

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 101: Reward - Read

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Chapter 101: Reward

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before asking, “What do you know about the Evernight parish?”

Zhang Lei shook his head. “I don’t like dealing with these religions. I find them crazy and dangerous. I’ve only heard that the Evernight parish believes every night to be dangerous. Only by obtaining the Arbiter of Fate’s blessing can one live to see the dawn.

“Therefore, they like to pray when it’s just dark and gather late at night. They call their Mass a carnival...” At this point, Zhang Lei said in confusion, “I don’t know what a carnival is like, but I keep having the feeling that calling a religious Mass this is a little strange.”

“You wouldn’t think so if you’ve heard parenting lectures and mechanical explanations,” stated Shang Jianyao in a tone that suggested he was used to it.

Zhang Lei did not ask about the parenting lectures or mechanical explanations. He glanced back at Meng Xia—who was chatting with a few friends—and said to Shang Jianyao, “What else do you want to ask?”

“Apart from the Arbiter of Fate, which other Kalendarium do you know about?” Shang Jianyao put on a look as if he wanted to get to the bottom of this.

Zhang Lei recalled and said, “Not many. December’s Arbiter of Fate, January’s Subhuti, and when I was in Weed City, I heard from First City’s people that some of their nobles secretly worship September’s Mandara.”

Shang Jianyao recalled his team leader’s description and sincerely made an evaluation. “In First City, it’s possible that all the believers of the Kalendarium exist.”

“It’s not a good place”—Zhang Lei nodded—“for most people.”

He pointed at Meng Xia. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll be going over.”

Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, “Why aren’t you asking me about why I’m suddenly asking about this?”

The tanned, medium-build Zhang Lei stood up and slowly said, “The more you know, the more dangerous it will be.”

With that said, he didn't stay any longer. He turned around and walked toward Meng Xia.

Shang Jianyao continued sitting there without doing anything as if he had been isolated from the lively atmosphere around him. He quietly watched the people coming and going without feeling uncomfortable.

...

The next day, Shang Jianyao once again arrived ten minutes early at the Old Task Force's Room 14 on the 647th floor.

As expected, Jiang Baimian was already sitting in her seat.

Shang Jianyao walked over and bluntly said, "I met an outsider employee yesterday."

"Oh?" Jiang Baimian indicated that she was waiting for him to continue.

Shang Jianyao pulled out a chair and sat down. "He has a certain level of understanding of the Kalendarium and Awakened..."

He repeated Zhang Lei's recount.

"As expected, an Awakened's ability that's directly related to the heart is in the Arbiter of Fate's domain." Jiang Baimian sighed thoughtfully. "I wonder if it's because they believe in a certain Kalendaria that they obtain the corresponding domain's abilities when they awaken... Then, how are the characteristics of one's abilities determined before their faith is confirmed?"

"Yes, Du Heng said that different prices would vaguely reflect different domains. Therefore, the categorization is based on the price paid?" At this point, Jiang Baimian suddenly asked, "Then, what price did Qiao Chu pay? What price did Du Heng and Galoran pay?"

Shang Jianyao replied, "Not all prices can be easily seen. If Jingfa didn't say anything, nobody would've directly thought that the price he paid was increased. I almost used 'being single forever' to exchange for my abilities back then, but it didn't work. That price was useless."

Jiang Baimian was immediately surprised. "Didn't they say that one just has to pay a price? It also has to be a price that adheres to certain rules?"

"I don't know." Shang Jianyao was very honest.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "It's difficult to tell anything from individual cases unless you've tried many times before finding the right price."

“Three times. The second time, I wanted to exchange for it using ‘no friends,’ but it still didn’t work,” Shang Jianyao said truthfully.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “We can only conclude the pattern after we get to know more Awakened and understand their failures and successes.”

“They won’t say anything,” Shang Jianyao pointed out.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “What if the price they paid is that they can’t lie or that they have to answer all questions?”

She then said in thought, “The more I thought about it after I returned, the more I felt that Qiao Chu’s charm didn’t seem like an ability. Instead, it was closer to a price.”

Shang Jianyao’s eyes slightly flickered as he immediately said, “Apart from him, all the Awakened I’ve met up until now can control their abilities.”

In other words, even if their abilities brought about some negative results, Awakened could choose to use them or not.

Qiao Chu had been chased by the Nightmare Horse the entire way. He might’ve even lost a car because of this. It was only when he tricked the other party into crossing the river and blew up the bridge that he truly escaped.

Normal Awakened would’ve stopped the bewitchment long ago.

Of course, Shang Jianyao couldn’t guarantee that there was no such thing as indiscriminate and passive bewitchment among the bestowed abilities.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian agreed. “From the looks of it, there’s a high chance that Qiao Chu’s bewitchment is the price he paid.”

At this point, she suddenly laughed. “Think about the time when Qiao Chu just became an Awakened. Think about the results of passive bewitchment—which can’t be eliminated—when he was still relatively weak. Tsk...”

Shang Jianyao skipped the possible cases and came to a conclusion. “Tragic.”

He then added, “Before entering the Sea of Origins and defeating the fears in his heart one by one, Qiao Chu’s charm won’t have such a large range. The effects won’t be as strong either.”

“What are you thinking about?” Jiang Baimian smiled mischievously. “I originally wanted to say that Qiao Chu is definitely very popular with things like mosquitoes. There’s no fear of being bitten if you stay with him. Tsk, has the boundaries of physiology education expanded in your cohort?”

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to answer curiously, she said, “Normally speaking, no one will use ‘increased charm’ as the price. This is not a price in general opinion. Therefore, Qiao Chu should’ve used ‘charm’ to exchange for his abilities back then...”

“In the end, he didn’t expect to be loved by all. He’s the kind that humans and dogs want to have sex with. Yes... According to my experience, my urge to force myself on him gradually became stronger over time. I can foresee that we would’ve taken the initiative to rape him if we stayed close to him for another day or even a few more hours.”

“This is indeed a price. Tragic...”

“Your cohort’s physiology education wasn’t bad either,” Shang Jianyao evaluated seriously.

“Ah? What did you say?” Jiang Baimian touched her ear and said seriously, “Besides, we’ve previously discussed this. Given the situation back then, if Qiao Chu showed hostility and acted viciously, the corresponding target’s bewitchment could be removed. His companions would also be agitated and escape the influence to a certain extent. Well, apart from animals and Heartless... It seems like there are still many restrictions.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “If that’s the case, Qiao Chu has yet to showcase his third Awakened ability. It’s good that we were careful back then.”

They currently knew two of Qiao Chu’s Awakened abilities. One was to make people depressed, and the other could make people focus on something. The former was an area-of-effect ability, while the latter seemed to be a single-target ability.

As the two of them discussed, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen walked in one after another.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian stood up, clapped her hands, and said with a smile, “The higher-ups have replied!”

Be it Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, or Shang Jianyao, their eyes lit up upon hearing that the rewards were issued.

“Stop. You’re not allowed to sing or dance!” Jiang Baimian stopped Shang Jianyao in advance, preventing him from doing anything.

Shang Jianyao immediately revealed a regretful expression.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and smiled. “The rewards and compensation are in two parts. The first part is that everyone’s employee rank will be increased by one level. In other words, I’m now a D7—a real team leader. Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong

were originally going to be promoted to D2, but they directly advanced to D3. Bai Chen was originally going to be a D1 official employee, so she's now a D2."

"D3?" Long Yuehong exclaimed in surprise. "Doesn't that mean we can get 1,000 extra contribution points every month?"

This meant that his monthly salary would be 2,800 contribution points.

Furthermore, when he got married next year and was assigned a room, higher-ranking employees could get a better room.

"What rank do I have to be before I can apply for genetic modification? What if I pay using my contribution points?" Bai Chen's happiness flashed on her face before quickly disappearing.

Jiang Baimian smiled and answered, "I've helped you ask. In your situation, you just need to be a D4. If you are willing to participate in a very dangerous project, you can do it now. However, I don't suggest you do so. You need to be alive to do it."

Bai Chen nodded slightly, indicating that she wouldn't be so rash.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Shang Jianyao. "Are you unhappy?"

"I'm happy." Shang Jianyao had a serious expression.

"Forget it. I shouldn't have asked you." Jiang Baimian continued, "The second part of the reward is that everyone gets 100,000 contribution points as compensation."

"100,000?" Long Yuehong had never seen so many contribution points in his life.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "It's not much. We stole it. No, we brought back an armored car, a heavy machine gun, a Blackmarsh Iron Snake's hide, and two cars of supplies. If we sold these things in a place like Weed City, their value would definitely exceed 400,000 contribution points several-fold.

"However, you have to think about it. Our weapons are provided by the company, our jeep is given by the company, and we are raised by the company. It's very reasonable for the company to take a huge cut. Besides, isn't there compensation through employee rank promotion? This is more difficult than simply getting contribution points."

"That's quite a lot already." Long Yuehong expressed that he had no complaints at all. He wanted to help his parents, brother, and sister change to a bigger room, but he only needed about 30,000 points.

To Bai Chen, it was an irrefutable truth that the strongest party took the most war spoils. Therefore, she didn't find any problems with it.

Shang Jianyao wanted to say something, but no one wanted to hear it.

Jiang Baimian then opened the desk drawer and took out three docket. "They have your names labeled. These are the things you can receive after the review.

"Heh heh, the company has returned all our watches to us. These are all mechanical watches. They are much more valuable than electronic watches and are worth at least 50,000 to 60,000 contribution points. Yes, the company has repaired all the damaged parts for us too.

"Oh right, remember to update your electronic card later. If the contribution points aren't right, remember to tell me. Ah, the 900 points of field allowance will also be directly distributed."

As Jiang Baimian spoke, Shang Jianyao took the docket with his name and poured out the items inside.

There were a pair of black sunglasses, a dark mechanical watch, a transparent glass ball with a yellow petal, the recording pen from Blackrat Town, and a palm-sized, black speaker with a blue bottom.

Bai Chen didn't bother looking at her docket. She stared at Jiang Baimian and asked in concern, "Team Leader, what's the result of Moat Town?"

Chapter 102: Medical Record

Faced with Bai Chen's question, Jiang Baimian lowered her head and chuckled. "There's no rush. We have to wait for the next board meeting for the decision to be made. But according to Minister Xenny, the directors are relatively open-minded regarding this matter. The only dispute is over the treatment to be given to them."

"Okay! Okay!" Bai Chen clearly heaved a sigh of relief.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and picked up a piece of paper from the table. "The laboratory has already produced a report on the pieces of paper Shang Jianyao brought back from the steelworks factory ruins.

"Among those pieces of paper, there are two pages with imprints left from the previous pages. After doing some restoration work and comparison, it can be determined that it's a medical record.

"This medical record isn't complete, but it's mainly this: Name: Fan Wensi; Gender: Female; Age: 52; Marital Status: Married. Address: Family Zone, Zone 2, Building 4, Room 302.

“The patient self-reported that they have normal mobility and normal mental conditions. Main complaint: In the past seven days, she’d see her son’s figure at least once a day. The patient’s son had an accident a few years ago and became a vegetable. He is currently receiving experimental treatments somewhere in the north as a volunteer...”

After reading it, Jiang Baimian looked around and inquired, “How is it? Any thoughts?”

“A mental patient’s medical record that’s not too problematic.” Bai Chen had finally understood what a medical record was after joining the company.

Long Yuehong questioned, “That steelworks factory’s hospital can treat mental illnesses?”

From his point of view, it was a place slightly larger than the sickbay on each floor of Pangu Biology. Furthermore, only one of the three major hospitals in Pangu Biology could treat mental illnesses.

“The patient might not have believed that she had a mental illness and suspected that something was wrong with her eyes. Hence, she got some outpatient consultation. In any case, the doctor will consider which hospital she will be transferred to, so she doesn’t need to consider such matters.” Jiang Baimian tried to explain based on Pangu Biology’s internal situation.

Shang Jianyao, who was quietly listening to their discussion, suddenly asked, “What if the patient has no mental problems or has no problems with her eyes. Yet, she can see her son at least once a day?”

Long Yuehong hissed. “Stop telling ghost stories. That’s a vegetable! Taking 10,000 steps back, even if her son received successful treatment and woke up, there’s no reason for him to hide from his mother and only appear around her a few times a day.”

Shang Jianyao’s guess made Long Yuehong inexplicably feel a chill run down his spine as if a cold wind from hell had blown past him.

A cold wind...

Wind... Long Yuehong’s eyes widened. “When did you switch on the electric fan?”

Only then did he realize that Shang Jianyao had soundlessly turned the silent electric fan on his team leader’s table to face him and pressed the switch.

It was sometimes relatively hot in Pangu Biology’s daytime.

“When you guys were discussing,” Shang Jianyao replied with a smile. “This adds to the atmosphere!”

“Don’t waste energy!” Jiang Baimian switched off the fan with a smack. She then said, “We can’t tell anything from a single medical record, but since it’s information left behind by the Old World, it’s best to file it up for our team. It might come in handy at some point in time. It might be linked to other clues and reveal something.”

“Alright.” She clapped her hands. “Today’s information is the oral history gathered by the previous Old Task Force.”

“Oral history?” Bai Chen could probably understand what it meant, but she still found the term unfamiliar.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. “Oral history is a verbal account of the parties involved. They recount things that they have heard or experienced themselves. The former Old Task Force’s main job in the early stages was to gather this information. What they did later and what they harvested were buried in the sea of history with their disappearance. Yes, according to the radio transmissions, they still had a batch of important oral histories that they didn’t manage to report in time.

“The batch of oral histories we obtained mainly came from the older employees who were still alive in the company back then and had experienced the Old World’s destruction. This is all very precious information. Most of these people have already passed away.

“After reading through this batch over and over again and extracting useful clues and information, we’ll switch to the second batch of oral histories. These are accounts from Old World survivors in the nearby area, people like Mayor Tian.

“There won’t be a third batch after that. We can only rely on ourselves. In short, we have to search for our next target by using this information. Or we can follow the route taken by the former Old Task Force based on the saved electronic text.”

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao raised his hand.

“There’s no need to say anything. I know.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “You want to choose the second option.”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “There might be no difference between the two choices.”

Jiang Baimian came to a realization. “Are you saying that the route the Old Task Force previously chose should also be based on the clues extracted from these oral histories?”

“No.” Shang Jianyao shook his head again and spoke in a low voice with a hint of magnetism. “There’s only one path that fate has determined for us.”

Jiang Baimian glared at him and turned to Long Yuehong. "Is this a line from a radio program?"

Long Yuehong nodded heavily. "Yes!"

Jiang Baimian did not look at Shang Jianyao. Instead, she smiled at Bai Chen and said, "I forgot to mention that you can move to the 622nd floor. As for which room you will be assigned to, someone will contact you when the time comes. Haha, you can listen to the radio tonight."

Bai Chen tersely acknowledged her words, and her expression flickered before quickly returning to normal.

Jiang Baimian didn't say anything else and waved her hand in the opposite direction like she was swatting a mosquito. "Start reading the information. Shang Jianyao, don't play music!"

"I can't control it!" Shang Jianyao replied loudly.

"Then, reason with it," Jiang Baimian replied angrily.

Shang Jianyao's eyes immediately lit up as if he found this method very consistent with his train of thought. He sat down and rambled on to the small black speaker with a blue bottom. "I went through so much to repair you. You have to be obedient..."

Long Yuehong blankly stared for a few seconds before muttering to himself, "I now believe that he actually has a doctor to prove it..."

"Ah, what did you say? Louder!" Jiang Baimian tilted her head.

Bai Chen ignored this and flipped through the information by herself.

"Nothing." Long Yuehong quickly shook his head. He then sighed silently. What kind of team is this...?

It was unknown when he would receive his transfer orders.

...

After dinner, Shang Jianyao did not immediately return to the 495th floor. Instead, he took the elevator to the 490th floor.

He skillfully circled around the Rec Center and the Supplies Allocation Market and arrived in front of the row of rooms at the back.

In the middle of these rooms hung a vertical sign with white and black words: "Eleventh Orphanage."

This was where Shang Jianyao had once lived for three years.

Within Pangu Biology, there was an orphanage every ten or twenty floors. It was responsible for raising children who no longer had immediate family members until they were 18 years old.

At this moment, many of the doors to the orphanage were open, but only two or three figures were present. The others had gone to the canteen ahead.

Shang Jianyao walked in and came in front of the lame gatekeeper, Li Jiawen.

"Is the matron around?" Shang Jianyao asked calmly.

Li Jiawen's hair was already white. He sat behind a table and looked like he was about to doze off. Upon hearing this, he quickly looked up and examined the visitor for a while. "Oh, Jianyao... The matron has gone for dinner. Have a seat; she'll be back soon."

"No need for that." Shang Jianyao shook his head and walked to Li Jiawen's side.

On the wall was a black machine that could be used for contribution point transactions.

Shang Jianyao looked at the relatively spacious activity area inside, the relatively old equipment, and the relatively simple furnishings. He took out an electronic card and swiped it on the machine.

He then pressed the numbers for 50,000 and chose 'Eleventh Orphanage' as the recipient. As it was a large transaction, he pressed his fingerprint to the machine as confirmation.

Li Jiawen looked at Shang Jianyao's back and chuckled. "Are you here to donate? How thoughtful. Didn't you just start working?"

The company was in charge of the orphanage's basic budget, but it only covered rooms, venues, employees' salaries, the living insurance, and the corresponding energy allocation for every orphan.

If one wanted the orphanage to have a better environment and for every orphan to eat better, they would have to rely on employee donations.

Shang Jianyao turned around, put away the electronic card, and smiled. "Save it for me."

"Huh?" Li Jiawen was confused.

“Not even a word of thanks.” Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything else. He nodded gently and walked out of the orphanage.

Li Jiawen watched him leave. He slowly stood up, limped to the black machine, and checked the transaction records.

“50,000?” he exclaimed. After working for so many years, his current savings were about this amount.

...

On the 495th floor, Supplies Allocation Market.

Shang Jianyao bought a pile of items that were expensive and convenient to sell. He carried them and walked back to Zone B.

He didn’t go home and instead made a turn to the other side.

After walking for a while, Shang Jianyao stopped in front of an open room. This was Shen Du’s home.

His home was slightly larger than the current room Shang Jianyao occupied. There was a cramped bedroom on the right, and the rest served as the living room, kitchen, and dining room.

Shen Du’s wife, Tian Jing, was busy in the kitchen area outside. Their child kept running around her.

Shang Jianyao walked over and suddenly asked, “Why aren’t you going to the canteen?”

Tian Jing was in her thirties. Although she had a beautiful face, she looked very haggard.

She smiled bitterly. “We still have to take precautions. Although the company has always said that the Heartless disease is not contagious, everyone is still relatively afraid of it. Look, they’ve even given me a break.”

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “Uncle Shen has always taken good care of me.”

As he spoke, he placed the pile of things in his hands inside Shen Du’s house.

“...No, no, this is too precious!” Tian Jing only took a glance and knew that the items that Shang Jianyao had brought were worth tens of thousands of contribution points.

Shang Jianyao stopped and thought for a moment. "If you don't want to accept them, you can choose to be my mother."

"?" Tian Jing was stunned.

Shang Jianyao took the opportunity to put everything down and waved his hand. "It seems like you don't want to."

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao's 'firm' attitude, Tian Jing stammered, "If you need any help in the future, just tell me."

Shang Jianyao nodded and turned to walk back home.

He vaguely heard Shen Du's child ask his mother behind him, "Mommy, isn't that uncle afraid that we will get sick?"

"Mommy, when will Daddy recover?"

"Mommy, when can Daddy come back?"

Shang Jianyao's footsteps paused before he quickened his pace.

Chapter 103: Special Training

A few days later, when the Old Task Force's afternoon training session was about to begin.

Jiang Baimian walked back to her room with a slightly complicated expression. She came in front of Long Yuehong and fell silent for a moment. "Your transfer application has been rejected."

Long Yuehong's body swayed slightly, and he couldn't conceal the disappointment on his face.

Jiang Baimian sighed softly. "It says that we shouldn't abandon or give up on lagging members. We can't directly sentence them to death just because they show psychological discomfort during a single training session.

"Besides, nobody has applied to join the Old Task Force at the moment. There's a lack of manpower everywhere. To get a replacement, we can only wait for the next assignment."

Long Yuehong lowered his head and muttered to himself, "...I understand, I understand."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and consoled him with a smile. "I won't ask you to say it louder this time."

Long Yuehong fell silent for a moment before saying, "I'm actually not that disappointed, and I'm not in pain. At least I find the Old Task Force's job meaningful now."

Jiang Baimian smiled. "If it wasn't meaningful, I wouldn't have established the Old Task Force either."

With that said, she patted Long Yuehong on the shoulder. "Train well, improve yourself, and strive to live until July next year. When the time comes, I can apply for a new member and replace you."

Long Yuehong smiled in a way that looked more like a grimace. "Team Leader, your words are inauspicious."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao came over and smiled. "Team Leader, you should say: I'll beat you up later and improve your survivability!"

Long Yuehong's face turned pale. He inexplicably felt that this was more terrifying than going out into the field for investigations. After all, there were still a few months before the next mission's official start, where he would face all kinds of dangers. There were only about ten minutes before their afternoon training session started.

Jiang Baimian repeated Shang Jianyao's words, but she wasn't staring at Long Yuehong. Instead, she was looking at Shang Jianyao. "I'll beat you up later and improve your survivability!"

She put on a look that made her seem eager to get her hands dirty. She then thoughtfully said to Long Yuehong, "If there's a chance, we'll get you another military exoskeleton. This can effectively enhance your strength."

"Sure, sure." Long Yuehong's eyes lit up.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Actually, you can also consider a biomechanical limb transplant. It's much safer than genetic modification. If you have a man's romance and like machines, you can try replacing certain parts of your body with machines. Some large factions are very good at this. I remember there's a mechanical arm model that has many functions. It's quite desirable."

"...There's no need for that for the time being." Long Yuehong still preferred his original body.

"Sigh, I'm only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. I might as well replace it." Shang Jianyao 'helped' do a voice-over.

Long Yuehong's facial muscles twitched as he blurted out, "Why aren't you doing the replacement?"

"I haven't gotten a chance yet," Shang Jianyao replied seriously.

Long Yuehong was speechless.

Upon seeing the atmosphere turn for the better, Jiang Baimian turned her head to Bai Chen, who was watching quietly. "That suggestion was also for you. Biological prosthetic limb transplant and mechanical modification technology are relatively mature, so they aren't that dangerous.

"Do you want to pair up with me and be Lightning Sisters?"

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao made a comment before Bai Chen could speak. "Team Leader, your sense of naming sucks. You must have skipped on listening to the radio!"

"... I think you have skipped on getting electrocuted." Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth.

Bai Chen slowly exhaled and nodded. "I'll consider it."

"The only question is: who's the older sister and who's the younger sister?" Shang Jianyao 'helped' Bai Chen with a voice-over again.

Jiang Baimian was momentarily at a loss for words. This was because Bai Chen was indeed older than her. Furthermore, she was very mature in terms of mental age. But as team leader, Jiang Baimian could not bring herself to call herself the younger sister.

She had always designated herself as the team's protector and guardian.

Jiang Baimian quickly came to a realization and glared at Shang Jianyao. During this process, she laughed and changed the topic. "After today's training, there's still a special training session. This is to train your courage."

"How?" Long Yuehong was a little afraid.

Jiang Baimian raised her chin and smiled. "Stay here alone tonight. You can't bring a flashlight or any illumination tools."

"That sounds a little terrifying..." Long Yuehong sighed sincerely.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Only one person for each round of training. Otherwise, it will be useless. Shang Jianyao, it's you tonight. Bai Chen, it's you tomorrow night. Long Yuehong, the night after tomorrow."

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief when he heard that he was not the first. “Yes, Team Leader!”

Shang Jianyao solemnly said, “Yes, Team Leader!”

After Bai Chen replied, Shang Jianyao raised his hand and asked, “Can I sleep while staying here? Can I turn on the speaker to listen to music?”

“None of that!” Jiang Baimian replied firmly.

...

After dinner, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen left Room 14 one after another and returned to their respective floors.

At the same time, Jiang Baimian took away all the flashlights and batteries.

Shang Jianyao read the thick oral histories under the light in the room. From time to time, he could hear the radio announcing the time.

At 9 p.m., all the lights on the entire floor went out at the same time, and the area in front of Shang Jianyao turned pitch-black.

There was no natural light source here at all. There were tables, chairs, and walls all around. Shang Jianyao couldn't even see his finger, much less the outline of various objects.

He subconsciously wanted to turn on the table lamp, but he realized that it was useless.

The 647th floor was not like the Residential Zone. After the street lamps were switched off, one could use their own energy allocation to give light to their home. But here, all rooms would have their power cut at the stipulated time unless the corresponding person-in-charge submitted a request to work late or work all night.

Shang Jianyao retracted his hand and sized up his surroundings again. All he saw was rich darkness.

In this darkness, he didn't know where the boundaries were, nor did he know if anything else was hiding around him apart from the familiar objects.

Furthermore, the 647th floor was different from the Residential Zones. The rooms in the Residential Zones were densely packed, and the soundproofing was average. Every night when it was quiet, Shang Jianyao could always hear some private conversations and grunting sounds.

Sometimes, children would cry, adults would quarrel, and someone would snore. Before Shang Jianyao fell asleep, the night was often not absolutely quiet.

In such a workplace, it was relatively lively during the day. After 7 p.m., there might not be more than ten living people on the entire floor. When the lights were switched off, there were almost no humans.

Therefore, Shang Jianyao felt that this place was abnormally quiet at this moment, so quiet that it seemed to have frozen.

A creaking sound suddenly sounded. Shang Jianyao took the initiative to shift the stool, breaking the terrifying stillness.

But moving around wasn't something he could keep doing. The sound quickly subsided as if it was swallowed by the thick darkness around him.

Shang Jianyao sat there with his eyes wide open and stared into the darkness' depths, wanting to see what was happening.

This darkness and silence made him unable to determine his own existence. He felt like he would be swallowed by the darkness at any moment.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao suddenly starting singing. "Reminiscing the past, a painful yearning that I can't forget..."

As he sang, he switched to a more intense genre. "Arise, ye prisoners of starvation... Arise, ye wretched of the earth..."

He roared as if he wanted to break the extreme darkness and silence.

After he roared, Shang Jianyao stopped and panted slightly.

The entire floor became quiet again, and the darkness never changed.

Shang Jianyao calmed down for a while before singing again.

He sang and stopped, but he couldn't get a response. He couldn't break through the darkness.

After a long while, Shang Jianyao suddenly spoke and shouted, "Is there anyone? Is there anyone there!?"

He only received his own echo.

Phew. Phew.

Unknowingly, Shang Jianyao's breathing became heavier as if he was using this method to prove that he still existed.

At this moment, he suddenly turned his head and looked at the door.

Light footsteps came from the side and quickly approached. A yellow beam of light shone into the room.

The beam of light then rose, illuminating a bright, white face.

"Am I terrifying?" A faint female voice echoed in the room.

Shang Jianyao glanced at Jiang Baimian—who was using the flashlight to illuminate her face. "You're so childish."

"..." Jiang Baimian replied in exasperation and amusement, "I'm just concerned about you and trying to lighten the mood!"

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to speak, she curled her lips. "You really can't sing well."

"Have you been hiding next door?" Shang Jianyao asked directly.

Jiang Baimian smiled and explained, "Two rooms away. Otherwise, you, an Awakened, would've discovered me." She walked to Shang Jianyao's side, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

She shook the flashlight and watched the light dance wildly.

After a few seconds, she casually said, "This special training was mainly designed for you. Your fear of being sealed in darkness and extreme silence should've been generated when your mother was hospitalized for a long time after your father disappeared, right?"

"At that time, you were only 13 or 14 years old. When you woke up in the middle of the night, there was no one at home, and there was no sound around you... Thus, you emboldened yourself by singing?"

Shang Jianyao remained silent and didn't answer.

Jiang Baimian laughed and continued, "You have to deal with this problem step by step and adapt to it step by step. You can't be too agitated in the beginning, or it will only worsen your fear. Therefore, I'll accompany you for the first few times. I might have a few words with you, but I won't turn on the flashlight.

"When you get used to this situation, I won't speak, and I'll also sit further away.

“After this phase ends and if you don’t encounter any negative problems, I’ll go two rooms away and stay there so that you won’t see or hear me but know that someone is nearby. When the time comes, I might quietly return home, but I won’t tell you.”

Shang Jianyao quietly listened and nodded as the flashlight beam shone at him. “Alright.”

Jiang Baimian smiled and switched off the flashlight.

The entire room became abnormally dark again, but compared to before, there was an additional sound of breathing.

Chapter 104: Steadily Advancing

In the almost frozen darkness, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian sat opposite each other. Neither spoke.

Unknowingly, it felt like the first person to speak would lose.

Finally, Jiang Baimian broke the silence and laughed self-deprecatingly. “Why should I compete with you?”

As she spoke, she stood up, covered her mouth, and yawned. “I’ll go lie down on the sofa and sleep for a while. As for you, you can count your heartbeats and seriously feel the circulation of every part of your body. You can also mentally go through all the oral histories you’ve previously read and do a brief summary and inspection.

“Try to see if you can get some inspiration or comb through the matter regarding Wang Yafei and Shen Du from beginning to end to see if you have missed any key points. Additionally, you can also get up and walk or stroll. As long as you can see, dancing won’t be a problem.”

After giving her instructions, Jiang Baimian strode forward and nimbly circled around the different obstacles in the darkness before successfully arriving at the sofa.

Shang Jianyao regretfully said, “You actually didn’t trip.”

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. “You sure are cooperative. You know how to bring this up.

“When I switched on the flashlight just now, I observed my surroundings and memorized most of the items’ exact locations. At the same time, I can also sense the electric signals from my motion. From there, I can adjust my direction and not deviate from the designated landing spot.

“Remember, you have to grasp the surrounding layout and terrain quickly, no matter where you are. It can save lives at critical moments.”

Jiang Baimian was clearly very pleased with herself.

After educating her team member, Jiang Baimian sat down and retracted her legs. “I’m sleeping.”

Just as she said that, she laughed again. “You can wake me up if you’re afraid, but don’t wake me up with singing!”

Shang Jianyao’s words were stuck in his throat.

Jiang Baimian deliberately pretended to fall asleep. After waiting for a while, she gradually heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that Shang Jianyao did not exhibit any signs of his previous state.

As she feigned sleep, Jiang Baimian eventually fell asleep.

Jiang Baimian was woken up by a sudden beam of light shining at her. She abruptly stood up, lifted her thick cotton coat, and looked around in confusion. “What time is it?”

“It’s 6:30.” Shang Jianyao’s voice sounded from nearby.

Jiang Baimian subconsciously looked over and realized that the fellow was actually doing a handstand with his back against the wall.

“W-what are you doing?” Although Jiang Baimian had recently been able to grasp Shang Jianyao’s responses and deter him from saying weird stuff in advance, she really couldn’t understand why he was doing a handstand.

Shang Jianyao maintained his posture and calmly replied, “A way to change the way I consider things. I’m looking at the problem from a different perspective.”

“...This angle is indeed extraordinary.” Jiang Baimian praised him against her true beliefs. “Then, did you gain anything?”

“No.” Shang Jianyao exerted strength with his waist and abdomen, and with a push off the floor with his arm, he stood up properly.

Jiang Baimian decided not to continue the topic. She took two silent breaths and asked, “How was it last night?”

“I just couldn’t use the bathroom,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

Jiang Baimian relaxed and smiled. "You can go. There are sensor lights in the public bathroom here at night."

"It's mainly because it's easy to bump into something before leaving," Shang Jianyao explained seriously.

Jiang Baimian was just about to reply, "What's the big deal? It's not like you'll kill yourself by bumping into things."

However, she suddenly had a thought and smiled. "Were you worried that you'll create a commotion and wake me up?"

"That's impolite." Shang Jianyao did not show any signs of having his thoughts seen through.

Jiang Baimian then praised, "That's not bad."

She stretched her waist and limbs and smiled. "You've adapted well. Continue reading the oral histories this morning. You can go back and rest in the afternoon. You don't have to participate in the training session."

"In the future, you just need to stay here when it's your turn. Don't be too anxious. Take things one step at a time. As long as you can take every step steadily, trust me; this fear of yours isn't a big problem. You will definitely emerge victorious."

At this point, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "I've read an Old World book, and there's this sentence in it: What doesn't kill you makes you stronger[1]."

Shang Jianyao nodded solemnly, indicating that he would keep it in mind.

As Jiang Baimian walked to the door, she casually said, "I'll go wash up. Yes... I have to rest well tonight."

"No, what if Bai Chen has a similar fear? What if Long Yuehong is more afraid of the dark than you are and is more afraid of the silent and relatively sealed darkness? Sigh, I have to watch over them for the next two nights. I mustn't have anything go wrong..."

"It's so tiring being a team leader!"

Shang Jianyao quietly listened to Jiang Baimian's complaints and volunteered. "I can help you watch over them."

Jiang Baimian frowned and asked rather vigilantly, "Are you trying to scare them?"

"Since we are training our courage, how can we be missing that?" Shang Jianyao said boldly and confidently.

Jiang Baimian's eyes slightly flickered as she smiled. "This suggestion can be considered, but it can't be done during the first few times. What if they get spooked?"

Hehe, when the time comes, it's still not certain who will be the one doing the scaring.

Shang Jianyao didn't say anything else and rushed out to the public bathroom.

...

At 7 p.m., he went to the small canteen on the 647th floor for dinner after waking up. He then returned to the 495th floor's Rec Center.

He found an empty corner as usual and sat there, observing everyone coming and going.

As expected, he saw Long Yuehong and his blind date.

Unlike before, Long Yuehong spent a large sum of money on buying sweets, pumpkins, and glass bottled beverages from the Supplies Allocation Market next door. After receiving the compensation and bonuses, Long Yuehong had been doing well recently.

"How extravagant..." Shang Jianyao evaluated softly.

As he looked around, he realized that Jian Xin—who had short hair that reached her ears—was watching her husband, Zhuo Zhengyuan, play cards.

After so many days, this lady—who had been worried, uneasy, and tense after Wang Yafei's death—seemed to have returned to normal. Her face was ruddy again, and she happily chatted with the people around her.

Similarly, the grief and fear she felt because of Shen Du's death seemed to have disappeared.

After a while, Jian Xin lowered her head and spoke to her husband, Zhuo Zhengyuan. She turned around and walked to the door.

Jian Xin looked like she was going to the public bathroom.

Shang Jianyao suddenly stood up and walked over. He 'coincidentally' bumped into Jian Xin near the entrance.

There was nobody here.

When Jian Xin saw that it was Shang Jianyao, her expression became a little complicated. She forced a smile and asked, "I heard that you and Long Yuehong found many good things on the surface?"

As she spoke, she couldn't help but look at the mechanical watch on Shang Jianyao's left wrist.

"These things are all over the ruins," Shang Jianyao said truthfully.

Without waiting for Jian Xin to speak again, he directly inquired, "Did you see anyone you shouldn't have seen on the 478th floor that day?"

He didn't directly say the words 'the day Wang Yafei died.'

Jian Xin's face turned slightly pale as she muttered, "I've been thinking about this the past few days. I was busy cleaning and didn't pay attention to my surroundings."

She paused and spoke at an accelerated pace. "Later, Wang Yafei died. I was very uneasy and scared. It was impossible for me to be in the mood to observe him."

As she spoke, she looked around and pursed her lips. "The only person I find strange is Xiong Ming. I bumped into him at lunch in the canteen. Normally, he should be working in the Indoor Ecosystem Zone. Maybe he took sick leave..."

Shang Jianyao's expression did not change. He suddenly asked, "Why do you have a deep impression of him?"

Jian Xin was not that afraid to discuss this topic, so her speaking volume returned to normal. "He's very easy to remember. You might not be aware, but there's something wrong with his eyes. His eyeballs don't seem to move much. He just looks at you blankly and is unable to discover anything when it comes at him from the side..."

"Is that so?" Shang Jianyao nodded and suddenly said, "This matter is in the past."

"I hope so." Jian Xin sighed slightly and pointed outside. "I'm going out."

Shang Jianyao did not stop her and walked to the other side.

The two of them seemed to have bumped into each other on the way and had a little chit-chat while no one was around.

The next morning, Shang Jianyao entered Room 14 on the 647th floor ahead of time. He waited for a while before Jiang Baimian finally arrived.

"I got here first." Shang Jianyao seemed like he had achieved a major victory.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "I don't even want to agitate you. I made breakfast at home."

She would cook a meal for her parents from time to time.

Worried that this topic would make Shang Jianyao uncomfortable, Jiang Baimian sized him up and asked, "You're early. Is there something?"

Shang Jianyao nodded. "I met Jian Xin yesterday..."

He recounted how Xiong Ming was supposed to be at work but had lunch on the floor where he lived. He didn't forget to mention the details regarding the target's abnormal eyes.

Jiang Baimian's expression flickered as she nodded slightly. "This person is indeed very suspicious. There are signs of him paying a price. We next have to figure out how to seek confirmation without leaving a trace and obtain clues."

At this point, Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and smiled. "It's time to test your ability to make friends! Of course, it can also be a test of your ability to acknowledge a god-relative."

[1] From Nietzsche

Chapter 105: Neo-Human

On the night after his night duty, Shang Jianyao took the elevator and arrived at the 478th floor.

Before this, he and Jiang Baimian never asked anyone about Xiong Ming's looks, where he would most often go after work, and where he lived.

They were worried that they would bump into a secret member of Life Ritual and attract unnecessary trouble or overreaction by rashly asking such questions.

Shen Du's death was an example.

Therefore, Jiang Baimian suspected that one of the Order Supervisors back then was an Awakened from the Life Ritual parish.

Unfortunately, Shang Jianyao had 'secretly' observed that nobody in the Order Supervisory Department on this floor had any obvious abnormalities. The price one had to pay for their abilities would often appear on the surface.

Since there was nothing to focus on, Shang Jianyao didn't consider such matters. He went straight to the Rec Center on the 478th floor, planning to stay there until Newspoint began.

Like the 495th floor, the Rec Center here was also the busiest place at night. Some people played cards, some chatted, and some gathered together to knit sweaters.

Shang Jianyao swept his gaze around, but he didn't find Xiong Ming—who had relatively obvious characteristics. He found a corner without many others and carefully made observations.

After about 20 minutes, his back tensed up.

At this moment, a man entered through the door. He looked to be in his mid-twenties and wore a black, well-tailored top. His hair was styled very short, and every strand seemed to be facing the ceiling vertically.

His face was rather clean, and he had very slight stubble. He had nice facial features, exhibiting the aesthetics of a carving. It was obvious that he was from the new generation that had undergone genetic enhancement since they were embryos.

However, something seemed to be wrong with the man's eyes. They were lacking in vitality as if they were made of wood. They were fixed in place with no mobility to the left or right.

Shang Jianyao stood up and walked over.

“Xiong Ming?” he called out hesitantly.

The man stopped. He was clearly standing slightly askew from Shang Jianyao, and his eyes could clearly see the other party with a slight twitch. However, he ended up turning his entire head over.

“You are?” The young man indirectly admitted that he was Xiong Ming.

After meeting Xiong Ming's eyes, Shang Jianyao could sense the anomaly in his eyes more directly. This allowed him to confirm the other party's identity completely.

He looked around and saw that no one was paying attention to him. Therefore, he smiled and said, “I came specially to find you.”

“Oh?” Xiong Ming narrowed his eyes.

Shang Jianyao smiled warmly and said, “Look, you have special powers, so do I.”

Xiong Ming's expression sank when he heard that, and his gaze turned extremely dangerous.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe, and his heart was about to stop beating. He maintained his smile and continued, “You are a member of a secret organization, and so am I.

“So...”

Xiong Ming stared at Shang Jianyao for a few seconds without moving, and his expression gradually softened. He nodded slightly and said, "So you're also a Blessed of the Kalendaria, a fellow parishioner."

He turned his head to look at the noisy environment and pointed outside with his chin. "Let's go out for a walk."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao was a little disappointed.

He imagined that, given their 'close' relationship, the other party would invite him to eat some pumpkin seeds or drink some orange soda.

After leaving the Rec Center, the two of them strolled to a relatively quiet corner.

Under the white light from the ceiling, Xiong Ming—who was slowly walking forward with his hands in his pockets—suddenly asked, "When did you awaken?"

"This year." Shang Jianyao was very calm.

Xiong Ming nodded slightly. "Beginning of last year for me."

His expression gradually became solemn. "Even with the Arbiter of Fate's blessings, only one or two people can successfully awaken each time, sometimes even none. People like us who can awaken are undoubtedly the Blessed of the gods. We are unique and outstanding beings. That's why I'm willing to tell you so much. No one else is worthy."

Xiong Ming turned around and pointed at the Rec Center. "Do you see those people? If I want them dead, they will die immediately. They are so average, ordinary, stupid, and vulgar. Their only use is to allow us to stand out."

At this point, Xiong Ming smiled faintly and turned his head to Shang Jianyao. "A new world is prepared for Neo-Humans."

"A monk once said the same thing," Shang Jianyao replied with a smile. "But at the very least, he doesn't have to rely on ordinary humans for labor. He also doesn't pee, fart, or poop..."

Xiong Ming frowned. "There's no need to say that. Machines will eventually replace old humans."

He then asked, "Have you entered the Sea of Origins?"

"I just entered." Shang Jianyao didn't hide anything.

“Pretty talented.” Xiong Ming turned around and continued walking toward a quiet corner of the street.

The rooms on both sides were densely packed together like pigeon-rearing cages.

Xiong Ming looked around by turning his head and body and then raised his chin slightly. “We Neo-Humans shouldn’t just live in such places. Don’t worry. It won’t be long before we take our rightful places.

“Only the Arbiter of Fate can be above us.”

Shang Jianyao looked at Xiong Ming’s wooden eyes for a second and suddenly asked, “Your ability is to cause cardiac arrest?”

Xiong Ming did not answer immediately. He sized up Shang Jianyao with a deep gaze for a while.

This made Shang Jianyao’s heartbeat seem abnormal. The suffocating feeling was almost tangible.

“You guessed it from Wang Yafei’s death?” Xiong Ming finally spoke, breaking the suffocating silence.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Shang Jianyao asked with a smile.

Xiong Ming smiled. “Actually, I could have used a more obscure method, but there’s no need. He’s not worth my time.”

Shang Jianyao nodded. It was unknown if he agreed or was just casually nodding. He then asked, “Did the Doctor of the Church send you to kill Wang Yafei?”

Xiong Ming tersely acknowledged it. “That person isn’t much usually. He likes to short-weight his employees. He only likes to stock up on things with little supply. He will only sell them to you when you beg him. Therefore, I took on this mission.

“In order to kill him, I applied for sick leave a day in advance. After breakfast, I entered the Rec Center and stayed by the wall that separates the Supplies Allocation Market. I did this because I heard an employee of the Strategy Committee mention which surveillance cameras are still usable.”

Within Pangu Biology, the surveillance system was managed by the Strategy Committee. This was to restrict the Order Supervisory Department’s authority and prevent imbalances in power.

“Strategy Committee...” Shang Jianyao repeated the name. He remembered that Ren Jie—the Guide on the 495th floor—was also from the Strategy Committee.

Xiong Ming didn't repeat Shang Jianyao's words and continued speaking. "Around 9 a.m., I heard Wang Yafei's voice. I confirmed that he was next door and confirmed his exact location.

"It only took a few seconds to kill him. It was very simple.

"It quickly became chaotic. I took the opportunity to change locations and distanced myself from the wall. Then, I borrowed a book and read it until noon before heading to the canteen for lunch."

Xiong Ming spoke in detail as if he was pleased with the success of his mission, something he had always wanted to share with someone.

Shang Jianyao quietly listened and smiled. "The parish has always claimed it as divine punishment."

"Isn't this a divine punishment?" Xiong Ming tilted his head slightly and said, "Is such a deity-like method not worthy of being called a divine punishment? Besides, this itself is carried out by a deity's Blessed."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and asked seriously, "Is the dance performed by a Blessed called a divine dance?"

"What are you talking about?" Xiong Ming frowned.

Shang Jianyao didn't explain and asked, "How many people are like us?"

"I'm not sure." Xiong Ming shook his head. "Every Doctor of the Church has a small number of Awakened under them. They might not know each other's existence."

"Every Doctor of the Church?" Shang Jianyao grasped the crux of the matter.

Xiong Ming looked at him in surprise. "Don't you know? There are several Doctors of the Church in the company."

He paused and said, "We are also strong contenders for the position of Doctor of the Church."

At this point, Xiong Ming looked at Shang Jianyao suspiciously. "Which Doctor of the Church are you under?"

Shang Jianyao did not panic at all and replied seriously, "The Doctor of the Church who has always been paying attention to us."

“Him? He’s the most mysterious of the Doctors of the Church. I’ve never seen him directly either.” Xiong Ming came to a realization. “No wonder you know so little... Won’t it take a long time for the people who follow him to receive an order?”

“At least that’s the case for me,” Shang Jianyao said ‘truthfully.’

Without waiting for Xiong Ming’s response, he questioned, “Which Doctor of the Church made you kill Wang Yafei?”

Xiong Ming’s expression changed slightly. “All Doctors of the Church use certain words of the Old World as their title. The one I’m following is called ‘Deceased’s Return.’”

Chapter 106: The Technique to Report

“Deceased’s Return...” Shang Jianyao repeated this slightly strange term and asked curiously, “Where does this term originate from?”

Xiong Ming curled his lips indiscernibly and said, “It’s said to be part of the Old World’s rite of birth or funerals. This is the domain controlled by our Lady, Arbiter of Fate.”

Shang Jianyao seemed to find this very interesting and quickly asked, “Apart from First Seven, what else is there? Which ones are empty? When I become a Doctor of the Church, I can choose one for myself.”

Xiong Ming nodded slightly in agreement. “Ambitious. Not bad. That’s the spirit a Neo-Human should have.”

He seemed to have pondered this question long ago, and his wooden eyes glowed slightly. “The ones currently known are Full Month, Hundred Days, Coffining, Wake, Funeral Procession, Memorial, and Mourning...”

“Among them, Coffining, Mourning, Hundred Days, and Funeral Procession are still vacant. You can consider one of the four, or think of a way to snatch the titles from the other Doctors of the Church.”

Shang Jianyao seriously discussed with Xiong Ming which name sounded better before asking, “Which department is the Doctor of the Church, Deceased’s Return, from?”

Xiong Ming looked at Shang Jianyao for a few seconds with his seemingly immobile eyes and chuckled. “You should ask the Doctor of the Church, Wake, about such matters. I shouldn’t or can’t meddle in the affairs of others.”

Wake... Shang Jianyao silently memorized this name.

Wake was probably the most mysterious of the Doctors of the Church.

“I’ll ask when I get back.” Shang Jianyao didn’t force the issue. He looked at the ceiling lamps and casually asked, “How did Shen Du die? Who made him contract the Heartless disease, or rather, appear to contract the Heartless disease?”

“Who’s Shen Du?” Xiong Ming asked with a frown.

“Ah... Then it’s fine.” Shang Jianyao smiled.

Xiong Ming thought for a moment. “At present, I’ve never seen an Awakened’s ability turn others into Heartless. There’s none that gives similar symptoms either.”

Shang Jianyao nodded and said without hesitation, “I should go.”

He was worried that the more questions he asked, the more likely he would be exposed, destroying the effects of Inference Clowning.

At such a close distance, Cardiac Arrest could kill him instantly.

Furthermore, Shang Jianyao had obtained the most critical information. Hence, he had no need to stay any longer.

Xiong Ming—who was wearing a black shirt—smiled and waved his hand. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Shang Jianyao smiled brightly as he waved his hands enthusiastically, using a great deal of force.

After bidding Xiong Ming farewell, Shang Jianyao entered the corresponding elevator, swiped his card, and pressed the number ‘647.’

...

As this was only the second round of bravery training, Jiang Baimian continued hiding two rooms away like she was torturing herself. She would immediately appear and comfort her teammates if anything went wrong.

However, it was not 8 p.m. yet. There was still some time before lights out. Jiang Baimian lay on the sofa in a rather relaxed state as she flipped through the information she had obtained ahead of time.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao enter, Jiang Baimian muttered loudly, “I’m just a worrisome person.”

She then retracted her casually placed legs and sat up straight. “How was it? Got anything?”

Jiang Baimian knew that Shang Jianyao would make friends with Xiong Ming tonight. This was also one of the reasons why she stayed on the 647th floor tonight.

If not, Shang Jianyao might not be able to divulge the important, critical, and urgent information immediately if he obtained it.

Sometimes, an opportunity was fleeting.

“He admitted that he was the one who killed Wang Yafei.” Shang Jianyao went straight to the point. He then sat in the chair opposite the sofa and repeated Xiong Ming’s words as completely as he could.

Jiang Baimian originally had a serious expression when she heard the information, but the words ‘Deceased’s Return’ seemed to have some kind of magic. It instantly shattered her psychological defenses and made her unable to stop cracking up.

“Haha, your parish. Haha, what a genius at naming! I’ve read the descriptions of funerals in some of the Old World’s books. Who knew that someone would use these milestones as their title? Haha, that’s too funny. Haha, don’t you find it a little ridiculous?”

After laughing for a while, Jiang Baimian held her stomach and ‘seriously’ said, “Xiong Ming still doesn’t know much about funerals. I think you will definitely like one of the titles: Singing In Spirit. It’s the act of singing scriptures for funerals.”

Shang Jianyao listened attentively and shook his head. “Team Leader, this is a very serious matter.”

At this moment, Jiang Baimian felt like she was acting like Shang Jianyao and that Shang Jianyao was acting like her.

“Huh? What did you say?” Jiang Baimian habitually touched her ear. “Yes, this matter involves two lives. We can’t deviate from the main point.”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “Choosing a title is a very serious matter.”

“...” Jiang Baimian suddenly took a deep breath in and sized up Shang Jianyao several times as if she was searching for a place to hit him.

After a few seconds, she exhaled and said seriously, “Since Xiong Ming has already admitted to it, our guess has been confirmed. Furthermore, he clearly doesn’t want to reveal the true identity of the Doctor of the Church behind him.

“We should report this matter as soon as possible. If we continue investigating, it will be very dangerous and easily exposed. There’s no need for that.”

Shang Jianyao did not insist. "Alright."

Jiang Baimian leaned back slightly and cupped her right hand around her mouth and nose, seemingly in thought. "The problem now is how to report the matter and who to report it to. I don't want to become a Heartless."

Shen Du was an example.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to speak, she laughed self-deprecatingly. "The other party seems to be shrouded in fog and hidden in the darkness. We have no way of knowing who their members are and who isn't."

"I am," Shang Jianyao replied very firmly.

"..." Jiang Baimian was speechless. "I mean, I can't even be sure that there aren't any Life Ritual members among the Security Department's higher-ups or board members. It will be troublesome if I report it to them."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said confidently, "I have an idea."

"What is it?" Jiang Baimian was prepared to receive a strange answer. She didn't stop Shang Jianyao because she felt that this might bring her inspiration. After all, Shang Jianyao's perspective on problems was indeed different from that of normal people.

Shang Jianyao eagerly said, "Infiltrate the radio station, control Hou Yi, and broadcast this news in the middle of the Newspoint. When the time comes, everyone will be able to hear the news. The higher-ups who aren't part of Life Ritual will immediately take action!"

Jiang Baimian listened carefully and thought for a moment before blurting out, "Whoa, that's actually quite a good idea! This train of thought is really good. Not bad."

"Since the Life Ritual hasn't controlled the company and doesn't dare to preach openly, it means that they are a minority. Even if they have their people amongst the higher-ups, there definitely aren't many of them. As long as we publicize this news and let most of the higher-ups know, the difficulty of them causing trouble will rise exponentially. They might even have to sacrifice their tails to survive."

Shang Jianyao immediately stood up. "I'll do it now!"

"Stop!" Jiang Baimian shouted for Shang Jianyao to stop in time.

She snapped, "I only said that the train of thought was good, but I didn't say that it was feasible!"

“I can easily sneak into the radio station.” Shang Jianyao indicated that the plan was highly feasible.

“I know; you have Inference Clowning. If it weren’t for its other uses, you could change this ability’s name to Making Friends.” Jiang Baimian exhaled helplessly. “The problem is the possible consequences.”

She raised her finger and did the analysis for Shang Jianyao. “This can indeed resolve Life Ritual. But by broadcasting the information like that, everyone will learn of it. The company won’t be able to give the parish’s lowest-ranking members a slap on the wrist. Aren’t they the people you want to protect?”

“Besides, how are they to withstand the strange looks from the employees around them?”

“That’s the main problem. On a smaller scale, do you think the company won’t investigate the radio station after this? When the time comes, they can easily determine that you are an Awakened.

“Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted to hide? After that, I’ll definitely be punished for helping you hide your secret of being an Awakened. Otherwise, I’ll receive an evaluation regarding my inability to read people.”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a few seconds before sitting down again. He then voiced his current thoughts. “I’m not too afraid of the company finding out that I’m an Awakened. I’m only worried about being transferred away from the Old Task Force.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Don’t worry. We don’t need you to expose yourself for the time being. Your train of thought gave me a simpler and more perfect solution.”

Shang Jianyao cooperatively asked, “What is it?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “The solution is to send an email to every board member and every Security Department senior executive to tell them the entire story.”

“Email?” Shang Jianyao had learned this term in textbooks and had experience using it in university.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded. “I will say that my team member, Shang Jianyao, came to a realization after Wang Yafei’s death and reported the Life Ritual to me. I then deduced that an Awakened was involved based on the routine investigation reports and medical statistics. Furthermore, the person in question was on the 478th floor. After that, Shang Jianyao confirmed that the suspect was Xiong Ming by asking the person involved and paying a visit.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian sighed. "This is the email I'll send. But if Xiong Ming is captured and snitches on you, your identity as an Awakened will be exposed. Fortunately, you don't mind too much."

Shang Jianyao said seriously, "I didn't tell Xiong Ming that I'm an Awakened. I only said that he has special powers, and so do I. His special power is that his eyes can't move. My special power is my mental problems."

"...Do you think the company will believe that Xiong Ming befriended you so easily?" Jiang Baimian covered her forehead.

She then stood up. "I'll go back and send an email now. Be prepared to be questioned tonight."

Shang Jianyao nodded and didn't say anything else. He took the elevator back to the 495th floor.

Under the street lamps' illumination, he strolled to Zone B, Room 196.

He was just about to take out his key and walk to the door when he suddenly saw a figure out of the corner of his eye.

Chapter 107: Garbage In, Garbage Out

The figure stood between Rooms 188 and 190, almost ten meters away from Shang Jianyao. He wore a dark cap, a blue top, and black pants. His leather shoes were slightly old.

The person was standing with his back against the wall. His hat was pressed very low, almost covering his eyes.

The shadow produced by the brim of his hat fell and enveloped his entire face, so Shang Jianyao was only able to see the silver-black metal tube in his mouth.

This metal tube was only the length of a finger, like a substitute for crude cigarettes.

Shang Jianyao's heart palpitated, and he gave up on the attempt to take out his key. He bent his knees slightly and exerted strength with his waist, instantly entering a ready state.

At this moment, his vision suddenly turned black. It was not that he had fainted, but that the light around him seemed to have been sucked away by something.

Not only that, but he couldn't hear anything.

Shang Jianyao's current state seemed like he had returned to the first 'island' he had encountered at the Sea of Origins.

There was complete darkness and silence. Apart from himself, there were no other people.

A familiar fear spewed out of his heart again, making him tremble slightly.

Yue Qifan—who was leaning against the wall—immediately stood up and turned around. He quickly looked up and aimed the silver-black metal tube in his mouth at Shang Jianyao.

It was a blowpipe.

Unlike the simple wooden blowpipes made by wilderness nomads on the surface, this metal blowpipe had a relatively complicated mechanical structure. It was driven by springs and mechanisms. Therefore, it was not one to two meters long, perfect as a concealed weapon. Furthermore, it did not require real blowing. It could be fired by pressing a button with one's tongue.

In a sense, this couldn't be called blowing a dart because it could be activated with fingers.

Its real name was Dark Dart.

Yue Qifan used the most inconvenient mouth and tongue activation method because the Doctor of the Church had told him about how the target had the ability to immobilize a person's hands.

Due to this, Yue Qifan didn't use his hands. At the same time, he also knew the characteristics of Shang Jianyao's two other Awakened abilities.

One was similar to Hypnosis, but there had to be a conversation. Furthermore, its effective range was very small. The other ability made one carry out irrational acts, and the effective range was between four to eight meters.

Due to this information, Yue Qifan kept a strict distance from Shang Jianyao.

He was currently nearly ten meters away from Shang Jianyao's room, placing him outside the effective range of the two Awakened abilities—Conversational Hypnosis and Irrational Behavior. As for the ability that affected one's hand mobility, Yue Qifan relied on blowing darts to avoid being affected. Every room here was two meters apart, so he could easily calculate the distance.

The reason why he did not choose to attack from a further distance was that, among his three Awakened abilities, Dream Journey—which covered the largest range—could only affect humans who were less than 11 meters away.

Yue Qifan's plan was: At the most suitable distance, first use the Dream Journey ability, which stimulated certain memories of the other party and gave rise to a certain level of true illusion. It could make Shang Jianyao fall into a state of fear, confusion, and dementia, allowing Yue Qifan to control him temporarily.

He would then blow out a small dart, tranquilize the other party, and drag him into Room 196. He would then methodically use his Awakened ability, Memory Snippet Erasure, to read Shang Jianyao's memories and erase all clues.

This was the best plan Yue Qifan had come up with based on his abilities and the items he had. After all, it had happened in a rush. The Doctor of the Church's orders had come too quickly and too suddenly, leaving him no time to make additional preparations.

As for why he often prepared to blow a dart, it was because he used it to restrain the price he paid to a certain extent.

In fact, Yue Qifan felt a little strange. From his point of view, it was better to leave this matter to Xiong Ming. A cardiac arrest was the best way to silence and destroy clues.

Perhaps the Doctors of the Church don't want to cause any more deaths and are afraid of attracting the attention of the company's brass. Hence, they deployed an Awakened like me, who can erase memories... Yue Qifan's thoughts raced as he predicted the direction in which Shang Jianyao would possibly dodge after coming to this realization. He then pressed his tongue against the mechanism at the bottom of the Dark Dart.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—whose body was slightly hunched and trembling—suddenly laughed. "What a weak ability."

At this moment, Yue Qifan was a little stunned. Why can he speak? At such a time, even if he's not affected enough by Dream Journey and can come to his senses in time, he should dodge to the side or roll on the ground to avoid any subsequent attacks...

Why is he wasting such precious time talking? This is a completely abnormal reaction. Damn it. Why is he talking!?

Yue Qifan's tongue had just pressed against the Dark Dart's switch, but he failed to carry out the subsequent actions before he could exert any strength.

His forehead was covered in sweat as he opened his mouth and uncontrollably replied, "How can you call it weak?"

With a clang, the silver-black metal tube landed on the ground and bounced a few times.

However, Yue Qifan did not stop talking. "It should induce certain memories in you, making you immerse yourself in a certain scene from the past. If it's well-designed, the segments will be tightly intertwined. It can even prevent you from distinguishing reality from illusion."

Shang Jianyao was stunned for a moment. "Why are you responding to my mockery? I just had a brain spasm."

Without waiting for Yue Qifan to speak, he suddenly understood and laughed. "The price you paid is that you have to respond to everything others say?"

"Do you think it will be that simple?" Yue Qifan answered in a tit for tat manner.

A dense layer of sweat had already seeped out of his forehead.

The price he paid back then was 'self-discipline.' But in fact, the price was not that high. Yue Qifan only lacked self-discipline in one aspect. That aspect was in 'arguments.'

As long as someone started a topic, he couldn't help but argue and debate. Even if he agreed with the other party's point of view, he sometimes couldn't help but clutch at one or two small details and argue with them.

Yue Qifan originally didn't find anything wrong with this, or he wouldn't have paid the price using 'self-discipline.' But as time passed, he realized that the price he paid was very dangerous.

After all, it was not always appropriate to argue with someone.

In an emergency, a second or two might decide one's life and death. It was simply a waste of time to spare a thought for a debate. Furthermore, this would only worsen Yue Qifan's social relations.

As a result, he custom-made this metal blowpipe through the parish. As long as he held it in his mouth and constantly reminded himself, Yue Qifan could control himself to a certain extent.

When a secret operation was needed, this blowpipe could be used as a weapon.

Of course, the price could not be completely avoided. Yue Qifan could only guarantee that he could barely keep his mouth shut as long as others did not mention anything related to him.

The operation he designed undoubtedly didn't give the target a chance to speak. Yue Qifan also believed that no human would choose to speak instead of dodging or counterattacking when facing danger.

Who knew that he would encounter such a weirdo today?

Also, this weirdo was still mocking him. How could he tolerate this?

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was facing Yue Qifan's question—gave a second response. "Is being stubborn your price?"

As Shang Jianyao spoke, he exerted strength with his ankles, knees, and waist simultaneously, pouncing at Yue Qifan like a beast.

He wanted to close the distance between them.

Shang Jianyao suddenly felt his body lose its balance. To him, such actions were a piece of cake. He wouldn't make a single mistake, even if he did it a hundred times.

Unexpectedly, he inexplicably lost his balance in mid-air today.

Bang!

Shang Jianyao fell to the ground.

"There's no need to argue about the truth." Yue Qifan took out another Dark Dart from his pocket.

Yue Qifan had prepared more than one weapon!

As he spoke, Yue Qifan smiled and pressed the switch.

His third Awakened ability was: Balance Hindrance! The effective range was six meters.

Shang Jianyao's act of pouncing was exactly what he wanted. Of course, he never wished for such a development to begin with because the target's Awakened abilities could be used at this distance.

Fortunately, the development was very beneficial to him.

A small metal dart shot out with a whoosh, heading straight for Shang Jianyao—who was on the ground.

Shang Jianyao only had time to adjust his position slightly and avoid being hit in the head.

Pfft!

The metal dart stabbed into the area between Shang Jianyao's left shoulder and chest.

Shang Jianyao immediately jumped up, showing no signs of being paralyzed.

Facing Yue Qifan's surprised gaze, Shang Jianyao plucked the dart out and threw it to the ground. He smiled and said, "I've been wearing bulletproof vests all this while!"

Although Wang Yafei and Shen Du were clearly not shot to death, Jiang Baimian still approved each team member's acquisition of a bulletproof vest for safety reasons after Shang Jianyao officially intervened in the matter.

Firearms and bullets were strictly controlled within Pangu Biology. Jiang Baimian had to report in advance for real ammunition training and adhere to complicated procedures. However, not only was an item like a bulletproof vest—which did not have any lethality—easy to apply for, but the team leader could also call the shots as long as the team was equipped with bulletproof vests.

"Coward," Yue Qifan argued. As he spoke, he suddenly turned around and ran.

Yue Qifan felt that he had no chance of winning in this situation. As for how to wrap things up later, it would be left to the Doctor of the Church to worry about!

But as soon as Yue Qifan turned around, a strong emotion rose in his heart. How can I flee? How can I give up just like that? How can I leave in such an embarrassing manner?

As his thoughts raced, Yue Qifan turned around and pounced at Shang Jianyao. His dark-brown eyes seemed to have turned pure black.

Almost at the same time, Shang Jianyao felt an invisible object swell in his mind. They rose into the sky like stars, densely covering all the surrounding areas.

Within every 'star' was a snippet of life that Shang Jianyao had experienced.

A beam of light drilled in from the outside at this moment, carrying a 'star.' It streaked across the sky and fell into the illusory Sea of Origins.

Shang Jianyao immediately frowned as if he was confused about what he was doing.

Yue Qifan snapped to his senses at the same moment, and his pupils suddenly dilated. Holy sh*t! Why didn't I escape? I even used the Memory Snippet Erasure ability as an attack... Is this the Awakened ability that makes people do irrational things?

Yue Qifan instantly understood what had happened, and his heart palpitated. His ability, Memory Snippet Erasure, was not a combat ability at all. This was because Yue Qifan had to read a target's memories in advance and mark scenes that couldn't exceed three minutes for erasure in order to achieve precise effects.

It would take a lot of time, and the two parties had to be within three meters of each other.

Yue Qifan had only used his instincts to casually wipe away a portion of Shang Jianyao's memories. He had no idea what the effects would be.

It was also difficult to cause any real damage to the target. After all, three minutes' worth of memories was just too little.

Shang Jianyao frowned at Yue Qifan, who was wearing a very low cap. He didn't say or do anything.

"..." Yue Qifan's heart palpitated. Did I wipe away the memories of our battle just now? He doesn't remember that we're enemies, and he doesn't even know that I attacked him...

Yue Qifan was delighted when he thought of this, and he straightened his back. He casually pretended to hum a song as he bent down to pick up the metal tube and the small dart from the ground.

After doing this, he lowered his baseball cap even more, preventing Shang Jianyao from seeing his appearance.

One step, two steps, three steps. Yue Qifan hummed a song and slowly walked into the distance.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly turned around and shouted, "Hey!"

Yue Qifan's pupils dilated, and a cold sweat broke out on his back. He started running without thinking.

As Shang Jianyao watched Yue Qifan's figure disappear around the 'street' corner, he made a terse exclamation and muttered to himself, "He can't accept my evaluation of his singing standards?"

...

349th floor, Zone C, Room 12.

Jiang Baimian logged into her account and seriously wrote an email. After confirming the recipients, she moved the mouse and pressed the left button.

Chapter 108: A Chaotic Night

After waiting for a while, Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that the email had been delivered successfully. She leaned back in her chair.

What happened next was not her problem.

“I only hope that the company deals with it quickly and doesn’t leave any latent problems...” Jiang Baimian muttered to herself. She turned around, bent down, picked up the blue flask beside her, and prepared to fill her cup.

She shook the flask twice and realized that it was much lighter than expected.

There’s no more water... Jiang Baimian shook her head. She walked out of the study and into the living room with the flask.

“Why did you coop up in the room the moment you came back?” Jiang Baimian’s mother, Xue Sumei, immediately nagged when she saw her.

Jiang Baimian didn’t mind and replied with a smile, “Isn’t this love for my profession?”

With that said, she changed the topic. “Mom, your new hairstyle looks good.”

A hair salon was specially provided on the 349th floor. Of course, the residential zones of the other floors above the 349th floor had similar facilities. However, they were relatively simple. Usually, they only did the most basic hairstyling and haircuts. Only during festive seasons would they carry out special services like hair-perming.

Xue Sumei subconsciously touched her sideburns and asked with a smile, “Is that so? I did it this afternoon. Didn’t you see it when you came back?”

Xue Sumei had very few wrinkles on her face. She looked prim and proper, and her hair was curled into waves. She looked several years younger than she actually was.

“I’m giving Dad a chance. I can’t discover it before he does.” Jiang Baimian lied with her eyes open.

Jiang Baimian successfully changed the topic to Jiang Wenfeng.

As expected, Xue Sumei began to complain about household trivialities. She complained that Jiang Wenfeng spent every day in the cotton field for the past month and had come back smelling bad.

As she spoke, Xue Sumei glared at Jiang Baimian. “Why am I talking about this to you? Let me tell you something. Little Zhao is very satisfied with you. Why aren’t you a little more enthusiastic?”

“I’ll wait for the company to assign me. I’ll get married when the company assigns me one.” Jiang Baimian used the company as a ‘shield.’

“You can get married first. There’s no rush to have children.” Xue Sumei tried to reason with her.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?” Jiang Baimian replied loudly. She took the opportunity to shake off her mother and ran for the door.

Outside the door was a man in a grayish-green uniform. He was in his thirties and did not wear a badge. His skin was bronze, and there were signs of the elements on his face. There was a clear scar at the corner of the man’s eye, making him look rather fierce.

“Chen Xinyan...” Jiang Baimian recognized the visitor and smiled. “Has management begun taking action?”

Opposite her was a friend she had met not long after joining the Security Department. Back then, Chen Xinyan—who had also undergone genetic modification—was in the Special Forces.

He was later transferred to a brigade directly under management because of his outstanding performance in several operations. He was currently a company OC, a D8.

Chen Xinyan nodded. “Yes. The mission I assigned to myself is to protect the key witnesses.”

At this point, he laughed. “Even though you don’t really need protection.”

“The main reason is that I can’t legally carry a gun.” Jiang Baimian turned her head slightly and sensed the area. “You brought a team?”

Although the brigade directly under management was definitely smaller than those assigned to field operations, the team still had more than ten people.

“It’s also to prevent chaos,” Chen Xinyan explained simply.

Jiang Baimian smiled and made way before pointing at the living room. “Come in and have a seat then. I’ll wait to hear about the operation’s progress from you.”

Xue Sumei looked over for a while. Although she was curious about what had happened, she still took the initiative to retreat to the bedroom.

...

In a certain room, amidst the scattered flashlight beams.

Yue Qifan picked up a dark-blue landline telephone and carefully dialed a particular number.

“Hello.” A familiar voice sounded from the other end.

Yue Qifan quickly reported, “Sir, the operation has failed. The target was very vigilant.”

The other party fell silent for two seconds before asking, “Were you exposed?”

“No. I happened to wipe away the memories of our contact and battle. He doesn’t remember me attacking him and only thinks that I’m an employee who passed by. Besides, I lowered the brim of my hat and had altered my looks,” Yue Qifan said quickly.

The other party fell silent again, but he quickly suppressed his voice and said unhurriedly, “Don’t take any further action. I’ll deal with the rest.”

“Yes, Sir.” Yue Qifan heaved a sigh of relief.

...

On the 478th floor, at the intersection of Zone A and Zone B.

Two teams—which were directly under management—spread out and controlled the area in secret.

The leader confirmed the situation with his pacemaker, measured the distance between him and Xiong Ming’s room, and gave the order. “Take action immediately and resolve this as quickly as possible without giving the target a chance to react.”

Just as he said that, the four members in gas masks immediately bent down and rushed forward.

In just a few seconds, they arrived outside Xiong Ming’s room.

Then, one person slammed open the door, and the other threw a grenade containing anesthetic gas. The two of them aimed their guns inside, prepared to launch a second wave of attacks.

With a slightly dull explosion, the gas spread out in the relatively small space.

With a thud, the sound of something heavy collapsing to the ground came from inside.

The two operatives waited for a few seconds before carefully entering the room. They then speedily carried out the unconscious Xiong Ming.

Someone who knew Xiong Ming went up to take a look and quickly straightened his body. "Sir, target confirmed!"

The leader nodded and waved his hand. "Bring him back for interrogation."

He then looked around and methodically issued a follow-up order. "Biochemical section, neutralize the residual anesthetic gas.

"Support section, calm down the residents of this area."

"Everyone else, retreat immediately!"

...

On the fifth floor of the underground building, in a room in the Administrative Zone.

Xiong Ming woke up and realized that he was sitting behind a table. His hands were cuffed to the armrests on both sides of the chair.

On the other side of the table was a calm, middle-aged man.

This man was stripped clean and wore all kinds of portable medical equipment. He looked like a human who had undergone cybernetic modification.

Beside him was professional resuscitation equipment.

"Are you all that afraid of me?" Xiong Ming's panic and aggrieved mood suddenly eased. He never imagined that a Blessed of a deity like him would be captured so easily. Back then, he didn't have the time to do anything.

Looking at Xiong Ming's wooden eyes, the middle-aged man calmly replied, "As the saying goes, it's better to be prepared."

Xiong Ming fell silent for two seconds before he suddenly smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"Oh?" The middle-aged man expressed his doubts.

Xiong Ming wanted to lean back, but he was restrained by the handcuffs. He could only smile without changing his posture. "I don't think any organization will refuse a Neo-Human's surrender. My abilities and my process of obtaining them will definitely be very useful to you."

The middle-aged man fell silent for a moment before saying, "You're very clear-minded. As a parishioner, shouldn't you be very fanatical?"

Xiong Ming laughed. “I only believe in the Arbiter of Fate. The other parishioners have nothing to do with me.”

The middle-aged man slowly exhaled and said, “Then tell me who is Doctor of the Church Deceased’s Return? Which other Doctors of the Church’s true identity do you know?”

Without waiting for Xiong Ming to answer, he added, “Don’t lie. Don’t tell me you believe that there aren’t other Awakened in such a large organization like the company?”

Xiong Ming’s expression changed slightly and became serious. “Since I’ve made a decision, I won’t hide anything from you.”

...

In Room 12 of the 349th floor’s Zone C, a melodic ringtone sounded at Jiang Baimian’s home.

Chen Xinyan spoke before Jiang Baimian could get up. “This should be a call for me.”

“Looks like there’s good news.” Jiang Baimian smiled.

Chen Xinyan then picked up the telephone on the small table beside him and briefly introduced himself. After quietly listening for a while, he put down the phone and turned his head to Jiang Baimian.

“We’ve already confirmed the identity of Deceased’s Return. Strategy Committee’s Surveillance PIC, Zhang Zicong—a D9 employee.”

“Surveillance PIC? As expected...” Jiang Baimian was not surprised at all. She had long suspected that a Life Ritual member was hiding in the Surveillance Department and that their rank was not low.

Otherwise, it would’ve been impossible for Xiong Ming to have a clear grasp of the surveillance cameras’ operation and devise a seemingly perfect plan. Shen Du’s report wouldn’t have been discovered in such a timely manner either.

The reason why there was nothing wrong with Shang Jianyao’s conversation with Jiang Baimian was that they always discussed it in the Old Task Force’s room—a place without any surveillance.

The only problem now was how the Life Ritual parish made Shen Du fall ill in such a timely manner.

Chen Xinyan glanced at Jiang Baimian’s expression and asked with a smile, “You seem to have expected this?”

“I had some guesses, but I couldn’t be sure. There are too many things that I can’t explain. Therefore, I didn’t get my team members to continue investigating. It’s too easy to be exposed.” Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted around slightly. “It’s no wonder the Guide said that the Doctor of the Church has always been paying attention to all of you the entire time. That sentence really has a deeper meaning...”

At this point, she suddenly thought of something. “Shang Jianyao was chatting outside when he went to look for Xiong Ming. There had to be cameras around!”

Chen Xinyan tersely acknowledged it. “Don’t worry. When I came over, my colleagues had already gone over to protect him.”

...

Shang Jianyao sat behind a desk by the window. He looked down at his clothes under the light of the street lamps outside.

He pressed the small hole around his left shoulder and muttered to himself, “When did this tear?”

He suddenly sensed something and looked up.

He then saw a figure jump over.

It was a middle-aged woman wearing a polyester shirt. Her face was extremely warped, and her body was severely hunched. Her eyes were turbid and bloodshot like those of a crazy beast.

Ren Jie.

Guide Ren Jie.

...

In the PIC’s office in the Strategy Committee’s Surveillance Department.

With a bang, the members of the management’s brigade slammed open the door.

With the help of the light inside, they saw a figure.

This figure wore a black top, black pants, and black leather shoes. The figure was hanging from the ceiling and gently swaying due to the door’s opening.

Chapter 109: Blackout

349th floor, Zone C, Room 12.

Chen Xinyan picked up the telephone again and listened for a while.

Upon seeing his expression turn solemn, Jiang Baimian thoughtfully asked, “Negative development?”

Chen Xinyan nodded. “Ren Jie—495th floor’s Guide—has been infected with the Heartless disease and is under control. Doctor of the Church Deceased’s Return, Zhang Zicong, destroyed many surveillance files and hanged himself in his office.”

Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows slightly. “That was pretty fast.”

Chen Xinyan continued, “Zhang Zicong left behind a suicide note. He claimed to have the Awakened ability to make people go crazy and appear to be infected with the Heartless disease. He also personally dealt with Shen Du and Ren Jie. He knew that the matter had been exposed and he wouldn’t be spared, so he decided to be a martyr.”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and asked, “Did he say how the faith of the Arbiter of Fate was inculcated into him?”

“His suicide note said that he served in the Security Department and often worked on the surface for the past ten years. This matches his résumé.” Chen Xinyan’s expression had eased up and returned to its previous composure.

He thought for a moment and asked, “What do you think of Zhang Zicong’s death and note?”

Jiang Baimian indiscernibly puffed up her cheeks. Then, she quickly stopped this behavior to maintain her image.

She smiled and said, “The note was written in too much detail. It’s as if he wanted everything to be accounted for and shoulder all the blame.”

“Great minds think alike.” Chen Xinyan gave a thumbs up. He paused and said, “But after we capture the relatively important parishioners Xiong Ming divulged, today’s operation will almost be over.

“Zhang Zicong’s death and the surveillance data’s destruction has indeed cut off any further direction in our investigations. We can only use his testimony to understand his usual social connections and conduct a more detailed investigation. At the same time, we have to see how much useful surveillance footage the technical department can recover.”

Jiang Baimian nodded solemnly. “If you need any help, feel free to look for me.”

After making the promise, she immediately smiled. “Immediately let me know if you have any further news.”

Chen Xinyan smiled. “No problem.”

...

495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

Shang Jianyao sat behind the desk and looked at the glass window that he could touch simply by reaching out. His gaze was a little unfocused.

At this moment, a sweet voice—which Pangu Biology employees were very familiar with—suddenly sounded on the Random Stories radio program.

“Dear employees, I have breaking news here with me. I’m Radio Broadcaster Houyi.

“After strict investigations, the company captured a group of terrorists tonight...”

Shang Jianyao’s eyes flickered as he leaned back in his chair.

After this piece of news, the interior of Pangu Biology returned to normal.

The next day, Shang Jianyao entered Room 14 on the 647th floor 15 minutes early. As expected, he saw Jiang Baimian waiting there.

He walked over, pulled out a chair, and sat down. Without waiting for his team leader to speak, he spoke first. “I might have been attacked.”

Many of the words Jiang Baimian was about to say got stuck in her mouth. She couldn’t help but ask in surprise, “What do you mean by might?”

Shang Jianyao pointed at his left shoulder near his chest. “There’s a fresh hole here that reached all the way to my bulletproof vest.”

He then raised his right arm. “There are sudden bruises and scratches on this side of the elbow, ribs, and the side of the leg.”

At this point, Shang Jianyao added, “It wasn’t caused by your combat training. I didn’t participate in any training yesterday.”

“You’re very careful.” Jiang Baimian nodded and thought for a moment. “When did these marks appear?”

Shang Jianyao had long thought about this question. “After bidding you farewell, just before I entered my room. I only remember walking to Zone B before I found myself at the door. I estimate that I have about two to three minutes of blank memories between that period.

“Back then, a strange person passed by. I didn’t see his face clearly.”

“How strange?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao very ‘solemnly’ replied, “His singing was terrible.”

“...That’s a characteristic.” Jiang Baimian sighed silently. “What else?”

“He wore a baseball cap that was pressed very low. When he heard me calling for him, he ran like a rabbit,” Shang Jianyao described truthfully. “He picked up a metal tube and something else from the ground. I suspect that it was the weapon that he used to attack me and created the hole.”

“You sure have a deep impression of rabbits,” Jiang Baimian casually said. “Why didn’t you chase after him back then?”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “Back then, I thought he ran off because he was afraid that I would comment about his singing skills.”

“...” The corners of Jiang Baimian’s mouth twitched. “It seems like your jumpy train of thought has pros and cons. At times, it can allow you to be unaffected by the corresponding state and break free of any shackles. At other times, it can also make you miss some obvious clues.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, Jiang Baimian asked again, “How can you be sure that the blank memories lasted about two to three minutes?”

Shang Jianyao glanced at his team leader curiously. “When you first obtained a watch, didn’t you keep looking at it from time to time?”

“...” Jiang Baimian had to admit that Shang Jianyao made sense, but she was unwilling to admit it. “But it’s been many days since you obtained the watch. You went to Qifeng Town and even returned to the company. Besides, your watch is good. It’s only a little damaged, and it’s been running the entire time. Don’t you get sick of it?”

Shang Jianyao said with an ‘obviously’ expression, “If I don’t look at it often, how can I let the company employees know that I have a mechanical watch?”

“That makes sense...” Jiang Baimian was convinced.

She didn’t ask any further and analyzed the situation as she thought. “In other words, there’s a high chance that you were attacked, but you don’t have any relevant memories. You can only make a guess based on the traces on your body...”

“Recently, the ones most likely to attack you are Life Ritual’s parishioners. Yes, the Doctor of the Church most likely saw you conversing with Xiong Ming, so he

immediately reacted. Their goal is definitely to erase the relevant clues and stop the investigation.

“This goal can be achieved by killing you and infecting you with the Heartless disease. It can also be achieved by wiping away the relevant memories. The latter can be linked to your missing memories of an attack.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and guessed, “The Life Ritual parish didn’t have the time to plan a meticulous murder. They could only send an Awakened member with the ability to erase memories to you immediately. During this process, there was a high chance that a series of battles happened. However, he ultimately failed. He had no choice but to terminate the attack by wiping away your latest memories to escape safely...”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped in agreement.

Jiang Baimian glared at him. “Why didn’t they directly infect you with the Heartless disease? Did they go into a tailspin? Before attacking you, Deceased’s Return—Zhang Zicong—had no intention of sacrificing himself?”

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to speak, Jiang Baimian asked, “Have you forgotten your conversation with Xiong Ming? Did you forget anything related to the Life Ritual parish?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “No, those memories are very complete. They can be verified from front to back, left to right.”

Shang Jianyao had clearly finished jogging through his memories last night.

“From the looks of it, the ability to erase memories is very restrictive. It might only be able to target two to three minutes of information, and it can only be done one at a time... Unfortunately, Deceased’s Return destroyed plenty of the surveillance footage. Otherwise, we would’ve been able to find traces of the person who attacked you. Yes, I’ll report the matter later...” Jiang Baimian then talked about the operation last night in great detail.

She then said, “I was a little curious about one thing. Xiong Ming didn’t mention you at all in his statement. He didn’t mention chatting with you.

“I previously thought that he was protecting you—a fellow Awakened, a Neo-Human. I thought that he was rather humane by certain standards, but there aren’t many people who he acknowledges as ‘humans.’

“From the looks of it, he might’ve met that person earlier than you and had his memories wiped.”

Shang Jianyao was confused. “Why did they wipe his memories? So what if he knows?”

“I can’t figure it out either. Maybe the Life Ritual parish’s higher-ups were worried that Xiong Ming would incite a Neo-Human faction... Back then, they should have been relatively confident and handled the matter very carefully. In the end, your combat strength exceeded their imaginations, forcing them to terminate their plan. As a result, I didn’t encounter any subsequent attacks.” Jiang Baimian casually said, “Next, we can only see how the company’s investigations turn out. Heh heh, at least your identity as an Awakened has been kept secret for now.”

Shang Jianyao nodded and smiled. “I knew something was wrong with the surveillance cameras.”

“That’s right... It’s no wonder the Life Ritual parish was confident about their secrets leaking. They also rattled on about how the Arbiter of Fate has always been paying attention to all life and how the Doctor of the Church has always been paying attention to your words.” Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion. “Who could’ve imagined that the PIC of the entire Surveillance Department was the parish’s Doctor of the Church? This also explains why their secret proselytizing hasn’t been discovered for years.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment, and his expression became a little strange. “Team Leader, do you think the surveillance footage can be recovered?”

“The current feedback I’m getting is that it’s very, very difficult.” Jiang Baimian’s heart stirred as she asked with a smile, “Don’t tell me you took off your pants to humiliate the surveillance camera?”

Shang Jianyao sized up Jiang Baimian. “Team Leader, you’re so perverted.”

“...” Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “I’ve only made a face to scare him, shone a flashlight at it, and made insulting hand gestures at it.”

Jiang Baimian shut her mouth and shook her head slightly with mixed emotions. After a few seconds, she exhaled. “Your life sure is colorful...”

Just as she said that, the Old Task Force’s only landline phone rang.

Jiang Baimian signaled for Shang Jianyao not to speak as she picked up the receiver.

“Hello? Ah, the minister... wants me to go over?” Jiang Baimian quickly put down the receiver and said to Shang Jianyao, “Deputy Minister Xenny needs me for something. I

believe it's either about the Life Ritual parish or the answer regarding Moat Town has been given.”

Chapter 110: Rules for Friendly Partnership

On the 646th floor, in the deputy minister's office.

After Jiang Baimian knocked on the door and entered, she sat opposite her immediate superior with a smile.

Xenny was a woman in her thirties. She had long chestnut hair and a pair of chestnut eyes. Xenny wore a white shirt inside; a well-tailored black jacket that only had two buttons at her belly draped over it.

From her attire alone, Xenny looked smart. But her slightly curled chestnut hair and the faint smile on her face added a hint of warmth to her. It made others feel like they had an affinity with her and could trust her.

The Security Department's deputy minister picked up the porcelain cup and took a sip. She then smiled at Jiang Baimian calmly. “I called you here mainly for a few matters.”

With that laid out, she picked up a document on the table. “These are the results of the investigations that you previously reported. What you need to pay attention to are the different confidentiality levels of different information.

“Determine which information can be used for chit-chat with ordinary employees, which ones can only be used for communication up to certain ranks, and which ones aren't approved. They can only be discussed internally or higher-ranking employees with the corresponding clearance.”

Jiang Baimian instinctively stretched out her right hand and wanted to take it, but Xenny didn't hand her the document.

Xenny tucked her hair behind her ear. “However, you won't be using this document for the time being.”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian could tell something was up and had a guess.

Xenny didn't immediately explain. After handing the document to Jiang Baimian, she gently placed her elbows on the table. “You guys have done well regarding the Life Ritual parish. The corresponding rewards will be given after the preliminary investigations are concluded. When you receive the rewards will depend on the progress of the subsequent investigations. It might not be fast, so don't be too anxious.”

She thought for a moment and added, "Tell your team member, Shang Jianyao, to cooperate with all kinds of inquiries in the next two to three days. This matter is handled by the management's brigade. I won't be able to interfere much."

Xenny shared the same rank as the brigade commander. They were both part of the M1 management.

"Alright, I'll remind him," Jiang Baimian replied, feeling inexplicably guilty. She couldn't guarantee that Shang Jianyao wouldn't have a screw loose when being questioned.

Even Shang Jianyao couldn't guarantee it himself, much less her. Nôv(el)B\\jnn

Xenny clearly didn't hear the hint of abnormality in Jiang Baimian's tone. She then said, "The Board of Directors held an emergency meeting last night. They also confirmed Moat Town's matter."

"What was the result?" Jiang Baimian didn't hide her concern.

Xenny smiled gently and said, "We'll sign a friendly partnership clause first."

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief when she heard that.

The term 'friendly partnership' was official terminology. In simpler terms, it meant: establishing a vassal relationship. Although this definitely couldn't compare to the complete recruitment of Moat Town, Jiang Baimian still found it acceptable.

Xenny was in no rush to continue. She picked up the sky-blue porcelain cup, blew at the tea leaves floating on the surface, and took a sip.

After moistening her lips, she maintained her smile and said, "We will carry out a series of transactions with Moat Town. We will also send a team over to help train their armed personnel and establish a more effective command system.

"If they put up a request, we will also mobilize civilian staff to help them straighten out any internal management systems and eliminate many conflicts before they erupt. After that, the people we send over will slowly filter out the good seedlings and provide them with the opportunity to join the company officially.

"In ten years, if Moat Town and our friendly partnership continue and their performance is recognized, we can consider recruiting them as a whole."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "That's good."

This was an experienced and prudent plan that was more acceptable to Moat Town.

Without waiting for Xenny to speak, Jiang Baimian asked in enlightenment, “Minister, are you sending us to Moat Town to do the negotiations?”

This was probably why the intelligence review documents were temporarily useless.

“It’s really easy talking to you.” Xenny smiled and praised her. “You guys are the middlemen in this matter, so, of course, you will be the ones going. In a few days, bring a radio transceiver and the corresponding batteries over. If the negotiations bear fruit, leave the machine behind and give them a frequency channel. Get Moat Town to send us a report, and you will countersign with an agreed password as proof. If you can’t reach an agreement, you guys will bring the radio transceiver to Weed City.”

“Weed City?” Jiang Baimian was a little surprised.

This was a peripheral city of First City, located at the edge of the Monk Wastelands. It was a relatively open place with many active Ruin Hunters.

Wu Shoushi and An Ruxiang’s team—whom the Old Task Force had previously encountered—came from Weed City.

Xenny nodded. “That is your second mission. As you know, there are other Old Task Forces besides yours. We lost contact with one of the teams after they entered Weed City and sent the roundtrip telegram. It has been almost three weeks. We have gotten the company’s intelligence personnel in Weed City to investigate, but we haven’t received any feedback yet.

“Your mission is to cooperate with the intelligence personnel to figure out the truth behind the team’s disappearance. Take appropriate revenge or carry out your main duties as investigators based on the new clues discovered by the missing team.”

Their main duty as investigators was the investigation of the cause of the Old World’s destruction.

“Aren’t you overestimating us?” Jiang Baimian suppressed her urge to give it a try. “Our team has only been formed for three months. Besides, how long has it been since the last mission ended?”

Xenny looked at Jiang Baimian and smiled. “I trust you. Besides, the company has a certain level of strength over there. You can mobilize them.”

“Why do we—a newly established Old Task Force—have to do it? Can’t the company send a different team or other intelligence personnel?” Jiang Baimian was still a little confused.

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian suddenly came to a realization. “Minister, are you asking us to leave the company temporarily?”

Xenny nodded and praised her with a smile. "As expected of you."

She retracted her elbows from the table and simply explained, "The investigation of the Life Ritual parish wasn't that smooth. Many of the clues led to nowhere. This isn't a problem that can be resolved in a short period of time. We are worried that the hidden heretics will take revenge after things calm down a little."

"And who do you think will be the most likely targets for revenge?"

"Shang Jianyao and me," Jiang Baimian answered without hesitation.

Xenny tersely acknowledged it. "Although the company can use you as bait, I don't think I can let you take the risk. You're relatively fine. You live in the management zone where there's strict control over all entries and exits. Besides, your father has always been secretly protecting you."

"But it will be relatively dangerous for Shang Jianyao. In addition, there's a slight possibility of them taking out their anger on other members." At this point, Xenny leaned back and silently exhaled. "Therefore, we've decided to make the easiest choice. We'll send you to the surface and distance you from this vortex."

"Trust me, the matter regarding the Life Ritual parish is definitely a little more troublesome than you imagine. Go. Stay on the surface for a few months. When spring comes, the problem should be resolved."

Jiang Baimian agreed with this plan and asked worriedly, "What about the other members' families?"

Jiang Baimian was mainly referring to Long Yuehong.

"There's no need to worry too much about that. How many degrees of separation is that? The heretics will not take out their anger on them. The ones who executed the pursuit are far more qualified for any retaliation. Besides, we will take care of them to a certain extent," Xenny explained simply. "If they take revenge irrationally, we can quickly dig them out by their roots."

Upon seeing that Jiang Baimian no longer had any questions, Xenny picked up the document and ended the conversation. "This is the information on that team. Take a look at it over the next few days. Then, draft a mission plan for me. Heh heh, although plans can never keep up with the changes when carrying out missions, we still have to follow the necessary procedures."

Jiang Baimian took the document and smiled. "Can I apply for a military-grade exoskeleton or bionic artificial intelligence armor?"

"What do you think?" Xenny asked with a smile.

Jiang Baimian immediately looked deflated.

Upon seeing this, Xenny added, "If you can get your hands on a military-grade exoskeleton or bionic artificial intelligence armor, I can make the decision to leave it in your team."

"Alright!" Jiang Baimian's smile immediately lit up.

This made Xenny suspect that Jiang Baimian had been pretending to look deflated.

...

When Jiang Baimian returned to Room 14 on the 647th floor with the two documents, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen had already arrived.

She deliberately wore a solemn expression as she looked around. "Two things."

Bai Chen's expression turned a little solemn as she slowly stood up from her seat. Long Yuehong felt the muscles on his back tense up.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao's voice sounded. "Team Leader, you're laughing secretly."

Jiang Baimian couldn't maintain her expression any longer and scolded him jokingly, "How am I laughing secretly?"

"I guessed it." Shang Jianyao had a serious expression.

"..." Jiang Baimian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She then said to Bai Chen, "We have received a reply on Moat Town's matter."

Upon seeing that Jiang Baimian's smile didn't have a hint of gloominess, Bai Chen secretly heaved a sigh of relief and eagerly asked, "What's the result?"

Jiang Baimian repeated Deputy Minister Xenny's words and said, "The mission of taking up the matter has been handed to us. We'll set off in three days."

Bai Chen had no objections to starting a partnership as a vassal first before considering full-scale recruitment. In a rare instance of taking the initiative, she said, "Even if they didn't assign me the mission, I'd have applied to participate in it."

Otherwise, she couldn't be at ease.

"That's pretty good," Long Yuehong said, sighing with emotion.

He still had a fresh memory of the children in Moat Town studying.

Shang Jianyao inexplicably asked, "Can we apply for more canned food for making transactions this time?"

"You can trade a little more using your share, but it will be relatively more troublesome on the subsequent journey. It's already winter, so there's very little food." Jiang Baimian laid out the pros and cons.

Bai Chen acutely asked, "Subsequent journey?"

It would only take more than a day or so for them to make a return trip. It was even possible that it might not even take a day. Hence, there shouldn't be a need to talk about searching for additional food.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Long Yuehong and sighed. "Isn't there a second matter? We still have to make a trip to Weed City."

Long Yuehong blurted out, "How long will this take?"

He got along well with the girl he was recently introduced to. It might not be long before they confirmed their relationship.

"It will take one to four months." Jiang Baimian smiled amiably and didn't make any promises.