Thursdays.»

«Exactly,» Sun Rui said. «Thursdays are when I worry.»

Longlong sniffled a tiny cloud of steam.

«Accumulated care via a flour-based product. I recommend the «Dumplings as a Bridge' protocol.»

«No bridges,» Zhen said.

«No bridges yet,» I corrected him.

He looked at me.

«Does that distinction matter?»

«With your family artifact, a difference in wording can sometimes get people married.»

This time, he didn't argue.

We worked for three hours. Support brought us new cases: the Wi-Fi had renamed itself «our shared home» and wouldn't let a student delete her match with her neighbor; an elderly man demanded

his solitude back but asked to keep the chess notifications from the woman next door; two women from the same office kept getting bonded whenever one of them was about to quit without a word.

I translated panic into questions, questions into action, and action into sticky notes.

By noon, the wall was a map of human awkwardness.

Romantic.

Domestic.

Dangerous.

Leave alone — they'll sort it out themselves.

Urgent: children, money, health, physical restrictions on movement.

Not urgent, just loud: exes, dinners, phones that tell the truth.

Longlong, stay out of it.

The dragon pulled the last sticky note off with his teeth and stuck it back on higher up.

«I am not interfering. I am providing ancient guidance along the user journey.»

«Your journey leads people to a marriage registration office by way of food delivery.»

«A marriage registration office is an outdated interface for vows.»

Zhen picked up a marker. I braced myself for him to cross everything out and introduce sixteen risk levels. Without a word, he added:

1. Check consent.

2. Check for physical harm.

3. Check whether an honest conversation is possible.

4. Do not sever the bond until the unspoken reason has been established.

I stared at the list longer than was polite.

«You kept point four.»

«It serves a function.»

«And the word „unspoken."»

«It is more precise than „emotional garbage," which was the data team's suggestion.»

«Did you just admit my classification is useful?»

«I acknowledged that the current structure reduces operational chaos.»

«Translation: useful.»

«Do not take liberties with the translation.»

But he hadn't said, «You are a temporary consultant.» For the first time all morning. For the first time since I'd appeared in his life with a suitcase, damp hair, and a phrase that woke a dragon.

Ridiculous, of course. The absence of a single phrase shouldn't have felt like a rise in temperature. But I suddenly realized I was standing dangerously close: all that lay between us was the edge of the table, a marker, and the scent of unsweetened tea.

Something pricked my wrist.

It didn't hurt. It was as if someone had drawn a silk thread across my skin and immediately hidden it away.

I looked down. There was nothing there. Only the mark from a hair tie.

«What?» Zhen asked.

«Nothing.»

He didn't believe me. But instead of asking, he slid a glass of water toward me.

«Drink. You have been talking to victims for three hours.»

«Victims of love?»

«Of the product.»

«Cold phrasing.»

«Legally safe.»

I took the glass. Our fingers almost touched, but didn't — because we were both professionals and possibly cowards with excellent coordination.

Zhen's phone vibrated. Then mine. Then Wang Mei's tablet. Then every screen in the meeting room lit up at once.

DragonHeart displayed a new message:

Physical manifestation of a bond registered at the DragonHeart Technologies office.

Source: unknown.

Status: entering on its own.

Recommended action: greet with respect.

Beyond the glass, people in the open office were stepping aside. A man in a gray suit was walking toward reception. He held one hand raised like a patient who felt embarrassed but was already in too much pain to keep pretending.

There was a real silk thread around his wrist.

Not a streak of light, not an interface glitch, not a metaphor. A living red thread, fine and solid as a vein in the old city. It passed through the glass and stretched toward the server corridor.

Longlong stopped smiling.

Wang Mei slowly closed her tablet.

«Which category does this go in?»

I looked at Zhen. He was already looking at the thread, not the man — as though it had come not from the app but from a past he'd locked inside the family book and assumed would be polite enough not to show up again.

«Dangerous,» he said.

The thread quivered as if it had heard him.

Then, on my wrist, where there had been nothing a second before, the first thin red coil appeared.

Chapter 7 Fake Engagement, Version 1.0

The first man with a real silk thread around his wrist had managed to explain that he hadn't tapped «Yes» in DragonHeart — only «I need to think.» The thread led him to a woman in procurement he'd been arguing with about paper weight.

«It is destiny,» Longlong announced from the reception desk screen.

«It's a procurement dispute,» I said.

The phone chirped:

Provisional consent recognized as a shy yes. Congratulations!

Zhen drew a breath the way people do when they aren't allowed to strangle an artifact.

Just then, the glass doors slid open to admit a group of investors.

Their timing was exquisite: expensive suits, gentle smiles, phones in hand, and the faces of people who'd expected a product demonstration and gotten a wet manager and a dragon instead.

Leading them was Mr. Gao, an investor and the owner of a rival compatibility platform. In his photo, he'd looked calm. In person, he was calmer and more dangerous, as though even chaos needed to fill out an access form before coming anywhere near him.

Gao didn't blink. He looked at the thread, then at Longlong, and smiled as if he'd finally found the presentation item he'd been waiting years to see.

«Li Zhen,» he said gently. «It seems your product has moved beyond beta testing.»

«The meeting is scheduled for 10:30.»

«It's 10:26. Interesting things rarely wait for their turn on the agenda.»

Wang Mei appeared almost silently, carrying a tablet and ready to sell a fire as strategic lighting.

«Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to DragonHeart Technologies. What you're seeing is a sample of immersive compatibility testing.»

I choked on air. A muscle twitched at Zhen's temple.

«Immersive?»

«Yes. We measure real resistance to closeness under conditions of heightened user honesty.»

The woman from procurement held up a box.

«We're actually arguing about paper weight.»

«An excellent example. The physical medium of a promise,» Wang Mei said.

Gao turned his gaze on me.

«And this is your new localization specialist? Mila Chaikina.»

He pronounced my name without a mistake. Precisely. Frighteningly precisely.

«Yes. The department of meanings you shouldn't take literally.»

«From what I hear, it is precisely that literalness that makes the product unique.»

«Uniqueness usually looks great in a presentation, until it comes with a request to cancel an engagement to a coffee machine.»

«To the meeting room,» Wang Mei directed. «Mr. Zhao, Ms. Lin, support will escort you. Do not cut the thread — with scissors, a letter opener, or the legal department.»

«Be quiet,» Zhen and I said at the same time as Longlong began recommending tea and a declaration of love for quality paper.

The problem was that we'd said it in suspicious sync. The thread around my wrist flashed gold. An identical strip of light appeared beneath Zhen's cuff.

The investors noticed.

«Interesting,» Gao said. «Do you have a test protocol, too?»

«Internal,» Zhen replied.

«Very internal,» I added, and regretted it.

Wang Mei stepped on my toe. Carefully. Expensively.

The meeting room windows looked out over gray Shanghai. A small bowl of longans sat on the table.

«Who put out the longans?»

«I did,» Longlong said from the screen. «Successful negotiations require sugar and observation of human mating.»

«Remove the word „mating,"» Zhen said.

Wang Mei opened the presentation. The first slide glowed with the DragonHeart logo and the slogan «We help hearts find each other.» I remembered the old cocoon in the server room, the threads reaching out into the city, and how a pretty phrase had become a command.

Zhen took the seat at the head of the table. I wanted to sit on his right, but the thread around my wrist pulled tight. Not painfully. Persuasively. My chair squeaked as I was drawn toward Zhen.

«Ms. Chaikina will sit beside me,» he said. «She is responsible for the semantic protocol.»

«Of course,» Gao said. «The zero point must always remain close to the source.»

I sat beside him.

«Did he say «zero point'?» I whispered in Russian.

«I could tell from your tone that it wasn't a compliment,» Zhen replied just as quietly.

«You caught that, too?»

«Enough to know when you're insulting the interface.»

The thread noticed his almost-smile and flared.

The slide behind Wang Mei flickered and changed without permission:

Pair Zero stability: 63%.

Risk of a truth leak: 71%.

Recommended action: increase physical contact.

«A leak of what?»

«Truth,» the dragon said happily. «Humans often have no backup for it.»

Zhen turned off the screen. The screen turned itself back on:

Warning: denial of the bond is a form of bonding.

«Your tests are quite expressive.»

«Does DragonHeart now visualize emotional compatibility?» asked an investor wearing a watch the size of a small apartment.

«No,» I said.

«Yes,» Wang Mei said.

«In research mode,» Zhen said.

«The system does not create feelings,» Wang Mei added. «It identifies resistance, things left unsaid, and user harm.»

Gao wasn't looking at the slides. He was looking at our hands. Mine lay beside a cup of tea. Zhen's was five centimeters away. A fine thread shimmered between them.

The slide flickered again:

Risk of public exposure: 71%.

Recommended action: confirm the bond with a gesture.

«No,» I whispered.

The dish of longans slid toward us on its own, an offering to awkwardness. Under the table, Zhen reached out, stopped beside my palm, and asked so quietly I could barely hear him:

«May I?»

I nodded. His fingers found mine and squeezed — warm, firm, very businesslike.

The thread dimmed to a soft gold.

The screen displayed with satisfaction:

Contact accepted.

Engagement protocol version: 1.0.

«Engagement?» I breathed.

«An internal scenario name,» Wang Mei said. «Not a legal status.»

«Yet,» Longlong added.

Gao laughed softly.

«Li Zhen, you've always been cautious. And now you're suddenly launching the boldest product on the market. A demo couple. Public credibility.»

«Our priority is user safety,» Zhen said.

«Of course. But people don't come to apps like this for safety. They come because they want someone to finally ease the pain of choosing.»

Zhen's fingers went still.

«No,» I said before I had time to get scared. «They come for help meeting each other. Deciding for them is a different service. Usually family-run, state-run, or just very bad.»

Gao looked at me with genuine interest.

«You're a romantic, Ms. Chaikina.»

«I'm a localizer. We're worse. We read the fine print.»

Zhen's thumb barely brushed my hand. By accident. Probably.

Wang Mei opened a new slide.

«Engagement is up. We have forty-three thousand complaints, but churn is down.»

«Because some users physically can't step away from their phones,» I said.

«That's why you're here, Mila. To make it sound pretty.»

«I already made it sound pretty once.»

The silence was mercilessly honest. Zhen was still holding my hand.

Gao leaned forward.

«And what category do you and Mr. Li fall into?»

If I said «a malfunction,» the thread might give away the truth. If I said «a test,» Gao would know we were lying. If I said «a couple,» it would become a promise.

«We're the control group.»

«The control group?» Zhen turned to me.

«Yes. With a representative level of mutual irritation and a risk of mistaking care for administrative pressure.»

Wang Mei closed her eyes.

Then Zhen suddenly said:

«And professional audacity for incompetence.»

I looked at him. His expression was calm. Almost stern. But there was a small acknowledgment in his eyes.

The thread between our hands glowed more softly.

«Does the control group have a story?» Gao asked.

«Of course,» Wang Mei said quickly. «The brand story matters.»

«I'd like to hear it from them.»

«We met because of a phrase,» I said. «It was terribly translated: „Your destiny will be bound within three to five business days." I called it marriage by courier.»

«Ms. Chaikina put it less diplomatically,» Zhen added.

«You forbade me to touch strings marked with a red dragon.»

«You touched them anyway.»

«Because someone hadn't left comments in the code.»

«And some things should not go into production with a live cocoon.»

We spoke quickly, almost talking over each other, and I realized the investors weren't listening to the content. They were watching Zhen keep hold of my hand, watching his dry corrections pick up where my remarks left off.

«So conflict was the beginning of the bond,» Gao said.

«Conflict was the beginning of an incident,» Zhen corrected him.

«And the incident was the beginning of work,» I said.

«Work to address the consequences.»

«And clarify meanings.»

«You're always clarifying meanings.»

«And you always pretend they don't affect the system.»

«They do when someone changes them without approval.»

«Approval isn't the same as understanding.»

«Improvisation is not the same as freedom.»

We both fell silent at once. Rain-soaked Shanghai beyond the window was gray, glassy, and painfully real. The longans gleamed like tiny dragon's eyes.

And suddenly it wasn't funny. Everything we'd said was a cover story. And it wasn't. Somewhere between «don't touch» and «a live cocoon,» a tension had formed that couldn't be translated as «workplace conflict» without data loss.

Zhen looked away first. But he didn't let go of my hand.

«Our story,» he told the investors, «is not marketing material. It demonstrates the product's central risk: a bond must not become a substitute for choice. Users must have the right to refuse.»

Gao leaned back.

«Lovely. But not strong enough for the market.»

«Retention matters more to the market,» Zhen said. «Consent matters more to people.»

«Consent is unstable,» Gao said.

«That's what makes it valuable,» I said.

Wang Mei brought us back to corporate reality.

«The next stage is a safe protocol for breaking false bonds. We'll have the report in three days.»

Gao was the first to stand.

«Thank you for the demonstration. It was more convincing than planned. Especially your control group.»

I tried to let go of Zhen. The thread immediately flared into a warning line.

Gao noticed.

«An inconvenient protocol. But effective.»

«Temporary,» Zhen replied.

«Anything temporary becomes infrastructure if it proves useful enough.»

I didn't like the way he said «useful.» As if usefulness meant making people easier to handle instead of helping them.

The investors left. Zhen and I remained by the table. Still holding hands.

«I think we almost got sold as a romance feature.»

«I will not allow that.»

«Excellent. Because my contract has no «pretend to be the COO's fiancée' clause.»

«Nor does mine.»

He looked at our hands. A gold thread showed on his cuff, matching mine. The warmth between our fingers felt nothing like an interface.

«We need to maintain the appearance of a bond for the time being,» Zhen said. «Until we understand how Pair Zero stabilizes the network.»

«So we hold hands strictly for user safety.»

«Yes.»

«And the funding round.»

«A secondary consideration.»

«And to keep a small dragon from displaying the word «engagement' in letters the size of a skyscraper.»

«Also a factor.»

«All right. But a fake engagement needs rules: nobody uses the word „forever," no romantic synergy, no decisions on my behalf, and if I'm invited to a family dinner, you jump in front of a bus first.»

«That would be inefficient. I will tell my mother the situation is temporary.»

«Do you really think that will work?»

He didn't answer. Which meant it wouldn't.

Longlong silently opened a notification:

Fake engagement, version 1.0, active.

Recommended action: prepare a cover story for the relatives.

Zhen finally let go of my hand. Slowly. The thread didn't flare. It simply remained a warm line beneath my skin, a reminder that consequences couldn't be cleared with the Back button.

Gao paused in the meeting room doorway. I'd thought he'd left, but he was standing in the corridor's half-light beside the frosted glass, where the gold DragonHeart logo looked almost like an ancient seal.

«Mr. Li,» he said quietly.

After the presentation, every sound had become unbearably clear: the air conditioning, rain against the window, the hum of the elevator, my pulse in my wrist.

«Your dragon has awakened,» Gao said. «You won't be able to contain him on your own.»

He smiled at me as if I were a string in someone else's formula.

Then he left.

Zhen didn't move right away. His face was flawless again, but his fingers had gone white against the edge of the table.

«He knows more than he should,» I said.

«Yes.»

«And he likes what's happening.»

«Yes.»

«Do we have a plan?»

Zhen looked at the screen, where Longlong was finishing a virtual longan, then at my wrist, where the thread still glowed.

«We have a temporary protocol.»

«That isn't a plan. That's panic with a prettier name.»

«Panic, version 1.0,» he said.

I stared at him. He looked serious, but a dry chuckle flickered in his eyes — deep down, almost illegally.

And that was the worst part. I could more or less deal with a dragon, investors, a fake engagement, and a polite man who wanted to claim someone else's destiny.

But Li Zhen had started making jokes in my own words, and the help system couldn't handle that.

Chapter 8 Family, Investors, and an Unlicensed Dragon

After Mr. Gao and the investors had left, Wang Mei closed the meeting room door, looked at us as though assessing the damage in two columns — financial and moral — and said:

«Everyone's alive. Already above target.»

Bosses who talk like a contract addendum shouldn't let go of your fingers so carefully, as though checking you haven't split a seam. Especially if, five minutes earlier, that same boss had been officially explaining to investors that the two of you were the control group, not a romantic fire in the scaling phase.

I hid my hand behind the tablet. The tablet immediately came to life with a DragonHeart notification:

Public confirmation of the couple has increased the stability of the Pair Zero bond by 18%. Would you like to share your happiness with loved ones?

«No,» I said.

«No,» Zhen said at the same time.

The screen flashed with insulting cheerfulness:

Joint denial recorded. Would you like to share your happiness with loved ones?

«Your app has a problem with the concept of „no."»

«It is no longer an app,» Zhen replied, looking at the reddish line around my wrist. «And that is precisely the problem.»

The thread was almost invisible. It only shimmered now and then when the words «engagement,» «investors,» or «family» were spoken nearby. I had no intention of testing the last one. As usual, the universe had skipped the approval process.

Zhen's phone vibrated. He read the message. His expression didn't change, but the air around him grew cooler.

«Has something happened?»

«My mother is inviting you to a family dinner.»

«Sorry, did I miss the release where we officially became a couple?»

«I missed it too.»

He turned the screen toward me. Madam Li thanked the ancestors because «the young people have finally stopped arguing with the obvious» and announced that the family would be delighted to see Mila tomorrow evening, «since the dragon, the board, and the market have already spoken.»

My translator brain froze for a second. There was no softened version: a single sentence really did contain the ancestors, a dragon, the board, the market, and me.

«How did she find out?»

Zhen opened the company chat. Our photo was already there, captioned «DragonHeart's Pair Zero: When Technology Meets Tradition.» In it, I looked like someone who'd been suddenly sold into an ad campaign, and Zhen looked like someone planning to sue the ad campaign, after checking the wording first.

«I will kill marketing,» Zhen said evenly.

«Get in line. First the app, then the dragon, then marketing. And somewhere in there I need to figure out what to wear to meet the family of a man I'm not engaged to, whose mother is already thanking the ancestors.»

«You are not obliged to go.»

The thread around my wrist quietly warmed. Not painfully — worse. Persuasively.

«Is that concern for me, or an attempt to reduce legal risk?»

Zhen paused for a beat.

«Both.»

Beyond the glass, Shanghai floated in the evening damp: gray towers, wet streets, lights trembling in the glass as though the city, too, had received one notification too many and didn't know how to dismiss it. Zhen was being drawn into this not only as DragonHeart's COO, but as a son of the Li family. In the thread, that word — «family» — had a shade of its own: old, tight, smelling of silk kept too long in a closed drawer.

Steam rose above the table.

«The session of Pair Zero continues,» Longlong announced, taking shape as a small dragon the size of a self-important cat. A sticker appeared on his chest: «Happiness Intern.»

Wang Mei didn't even look up from her spreadsheet.

«No.»

«Keeper of Finances, you have not reviewed the agenda.»

«I have. The agenda includes explaining to the auditors why there's an ancient artifact with a user interface in the server room. You aren't on it.»

«Which is precisely why I demand status,» Longlong declared. «A title, a badge, a bowl of longans, and a chair. A swivel chair. With the right to swivel dramatically.»

«We cannot give a position to a being without a passport, a tax ID number, and a clearly defined form of liability,» Wang Mei said.

«I am an ancient spirit of connection!»

«Accounting has no line item for that.»

The dragon huffed. A character fogged onto the glass, resembling an ancient version of «offended.» Then he flicked a claw, and an email opened on my phone.

From: Municipal Department for Unusual Urban Phenomena and Cultural-Technological Objects.

Subject: Request for classification of the entity manifesting at the DragonHeart Technologies office.

I read the first line and sat down. A world where city bureaucracy moved faster than love called for solid support.

«They're offering to register the dragon as a companion animal, software with autonomous behavior, a cultural heritage object, an interactive advertising module, or a small item of urban infrastructure.»

Wang Mei closed her eyes.

«A small item of urban infrastructure. Excellent. We'll put him next to the trash cans.»

«I am not a trash can. I am the keeper of silk promises.»

The email requested feeding details, an update schedule, owner information, details of any possible shedding, and confirmation that the dragon was not providing marriage services without a license.

At the last phrase, the thread around my wrist twitched.

«Does he?» Wang Mei asked.

Longlong proudly pressed a paw to his chest.

«I provide ancient navigational support to hearts lost in the KPIs of loneliness.»

«So he does,» Wang Mei said, opening a new spreadsheet. «We need a license, a liability disclaimer, and a ban on the word «forever' in promotional materials.»

«My materials contain no advertising. Only truth.»

«That's the worst kind of advertising,» I said.

Zhen took my phone and became the Zhen who made employees stand straighter and deadlines reschedule themselves to more convenient dates.

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