

Priorities

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Kian Seng stood up from his desk and stretched himself out, extending his hands high into the air as much as possible, and giving himself a good stretch. He had been at work for the last thirteen hours, and it was nearing the evening. If he had his way, he would be working even more, but the office management was adamant that all staff had to leave the office by seven o'clock in the evening; that was when the entire building would go into lock down mode, with the air-conditioning and lights switched off, and the doors electronically locked. He had undergone such a situation before, and didn't like the outcome. The office at night was stuffy despite the general coolness of the darkness, and perspiration had a way of just clinging on without ever letting go.

He completed his stretch and locked the screen to his computer and made his way to the subway station that was just outside the office complex. Like all the other late leavers, Kian Seng had already stuffed his ears up with his ear buds that were hooked to his cell phone which doubled up as his portable media player. He tapped his contact-less fare card at the turnstile and made his way on to the subway platform with Tristania blasting through his ears. Soon, his train arrived and he hopped on to it, oblivious to the world and held his ground in the rocking train as the doors closed and the subway moved off. Some thirty minutes later, Kian Seng was already back at his apartment.

He kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks as he closed the main door with his butt, after which he unbuttoned his sleeved shirt and went to the bathroom to take a shower. Dinner was a microwave quick meal that he had stocked up just the weekend before, and as he ate, he started to boot up and log into his desktop computer.

While the office management had a hard lock down in place, there was still a work around for those who simply had to get work done. The company servers were not shut down, and those who had private network access to the machines could still do some work from the relative comfort of their homes. Kian Seng's team was facing a hard deadline for a big project, and he had no choice but to keep such non-stop working hours for the past month just to keep up. Living alone had its advantages, among which was the freedom to wear whatever one was comfortable with to do work remotely. Kian Seng sat at his desktop computer dressed in nothing more than a pair of boxers that he had put on after the shower. The evening air was humid and stagnant, and the apartment did not have any form of air-conditioning whatsoever. No matter though, he was comfortable the way he was.

He kept on typing on his computer, working for two hours without stopping. Then his cell phone rang. Ignoring it, he kept on typing out line after line of code. But the phone kept ringing. Irate, he stopped his work and picked up the call.

"Kian Seng here. Who's calling?"

"It's Tian Xing," a soft female voice replied on the other end.

"Oh sis? What's this about?"

“Mum’s in hospital.” Tian Xing sounded as though she had been crying on the other end. Though her sentences were short, they were barely audible.

“You have to speak up. Did you say that mum’s in the hospital? What happened to her?”

“She hurt herself bad when she fell off the ladder while cleaning up the house during spring cleaning, when none of us were home.”

“Okay,” Kian Seng replied as he rested the cell phone on his shoulder and began typing anew. “What do you want me to do? I have a project deadline that is coming up this Friday. I can’t leave or anything.”

“You’re a terrible person!” Tian Xing shrieked through the phone. “Your mum fell and hurt herself bad enough to be hospitalised and before I can even say anything you’re telling me you can’t even be bothered to come visit her? What kind of son are you?”

“You shut up!” Kian Seng roared through the phone. “You’re just a little brat still going through college. What do you know about the real world and the need to make money to make ends meet? Don’t you dare lecture me on things like this, you ingrate! Who do you think is the one sponsoring your education!”

“Well, I can’t be bothered with you!” Tian Xing replied in a cold yell. “I didn’t want to call you, but mum insisted I do so. You do what you deem fit!” And with that, Tian Xing slammed the phone down.

Kian Seng heard the line cut off, the end-of-call beep repeating itself at regular intervals. He dropped the phone down on to his lap skilfully before picking it up and putting it on the table.

He paused for a moment to contemplate the exchange, before shrugging and going back to his work.