

48 Hours 521

Chapter 521 Quick Rescue

“In the afternoon, you asked a friend to keep an eye on the Church of the Sacred Heart. Did you suspect Father Jacob at that time?”

In the carriage, Holmes seemed a little surprised.

“No, I didn’t suspect Father Jacob at that time. I’m not targeting the Church of the Sacred Heart.” Zhang Heng shook his head. “You said that the letter came from the church, and although we cleared Father Jacob in the morning, I haven’t given up completely on this lead. Instead, I asked a friend to help me investigate churches in the Whitechapel District. To find out the true attitude of those churches toward prostitutes, she even put on some makeup, masquerading herself as one.”

“Are you talking about Miss Irene Adler?” Holmes came to a sudden realization. “She is indeed a better makeup artist than me.”

“That’s right,” replied Zhang Heng.

“You seem to be very concerned about your bet this time. Allow me to express my opinion on this matter,” Holmes said. “It is unwise to put such a beautiful lady in such grave danger, especially when Whitechapel is shaken by fear of the serial killer.”

Zhang Heng decided to be frank when it came to this. “This incident has developed in ways that have completely exceeded my expectations. I initially planned to meet up with her after investigating Mark Cohen, but I didn’t expect to encounter the police in his residence.”

Zhang Heng had been mingling with Holmes for several months. He knew how certain Scotland Yard officers, Gregson and Lestrade, for instance, were familiar with him. Unfortunately, low-ranking police officers knew very little. Most had never even heard of Holmes’s name, a similar story with the two policemen Zhang Heng encountered at Mark Cohen’s residence. Knowing he still had a long way to go before the quest could be completed, Zhang Heng didn’t want to offend Scotland Yard just because of some misunderstanding. Hence, he elected to surrender his weapon voluntarily.

At first, when he arrived at the police station, he thought someone there would recognize him. After he told the officers in charge of his arrest about his situation, Holmes had been messing with him, which was why no one released him from the cell.

It wasn’t until the Mark Cohen investigations were over that Zhang Heng had time to meet with Irene Adler. By that time, it was completely dark. They then saw a carriage crashing into a fruit cart, overturning it and blocking the road. The coachman and the fruit farmer locked themselves in a heated dispute, and after waiting for a long time, Zhang Heng and Holmes decided they should just switch carriages. By that time they arrived at the East End, it was already around nine in the evening.

“Did you both agree to meet here?” asked Holmes as he alighted the carriage.

The two now stood at a small pavilion, a relatively prosperous place at the East End. Nonetheless, they caught no sight of Irene Adler anywhere.

Although Zhang Heng was worried about her, Irene Adler wasn't in a situation as dangerous as he had imagined. Other than the fact that the authorities had increased the number of patrols after the three murders, Mark Cohen's arrest managed to ease Whitechapel District's tensions. Whatever the relationship between Father Jacob and Jack the Ripper was, he obviously wanted Mark Cohen to take the fall. If that were to be the case, the real Jack the Ripper should now be in hiding since Mark Cohen had been arrested.

But for some reason, Irene Adler still hadn't shown up.

Was it because she had waited too long and decided to return? It might be the reason she didn't show up as promised. After all, he did arrive several hours later than the agreed time, and Irene Adler certainly wasn't the kind of lady that would stand in the same spot, waiting for hours until Zhang Heng arrived.

Before leaving, she should also be smart enough to find a way to notify Zhang Heng. He became increasingly worried that Irene Adler might have been a little too smart for her own good. Having discovered Father Jacob's anomalous behavior, she might have investigated him alone. Of course, Father Jacob would not just sit there and wait for Irene Adler's big exposé.

The Church of the Sacred Heart shut its doors at eight. Father Jacob lived in a small house behind the chapel. Without wasting any time, Zhang Heng and Holmes rushed there, and upon their arrival, they found the house to be completely dark. Zhang Heng entered the house through the window, and Holmes, the front door.

Upon deeper inspection, they found the house to be empty.

Only an elderly dog lay on the floor, so old it could hardly move. It couldn't even manage a bark when a stranger broke in.

Holmes lit a candle, and the two scanned their surroundings. Unlike Mark Cohen's bloody cabin, Father Jacob's cottage looked just like an ordinary priest's residence. Sparsely decorated, a worn and well-read Bible was beside the bed. And that was it. There was nothing else worthy of note inside the house.

According to descriptions by the prostitutes, Father Jacob's daily routine was simple and straightforward, even considered to be rather rigid. He would either be working at the church or spending time at his residence and being anywhere else for the clergyman was a rarity. Since the church was closed and he wasn't at home, something was definitely not right. Holmes walked around the kitchen for a while. He was about to say something but decided to keep it in instead.

The disappearance of Irene Adler and Father Jacob made the whole situation a little uncomfortable, especially how Irene Adler only got involved in this matter because of entrustment. If something terrible happened to her, it would be difficult for Zhang Heng to forgive himself. Right now, it was imperative Father Jacob was located as quickly as possible.

In comparison to the sloppy Mark Cohen Father Jacob was a more cautious man. He left nothing in the house that would lead Holmes and Zhang Heng to him. The only notebook left behind was related to theology.

The entire house was in pristine condition, almost spick and span. Zhang Heng stood at the desk, closing his eyes. After half a minute he opened his eyes again.

“Church.”

“Mm?”

“No matter what relationship Father Jacob has to Jack the Ripper, it will not change the fact that he is a devout priest. Jack the Ripper knew about those prostitutes through Father Jacob, and as a priest, he had sworn an oath to keep those confessions confidential. I don’t think he leaked it intentionally. Jack, the Ripper, must’ve overheard it.” Zhang Heng paused before he finally concluded, “There is probably a secret room in the church, beside the confession room.”

“Below.”

“Eh?”

“That secret room is not next to the confession room, but below it. There is to be an empty space below the confession room!” Holmes pompously interjected. “I discovered it when I made my confession at the church. It was obvious when I stepped on the floor. I thought a basement had to be beneath it.”

Chapter 522 Just Wait A Little Longer

Zhang Heng and Holmes got to the church as quickly as they could. The rusty brass lock on the door wasn’t about to stop them from getting in. Holmes struck the lock with his cane with oomph and hurrah, only to find the stubborn old thing not budging an inch.

Defeated, he stepped aside and watched as Zhang Heng pulled out his revolver, firing a deafening shot at the lock. The two then ran into the church.

As was the case with Father Jacob’s residence, there was no one here. Moonlight poured through the stained-glass windows and lit up the pews with a kaleidoscope of colors, creating an atmosphere of enigmatic tranquility and stillness.

“Find an entrance,” Holmes instructed Zhang Heng before the pair split up.

Irene Adler, now underground, heard the movement above her. She struggled, twisting and squirming hard, but her hands and feet were tightly bound. Gagged with a piece of cloth, the only sound she could manage was a muffled whine.

Father Jacob continued praying fervently by a wooden table as if he hadn’t heard the gunshots.

But who the opera singer feared more was the other person in the room—a man between the ages thirty and forty, his skin paler than a ghost, as if he had never spent any time under the sun at all. His long and unkempt beard looked like it hadn’t been shaved for a long time, and he was thin, except for his pair of sinewy arms. A tattered old coat covered his body, and as he sat by the bed, he watched on at Irene with intrigue.

The priest seemed to have read the opera singer’s mind. “They won’t be able to get in. This secret room was a shelter built during the Middle Ages, and even if you were to dig your way, it’s not something to be accomplished in a day.”

Upon hearing that, Irene stopped struggling. The pale man was getting impatient. "Are you done yet? Can I start already?"

"Not yet. Just a little while more," replied Father Jacob without turning around to look.

The priest picked up a blood-stained leather apron from under the table. He turned to Irene, "You must be wondering why we've chosen you... This is all because of me because of a mistake I made when I was young."

"Can we leave the stories for later?!" the pale-skinned man snapped, but when he saw the apron, his eyes lit up.

"It won't take long," said Father Jacob. "Don't you remember what I taught you? We have to be polite and patient."

The pale-skinned man immediately stopped talking, and his face flushed red.

Father Jacob continued, "As I said—I've made a mistake. I was only nineteen then. Father Matthew wrote a letter to the church saying how short-staffed Sacred Heart had become. But at that time, priests were scarce, and barely any of them were willing to come to the East End. But I was young, zealous, and fervent, so I volunteered to go and help.

"I must admit—I came from a family of squires, and at the beginning, I had great difficulty adjusting to life here. I came to London when I was sixteen and stayed with Father Abelson. We occasionally visited the poor here in the East End, but it's different when you actually live here. When I first arrived, I was a little depressed. I wanted to go back to Father Abelson badly, but I was afraid people would think less of me because I couldn't bear the hardship.

"It was also around this time that I met a girl, Emma. She was a prostitute, only sixteen, and new to the trade. Her father died, and her mother ran away with another guy, so she had no choice but to do what she did to survive. But unlike the other girls, she would attend church every week, and that was also how we met.

"Perhaps because we were about the same age, that she felt I was different from the rest of the congregation, and she would often come to talk to me. I was in a rut myself, and many a time, she ended up being the one to comfort me."

Father Jacob seemed to be lost in the past as he spoke.

"Father Matthew had warned me before, but I did not take him seriously. I thought I was doing a good thing, leading a lost soul onto the right path. I became so complacent until one night, she came to see me. It was very late; a demanding customer had just hit her, and she cut her arm on some glass. I patched her up, and as I was getting up to leave, she kissed me. It took me by surprise, and my mind went completely blank. She then threw herself on me, and I wanted to push her away, but I don't know why I lacked the strength to do so. And then, it just happened.

"She disappeared before dawn, leaving me behind. Only then did I realize what I had done. I was filled with guilt and shame, knowing that I would have disappointed many

– Father Abelson, Father Matthew... and myself especially. Whatever the excuse, whatever that happened that night, shouldn't have happened! I wanted to fix it. So, from then on, I made a decision to avoid Emma. She came to church to see me several times, but I pretended I wasn't there. At night, I would lock the door of my lodging and wouldn't open it no matter who came knocking. After a while, she finally disappeared from my life.

"It was a huge relief, at first. I thought I had gotten away with it, but what I didn't know, was how it was the beginning of a nightmare."

"Can we start now?" the pale man interrupted, reaching for a scalpel from under the pillow. "Give me some time," replied Father Jacob, in a stern and commanding tone prompting the pale-skinned man to put the scalpel back.

"About a year later, I found an infant at the door of the church. Amid the shrouds covering it, was a letter with no signature. But I recognized Emma's handwriting. She claimed that it was our child and although there was nothing to prove it, I don't know why I believed her," Father Jacob paused. "...I just believed her," he repeated.

Irene looked at the pale man, and suddenly, she came to an understanding. Father Jacob nodded. "Yes, he is the child. I sent him to the orphanage, but he did not live a good life there. After he came out, I helped him get a job at the hospital, but he could never last long in one place. Only five years ago, Father Matthew retired and moved to the suburbs, so I was left alone in the Church of the Sacred Heart. I allowed him to live down here, and I told him the truth about his mother and me. I only wanted him to know where he came from, and I definitely didn't expect him to blame his mother for his miserable life."

"Can we start now, Father Jacob?!!!"

The pale-skinned man screamed at the top of his lungs. Obviously, his patience was running thin.

"She's all yours! I've never let you call me father, but now, you can call me your father," said Father Jacob.

Chapter 523 The Truth

Irene Adler watched in dread as the pale man got up from the bed and approached her. His eyes darted around in excitement, like a child who had discovered a new toy, not to mention how he seemed to have a perverse attachment towards her. The demented smile on his face reflected off the scalpel in his left hand.

The knowledge that she was all alone, and that no one would be coming to her rescue slowly sank in. Irene Adler shut her eyes in despair. A few seconds later, there was a loud rumble right above her, the sound of someone opening the entrance to the secret room. When Zhang Heng and Holmes rushed down with their revolvers, they were bewildered by what they saw. They never expected to bear witness to such a peculiar sight.

Irene Adler's hands and feet were still bound, unable to move. Father Jacob stood beside her, with no emotion on his face. A middle-aged man was lying in a pool of blood beside Father Jacob, and engraved on his face was an 'I-can't-believe-this-is-happening-to-me' look; his eyes staring woefully at Father Jacob as if asking why.

When Father Jacob saw Zhang Heng and Sherlock Holmes, he threw away the bloody knife in his hand and said calmly, "I'm glad that both of you are here. I'm the one that killed him."

Holmes squatted, examining the middle-aged man. He saw the wound on the back of his head and shook his head.

"It's too late."

Zhang Heng walked past the corpse, approached Irene Adler, untied the ropes on her hands and feet, and removed the rags from her mouth. Once free, she spat on the ground, getting rid of the strange taste in her mouth. Earlier, Zhang Heng had his Evil Wall ready for its final usage, but fortunately, Holmes managed to find the entrance within three minutes.

When the two rushed in, they thought that they would encounter a hostage situation, but the result turned out a surprise. Zhang Heng subsequently heard a system notification from the game that his main task was completed. Although he still had many doubts in his heart, it was not the time to dwell on such matters. The two detectives tied Father Jacob with the rope that bound Irene Adler, then notified the authorities.

Holmes stayed in the basement, guarding Father Jacob while waiting for backup from the police to arrive. On the other hand, Zhang Heng sent Irene Adler home, staying there until six in the morning before returning to 221B Baker Street. At that time, Holmes had already returned from the police station.

He looked content, and he even ignored Mrs. Hudson's protests, going straight ahead to his room to rub on his fiddle. It's loud and unmistakable melody echoed around the walls of the old apartment. Playing the rather raucous instrument in the wee hours of the morning, the neighbors might just come over and silence him for good.

"It seems you've got ins and outs of the whole thing figured out," said Zhang Heng. "It seems you can watch the operas for free in the future," replied Holmes at almost the same time.

"This might not be the most complicated case I have encountered, but indeed, it can be regarded as the most interesting." Holmes put down the violin and finally turned the topic back to the case.

"Father Jacob made a mistake when he was young and, he had an illegitimate child with a prostitute. Although I don't think he was really his child, all of that doesn't matter anymore. The important thing is that the matter had always been a knot in his heart. He is willing to treat that child as flesh and blood, or perhaps, is simply punishing himself, hoping to atone for his past mistakes."

Zhang Heng had already learned about these from Irene Adler, hence he wasn't surprised. He signaled for Holmes to continue.

"The birth of this child was a mistake. He is the fruit bore of a priest and prostitute after allowed their desires to rule over them. They are not even considered to be in love. To protect his reputation, Father Jacob had no choice but to send him to an orphanage. Having such an environment for a childhood, his character inevitably became withdrawn and gloomy. Father Jacob said that seeds of evil were buried in his body. I have a way different view on this matter."

Holmes lit the pipe. “The police and Father Jacob himself believe that Jack the Ripper murdered those trick girls out of revenge for giving birth and abandoning him. However, I think the murders were some sort of ritual to trace his life’s origin. Of course, not to mention how he must be dying for attention, much like the rest of the serial killers. The letter sent to the newspaper is the best proof of my speculation.”

“How about the uterus?” Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, I think that the uterus, in this case, is a significant symbol. It’s an important organ relating to reproduction, and it is also a place where the fetus grows. Jack the Ripper ripped out the victim’s uterus, indicating that he hopes to find a sense of belonging. For instance, he chose prostitutes who had given birth to children, drunkards, and those who constantly lived among men. Through these characteristics, he connected these victims with his biological mother. Each time he committed those crimes, it was then that he felt the closeness between himself and his victims. He feels as if he had found his mother...amazing. Emma gave him life, and he took that very life away from those prostitutes

-a perfect cycle.” Holmes blinked, “Of course, the latter part is just a speculation of mine. Jack, the Ripper, is dead, and I guess my speculations will probably never be confirmed. Speaking of Jack the Ripper, let’s talk about Father Jacob-I have to admit that his role, in this case, went beyond expectation. Remember our previous speculation?”

“Mm?”

“We had all agreed that there was no accomplice in this case. In the end, when you connected Father Jacob to Jack the Ripper through Mark Cohen, a brief period of confusion hit me. The fact also proves that Father Jacob was not an accomplice of Jack the Ripper.”

Holmes continued, “Jack the Ripper nestles silently in the secret room under the Church of the Sacred Heart’s confession room. This allowed him to eavesdrop on many secrets, secrets that should have always stayed within the confines of the cubicle. Father Jacob didn’t realize that his son had committed the first crime until he took the initiative to confess to him. At that time, Father Jacob was caught in a dilemma. He did not want Jack the Ripper to continue with his killing, but on the other hand, the murderer was his and Emma’s child. This is where he found a reason to protect this child, hoping to atone for neglecting his son throughout his youth.

“So he made another wrong choice. He decided to hide this matter and hoped he’d be able to control the beast. At the same time, he began subconsciously guiding Mark Cohen, who has a mental health condition, intending to use him as bait to misdirect the police. From a father’s standpoint, it all makes perfect sense to me.”

“But he obviously overestimated his abilities and Jack the Ripper’s long-repressed mental health troubles. Hence, the second and a third murder case. When the whole thing began to go out of control, Father Jacob realized that he couldn’t stop Jack the Ripper. Then, when Miss Adler came to look for him, Father Jacob saw her be the perfect target for Jack the Ripper. So he kidnapped her, but not to let his son kill her

—he was using her to test his son. “He wanted to see with his own eyes if his son had defeated the devil in his heart or not. He had repeatedly promised that he would not commit those crimes again, but the

results disappointed the father... From Jack the Ripper's reaction, Father Jacob knew that more people would inevitably lose their lives as long as his son was still alive. Thus, he was left with no choice but to end his son's life."

Chapter 524 Deductive Reasoning (End)

Holmes described the case from beginning to the end as simply as he could. However, words could never perfectly depict the complicated feelings and relationships involved in this case. Whether it was Father Jacob and Jack the Ripper, or the relationship between Jack the Ripper and the victims, it was probably more complicated than the world could perceive. It was a pity that they couldn't find the answer to those questions since Father Jacob killed Jack.

No matter what, the case was finally over. This was the best result that one could compare with the real-time cold case that would take place seven years later. Holmes stretched his arms, telling Zhang Heng, "You won the bet this time. Although you put yourself in grave danger, I can't deny that you were always one step ahead of me. Now, you can execute the privilege of the winner. It's time to choose the opera to watch tonight."

"Really?" Zhang Heng asked, "But why do I feel as if you didn't give it your best? Deliberately let me win this time?"

"Who knows, you seem to have an unexplainable reason-you have to beat me once."

Holmes smiled, "But I did try my best this time. After all, solving crimes is a passion of mine. It would be hard placing a roasted turkey before a food connoisseur and asking him not to eat it."

Two hundred seventy days seemed like a long time, but for Zhang Heng, who had been continually absorbing new knowledge every day, time passed in a blink of an eye. Including the Whitechapel District's serial homicides, he and Holmes had covered over a dozen cases together.

There were many bizarre and twisted stories. If Zhang Heng wrote all of them down, he might replace Conan Doyle as the greatest Victorian-era detective novelist. In the later period, Zhang Heng even began to handle some of the cases independently. His criminal investigation skills had reached Lv.2, followed by makeup skills. Other than that, he also asked Irene Adler for some knowledge about putting up a good performance, though his art appreciation skills remained at Lv.o.

Thus far, this game had yet to provide him with any items. It wasn't until the last day when Zhang Heng and Holmes went to see an equestrian show. When it ended, the two wandered along the banks of the Thames, talking about contemporary violin artists and 18th-century pirates, where Holmes marveled at Zhang Heng's understanding of Nassau. Following that, the two went to a tavern on the side of the road to sit down and relax.

It wasn't far from the pier; hence many sailors drank and played cards here. It was indeed a vivacious establishment; it's atmosphere loud and lively.

It was then that Sherlock Holmes's hold habits began to surface again. He pointed at a man with a mustache on his left and said, "Scotsman, has many brothers, graduated from Edinburgh University,

worked as a marine doctor, went to West Africa, likes writing, and they are good at crossword puzzles as well.”

“Heh, we don’t have to compete this time. I’ll buy you a pint.”

Zhang Heng still had some money, and it would be hard to spend all of it before leaving this world. That was why he did not mind to buy Holmes a drink. “That couldn’t be better. We’ll start with two pints,” Holmes requested to the bartender.

Just when the two found a seat to sit down and wait for the beer, the mustached man playing the crossword puzzle at the other table came over. Newspapers in hand, he exclaimed, “Mr. Sherlock Holmes and his Eastern roommate, Sir. Zhang Heng! I did not expect to see you two here.”

“Good, sir. You know us?” Holmes raised his eyebrows.

“Of course, you two are the most famous detectives in London right now,” replied the mustached man with a smile. “Can I sit here?”

“Please do! The more we drink with, the more interesting it gets,” Holmes said. “What is your name?”

“Doyle, Arthur Conan Doyle,” said the visitor enthusiastically, reaching out his hand.

Holmes was a little surprised. After shaking his hand, he turned to Zhang Heng. “Is he the friend that you mentioned before?”

Holmes noticed Zhang Heng was even more surprised than he was when he heard the name.

“Don’t be surprised. We actually met for the first time.” Conan Doyle explained, “Before that, we were communicating through words.”

“Communicating through words. You mean the letter?” Holmes frowned.

“Close enough,” Doyle said, pausing. “When I came, I heard about an interesting case at Central Garden. A lady fell to the ground, and when she regained consciousness, her purse and other jewelry were still there. However, only her earrings are missing. Why not investigate this?”

“Sounds interesting. After staying idle for so long. We finally have something to do.” Holmes was excited. He seemed to have forgotten Zhang Heng that sat beside him. He picked up his cane, got up, and strode out of the tavern.

After that, the bartender brought two mugs of beer for them. Doyle picked up one of them and sighed. “Thank god for that guy finally left. Otherwise, I can’t guarantee that he will not figure out my real intention with his crazily good observation skill. By the way, do you know that I created Sherlock Holmes based on a teacher I met when I was in college? His name is Joseph Bell. The way he teaches and asks questions will grant him the ability to see through your soul. He is capable of telling where you come from and what your occupation is. He had a great impact on me at that time. I have thought that if he is a detective, he will definitely turn this line of work into accurate science.”

“Of course, Edgar Allan Poe and Émile Gaboriau also gave me a lot of inspiration. The character that Poe created, Detective Dobin, has always been my childhood hero. And Gaboriau’s interlocking writing method also gave me a lot of inspiration. This is how the writers work. One generation will influence

another generation, just like passing on the precious knowledge from generation to generation. When you read the works of modern people, you can always find the context that comes from the past.”

Conan Doyle took a sip of beer and said to Zhang Heng, “You should also try it. There are still a few hours left before your quest comes to an end. It’s not easy to return to 19th century London to taste the beer here.”

“Who are you?” Zhang Heng finally asked.

“Who am I?” There was a smile on Conan Doyle’s face. “I am those names that you are familiar with. I am William Shakespeare, Alexander Dumas, and Arthur Conan Doyle. I’m also Neil Gaiman, George Raymond, and Richard Martin.”

“The god of the novel?” Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows and took a sip of the beer in his glass.

“It’s an acceptable way to explain the current situation.” Conan Doyle snapped his fingers. Zhang Heng thought of the ancient Celtic god he met in the Black Sail quest and the mysterious man who called himself Einstein at the Apollo Project’s training camp. Now that he encountered the god of the novel, he suddenly realized something, “So, there is a god that is related to the quest in every round of the game that I play?”

“You are good at observing, just like your roommate Sherlock Holmes.” Conan Doyle praised, “As you can see, all the games serve two functions. The players can get game items, points, and skills from it. And we can also use this to observe the players and find a suitable agent for ourselves. You have the Infinite Building Block with you, so it should also be easy for you to understand. For us, it does not mean that the more powerful the players are, the better it is for us. We must also take into account the compatibility. This is a very complicated matter. You have to weigh all of the aspects to make the best decision. At the same time, recruiting agents must also obtain the consent of the one that is being recruited.”

“Do you want to recruit me to be your agent?”

“Well, in theory, it is true that only when I want to recruit someone as an agent will I show up in front of him before the end of the quest. But you are an exception,” Conan Doyle pointed at Zhang Heng’s watch on his right hand, “You have chosen your side, haven’t you?”

“Then why do you even bother to show up in front of me?” Zhang Heng asked, while quietly putting his fingers into his pockets and holding the knife there.

“Don’t be nervous, I’m don’t have ill intention towards you,” Conan Doyle shrugged, “On the contrary, there are actually many connections between you and me.”

“Connection?”

“I noticed that you are trying to find some answers that can help you to understand yourself better,” Conan Doyle drank the beer in the glass in one breath, then burped contentedly, and stood up, “You will thank me for this meeting when you find the answer. “

“Wait, do you have the answers?”

Conan Doyle did not continue on this topic but showed a smile, "We will meet again, just like all the protagonists in the story have to make the final choice. By then, you also need to make your own choice."

After speaking, he put down the empty mug in his hand. Zhang Heng wanted to go after him, but he found that his body could not move. He could only watch the novel walked out of the tavern. After that, he landed his attention on the newspaper that was left behind. There was a small bump in the middle of it. Zhang Heng opened the newspaper. He found the pen that Conan Doyle used to play the crossword puzzle.

Chapter 525 Manhunt Thread

Two weeks passed since the end of the Deductive Reasoning quest.

Zhang Heng could finally bid farewell to the fish and chips he'd been chomping on for the days he could remember. He could yet throw himself again into the embrace of the canteen on the second floor. His other three dorm mates were used to his occasional night absentees by now, and it wasn't like their school officially appointed an officer to check on them. Even if he lived outside campus, no one really cared anyway.

Rumors, however, would eventually emerge if one kept leaving campus grounds, just like how Shen Xixi was branded a sugar baby, said to be cozing up to older rich men who would bolster her opulent lifestyle. It was now Zhang Heng's turn to taste Shen Xixi's unpleasant experience, especially after someone spotted him having dinner with Han Lu at the food court. Han Lu's flirty attitude definitely didn't help things; there was plenty a room for imagination since there was a time he wouldn't return to the dormitory every month. Of course, nobody believed Zhang Heng's explanation that Han Lu was just his mother's best friend. The rampant rumors showed no sign of slowing, answering the true, loquacious nature embedded within a person. Besides satisfying one's curiosity, it was to be expected that a little imagination was also added to whatever topic they wanted to know more about.

The ugly truth was, whenever a person fell from grace, an onlooker would actually receive gratification from it. A few insincere words of consolation were also an inevitable addition to the package. After all, no one would so brazenly endanger their future and finances due to words from a loose tongue. It was probably because he was male, that he attracted lesser attention than Shen Xixi. Men had their attention drawn to different things, where their time would be rather spent on games, sports stars, or manga characters. Not to mention they were in their sophomore year, and most hadn't even the slightest of what their future looked like.

Zhang Heng or Shen Xixi were both usually busy with things that really mattered, and these rumors didn't bother them at all. He now owed Shen Xixi a favor after the Dreamland of Death incident. Considering the risk of never returning to the real world, Shen Xixi and her team knew nothing of the consequences of entering Han Lu's dream. Even so, they still chose to enter, and although they did it out of their own accord, Zhang Heng didn't want to take their kindness for granted.

As of now, there was nothing he could do to help Shen Xixi. The non-guild player group she led had recently gained momentum. Not only had a large number of players had joined them, but smaller and medium-sized guilds had begun engaging and cooperating with them.

Everyone might not have the same goals, but most of the players knew that killing supernatural creatures would grant a high chance of game items dropping. Considering game items were scarce, and the method to obtain them had always been a mystery, Shen Xixi had actually provided them with a reliable means.

Shen Xixi did not refuse such people, though. Not only was it challenging to discern everyone's true purpose, but she knew all too well that players like her were a rarity, armed with the sole purpose of protecting the ordinary. They wouldn't be solving their problems anytime soon with the small number they had, which was why they sorely needed help. No matter what the purpose of the other party was, Shen Xixi didn't mind working with them, as long as the final results matched their

goal.

As time went on, however, the organization began to juggle with complicated internal issues, and Shen Xixi now spent most of her time coordinating and managing the guild. The city they were in was also an exceptional one, where two of the three major guilds were headquartered here. So far, the grand guild had not expressed their stand on Shen Xixi's newly-established guild, probably wanting to observe her for now.

The flash-drive obtained from the Whistleblower quest enabled Zhang Heng to log in to the player forum on his computer without worrying about his IP address getting tracked. Hence, he had been quite active on the forum recently.

After some time, he noticed a post.

It was called "Finding People," its creator going by the handle of Scarlet Sword, a supporting role in a fantasy novel. The forum was filled with a myriad of posts similar to this. The team that lost to Zhang Heng in the Lego quest was a good example. Disgruntled, they furiously told the world that they would look for Zhang Heng no matter what happened.

Whether in multiplayer or single-player mode, there was a chance of encountering other players. Undoubtedly, having more than one player would also see complaints starting to come in. That said, the developers had done an excellent job protecting the privacy of players. Everyone's appearance and voice were modified, and unless one confessed their identity, it was practically impossible to look for a specific player once a game ended.

The good news was that there was now a player forum—a place where all players could congregate. Looking for a specific player had naturally become one of the hotter topics of the forum. Then, there were quite a few posts created solely to vent a player's anger, carrying with them not much meaning in the end. Scarlet Sword's post, however, was different. When Zhang Heng saw the name, he instantly thought of the woman in red from the Whistleblower quest. The two had a brief but fierce fight, finally ending when Zhang Heng blasted off the ceiling of a parking lot with an RPG. The ceiling gave way to a pile of debris, right where the woman stood. Naturally, Zhang Heng thought that she'd been eliminated, only to learn later from Mr. Coffee that she was still alive, deciding to call the quest quits. And this post was no accident. She was looking for him.

The woman named Scarlet made no references to the previous battle, leaving neither resentful remarks, nor did she covet revenge as well. Instead, she simply asked politely if he was available for them to discuss something.

Zhang Heng knew what she was talking about

—the katana originally belonged to Scarlet, broken into two halves during the explosion. Realizing it would be unsafe to linger within the collapsing parking lot, Zhang Heng only managed to pick up the sword's upper part, leaving its lower half-buried under the debris. Scarlet must have retrieved it after Black Nest cleaned up the place.

The two were presently caught in an awkward situation, where neither could use the incomplete game item. Zhang Heng consulted the bartender lady, and to make matters worse, even if the missing part was retrieved, the follow-up maintenance cost of the katana would amount to a whopping 2,000 game points.

The post received many views, but there were only a few comments. Players clicking on that post didn't see the expected trolling and bickering, leaving many who were hungry for drama high and dry. Some players even pretended to be Zhang Heng, asking to talk to her. However, Scarlet didn't reply to them.

Bait-post or not, he intended to contact her anyway. If he managed to work things out, he could at least figure out the katana's value first before deciding if he should repair it or sell it.

"I feel sorry for what happened at the parking lot. What do you want to talk about?" he typed.

Chapter 526 Trade Request

Zhang Heng's reply became the top comment in Scarlet's post. After that, new comments kept popping up. After players caught glimpse of his message, someone commented, "Not bad, the good brother of mine. It seems you've done something exciting in the parking lot. You can die with no regrets now."

This nonsensical reply made for a lousy head start on Scarlet's post. A few seconds hadn't even passed before someone already commented. "So what happened in the parking lot? Can you describe it in 800 words?"

Someone then followed suit, saying, "Nah, don't believe him. I'm the main character here. We did in the garage, not in the parking lot."

Fortunately, Crimson Sword reply immediately. Two minutes later, Zhang Heng was invited to a chat room; a new function recently implemented on the forum. Initially intended as a convenient place for players to communicate, it had unfortunately turned into a place where spammers posted their malicious messages.

Hundreds of people opened chat groups—they ranged from celebrity-chasing groups to football star debates, emotion management classes, and discount information on famous brands. Each chat room had a theme. Alternatively, one could also do what Scarlet did—create an encrypted space to talk about private matters.

Seeing Saturn 5 enter the chat room, Crimson Sword went straight to the subject.

[Is the upper part of Mikazuki Munechika with you?]

Zhang Heng raised his eyebrows as he typed.

[So this katana is Mikazuki Munechika? What about the one at the Tokyo National Museum.]

(That one is a counterfeit.)

Scarlet had nothing to hide when it came to this. She was somewhat of an excellent communicator, and more specifically, good at talking to people like Zhang Heng. She knew there was no other way to speak to him except for absolute honesty.

Since no one was about to fool anyone, whatever ill intention one had for the other had to be put aside for now. It would also make communication more efficient.

(You treasure the katana a lot. What is its value?) Zhang Heng asked again.

(Grade C)

Scarlet paused, then added,

(But this Grade-C weapon suits me best. I can't spare you the details, but I can tell you that I've been using it for more than a year now... I have a unique ability. The longer I use the sword, the more powerful it becomes, which is why I am so obsessed with finding it.

(Do you want me to return it to you?)

[No. I want to propose a trade. You defeated me in the Whistleblower. The broken katana is your trophy, but we each have a piece of it. Nobody can use it in this state, so instead of the stalemate, it's better that we make a deal.]

(What will you pay for it?) [The katana isn't one of the more popular weapon choices. This Grade-C game item is estimated to carry a market value of 1300 to 1500 points. One thousand game points are all I can pay for the half you currently possess. I can make up for the rest of the points with game items if you don't mind.)

(Do you have a way to reforge this?)

(That's a problem I'll need to solve.) Immediately after that, she became worried if Zhang Heng might think her offer not good enough. So, she explained again.

(This is the best I can offer you. I'm frank with you here. If you ask for more, then I see no option but to abandon this trade and look for another katana that suits me.]

She hesitated for a while, saying everything in one go. [I'm willing to tell you one more thing. This sword isn't that great for ordinary people. I only value it this much because I specialize in wielding the katana. Only I can maximize its value.]

Zhang Heng, however, gave an unexpected reply.

[I'm afraid I'll have to say no to you.]

Scarlet wasn't too pleased by the reply. She had put in great efforts in analyzing Zhang Heng, and supposedly, there was no reason for him to reject the deal. At the very least, he should have shown a

little interest in the negotiation. Scarlet began to wonder if Zhang Heng actually hated her due to the previous battle.

At the time, Zhang Heng and Scarlet took sides with different factions in the quest, and it wasn't surprising that they would fight each other. Besides, the battle caused her to sustain significant losses, where not only was her precious katana broken, but half of it was now in Zhang Heng's hands. Not to mention how she almost lost her life in the battle. All things considered, she should have been the one holding the grudge, not Zhang Heng.

Seeing communications breaking down, Zheng Heng hurriedly explained his intention.

(I use melee weapons as well.)

Scarlet was bewildered when she read what he typed. During the previous battle, she marveled at his swordsmanship, only to take out an RPG in the middle of the battle. Then, when they first met, he displayed excellent archery skills. It was why she didn't know which weapon he preferred, even going as far as to think that something must be wrong with the man. Everyone had a limited amount of energy. Scarlet, being a natural on the katana, occupied most of her day training, and honing her skills. And that was all she was really good at. It was her first time encountering an opponent as skillful as him.

Zhang Heng didn't appear to reject the deal because of anything personal, and despite the attempts of striking a deal, they were now back at square one.

So, instead of the deadlock volley, Zhang Heng made her a counter-offer.

(I will give you 1,000 game points. I believe it is an amount sufficient to solve our problem. How about you sell me the other half?)

[Can you fix it?]

[This is a problem I'll need to solve.]

Zhang Heng used her own words on her. Now, their positions were completely reversed.

Of course, it wasn't just some random price he came up with. He knew Scarlet wasn't lying, though she didn't explain why she was so desperate for the broken piece. Everything else, apart from that, should be fine. The katana carried a value of 1,500 game points, and if he were to buy the other half, he would need to pay her 1,000 game points and spend a further 2,000 to repair the sword. This would mean the katana would be sold at double its market value.

But the problem was that even with a considerable amount of game points, Zhang Heng could not find a melee weapon he really liked. Melee weapons were niche and wouldn't sell for a good price. Other than that, bladed weapons were a rarity as well. Zhang Heng had been looking for an excellent bladed weapon since he returned from the Black Sail quest, having entrusted Ding Si to look for a good one in the market. Unfortunately, he failed to get what he wanted until today.

And if Mr. Coffee wasn't lying, the so-called "proxy war" was slated to begin soon. It was probably why Scarlet was so desperate to get her katana back. According to her, she would need a long time to increase her bladed weapon's combat power, and if she got another one, she would have to raise it from scratch.

What more, according to the bartender, 2,000 game points should get the katana fixed and upgraded. For Zhang Heng, spending 3,000 game points on the katana sounded like a reasonable amount.

Chapter 527 The Game's Next Phase

This time, Scarlet was left speechless.

Like what she said, 1,000 game points was indeed a very generous offer. It was a fact half a katana was barely usable, and even if Zhang Heng refused to sell his other half, it wasn't like selling her part of the sword would be a problem. If it were not for the proxy war that was approaching, she might have just accepted Zhang Heng's proposal.

But now... she appeared to be unwilling to sell her half to him. Zhang Heng had made it clear that he did not want to sell his half because he too lacked a bladed weapon, and it seemed game points weren't his concern.

Scarlet hesitated for half a minute before finally replying to him.

[I will think about it.]

[Okay.]

Zhang Heng replied politely without pushing it.

Scarlet couldn't help but ask again at the end.

(Where and whom did you learn your swordsmanship from?)

This time, Zhang Heng refused to reply. It was clear from his attitude that he didn't want to answer this question. Scarlet realized that she, too, might have crossed the line, and after a while, she saw a prompt on the upper right corner of the screen that Saturn 5 had left the chat room. And so, it was in that manner that the first conversation between the two ended.

Scarlet turned off her Surface. She was relieved. 'Saturn 5' was not as crazy as Mr. Coffee. In fact, she thought Zhang Heng to be very rational and communicated extremely well. However, once his mind was made up, changing it was almost impossible. From there, Scarlet could also tell that Zhang Heng didn't need game points.

Scarlet, on the other hand, had come up with everything she had to gather a total of 1,000 game points. Her loss in the Whistleblower quest forced 800 game points out of her to purchase a mission failure exemption card.

If possible, she wouldn't mind using some other means to take back the upper part of her katana. After all, Zhang Heng took it from her without permission. Then, when she fought with him, she didn't manage to get any advantage out of him, and although she held Mr. Coffee in disdain, she had to admit that his strength rivaled a nuclear-powered mecha.

Up until now, she still didn't understand how Mr. Coffee could have lost the battle. One thing was certain, though-Zhang Heng had terrifying strength. So, whichever way this went, she would still need to rely on a deal if she wanted to get the other half of the katana. While Scarlet continued to weigh the

chips on her hands, Zhang Heng was in the lecture room, attending a Western Culture and History class, an elective he had taken.

He'd put in some effort into choosing several courses this semester. Besides selecting those he had an interest in, he deliberately chose courses helpful to the game, even picking Elementary French, a very complicated-sounding language.

He earned lots of course credits in this semester alone, and throughout the period, he also had much more free time. Not to mention the extra 24 hours he had in a day. As usual, after finishing the seventh game, he gave the pen he got at the end to the bartender for identification.

The results, however, were somewhat unexpected. This was the first time the game point failed to identify an item, prompting the bartender to refund Zhang Heng with four points and provide him free advice.

"Such situations are rare, but it has happened before. After all, even the system panel could get hacked at the auction center. I'm not surprised by the results. Perhaps you could tell me how you obtained this pen? I could try to help you figure out the problem."

Zhang Heng remembered the words of Conan Doyle right before he left. So far, Zhang Heng was confident that the old man in the Tang suit approached him for other purposes. His qualifications and game points had all been provided by the old man, and up until now, he still didn't know the bartender's role in the game's system.

Zhang Heng hesitated for a while and finally decided to reveal his encounter with Conan Doyle in the quest before taking back the pen. He then asked the bartender again about the proxy war. "Proxy war? Ahh, the organizing committee was just about to announce it," said the bartender, "So, there is nothing wrong with telling you first. Anyway, I guess quite a few people know about it already, and after completing so many rounds, you should know what it's all about. As of now, most of the agents have been determined. Very few haven't placed their bets yet, but the important is estimated to be released next month. By that time, the game would be entering its next phase."

"The next phase?"

"Yes, the qualifiers are about to end, and the main game will commence once the name list is released. The next phase is about to get really exciting! It seems you've already got the tickets for the next round. I wish you good luck in advance!"

"What about ordinary players?" Zhang Heng frowned. "What will happen to them after the proxy war starts?"

"They may freely choose the side they wish. They can either join the agents or become apostles. A single person never starts wars. Of course, if you are strong enough to defeat everyone, I will be the first to applaud you," the bartender added with a sly grin.

Zhang Heng wondered if something was wrong with him. As they conversed about the topic, a wild flash of fanaticism and excitement glistened within the bartender's eyes.

"You should wait for the organizing committee's notification for the specific content. I'm going back to work. I overspent last month, and this month, I suffer the consequences of a huge debt."

And that was all the information Zhang Heng had currently. For good measure, he also sent a WeChat message to Fan Meinan. On a normal day, her reply would come almost instantly, which made him wonder if she really had nothing else to do except to scroll through Weibo every day. This time, she waited for an unprecedentedly long time before sending in her reply.

[I'm busy.]

After that, there was nothing from her. There was still about a month before the proxy war, and Zhang Heng was in no hurry. Fan Meinan seemed to have an important matter. When he thought about the powerful individual behind her, he figured someone was about to meet an awful end. It happened that Zhang Heng needed to deal with something too, hence, didn't browse the player forum for about a week.

The moment he came online again, he saw something utterly shocking taking place.

Chapter 528 Ultimatum

One of the three major guilds, Arc of Light, issued an ultimatum to Shen Xixi's newly formed union at midnight last night without any warning. It came as a complete surprise to Zhang Heng. They demanded an apology from Shen Xixi for the vicious conflict at Tongzhou that night, surrender the four murderers, and compensate for the losses. If she refused, they would declare war on her. Since no third party was present at the time of the incident, players on the forum couldn't tell what really happened that night. According to Arc of Light, the number of players from their faction had been tracking down a monster. In the midst of the chase, they ran into another team of players belonging to the union. The Arc of Light players immediately issued the union's players with a warning, to which they were wise enough to give way to them.

Regardless of why players joined the union, at least they did it intending to protect ordinary people. In other words, if Arc of Light were the ones who killed the monster, the union's players should gladly accept the outcome. Unexpectedly, union players apparently played dirty. They pretended to leave, but instead, took another path back to where they were initially.

At the critical moment when Arc of Light was fighting the monster, the union players abruptly attacked them out of nowhere. The ambush resulted in five out of the six Arc of Light players' deaths, where only one managed to stay alive to tell the tale to his faction. Following that, Arc of Light was furious; hence, the confrontation with Shen Xixi's union.

However, players on the forum had a hard time believing the whole story. First, the Arc of Light survivor was the only one who brought the matter up. Shen Xixi and her union, however, hadn't yet responded to the accusations. Next, the three major guilds had been trying their best to keep the players under control, intending to show that they were a very reasonable bunch. After all, they had the upper hand over most players, and it was impossible they wouldn't take advantage of their powerful position. They had people from all manner of life them all the time; hence, it was unavoidable that a few rotten apples festered among them. Many small, medium, and even non-guild players had mixed feelings toward these three major guilds.

Once the player base saw the announcement, more and more happiness seemed to build over their misfortune. One of the most upvoted comments was: 'The stupid dogs of Arc of Light bully whoever they can whenever they want to. They totally deserve what happened to them.'

Less than two minutes after he posted his comment, he was muted by the moderator; the reason for that was attacking somebody with hurtful words. The player forum was actually something that the three major guilds created. Still, most of its moderators were supposed to be selected by players to ensure a fair atmosphere. Instead, the three super moderators were all members of the three major guilds, now endowed with the powers of banning or muting anybody whenever they so pleased.

The player that was muted had no intention to keep quiet. Since it was easy to make a new account on the forum, the muted player returned in less than ten seconds, even using the same username but with a 01 added behind it.

(Come on, you power-hungry pig! I dare you to ban me again! You can mute me, but can you mute justice?)

As soon as this reply came out, players began cheering for him. This was how the internet rolled. If you asked the group of people to confront Arc of Light in person, there wasn't a single soul who dared to do so. However, no one would back down if you put them behind a keyboard and screen. The super moderator was aware of this problem, and after banning a bunch of worthless keyboard warriors, he gave up.

These cynics typically didn't care about who was right or wrong in this conflict between Arc of Light and the union. Most simply took the advantage to vent their dissatisfaction with the Arc. Since the union had just been formed not too long ago, most players found no conflict of interest with them. Besides, the union was different from a guild-players who joined the union were complicated. Some were independent teams not attached to any guild, and since the union was in a weaker position than Arc, they were bound to get the sympathy and support of the player base.

For this case, unfortunately, all that sympathy and support in the world had no effect in solving the problem at hand.

Zhang Heng realized that Shen Xixi was in trouble this time as soon as he saw the post. Regardless of right or wrong, establishing the union itself was bad news for the grand guilds. The union's current structure was relatively loose, and they were no threat to the three major guilds. And Shen Xixi had repeatedly stated that the union's purpose was only to protect the ordinary.

However, no one would know what would happen if the union continued to grow, that they might one day become a juggernaut powerful enough to turn against the three major guilds. After all, strength within the union's structure could be gradually cultivated, and player relationships could be enhanced through working towards the same goal. At the moment, everyone was working together to defeat the monster and to distribute the loot as per regulation. If these players were to cross paths in the same quest, there was a good chance that they would work together. Then, slowly but surely, they would stick with each other to form a powerful faction. This incident might just be a catalyst, but it did not matter if it was right or wrong. The three major guilds were tired of simply standing and observing Shen Xixi's union. This time, they were determined to do something about it. As if it were not bad enough, the two

other major guilds' unanimous silence could only indicate that the situation was slipping toward the worst possible outcome.

They employed a cunning technique—force Shen Xixi to hand over players responsible for the incident. Aiming to tackle the union's weakest link, they knew how the camaraderie within the union would be fractured forever once she surrendered her people. And if Shen Xixi chose to resist, then the Arc of Light would most likely declare war with the union. Let alone the difference in strength between the two sides—based on the union's current situation, how many would choose to coexist and die with this new emerging force simply?

So no matter which path Shen Xixi chose to go down with, the union seemed to have reached the end of its road. She had only kept mum about her stand on this matter because the union was in a complete mess right now. After receiving the warning, she immediately contacted the union's management, including the leaders of small and medium guilds, and representatives of the independent teams, beseeching them to develop a solution. Although Shen Xixi was prepared to face the worst, she felt a chill run up her spine each time she thought about everyone's reaction.

Nearly 90% agreed that the incident's team should be handed over to the Arc of Light. It wasn't like these people cared about the truth. It was just as they said; the truth was no longer important. Whether the Arc was lying or not, the top priority was first to ensure the union's safety. After that, they could prove their point to the Arc with words.

Shen Xixi looked at the allies in front of her, feeling a deep sense of exhaustion in her heart. No matter what outsiders thought, the reason she established the union was simple: to do the right thing.

Doing the right thing might sound simple, but those who had actually put it in practice only knew how difficult it was to do.

Because the world wasn't always reasonable.

Before coming here, Shen Xixi had met the players who caused the conflict, and she was at least 80% sure that Arc of Light was the one lying. Even if it wasn't the other party's plan, they were obviously about to use this conflict to break the union. Everyone knew what the players' fate involved in this incident would be if they chose to hand them over to the Arc. Everyone seemed to have deliberately ignored this. Personal sacrifices were underestimated in a big group of people.

Chapter 529 Deadline

Shen Xixi took Western cultural history as well, but she didn't make it to class today. In fact, she did not show up in school at all for the whole day. Many were used to this, though. The boys would show a hint of regret whenever the name of their course' beauty queen was mentioned. The girls, on the other hand, didn't care too much about her.

Even among the three residing in Zhang Heng's dormitory, two had drawn a clear line with Shen Xixi. Wei Jiangyang's girlfriend, Han Xiaoxiao, still couldn't let it go. She and Shen Xixi used to be close, and she once even persuaded her to rethink what she was doing. After all, she was from a decent family, where she didn't need to sell her body. Her dad was no wealthy CEO, but compared to most girls born to working-class families, she never had to worry about her life.

It did not make sense that she went down this path, not to mention how she was never a vain girl in the first place. However, neither those who cared about Shen Xixi nor the gloaters at school knew the real situation she now faced.

The union's impromptu meeting had been going on for a day and a night. Most important discussions had actually been completed in the first hour but, the founder of the union, Shen Xixi, didn't agree to the solution. It was why the meeting had been dragging on until now. Arc of Light gave them only one day. That was, if the union did not give them what they wanted by midnight, war would then be declared on them.

If that were the case, it was an acceptable outcome for the union.

Most in the conference room knew that once the players were handed over to the Arc of Light, the foundation they were built upon would fall apart. If the players were to be handed over today, they might end up the same tomorrow. That said, they should at least try to stay alive today, much less think about tomorrow.

The president of a medium-sized guild attempted a last effort. In persuasion, he said, "I know you are displeased by the outcome. In fact, none of us are happy. This is a huge blow to the union, and it might also affect your reputation. However, we all know how tough a decision it must have been for you, and we guarantee this position will remain as yours in the time to come."

"Reputation? I felt misunderstood! I don't care who the boss of the union is. We are not a guild. It doesn't matter who the chairman is." Shen Xixi shook her head, "I cannot possibly agree to hand them over to Arc of Light. They will be killed!"

"You may not want to surrender them, but we can't keep them as well," someone immediately retorted. "Although our numbers won't suffer, our players have far less strength than top guilds like Arc of Light. Their current admission criteria are to have at least survived five games, let alone that their guild has more than ten Grade-B game items. Most of our players have completed only three games, a less than average number. Moreover, we only have four Grade-B items, and most of them are non-combat type."

"The Arc of Light is not the only top guild," said Shen Xixi. "We will pay dearly if we go against them. Arc of Light must also consider if the balance between Silver Wings and the players can still be maintained."

"What is that dear price we will need to pay then?"

The guild leader of a small guild asked the question that everyone was waiting to ask.

The union's composition was inherently complicated, wherein small and medium guilds and independent player teams participated. So far, they had no problem cooperating, but in times of real danger, these apparently close allies would find it very difficult to work together.

Now that everything was out in the open, masks had come undone, and everyone spoke their minds. The medium guild leader who spoke before continued, "The agreement between us was to deal with monsters in the city. That does not include a battle against one of three major guilds, Arc of Light."

Shen Xixi frowned and was about to say something, but the next moment, someone abruptly kicked the door open.

Li Bai, still with blood still on his body, and Rabbit, a lollipop in her mouth, strode into the meeting room. They brought along three captives with them. "These bastards wanted to kidnap someone, but we caught them," said Li Bai. Rabbit went on, "...they are from Horizon. Li Bai beat up another two unlucky bastards, and they are now lying in the hospital."

Shen Xixi cast her gaze on a middle-aged man who had not spoken much. He seemed gentle. It was the guild leader of Horizon, and he did not avoid her gaze. He pushed up his glasses and confessed, "Someone has to do it, at this point. Since you are unwilling, we will do it for you."

"We haven't even come up with a conclusion yet!" answered Shen Xixi, still taken aback by the sudden intrusion.

"I don't even know what the point is for discussion," said the middle-aged man. "If you don't hand them over, there is no need for the union to exist anymore!"

"Is that a threat?"

Shen Xixi looked around the people in the conference room.

The atmosphere in the meeting room was tense. No one replied to her. In other words, they must have agreed with the middle-aged man.

"So, this is the justice your heart seeks?!"

Shen Xixi's heart sank, but there was a slight glimmer of hope, where she hoped to awaken the conscience in their heart through those questions.

However, after a long while, the oldest man and a representative of the independent players spoke slowly.

"Politics has nothing to do with justice."

There were only less than three hours left before they had to reply to Arc of Light.

Until now, the union still hadn't revealed their stand. On the other hand, the player forum was getting livelier by the minute-players had posted speculations about Shen Xixi's decision, and some had even started a bet for this event. Judging by the wager that most people placed, they leaned more towards Shen Xixi eventually handing the players to Arc of Light. It was only a matter of time.

Dragging it a little longer would show that the union did surmount some resistance against the Arc of Light onslaught, something that might ease the consequences of handing over the players. Public opinion on the forum seemed to have reached a consensus-it was a choice any reasonable person should make.

After all, Arc of Light wasn't really intending to destroy the union. At best, it was only because of the union's rapid growth, causing the three major guilds to ruffle their feathers. They wanted to use this opportunity to stunt and stifle their development, in the fear that they might someday become a threat.

Handing over the players meant reducing the union's internal cohesion, allowing the union to maintain its loose structure, and in turn, stopping Shen Xixi from integrating the emerging union into a powerful force. This would be an acceptable result for both parties.

However, at 11:12 in the evening, the medium-sized guild, Horizon, announced the forum, reiterating their respect for Shen Xixi and the union she led. They had also stated that the two sides chose to split due to personal differences and wouldn't rule out the possibility of working together again in the future.

As soon as this thread got posted, a second thread emerged before the lurkers got even to say anything about it. It was quickly followed by the third, then fourth. These were all posts by guilds or independent player groups within the union. Anybody smart would promptly sense that something wasn't quite right.

Without warning, the newly formed union was now on the verge of collapsing overnight.

Chapter 530 Preparation

Like everyone else, Zhang Heng had been following the progress of this matter. Even at night class, he would bring along his laptop, seat himself in the lecture room's last row, and check the latest news on the forum from time to time.

Class ended at 9.45 p.m. After returning to the dormitory, Chen Huadong and Wei Jiangyang invited him for a round of League of Legends. Zhang Heng agreed to play, and he chose a Jungler, where he occasionally glanced the forum while free-farming in the jungle. The first three rounds ended very quickly; all of them ending in less than 20 minutes. It was either Zhang Heng's team annihilating the opponents, or their core players were being targeted nonstop. Zhang Heng, the Jungler, did not even need to step out of the forest to help the battle.

However, the fourth game was extremely challenging. A very skillful player on the enemy's team was showcasing his mad skills, carrying the entire team. Unfortunately, four useless players had joined Zhang Heng's team, and all they knew was to cheer. The enemy team kept killing their team with no respite, like wolves hunting a flock of chickens. Once Zhang Heng's teammates were sent back to the base, they rushed to protect their towers, trying their best to maintain the fragile and precious balance. The fight was so intense that nobody seemed to get the high ground.

In the end, Zhang Heng had to sneak to the enemy's base to destroy their tower, leading them on to win the battle. When he turned off the game, he had already read Horizon's thread. At 11:32, the union, or rather, half-disbanded union, finally posted an announcement. It turned out they refused to hand their players over to Arc of Light.

There was also an attachment at the end of the post about the conflict with Arc of Light's players. The union told a whole different story, where the ones being assaulted was actually the union team. This independent player team was rather powerful, and though they were forced to face both the monster and Arc of Light players, they managed to withstand the onslaught. The monster ran away in the end. However, they managed to kill five Arc of Light's players, and only two on the union's side were killed.

Quickly, the post caused an uproar in the forum. It wasn't about the truth. In fact, even without the video evidence, many had already suspected that Arc of Light had fabricated the whole thing. It was Shen Xixi's decision that upset everyone. When Horizon announced they were leaving the union, some

were guessing that Shen Xixi might eventually go against Arc of Light. Even with that knowledge, they were still left in shock after reading the announcement.

The union was way weaker than Arc of Light, let alone in a semi-disabled state.

Shortly after Shen Xixi's announcement, more and more players announced that they were leaving the union for good. If the union looked shaky earlier, it now looked like it was on the verge of dying. All these took place the moment Shen Xixi posted the thread.

The Arc of Light reacted to Shen Xixi's decision very quickly. At 11:45, they responded to Shen Xixi, expressing their regret for the latter's choice. This time, they wrote in a very polite tone. They believed that Shen Xixi had been confused by the perpetrators, and they would head to the union at midnight to deal with the four murderers.

Any player that wasn't blind knew that the union had already collapsed. In other words, Arc of Light had achieved their goal. There was no longer the need for wonton obliteration. They did not want to cause more players to resent them.

At 11:49, the bartender sent Zhang Heng a message, telling him she placed the stuff he wanted at the designated spot. He didn't express his gratitude in the end since she didn't give him any discounts.

He then put all the things he might need in his backpack.

He never brought a powerful weapon, the Pestilence Bone Bow, back to the dormitory because he did not want anyone messing around with it. His dorm mates were baffled by his actions, knowing how it was normal that he didn't return. This was their first time seeing Zhang Heng leaving at such a late hour.

The moment Zhang Heng said that he had gone to find Han Lu, Chen Huadong and Wei Jiangyang gave him a quick glare. Ignoring the strange looks and questions they asked, he hurriedly left the hostel before the dorm lady locked the gate.

As usual, the world came to a standstill at midnight. There were a lot of things to do tonight, but Zhang Heng wasn't really anxious. He set the time and decided to take one thing at a time. For now, he planned to go to the parking lot to get his Polo.

Once Shen Xixi made up her mind, nothing would stop the collapse of the union. There was nothing Zhang Heng could do to stop it as well. But compared to the others, he got to know her earlier. He knew her better than them, and he knew what was really going on. With Shen Xixi's character, she would never give up the innocent in exchange for peace.

Now, she had to bear the consequences of her choice. Things had become less complicated since her mind was made, though. After achieving its goal, Arc of Light would proceed to punish the murderers. As expected, Shen Xixi chose to keep protecting the four players.

Zhang Heng finally got to pay back the favor he owed Shen Xixi in Dreamland of Death. Earlier this morning, he sent her a WeChat message, asking if she needed any help. She rejected him, saying that the union was capable of solving the predicament themselves.

Although Shen Xixi was stubborn in certain matters, it certainly didn't mean she was stupid or naive. Based on the circumstances at the time, Zhang Heng believed that she, being the decision-maker, had

naturally considered the worst possible outcome. She refused his help only because she didn't want to drag him into this pile of crap.

Shen Xixi also knew that Zhang Heng had been reluctant to join the union because he thought it wouldn't end well. She had no reason to get him involved at the union's most precarious moment. However, Zhang Heng did not really care about the risk. Even if she refused to let him help her, he could easily get her position with his Lv.2 hacking skill.

But instead of looking for Shen Xixi first, he drove his Polo to the address given by the bartender and found a black box hidden at the bottom of a dumpster behind the wall. A key was tied to the handle, and after closer inspection, he confirmed that he got what he wanted. He then tossed the object into the trunk.

He then drove leisurely to the next location without hurries.

Zhang Heng had been working nonstop for more than ten hours, and finally, he had done almost everything on the list. After that, he checked into a nearby hotel to replenish his energy with food and well-deserved sleep. He waited for his cellphone to ring on time, and only less than fifteen minutes left before the hour hand completed a circle.

Zhang Heng washed his face, opened the password-protected black box beside the bed. He took out a number of parts, assembled them before it was all finally combined into a CS5 sniper rifle, a weapon courtesy of American firearms manufacturer McMillan Firearms.

Unlike the famous Finnish Star or L115A3, the CS5 was not a sniper that could shoot super long range. It is more suitable for urban warfare. And it is also a rare sniper rifle equipped with a silencer to meet Zhang Heng's needs. He noticed that a post-it note was posted at the back of the rifle. It was written by a Miss Bartender with the words: Happy Killing. She even drew a cute version of a gunman at the lower right corner.