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The Freaks

When the alarm went off at 6:30 in the morning, Victor decided he and the world should sleep for another twenty minutes.

He finally went downstairs at 6:35, not without a lot of yawns and eye-rubbing. “Staying up late again?” asked Mom as he walked into the kitchen. “I’m surprised that you can still get up so early.”

Not without a little trick, thought Victor. “Unlike Oscar, I have a body clock.”

Usually, his brother would rush down the stairs ten minutes before the bus arrived. His parents would bring Oscar’s backpack to the door as he hurried off his breakfast. There would be hugs and nagging, and Oscar would wave back at them as he got on the bus.

Then he would turn around and ask Victor where to sit for today.

Although Victor and Oscar were only one year apart, their parents favored the younger sibling in every aspect. Victor couldn’t count the times he’d stayed at school till eight o’clock, just because both of his parents were at Oscar’s away game. They still cared about him, but whenever Oscar was around, Victor was entirely forgotten.

After lunch, Victor went to the library and settled down at the farthest table from the door, half-hidden behind bookshelves, his favorite spot. He was pondering over a math problem when someone drew out the chair opposite him.

“You’re late, Beatrice.”

“Only later than you, who never finishes his lunch.” The girl chuckled as she threw her bag on the chair.

Victor smiled. Him being antisocial, Beatrice was one of the few students who ever talked to Victor. Victor never knew why a friendly, caring, and smart girl like her would choose to become his friend, but there was nothing more precious than her presence.

A burst of rapid footsteps interrupted him. Oscar scurried into the library, slapped a stack of paper on the table, and babbled at Beatrice, “My essay! Office, locked, deadline by noon! Please!”

Beatrice let out a long sigh. She scooted her chair closer to the bookshelves and, making sure the library was empty, placed her hand above the stack of papers.

A second later, the papers were gone.

“Done.” Beatrice dusted off her hands, “Your essay is now lying right on top of the homework stack, and please don’t ask me to get them back if you forget anything.” And Oscar, who thanked her as if he might swear allegiance, ran off happily.

Victor frowned at where the papers vanished. "You know you should not show your power in front of others."

Beatrice shrugged. "Relax. I only use teleportation to help friends and neighbors, and it's not even a strong power like invisibility, flying, or, I don't know, controlling time."

Victor stiffened for a second. *Beatrice couldn't possibly know my power.* "But it's still dangerous. What if the people you helped rely on your power? Once everyone knows, you will either be treated as a freak or as the goose that laid the golden egg."

To his surprise, Beatrice laughed.

"You're not saying," she covered her mouth to hide her widening grin, "that your brother might force me to help him with every homework assignment? Oh god, what should I do—cry?"

Maybe, Victor thought as he watched Beatrice giggling behind her hand, I should teach her about the darkness of humanity some other time.

At 7:00, there was a downpour, and Victor, sitting by the gate, hoped his parents had not forgotten they had two sons. The school guard kept giving him pitying looks; thankfully he left Victor alone.

Off in the distance, the figure of Victor's parents' car appeared on his left, down the street. He stood up and walked hastily toward it, already planning out the complaints. *Next time Oscar has an away game, I will rather walk home,* he would say to his mom sitting in the front passenger seat.

A car whizzed by him from his back and almost knocked him onto the ground. Mud was splashed all over him. *Great,* grunted Victor, *just my lucky day.*

Suddenly, a chill ran over his body. Instinctively Victor's time-stop ability was activated. As he turned amid the hanging raindrops, his heart hit rock bottom.

There that car was, black and without headlights, on the wrong side of the road. Worst of all, in front of the car, within a hundred yards, was Victor's parents' little white Ford. Within a second, these two cars would collide, except that he paused the time right before it happened.

But Victor couldn't do anything. He couldn't move at all.

Yes, he did have the ability to stop time, but everything in the frozen world was unmovable, except the things he had touched beforehand. The fallen raindrops jailed him inside his umbrella. His stamina was running out due to maintaining the time stop. Besides, what help could he offer if he couldn't affect the world at all?

Powers were supposed to strengthen one, but now Victor felt even weaker. The rain watched him defiantly. The world derided his puniness. Let it happen, they said; things that are in motion can't be stopped.

Victor closed his eyes.

A second later, he heard a loud crash in front of him and smelt the smoke amidst the rain. Footsteps were everywhere, but he didn't open his eyes. He must have dropped his umbrella, for the rain was flowing down his face. And as some warm tears joined the raindrops, for the first time in his life, Victor felt his legs were too weak to hold him.

The door swung open. Oscar rushed into the house and pulled Victor into a tight hug. He sniffed at his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry. I should have asked them to leave earlier."

Victor slowly threw his arms over the sobbing boy and patted him softly on the back. It took him a long time to control his own impulse to cry.

Gradually, the brothers quieted down.

"The driver escaped," said Victor. "Our parents were lucky to be sitting on the left side. The right side of the car was...pulverized." He fell silent. The police said no one on the right side could have survived that extent of damage. *If Oscar had not stayed with his team but rode in the car instead...*

"When will our parents heal?"

"Their conditions are stabilized, but it will still take a long time before they can leave the hospital."

That made money a problem. Although the insurance could help out, they still had to live on their own without any income.

Slowly, Oscar pulled away and walked upstairs. When he reached the top stair, he murmured under his breath, "I wish it had been me."

Victor hunched over on the sofa, his head in his hands. The screaming of the crowd and the hissing of the fire kept coming back to his mind. There was nothing he could have done: it was too late to avoid the accident. *I can stop time. I should've done something.* But he only watched between raindrops and let it go.

Why did I give up so easily?

He was blessed with time-stop ability, yet he couldn't even use it to protect his parents. *And Beatrice has used hers to help as much as she could...*

Victor lay down and closed his eyes. In the darkness, he could see two cars frozen in the air, one second before they collided.

"It is my fault."

"That accident...how could the driver escape? Didn't his car plunge into your parents'?"

Trying hard not to picture the collision, Oscar explained, "His car plunged into our car from the right, so his driver seat was almost intact. I guess the driver just ran away in front of the crowd." He shook his head. It sounded absurd.

Beatrice pondered over the story and dropped her hands onto her lap. A loud metal crash echoed in the library. Oscar covered his ears and stared at her in disbelief. "Beatrice, how in the world...?"

Laying on her lap was a license plate, so deformed and worn out that the letters were barely recognizable. Without hesitation, Beatrice jotted down the numbers on her notebook and quickly teleported the plate back. Together they read out the plate number:

"QAFY693."

Oscar frowned. "Beatrice, you are not going to find the driver, are you?"

Beatrice gave an awkward smile.

"This is absurd. How do you find a guy with just a plate number? Even if you do, what can you get from him? He

fled from the accident!”

“It’s all right. I can get some information by searching that plate number, then I’ll just...”

“What, sneak into the house and take his money?” Oscar sighed. He grabbed Beatrice's shoulders. “My goodness, what chance do you have of stealing, for the first time, and from an unknown place?”

“It’s fine. I have a superpower, after all. Things will work out.” Beatrice moved her eyes away from Oscar’s glares. “You don’t deserve this plight, and *I* can help you.”

No, you shouldn’t. We can handle it by ourselves. This is not your responsibility. You are risking your own safety. All these thoughts rampaged in Oscar’s mind and they stumbled out together in one sentence: “It’s none of *your* business!”

The whole library went dead silent, and Oscar realized what he had said. “I’m sorry, Beatrice, that’s not what I mean! I just don’t want you to....”

“Nope, it’s fine.” Beatrice pulled away from his grip and looked straight at him with a smile that brought chills down his spine. “I am just a meddling freak.”

She swung her bag at his face and stormed off.

The adult world of deposits and insurance policies was complex and harsh, and Victor was already exhausted from it while his schoolwork remained untouched. Things shouldn’t have gone like this at all, he thought indignantly. That driver should have compensated them.

And then he remembered.

The scene before the crash had been engraved into his mind, every detail of it, the colors of the cars, the brand, ... the license plate.

Victor grabbed a pencil and jotted it down on a sticky note. Someday—no, tomorrow—he would go and visit that driver’s house. *To bring back the money we deserved.*

He pasted the note on the center of his table.

“QAFY693.”

Beatrice looked up at the house. The inside was too dark for 9:00 in the morning. Thanks to the license plate number, she had gotten the address and the name of this driver. *Somebody was right about me meddling in his business*, she thought bitterly. *Let him see what I can do.*

She opened her right hand. A small shining key was lying in her palm, still warm from its owner’s heat. Beatrice stepped to the door and, after making sure nobody was around, put the key into the keyhole.

The door creaked open. It was a big house, with an empty hall and a staircase leading to the second floor. Some of the rooms on the first floor were closed, perhaps locked. Nevertheless, the doors on the second floor were all ajar, revealing glimpses of mattresses behind them. It would take less time to explore the open rooms, thought Beatrice, as she softly closed the door and headed to the stairs. She frowned as her footsteps echoed in the hall: every corner of the house could hear her coming. *It’s just like what I did before, helping out with my power! I am giving my friends justice.*

The bedrooms were tidy but bare, and all the drawers and closets were empty. What was worse, the spacious room

seemed to amplify every sound she made. More than once, she swore she heard footsteps behind her, but they faded away when she reexamined the room.

Only one room was left: the farthest bedroom on the right. From the half-opened door, she saw an unmade bed near the window. *So the driver lives here*, she thought, reaching for its doorknob.

Suddenly, a wave of sirens pierced the window. Immediately Beatrice retracted her hand and backed away from the room. An ominous feeling hung over her: were they coming for her? But how have they found out?

All at once, the bedroom door flung shut right in front of her; its strength shook the whole house and added another layer of noise above the sirens.

There was no hesitation. Beatrice rushed to the staircase. Her brain ran frantically: there was still time for her to run out the back door and race through the garden, perhaps opening a hole in the wall; or she could risk walking out the front door casually, pretending to be a tenant of the house; or maybe she should hide in a cupboard...

She was five steps away from the first floor when someone abruptly pushed her from behind. She fell forward, hitting the stairs hard on her face, and blacked out.

Beatrice felt horrible. Her nose had been bleeding, but now the blood had coagulated and stuck under her nose. Her forehead was also tingling, and she might have twisted her left ankle. It was hard for her to focus her pupils with a swirling mind.

Then, when she finally saw her surroundings, she hoped it wasn't real.

She was locked in a police car on the other side of the street with her wrist handcuffed to the bars. All the police were outside investigating the house. No one would notice her if she teleported away, but she couldn't: her ability did not apply to herself. For once in her life, Beatrice felt incapable.

A voice rang next to her, "I see you understand the situation now."

The car was empty.

"Here, on your right."

At first, there was nothing in the passenger seats. Then, when Beatrice looked closer, the air seemed a bit distorted. All at once, a man popped up next to her with a smile on his face. Beatrice gasped and pulled back, hitting herself hard on the car handle. "You...you were inside the house! You pushed me down the stairs!"

The man's smile widened. "Well, I would rather call it 'legitimate defense'." He sat in such a polite demeanor like a gentleman. "So, what errands have brought a young lady like you here?"

His elegant words made Beatrice sick. "I believe some 'gentleman' was recently involved in a car accident and did not take responsibility."

The man leaned closer. He did not even attempt to hide a sneer.

"I see, so you have come for justice. I must say that your courage is incomparable, but you fail to think through your plan, and any actions without thinking come with severe costs."

"You see, I have only had a few drinks too many, and my car raced to the other side of the road. Luckily, my instincts activated my body and I successfully left the scene amid the chaos."

Beatrice's eyes widened. The man laughed. "So helpful, isn't it, invisibility and teleportation? To be honest, when my key magically transferred from my hand into yours, I was surprised that there were other freaks like me out there.

So, I called the police outside the house while you were rummaging upstairs.” He smirked, “Did you find enough compensation?”

“I have enough of your fancy language.” Beatrice glared at the man. “You drove drunk, caused an accident, and fled! Those powers are gifts, and you waste them on avoiding responsibilities? Now there you are, pleased with your deeds and fake politeness.” She couldn’t hold the flames in her eyes. “Where is your shame?”

For about ten seconds, the man’s face twisted between rage and restrained anger, and Beatrice feared he would lunge at her there and then. At last, after a few deep breaths, the man regained his manners with a stiffer smile.

“You might forget, my dear friend, that you are inside a police car. Do you understand what that means?” Beatrice froze.

“Did you know your parents had been notified of your theft? How disappointed and heartbroken they are right now, can’t you imagine?”

“And there’s more. You will be expelled from school. Your friends will know your deeds. Your name will show up on the news and people will remember you as a burglar. Worst of all,” his lips were within an inch of her ear, whispering, “the record of theft will leave a permanent taint on your record and affect your whole, promising, life.”

Beatrice had guessed the consequences of her action but had not prepared to face them. Now, she was utterly petrified.

“Unlike me, your ability is not for escaping. Normal people will treat all your noble deeds as laughable excuses. Besides, will your parents still trust you when all their common sense says otherwise?”

Once again, Beatrice felt helplessness submerging her. The man saw it, too. He gave his finishing stab.

“Now, when justice is unsupported, would you rather, ‘flee’?”

The car door swung open and shut.

Victor hadn’t seen Beatrice for the whole day. It was a pity; he planned to tell her his plan and maybe even show her his power. Now it seemed that he had to find the driver alone.

It was 4:00 in the afternoon. He had promised Oscar to cook dinner with him at 7:00. Enough time to get what he wanted. *This is my fault, and I am going to fix it.*

He looked up at the house he arrived at. It was dark inside. The owner was probably out.

The man leaned against the window on the second floor of his dark house to get a perfect view of his front gate. There, a teenage boy was looking around, his hand reaching for the doorbell.

He dialed a number from his recent calls.

Instinctively, Victor looked up.

Behind the window on the second floor, the air looked distorted.