

Ad Infinitum 151

Chapter 151: Partners

At 9:05 a.m., in an alley diagonally opposite the Hunter's Guild.

After Long Yuehong confirmed that nobody was tailing him, he carefully ran in and spoke to Bai Chen, who was hiding in the corner. "You can go to the guild to accept the mission."

Bai Chen took off her beret and mask and tugged at her gray scarf. "Alright."

She felt that it was necessary to cooperate with the investigation and clear the suspicion so that the guild could take down the mission. Otherwise, it would be very annoying if wave after wave of Ruin Hunters came looking for her. Furthermore, it would bring unnecessary danger.

The only thing she couldn't understand was why Long Yuehong insisted on reconnoitering before heading to the lobby. It wasn't a dangerous place.

But since the rookie assigned by the company had such a cautious attitude, it was still worth encouraging.

After accompanying Bai Chen out of the alley, Long Yuehong reminded her as various gazes swept over them. "When being interrogated, touch your pocket every minute."

Bai Chen said in amusement, "Do you really believe that naggy fellow?"

The fellow who rented the room opposite them clearly had a handsome face, but he looked like a lunatic. However, if it weren't for the fact that she couldn't find anything when she tried touching her pocket later, Bai Chen really would've believed that there was a folded star in her pocket.

But even so, when she thought of what the fellow had said about waiting for someone to ask before touching her pocket—about how touching it meant that she was dreaming—Bai Chen was not so sure that there really were no folded stars.

She had also encountered and heard of some magical things, especially those involving Awakened.

It seems like I subconsciously believe in this matter... Bai Chen didn't think too much about it and entered the Guild Hall before the Ruin Hunters approached.

When she was inside, she was no longer in a rush. She looked up at the scrolling and synchronized broadcast on the large screen.

“Mission: Find the suspects involved in Eugene’s disappearance.

“Description: A man and a woman. The man is about 1.8 meters tall. He wore a navy down jacket and a baseball cap. The woman was about 1.7 meters tall and wore a gray cotton jacket. She also wore a baseball cap...

“Reward: A clue that passes a review and is deemed valid will earn you at least 10 Oray, with a maximum of 500 Oray.

“Mission rank: C, 100 credit points.

“...”

Bai Chen then saw her photo on the big screen.

“Mission: Find Ruin Hunter Bai Chen.

“Description: Female. Known aliases: Qian Bai and Bai Feng. Involved in Eugene’s disappearance. She’s about 1.6 meters tall and has short hair. See photos for specifics.

“Reward: 5 Oray for every effective clue provided. 20 Oray for bringing Bai Chen to the guild or the City Defense Command’s headquarters.

“Mission rank: E, 10 credit points.”

They are indeed looking for me... Bai Chen looked around and noticed a man in a thick black coat looking at her.

She had previously seen this Ruin Hunter and had just heard Long Yuehong mention his name. Thus, she knew that he was Advanced Hunter Oudick.

Bai Chen casually retracted her gaze and walked to a window at the circular platform area. She calmly said, "I'm here to take on a mission."

"Which mission?" asked the female employee at the window instinctively.

According to their standard operating procedures, they couldn't redirect Ruin Hunters that came to them for the machines. They had to provide them the service before they could give a reminder.

"Searching for Ruin Hunter Bai Chen." Bai Chen didn't have the strange feeling of saying her name.

"Alright, please give me your Hunter's Badge," said the employee with a smile.

She took the badge and swiped it before suddenly becoming stunned.

After a few seconds, she looked up slightly and looked out through the glass. "You... are Bai Chen?"

Bai Chen had registered herself as Qian Bai with the Hunter's Guild, but Eugene's team had provided the guild with her real name.

"Yes." Bai Chen was relatively calm. "Taking the opportunity to earn a sum."

The clerk reacted after a while. "Then, I'll directly give you the choice of mission completion? Also, please wait here for a while; I'll report the matter."

Bai Chen directly said, "It's best if someone that can make a decision comes over and lets me cooperate with the investigation while satisfying my conditions."

The employee naturally couldn't agree to Bai Chen's request directly. She picked up the phone on the table and reported the matter.

Before long, a tall, thin man came to the lobby and walked toward Bai Chen with a few bodyguards guarding him. His hair was relatively sparse, but it was still black. Wrinkles had grown out of the corners of his eyes, mouth, and forehead. The most obvious characteristic was his large nose.

“I’m the guild’s Vice President, Cui En.” The tall, thin man nodded and introduced himself. He then politely said, “Madam Bai Chen, there’s no need to be nervous. The city’s defense forces are only looking for you to assist in the investigations.”

Bai Chen said without any care, “I have two conditions: First, I don’t trust them. As you know, there are many situations where they can’t find the true culprit and might casually choose a few scapegoats to point them out as the culprits. Therefore, I’ll only accept the interrogation and cooperate with investigations inside the guild.

“Second, I still have unfinished missions and need to earn money to survive. I’m in a rush; please be quick.”

The Hunter’s Guild’s creed had always been to serve and facilitate Hunters, becoming a Hunter’s home in a sense. Regardless of whether this was actually realized or not, none of the guild’s brass would dare to deny it in public.

Cui En was no exception.

Coupled with the fact that the local Hunter’s Guild had a special relationship with Castellan Manor, Bai Chen’s request was easy to fulfill.

Cui En pondered for a moment and smiled. “Sure. Don’t worry; as long as you haven’t done it, the Guild won’t watch you be wronged.”

Cui En said the last sentence very loudly so that the Ruin Hunters around them could hear him.

With the vice president in charge of Hunter’s Affairs promising her, Bai Chen felt relieved. She followed him to the second floor and entered a small room.

There was only a rectangular table here, with a chair on each side.

Bai Chen sat on the inner seat and subconsciously reached into her pocket.

She forcefully controlled her urge and silently mocked herself. I really was influenced by that naggy fellow...

Bai Chen still believed that a small, folded star would suddenly appear in her pocket.

She waited for a while before Cui En came in with his bodyguard and said apologetically, "The city guard called back and said that they won't send anyone over until the afternoon. You can busy yourself first; come back when the time comes. How about that?"

"Even if you aren't afraid that I'll escape, I have to worry that other Ruin Hunters will disturb me. It's better to resolve this matter as soon as possible." Bai Chen was rather persistent and honest.

Cui En thought for a moment. "Then, I'll communicate with them and try to get our people to take responsibility."

In essence, there was no difference. Everyone was under Castellan Manor's service.

Bai Chen nodded and quietly waited.

About 15 minutes later, Cui En returned to the room and smiled. "We have finished the negotiation. We'll get a professional and trustworthy person to be in charge of the subsequent inquiries and investigations."

With that said, Cui En introduced the man beside him. "This is Advanced Hunter Oudick. One of his nicknames is Polygraph. No lie can hide from him."

The black-haired, blue-eyed Oudick nodded slightly as a form of greeting.

Upon seeing that the interrogator had already arrived, Bai Chen recalled Long Yuehong's instructions and instinctively raised her hand to the edge of her pocket.

At this moment, Cui En had already led his bodyguards out and closed the door.

Bai Chen took the opportunity to stuff her hand into her pocket.

The next second, her pupils dilated a little because she touched an item folded from paper!

She really found a folded paper item in her pocket!

Before coming out, she had confirmed that there was nothing!

This means that... I'm dreaming? The corresponding memories surfaced in Bai Chen's mind, and she suddenly escaped her slightly muddle-headed state. She realized that she was walking out of the Today nightclub with Long Yuehong. There seemed to be a ferocious gaze from Eugene, which locked onto her from behind.

I'm dreaming... Bai Chen's heart palpitated, but she didn't show any abnormalities. She replicated the scene in her memories and silently walked back to the building where Ah Fu's Gun Shop was.

She then entered her room, lay down on the top bunk, and dazedly stared at the ceiling while in pain.

Just like that, she fell asleep at some point in time. When she woke up and finished breakfast, Long Yuehong walked into the room and told her that the guild had assigned a mission. Ruin Hunters were looking for her, so she had to disguise herself whenever she was out.

During this process, Bai Chen deliberately omitted the naggy fellow and prevented him from participating in the scene.

Knock! Knock! Knock...

Suddenly, Bai Chen heard a knock on the door and woke up.

She realized that she was still in the Hunter's Guild's small room.

At some point in time, Oudick had already sat opposite her. He retracted his fingers from the table and calmly spoke with his blue eyes. "You fell asleep. Did you have trouble sleeping last night because of Eugene?"

“Yes, I wish I could kill him, but I didn’t have the ability. I’m so afraid of him that I’m trembling,” Bai Chen answered frankly.

She had a clear conscience.

Oudick looked at her for a few seconds before nodding gently. “You’re not lying.”

He then asked a few more questions and obtained unconcealed answers.

Bai Chen even took off her scarf and showed him the female slave tattoo on her neck.

This made Bai Chen feel a little strange because she usually didn’t want others to see this. However, she did it quite naturally today.

Her explanation was that she wanted to be rid of the suspicion as soon as possible.

“I can understand your pain and fear,” Oudick said before getting up. “You can leave.”

“That fast?” Bai Chen was rather surprised.

Oudick replied simply, “Because you didn’t lie.”

Bai Chen didn’t probe further. She stood up and left the room.

After returning to the lobby on the first floor and receiving 20 Oray and 10 credit points, she met up with Long Yuehong—who was still a Rookie Hunter. They walked out of the guild lobby and turned into Central Square.

On the way, Bai Chen encountered the strange, naggy fellow and his companion—who both lived opposite her.

When the two parties were about to brush past each other, Shang Jianyao smiled. He took out a name tag and secretly gestured at his chest.

It was a red name tag with golden words. It read: Pangu Biology.

When Bai Chen saw this name tag, it was as if a circuit connected in her memories. The matters regarding Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian surged back into her mind.

She gritted her teeth to prevent herself from revealing any abnormalities.

After the two parties had distanced themselves, the corners of her mouth twitched slightly. She raised her hand to block her slightly red eyes.

It felt good to have companions.

Chapter 152: Dangerous Figures

After walking more than ten meters, Jiang Baimian smiled without turning around. "Given her reaction, she should've escaped the influence."

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to speak, Jiang Baimian said, "They sure are crude when it comes to doing things. I thought they would 'question' Little Red in passing, but it ended just like that. I made all the preparations for nothing."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Shang Jianyao asked cooperatively.

"Of course, it's a good thing." Jiang Baimian smiled. "I just want to tell you not to be overly confident in your abilities like Oudick. You still have to carry out the necessary procedures; this can help you discover the flaws. Yes... Be it Inference Clowning or your other two abilities, they can be restrained to a certain extent when one is prepared. Or the effects can be reduced."

Shang Jianyao turned to look at his team leader and replied seriously, "I still have companions that I can trust. They can protect my flank and back and charge together."

"...Can you not have such a good memory? It's very embarrassing to say that suddenly, alright?" Jiang Baimian tasted what 'having a taste of her own medicine' meant.

They walked into the Hunter's Guild as they spoke, planning to grasp the changes in the situation brought about by Eugene's death from the issued missions and find new clues regarding Lei Yunsong and Lin Feifei.

Before she could scan the contents on the large screen, Jiang Baimian saw Oudick come down from the second floor and walk over.

She smiled and took the initiative to greet him. "Good morning. Any new clues?"

Oudick shook his head. "I didn't find anything. What about you guys?"

Jiang Baimian frankly said, "We went to the bars last night and asked around. Nobody has seen anyone suspected to be Lin Feifei."

Oudick looked at the two people opposite him and suddenly asked, "You guys aren't behind Eugene's matter, right?"

It happened to be a male-female duo, and they were in Wild Wolf Alley.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "I didn't know this person until I was asked yesterday."

Oudick's gaze swept across Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian's faces, which were cleaner and better-looking than that of most Ruin Hunters.

He then nodded indiscernibly. "You do lack a motive."

Jiang Baimian was naturally unwilling to continue the topic. She smiled and said, "I can give you information regarding Lei Yunsong and Lin Feifei, but you have to promise to exchange information of equivalent value."

Oudick didn't readily agree and asked, "Is this information you previously obtained?"

Oudick didn't believe that the two people opposite him could find new clues faster than him. He had absolute confidence in tracking the target's whereabouts.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian smiled and nodded.

“Alright,” Oudick agreed.

Jiang Baimian looked around and pretended to be very careful. “More than a month ago, Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others visited a certain higher-up in the guild. I don’t know who it is.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at his team leader’s left hand in his pocket and didn’t expose that she was actually using Oudick to complete the investigation.

As an Advanced Hunter, Oudick always had the opportunity to interact with the local Hunter’s Guild’s higher-ups.

“Visited the guild’s higher-ups...” Oudick repeated thoughtfully with a slightly perplexed expression. He then politely waved his hand. “Thank you; see you again.”

“What about the information for us?” Jiang Baimian wasn’t surprised, but she was a little curious.

The corners of Oudick’s mouth twitched as he smiled. “I’ll tell you when I figure out which higher-up they visited and what they talked about. Isn’t this the information you want the most?”

“Deal!” Jiang Baimian’s smile remained the same.

After Oudick turned around and left, she sighed with emotion at Shang Jianyao beside her. “He’s still a little smart...”

“If he wasn’t smart, he would’ve died long ago just by relying on his abilities,” Shang Jianyao replied.

“That’s true...” Jiang Baimian nodded in agreement.

After scanning the missions displayed on the large screen, Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist to look at the time. She led Shang Jianyao out of the Hunter’s Guild, walked to Central Square, and found a bench to sit on.

After another 15 minutes, she stood up and said, "I'll go to the library."

"Is there a bathroom there?" Shang Jianyao suddenly asked.

"I guess so..." Jiang Baimian was not so sure.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. "Remember to observe later. People who like libraries can't be unaware of this question."

Jiang Baimian wanted to reprimand him for his strange theory, but she found it reasonable after careful thought.

Since the library was where she and Chen Xufeng 'liaised' and exchanged information, Jiang Baimian always felt that she couldn't stay there for too long. She left in a rush twice, only paying attention to the possible escape routes if she encountered any accidents.

However, this would make her appear a little suspicious instead.

Why would anyone come out of the library in less than ten minutes without borrowing a book?

"Not bad. You've become more meticulous." Jiang Baimian was not stingy with her praise. She then smiled and said, "When we were talking just now, I kept having the feeling that we had flipped our scripts."

Shang Jianyao glanced at her curiously. "I just happened to want to use the bathroom, so I thought of this question."

As he spoke, he stood up as well. Without waiting for Jiang Baimian to start reprimanding him, he added, "I tried to learn your way of thinking."

Jiang Baimian's brows eased. "Very good, but don't abandon what makes you unique. Only then can we complement each other. Two Jiang Baimians definitely can't compare to one Jiang Baimian and one Shang Jianyao."

"You forgot Bai Chen and Long Yuehong," Shang Jianyao pointed out.

Jiang Baimian looked up and couldn't be bothered to argue with him.

After entering the library and asking the librarian where the bathroom was, Jiang Baimian leisurely strolled around the bookshelves. From time to time, she would pick up a book she had never read and flip through it, fully enjoying the joy of wandering the sea of knowledge.

After a long time, she walked to a familiar spot.

At the familiar spot, she picked up 'Internal Revenue Code' and took out the folded piece of paper.

She quickly unfolded the piece of paper and scanned through it. "The company's feedback is as follows: The Anti-intellectualism Church is the same as the Church of the Fool All Beings and the Church of the Null Truth. They are religious organizations that believe in the Kalendaria that controls March, Last Man. However, they have certain differences in specific beliefs. The main areas of proselytization are mostly different, with some areas of intersection...

"This religion believes that the Old World's destruction stems from humans' thoughts and pursuit of knowledge. They hope to resolve this problem from the root..."

"There are a certain number of Awakened among them. The abilities they show are very mixed, but it can be seen that most of them are in areas related to hypnosis and memories..."

"Two years ago, this religion assassinated a Senate Elder—Sols—who was in charge of citizen education in First City. They suffered a huge blow back and disappeared for a long time..."

"It's said that the parishioner who led the assassination is still alive. He's a very dangerous and extreme figure. He's male—appearance and height: unknown. His nickname is 'Father...'"

"Father... Hypnosis, memories..." Jiang Baimian silently repeated these words, and her expression became rather solemn. At that moment, she had a new understanding of Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others' abnormalities.

After putting away the piece of paper, she wandered around the library for a while before heading out to meet Shang Jianyao, who had already finished using the bathroom.

Jiang Baimian didn't mention the information that she had just received and directly brought Shang Jianyao back to Ah Fu's Gun Shop's second floor.

After closing the door, she took out the piece of paper and handed it to Shang Jianyao. "Take a look first."

The weather was gloomy today, and there was insufficient light in the room. Shang Jianyao walked to the window before looking down at the paper's contents.

Upon seeing that he had almost finished reading it, Jiang Baimian asked, "Any thoughts?"

Shang Jianyao said seriously, "I want to beat up the person named Father."

Jiang Baimian was already accustomed to such words. "It's not like he's necessarily the one in charge here."

"Just take it as a yes." Shang Jianyao tried his best to persuade his team leader.

Jiang Baimian readily agreed and tersely acknowledged his words. "From the looks of it, Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others might've been hypnotized or had their memories tampered with. Therefore, despite having freedom of movement, they haven't contacted the company.

"The problem is: where are the remaining three members? Why aren't they anywhere to be seen? Why did the Anti-intellectualism Church hypnotize Lin Feifei and the others? It can't purely be to use them as gunmen, right?"

Shang Jianyao disagreed. "With their intelligence, that's a possibility."

"That's troublesome. I can't infer such people's train of thoughts..." Jiang Baimian said, in a dilemma. "But from the looks of it, the Anti-intellectualism Church only requests ordinary parishioners to give up on thinking. The Chosen Ones inside are in charge of guiding them; they shouldn't be stupid."

At this point, she recalled something. "Do you still remember your suspected attack back in the company?"

“I remember.” Shang Jianyao suddenly became excited. “Could it be that he’s a spy that the Last Man Church planted into the Arbiter of Fate Church?”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Not really... From the looks of it, although most Awakened in every religious organization have abilities in the field of their corresponding Kalendaria, there are also many exceptions...”

“I wonder if the Awakening can only be guided and cannot be controlled accurately. Or do the higher-ups intentionally do this to prevent their abilities from being restrained by hostile factions if they are too concentrated? In short, we have to remind Little White and Little Red to make preparations to prevent hypnosis or any influence on memories.”

When it was almost noon, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong returned and reported the various information they had obtained in the morning.

“Regarding Eugene’s disappearance, three people are now suspects. The first suspect is the family head of North Street’s Zhao Manor, Zhao Zhengqi. He is a member of Weed City’s Aristocratic Council and also does slave-hunting. He is a competitor of Eugene’s gang and has had many unpleasant encounters with him.

“The second suspect is Sun Jing—the younger brother of the underground market leader, Sun Fei. He owns a bar and a nightclub in Wild Wolf Alley. He has a group of thugs and is very influential. He is a suspect because his most beloved daughter disappeared more than two years ago, and Eugene is suspected to be behind it.

“The third suspect is someone in the Aristocratic Council. They deliberately made Eugene disappear, wanting to use this as an excuse to bring the slave hunters and First City’s troops into the city to achieve an unspeakable goal.”

After Jiang Baimian heard that, she said in amusement, “How convincing. If we weren’t the real culprits, I almost believed that it was one of the three.”

Chapter 153: Triple Effect

Shang Jianyao immediately echoed and slapped his thigh. “I almost thought that we weren’t the real culprits.”

You make it sound like you only heard rumors about you attacking Eugene and turning him into a slave before bringing him back... Long Yuehong couldn't help but lampoon.

Of course, he didn't have the intention of arguing about such matters with a mental patient in case Shang Jianyao started repeating: "Sigh, I'm only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement."

During random chats, Long Yuehong had asked Shang Jianyao about his attack on Eugene, hoping to learn something from it.

Jiang Baimian ignored Shang Jianyao and smiled. "We're in pretty good shape now. Basically, nobody will suspect us; I'm just afraid that things will escalate. Different factions in the city will begin to take advantage of the situation and pursue their own interests. That will very easily turn Weed City into a keg of gunpowder that might blow up at any moment."

At this point, Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen like she was no outsider. "Take the 20 Oray you just received to buy food. With food in our hands, we won't need to worry."

"Alright." Bai Chen—who was sitting on a stool in front of the table—nodded.

Jiang Baimian then took out the piece of paper she received from Chen Xufeng and handed it to Bai Chen. "Take a look first."

Long Yuehong immediately stood up, picked up a stool, and moved to Bai Chen's side to read it with her.

"Hypnosis, memories... No wonder..." Long Yuehong exclaimed in enlightenment at the end. He had also studied what it meant by 'hypnosis.'

"From the looks of it, Lin Feifei and the others are indeed controlled by the Anti-intellectualism Church, not framed." Unlike in the past, Bai Chen took the initiative to express her thoughts.

"It's not completely ruled out. We can only say that the possibility is very low; it can't be that coincidental," Jiang Baimian agreed.

She then deliberated and said, "Considering the Anti-intellectualism Church's way of doing things, they are more extreme and like to stir up something big. From this point, can we guess that they are

gradually becoming active in Weed City? Apart from the need to preach, they are also preparing to do something important?

“This is as different as night and day when it comes to Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others from Pangu Biology. Normally speaking, it’s impossible to have them implicated unless...”

Jiang Baimian paused, and Long Yuehong blurted out, “Unless they accidentally stumbled across the Anti-intellectualism Church’s plot?”

“It’s also possible that there’s an overlap with Weed City, causing Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others to be implicated,” guessed Bai Chen.

Shang Jianyao was unwilling to fall behind and voiced his thoughts. “There’s another possibility: When the Anti-intellectualism Church handed out the pamphlets, Lei Yunsong and the others bumped into them, which resulted in a conflict. This angered them, so they went all out. They found experts in the church to take action and redeem their reputation.”

“How irascible is that?” Jiang Baimian tactfully rejected the theory. “Although this suits the Anti-intellectualism Church’s stupidity, we can tell that their Chosen Ones are rather smart from their teachings. They won’t complicate matters unless necessary.”

She looked around and said, “We’ll temporarily investigate according to the theory that they came across a conspiracy or some other matter that resulted in them being implicated.”

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong raised his head and puffed out his chest in response, happy that his thoughts had been confirmed.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “Next, we’ll have to start dealing with this Anti-intellectualism Church. I hope we can find them as soon as possible. No one can guarantee your safety during this process. It’s best for you to be prepared so that you can prevent yourself from being hypnotized at some point in time, losing important memories, or having memories that you shouldn’t have.”

Long Yuehong quickly asked, “Team Leader, what should we do?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “There’s no need to be too nervous. Look, hasn’t a strong person like Eugene been quickly resolved?”

“Team Leader, the moment you said ‘look,’ I suspected that I was being influenced by Inference Clowning and treated Shang Jianyao as you and you as Shang Jianyao...” Long Yuehong replied softly.

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian touched her metal cochlear implant. She then smiled. “Am I not Shang Jianyao? Alright, I’m joking.”

She restrained her expression and gave her opinion. “You can prepare some small notes and keep them close to you. You can note down a few key memories in a way that others can’t understand and can only be understood by yourself. You can also footnote them as ‘referential standards.’ After that, take a look at them at regular intervals and examine your condition.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen agreed after some thought.

Jiang Baimian looked at her and suddenly thought of something. “Oh, it was Oudick who interrogated you, right? How did he interrogate you? By relying on a dream’s influence?”

“Yes, I didn’t know when I fell asleep, nor did I know that I was dreaming. Fortunately, I found Shang Jianyao’s folded star and came to a realization,” Bai Chen described simply.

“It wasn’t easy,” Shang Jianyao commented.

It was unknown what he was referring to.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and added, “In all the situations that we have faced, this is considered the most complex application of Inference Clowning. It made you subconsciously believe that there was such a small, folded star on you, so it reflected in your dream. In reality, matter can’t be fabricated, and so you can’t touch it.”

Bai Chen was a little confused. “What puzzles me is: Shouldn’t the effects of Inference Clowning be removed after I couldn’t touch the folded star in reality?”

Shang Jianyao laughed. “It’s very simple; I stacked three effects, not two. Do you remember what I said after you deduced that there was a folded star in your pocket? It was also an inference.”

Bai Chen recalled and said, “You mean ‘it’s very mysterious and involves supernatural powers; it’s an important prop that I can’t attempt to touch now, nor can I touch it?’”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly applauded. He then excitedly explained, “The first effect is to make you think that Team Leader and I are strangers and ignore the relevant memories.

“The second effect is that you are influenced by a stranger like me and believe that there is a folded star in your pocket.

“The third effect is to allow you to reach the conclusion that you can’t touch that star now. This way, you will still believe that it will appear in your dream when you fail to find it in reality.”

“If I didn’t encounter Oudick, would this effect have never been removed?” Bai Chen asked.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “After you sleep, if you don’t dream of anything or dream of anything else, it will naturally be removed.”

Upon seeing that Bai Chen was relieved, Jiang Baimian began to summarize the matter. “From the looks of it, Oudick’s Awakened abilities can force one to sleep and interfere with dreams. Uh, how did you feel in the dream?”

“Before I took out the folded star, I felt a little groggy. It was almost like a normal dream; I knew who I was, but I didn’t find anything abnormal about my surroundings,” Bai Chen said truthfully.

Jiang Baimian muttered to herself thoughtfully, “This is quite different from Nightmare Horse’s real dream.”

“Back then, I was very clear-headed in the dream and felt like I was in reality,” Shang Jianyao added enthusiastically.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “As it’s realistic enough, the damage one suffers in a dream will reflect in reality. Yes, Oudick’s ability to influence dreams shouldn’t be the same as the Nightmare Horse’s. One can be called Real Dreamscape, and the other can only be called Dreamscape Manipulation.

“Indeed. Oudick’s dream abilities are weaker than the Nightmare Horse’s, but he still has the ability to force a person to sleep. We definitely can’t underestimate him.”

As long as he was within the corresponding range, the ability was virtually like a bug in computer games when he was equipped with firearms.

After they were done discussing this matter, Jiang Baimian returned to the topic at hand. “The most important question now is: How should we find the Anti-intellectualism Church next?”

“Wait for the people who hand out the pamphlets after lights-out? Uh, with Weed City’s current situation, there should be quite a number of patrols at night. They probably won’t dare to come out...” Long Yuehong first voiced his opinion before dismissing it. “Search around the library? They might even take advantage of the chaos to burn the library again.”

“After the library was burned, it was already guarded by armed city guards.” Jiang Baimian had entered and exited the library several times, so she knew a little about such matters.

Shang Jianyao revealed a troubled expression. “The information isn’t detailed enough. If we can figure out what the Anti-intellectualism Church’s Holy Communion is, we can investigate the corresponding shops and markets.”

“...That’s an idea.” Jiang Baimian had to admit that a mental patient could always find a direction that normal people couldn’t think of. “We either have to ask Oudick or send a telegram to the company. Yes, we have to get ourselves a radio transceiver; we can’t always rely on Chen Xufeng. On the one hand, it’s easy to expose him. On the other hand, there are too many intermediary elements. It’s not timely enough, and it might delay us at critical moments.”

She looked around and continued, “Apart from this, there’s another direction; think about it. In order to destroy knowledge, apart from one of the carriers of knowledge—books—which other groups will the Anti-intellectualism Church target?”

“Teachers!” Long Yuehong—who had received formal education since he was young—reacted.

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. “Although the teachers of formal schools live at Weed City’s North Street and are relatively safe, we can’t forget other people. In some wilderness nomad

settlements, there are no public schools like Moat Town. However, a portion of people hope that their children can read at the very least.

“Therefore, when they have spare energy, more than ten families will team up and contribute. They will hire one to two part-time teachers to teach for a few months. After that, it will depend on the actual situation.

“As you can see, the citizens of Weed City lead better lives than most nomad settlements in the wilderness. Their population is also not small. Could it be that there are families where some children can’t study at North Street, and their elders don’t have the time or the ability to teach them? Could they join forces to hire a few teachers for short-term education? Could there be people who specialize in making a living with this as a trade?”

Bai Chen immediately said, “Yes. Many Ruin Hunters are illiterate themselves, so it’s not that convenient to take on missions in the Hunter’s Guild. It’s also very wasteful to just listen and ask. If such people have spare cash and have a certain amount of free time, they will often gather in groups of up to 20 and hire a teacher to teach them common words.

“In Weed City, such people are called temporary teachers.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Then, let’s split up and visit these ‘temporary teachers’ to see if they have received any threats recently and where they came from.”

Chapter 154: Familiar Person

After leaving the room and going downstairs, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian encountered Auntie Nan from Ah Fu’s Gun Shop.

“You guys sure are calm.” The elegant lady casually swept her gaze across them and greeted them with a smile.

“Aren’t you the same?” Jiang Baimian smiled in response. “What has other people’s matters got to do with us? I’m just afraid that they will open up a hole in Weed City’s sky.”

They had previously matched their statements, and everyone tacitly ended the topic. One party planned on going upstairs, and the other prepared to leave.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she asked, "Auntie Nan, do you know any temporary teachers nearby?"

Auntie Nan sized up the two people opposite her suspiciously. "You want to hire a temporary teacher?"

Given Jiang Baimian's appearance and clothes, they didn't look illiterate.

Jiang Baimian instinctively came up with a reason. "We mainly want to know more about this field and see if we can accept such missions. As Ruin Hunters, we definitely won't miss out on missions that we can accept."

Shang Jianyao immediately blew her cover. "You're explaining too much."

Jiang Baimian glared at him. She wasn't too vexed because Auntie Nan clearly didn't believe her words.

How could a Ruin Hunter—who could easily kidnap Eugene and return without leaving behind any clues—take on a 'temporary teacher' mission? It wasn't like she was going to be a tutor for the children of nobles.

Who would believe what Jiang Baimian had said, especially for someone in the know?

Auntie Nan tactfully didn't ask why and smiled. "We have one in this building."

"Where does he live?" Jiang Baimian asked.

Auntie Nan curled up the hair that had drooped down her temples. "It's a she, a lady."

Auntie Nan used the word 'her' in the Red River language. Otherwise, it was impossible to differentiate them via pronunciation.

Auntie Nan then said, "She doesn't live here; she comes over at 2 p.m. every day for an hour and a half of classes. Heh heh, more than ten ladies in this courtyard teamed up to hire her. The few you

saw last night are involved. They receive some dividends from Ah Fu's Gun Shop and are relatively well off. If you want to take a look later, I'll get someone to lead the way."

Jiang Baimian knew that the 'ladies' Auntie Nan was referring to were women that sold their bodies full-time or part-time.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao's hand on his stomach and said gratefully, "Alright, let's go out for lunch first. Get her to come to our room at almost two. Thanks."

Jiang Baimian seemed to have completely forgotten that she had just helped Auntie Nan and the others take revenge last night. It was as if this matter had happened so long ago that it was not worth mentioning.

At 1:50 p.m., someone knocked on Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian's door.

They had long sensed that someone was approaching and were waiting at the door.

"I just happened to have the intention of going out and taking a look," Jiang Baimian explained to the lady outside with a smile.

This lady was one of the people that had killed Eugene last night. Her eyes were large, and she had short hair that just passed her ears. She looked intelligent and young, making it difficult to determine her age accurately.

"There's still ten minutes." The lady made small talk before saying, "Gu Changle. We met last night."

"I won't introduce myself since there's no point in using a fake name. You can call me Big White," said Jiang Baimian in a self-deprecating manner. "As for him, he doesn't have a name. Just use 'hey.'"

She was taking revenge on Shang Jianyao for undermining her previously.

Gu Changle didn't answer. She turned around and said, "On the top floor. It's sunny there."

There was no electricity between 1:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.

Jiang Baimian looked at the floral scarf around Gu Changle's neck, which seemed much more beautiful than last night. She took two steps forward and walked beside Gu Changle.

Her 'professional habits' flared up as she curiously asked, "Sister Gu, why did you think of pooling money to hire a temporary teacher?"

Gu Changle's expression slowly softened as the corners of her mouth curled up indiscernibly. "I accidentally had a child previously, but I couldn't bear to abort it. Thus, I gave birth to it. I don't want her to be like me in the future. I keep having the feeling that it will be better if she can read and have more opportunities."

Jiang Baimian echoed her. "Indeed. Weed City's situation is relatively stable; being able to read is an advantage.

"The child has already gone to the classroom?" Jiang Baimian didn't know the name of where the temporary teacher taught, so she could only use the most common term to define it.

"She's only two years old. How can she go?" Gu Changle smiled. "I placed her at Auntie Nan's."

As Jiang Baimian climbed the stairs, she thoughtfully asked, "Do you want to teach her after you learn to read yourself?"

"That's right. I'm still young and relatively popular. I have room to choose, and my income is still stable. Coupled with the dividends I get from the gun shop, I can support the cost of hiring a temporary teacher. In a few years, when An'an grows up and can attend classes on her own, who knows what will happen? Who knows if we can keep the status quo? My idea is that I should learn more first. I can teach her myself when the time comes, no matter how bad the situation is." Gu Changle spoke of her considerations.

Jiang Baimian praised, "That's right. A person without foresight will definitely have immediate worries."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly applauded.

As they chatted, they arrived at the fifth floor and entered a relatively spacious room by the alley.

The light from outside shone through the four-pane glass windows, illuminating the bed, table, stools, paper, and simple blackboard inside.

At this moment, seven to eight women were sitting on stools and on the edge of the bed. They looked down at the paper in their hands and quietly revised the words that they had previously learned.

Jiang Baimian looked around and pulled Shang Jianyao to sit beside a 17-year-old girl.

Wrapped in a shriveled white cotton jacket, the girl focused on her notes from the last lesson. In this cold room, she trembled slightly.

After she finished reading a paragraph and looked up, Jiang Baimian revealed a harmless smile. "How long have you been attending lessons?"

The girl looked pretty, but she appeared a little haggard. She politely replied, "Almost two months."

"How's the teacher?" Jiang Baimian asked, trying to figure out something. This might be a question that first-time students would be concerned about.

"Very good; she's very patient and knows a lot." The girl was not stingy with her praise.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao interrupted. "Why do you want to pool money to hire a temporary teacher?"

The girl then realized that something was amiss. She looked at Shang Jianyao and asked in surprise, "Why is there a man?"

This matter was jointly done by the women in the courtyard, who were in the prostitution business. Usually, no man appeared.

“Are men not allowed to be prostitutes?” said Shang Jianyao matter-of-factly.

“My friend.” Gu Changle quickly introduced him.

The girl’s gaze swept across Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian’s faces, and she became increasingly confused.

The girl didn’t ask any further, and she sighed before answering the question. “My sister is a prostitute at a nightclub. She has no say on the guests she can accept; she’s like a slave. She contracted a venereal disease half a year ago and was chased out. She couldn’t find someone to treat her for quite some time, and she died not long after...

“She kept saying that there’s no hope in this line of work and that we wouldn’t be able to jump out no matter what. I might die from an illness in a few years, and she told me not to follow in her footsteps. But what can I do? I have to survive first, right?”

“I’m the one pulling in customers. It’s fine if I pay attention, but it’s not a solution if I keep doing this. One day, I’ll end up like my sister. When she died...” The girl stopped, lowered her head, and ‘laughed.’

“I just want to know a few more words and learn more while I still have some money. I might have a chance to be a clerk at the municipal building in the future. I can also take on some Ruin Hunter missions that don’t involve any risks. That way, I won’t have to continue with this line of work anymore.”

“That’s right.” Jiang Baimian agreed sincerely.

The girl wanted to say something when she suddenly saw someone enter from the door. She stood up and said, “Good afternoon, Ms. An.”

Jiang Baimian looked over and was momentarily stunned. The temporary teacher who came was actually someone she knew.

The temporary teacher was Ruin Hunter An Ruxiang, whom Jiang Baimian had encountered in the Blackmarsh Wilderness and Swamp Ruin 1.

She was a member of Wu Shoushi's team and had learned where Wu Shoushi's corpse was placed from the Old Task Force.

An Ruxiang's originally cold and indifferent expression changed slightly. "It's you guys?"

Shang Jianyao stood up and asked enthusiastically, "Are you surprised?"

An Ruxiang—who was no longer wearing the military-green camouflage uniform—opened her mouth, not knowing how to answer. She was vigilant and confused.

Jiang Baimian quickly pointed outside the door. "Let's go out and chat."

An Ruxiang nodded silently and walked out of the room under the students' confused gazes.

Upon arriving at the end of the fifth floor's corridor, Jiang Baimian spoke first. "We took on an investigation mission. We didn't expect to encounter you."

An Ruxiang's expression darkened before she returned to normal. "After leaving the ruin, we returned to Weed City with Shoushi and buried him at the place where he was born. Our trip was rather fruitful. With only two people left, we might as well do our own things.

"I wasn't in the mood, and I didn't take on any missions for a long time. Later, I recovered a little and casually took on some missions in the city, including being a temporary teacher."

Jiang Baimian curiously questioned, "You became one just like that?"

In Jiang Baimian's eyes, An Ruxiang was a woman very suitable for taking risks and fighting.

An Ruxiang looked back at the temporary classroom and calmly said, "I only wanted to be a temporary teacher for a week and find something to do."

"You ended up liking this occupation?" Shang Jianyao asked in interest.

“I can’t say if I like it or not.” An Ruxiang’s tone was flat. Perhaps it was because she had encountered an acquaintance that had mutually helped each other, so she spoke a little more.

As if recalling something, she continued speaking. “I grew up in an assassin organization. There’s nothing to hide. In the New Calendar’s early years, there were many similar organizations. Later, the organization was destroyed. I was lucky to escape and began wandering the Ashlands.

“The education I received since I was young was on how to kill. Even when I learned how to read, it was for the purpose of assassination. Once I lost my target, I didn’t know what to do or know how to find it. Yes, as Shoushi said, the meaning of living.

“It was only when I met Shoushi that I slowly escaped that state. Maybe I understood it too late, and he didn’t manage to wait until then...” At this point, An Ruxiang fell silent for a few seconds before she said, “After he died, I couldn’t find the meaning of living. But when I gave them lessons, I realized that there was light in their eyes when they looked at me.”

Chapter 155: Zeng Guangwang

Jiang Baimian knew that An Ruxiang wasn’t saying anything to Shang Jianyao and herself in her current state. It was because of this opportunity that she subconsciously sorted out her messy feelings.

Therefore, she didn’t echo, interrupt, or express her opinion.

An Ruxiang fell silent again. After a while, she said, “I’d never seen such light in my own eyes. It made me want to see it more.”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s response, she calmly asked, “Have you escaped the person with the bewitchment powers?”

“He still owes us a lot of things.” Shang Jianyao was a little excited at the mention of Qiao Chu.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “We later encountered the Advanced Heartless you encountered. In the chaos, we escaped the bewitchment range. However, I still have to thank you for your reminder back then. Otherwise, things wouldn’t have gone so smoothly.”

“It’s only right,” An Ruxiang said simply.

She then looked back at the temporary classroom. “What are you investigating? I’m about to begin class.”

Jiang Baimian knew that An Ruxiang wanted the long story to be made short, so she directly said, “We’re investigating the organization that randomly distributes pamphlets, which promotes that ‘knowledge is toxic.’ Have you been threatened while you were a temporary teacher?”

An Ruxiang instantly became vigilant. “A few days ago, a piece of paper was stuffed under my door. On it was written: ‘Stop the act of poisoning humans, or you will suffer divine punishment.’ They also wrote ‘suffer’ as ‘buffer.’ I only understood it after taking the context into account.

“Nothing abnormal has happened since then. My instincts and experience in this regard haven’t dropped.”

“That’s their characteristic.” Jiang Baimian agreed.

Shang Jianyao also added, “Their intelligence is relatively low.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Be careful in the next few days. You can come to us if anything abnormal happens. We stay here and are friends with Gu Changle.”

“Alright.” An Ruxiang was now alone, so she didn’t mind cooperating when faced with a strange situation.

“There’s nothing else. Go back to class.” Just as Jiang Baimian said that, she suddenly thought of a detail and muttered to herself. “It hasn’t been two months since we separated in Swamp Ruin No. 1, right?”

“Barely a month,” An Ruxiang answered.

“Then, how long have you been a temporary teacher here?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“About three weeks.” An Ruxiang remembered this very clearly.

“In other words, there was another temporary teacher previously?” Jiang Baimian remembered that the girl she had been chatting with had said that she had been here for almost two months.

“Yes,” An Ruxiang replied frankly. “I only received the corresponding mission because he suddenly resigned.”

“Then, do you know why he resigned?” Jiang Baimian became excited.

“I don’t know. I don’t like chatting.” An Ruxiang pointed at the temporary classroom. “You can ask them.”

“Alright.” As Jiang Baimian nodded, Shang Jianyao had already walked to the temporary classroom.

He walked in front of Gu Changle, squatted down, and looked her in the eye. “I have a question.”

Gu Changle suddenly felt a little nervous. “What?”

“Why did the previous temporary teacher quit so suddenly?” Shang Jianyao questioned directly.

“He didn’t say.” Gu Changle looked at the women around her. “But he’s not bad. He refunded a week’s worth of tuition fees.”

Jiang Baimian—who had followed him in—asked, “Do you know where he lives then? What does he look like?”

Gu Changle replied in confusion, “He’s just an ordinary man named Zeng Guangwang. His eyes are a little lecherous, but he’s still very focused when teaching. I’m not sure where exactly he lives.”

At this moment, the 17-year-old girl—who had been chatting with Shang Jianyao and the others—hesitated and said, “I know.”

“Where?” Shang Jianyao quickly turned his head.

As he and Jiang Baimian were rather good-looking, they naturally gained goodwill. The girl hesitated and said, "I met him at Yellow Corner Alley before he quit. H-he wanted to sleep with me once. I happened to be lacking in money back then. I thought that, since we were acquaintances and there was no fear of being robbed, I agreed. Anyway, it doesn't matter who I sleep with."

"He was pretty generous when it came to giving money. He lives in the courtyard between Yellow Corner Alley and Red Silk Alley. The building by Yellow Corner Alley, the building on the left. Block 2, fourth floor, Unit 406. Yes, Unit 406."

Jiang Baimian became excited when she heard that it was a courtyard between Yellow Corner Alley and Red Silk Alley.

That was where Lin Feifei had once rented a room!

After hearing the girl's description, the women around them giggled.

"Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Did he quit because he performed badly and was embarrassed to see you again?"

"Was he up to the task?"

...

Amidst these bold statements, Shang Jianyao sincerely thanked the girl before leaving the building where Ah Fu's Gun Shop was located. He then headed straight for Red Silk Alley with Jiang Baimian.

The one guarding the courtyard's entrance was still the old man. This time, Shang Jianyao didn't say a word. He stuffed a bag of compressed biscuits over and successfully stopped the other party's interrogation.

According to the described address, the two of them entered the corresponding building and went up to the fourth floor.

After taking a few steps, Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao. “There’s someone in the room.”

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao indicated that he had sensed it as well.

Jiang Baimian then reached into her pocket and gripped the Ice Moss’s gun handle. After finishing her preparations, she came to Unit 406’s door, raised her left hand, and knocked a few times.

“Who is it?” A voice—which sounded like it came from someone that had just woken up—sounded from inside.

“Your father,” Shang Jianyao replied fluently.

This shut Jiang Baimian—who had prepared a statement—up.

The person in the room seemed to become very angry. He forgot his vigilance and hesitation and suddenly rushed over, pulling open the wooden door.

He was a man in his thirties. He looked ordinary, and nothing special stood out.

The first person he saw was Jiang Baimian. He was stunned before he subconsciously smiled. “Yes, what’s the matter?”

Upon seeing this slightly lecherous behavior, Jiang Baimian became increasingly certain that this was Zeng Guangwang.

She smiled and asked, “Zeng Guangwang?”

“Yes, that’s me.” Zeng Guangwang finally saw Shang Jianyao. Due to his inferior height, he immediately became vigilant.

Jiang Baimian took out her Hunter’s Badge and showed it. “We took on an investigation mission, and we want to ask you something.”

“If you want to ask about something...” Zeng Guangwang rubbed his fingers.

Shang Jianyao’s existence prevented him from making any more excessive requests.

Jiang Baimian threw an energy bar over and didn’t give the other party a chance to bargain. She then directly asked, “Weren’t you previously a temporary teacher? Why did you suddenly quit?”

Zeng Guangwang’s face turned pale as if he had recalled something bad.

Upon seeing that he was inclined to refuse to answer, Jiang Baimian spoke first. “Is it related to the idea that knowledge is toxic?”

Zeng Guangwang was stunned for a few seconds before saying, “What do you know?”

Jiang Baimian didn’t respond and only looked at him.

Shang Jianyao tried to make eye contact with Zeng Guangwang, not letting him look away.

“Let’s talk inside.” Zeng Guangwang looked around, appearing timid.

After closing the door, he paced around and said, “I’ve previously been a temporary teacher for several families. I thought that I wouldn’t go out and take risks when the weather turned cold. During that period of time, I received several pamphlets one after another. They were similar to the pamphlets that were randomly distributed on the streets. They wrote about how thinking was a trap and how knowledge was toxic.

“I ignored it, finding them a bunch of idiots. Then, I came back from East Street one day and entered Yellow Corner Alley. Before I reached the courtyard entrance, I encountered someone...” As he spoke, fear appeared on Zeng Guangwang’s face. “That person was a little taller than me and about the same as you. He was wearing a black trench coat. Yes, a trench coat.”

Zeng Guangwang looked at Jiang Baimian and gestured. “He was very thin, and his expression wasn’t good. He looked very haggard, appearing as though he was suffering from a serious illness.”

Zeng Guangwang paused and took a deep breath. “He walked in front of me and looked at me. He then said, ‘Sir, knowledge is the root cause of the Old World’s destruction. Your actions are poisoning humans. Please cease and desist immediately; otherwise, the Kalendaria’s noose will come for you.’

After saying that, Zeng Guangwang felt like he had plunged into a nightmare. “His eyes were very terrifying; they were black, and there was clearly nothing strange about them. However, they were very terrifying. I can’t even remember what he looks like.

“I ignored him back then and thought that he was crazy. After I returned, I suddenly woke up in the middle of the night and realized that I was hanging in the closet, about to die. I had clearly been sleeping!

“I struggled with all my might, wanting to save myself. Fortunately, the wooden beam in the closet was very rotten to begin with. It didn’t take long for it to snap. In the room, there was no one else but me! I was f*cking terrified and didn’t dare to tell anyone. I quickly canceled all the missions as a temporary teacher and lost a large sum...”

Zeng Guangwang was rather agitated when describing this matter. He pulled open the dark-red closet door by the bed.

The wooden cross-beam inside had clear signs of snapping.

Hypnosis? Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully.

She turned her head and glanced at Shang Jianyao. She realized that the fellow had already walked toward Zeng Guangwang and sincerely said, “You encountered a ghost.”

“No way...” Zeng Guangwang originally didn’t believe in such things, but he believed it a little now. “What should I do then?”

During this period of time, he had been overly suspicious. He couldn’t sleep well, eat well, and he didn’t have an appetite. He didn’t even have the mood to complete missions and had to rely on his savings.

“Move as soon as possible,” Shang Jianyao suggested seriously.

Jiang Baimian—who wanted to stop him—shut her mouth. She felt that this was a good suggestion.

Be it escaping the Anti-intellectualism Church's line of sight or a familiar environment, this was the easiest way to achieve the avoidance of certain hints from acting up again.

“Alright...” Zeng Guangwang said hesitantly.

After bidding him farewell, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao walked down the stairs.

When they reached the first floor, Jiang Baimian finally said, “Who do you think warned Zeng Guangwang?”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Father. The Father I wanted to beat up.”

Chapter 156: Interweaving Clues

Jiang Baimian laughed involuntarily when she heard that. “You sure are confident.”

She then added, “This is also a good thing. At the very least, you can still be filled with confidence and infect the entire team when we encounter difficulties and become depressed. This is called idealistic optimism.

“Uh, did you say that before?”

Shang Jianyao nodded. “I don't mind it when you quote me.”

Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him and walked out of the stairwell. Then, she looked around and thoughtfully said, “There might be some Anti-intellectualism Church believers in this courtyard. The people who warned Zeng Guangwang might be hiding nearby.”

Lin Feifei—who was ‘controlled’—lived here. Zeng Guangwang—who had been warned and had almost hung himself—also lived here. If it weren't purely a coincidence, it meant that the Anti-intellectualism Church had many spies in the area.

Before Shang Jianyao could give his ‘suggestion,’ Jiang Baimian sighed. “Unfortunately, there aren’t any photos; otherwise, we could ask the guard. It takes too much manpower to go door to door and investigate; it’s not something we can complete. Furthermore, it’s easy to alert the enemy and bring about accidents.”

Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up as he quickly said, “I can sketch out the person who warned Zeng Guangwang by following his description.”

“Forget it then.” Jiang Baimian recalled Shang Jianyao’s drawings and directly rejected his suggestion.

She thought for a moment and said, “Go to the Hunter’s Guild and find Oudick. He might have a way to extract the person’s image from Zeng Guangwang’s dream.”

“I hope so.” Shang Jianyao had a look of regret.

The two of them left the door in Yellow Corner Alley, turned toward South Street, and walked toward Central Square.

Just as they were about to turn toward West Street, a loud bang suddenly sounded from the side.

Boom!

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao reacted reflexively. One rolled and curled up behind a bench, while the other threw their body down on the ground, pretending to be a corpse.

This didn’t mean that they could block bullets in such positions, but they could avoid any possible attackers’ line of sight.

After the explosion, Central Square became noisy. Screams, loud shouts, and rapid footsteps sounded incessantly.

Upon seeing that no intense battle had broken out, Jiang Baimian left her hiding spot and looked at the spot where the explosion had occurred—it was Weed City’s public library.

This building's glass windows had shattered. Black smoke and crimson flames spewed out.

The fire brigade—which wasn't far away—quickly rushed over and used various means to put out the fire.

Several people covered in blood were carried out one after another. Some were still moaning, and some had already stopped moving.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao—who had stood up—and a term surfaced in her mind: Anti-intellectualism Church!

She retracted her gaze from the relatively intact library and habitually observed her surroundings. Suddenly, her gaze stopped at a certain spot.

At the intersection of East Street and Central Square, a group of people—who had seen that the alarm had been lifted—were watching.

Standing at the edge of this group of people was a man in a black trench coat.

This man's hands were in his pockets. He was about Jiang Baimian's height, and he had slightly messy short hair. He looked very thin, and his face was abnormally pale as if he had just recovered from a serious illness or had yet to recover.

As if sensing Jiang Baimian's gaze, he turned his head and looked over. His eyes were almost pure black; they were like an abyss that could bury a person's soul.

The man's lips curled up as he revealed an indescribable smile. He then squeezed into the crowd and disappeared from Jiang Baimian's line of sight.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before turning to ask Shang Jianyao, "Did you see that?"

"I saw it." Shang Jianyao's arms had already assumed a running posture at some point in time, but his legs didn't move.

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. "I thought you would rush over and beat him up."

Shang Jianyao glanced at Jiang Baimian strangely and frankly replied, “We can’t catch up.”

“Alright. This way, at least it won’t expose the fact that you know he’s a dangerous person.” Jiang Baimian looked at the library—where the fire situation was under control—and slowly exhaled. “I hope not many books are lost inside.”

This was the hope of many children in Weed City. A temporary teacher was enough to teach some things, but it was impossible to learn more without books.

Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else. She led Shang Jianyao into West Street and entered the Hunter’s Guild.

She was just thinking about how she should leave Oudick a message if she couldn’t find him in the lobby when she realized that this Advanced Hunter was sitting at the edge of the area she and Shang Jianyao usually liked to stay in. It was unknown who he was waiting for.

Jiang Baimian walked over and smiled. “We have new clues.”

“Me too.” Oudick stood up while wrapped in his thick coat.

“Were you waiting for us?” Jiang Baimian came to a realization.

“You should wait at the door. That way, we’ll see you at a glance,” Shang Jianyao suggested enthusiastically.

Oudick ignored Shang Jianyao and directly said, “I’ve already asked which higher-ups in the local guild met Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others.”

Asked? He probably obtained the information with his dream abilities... Jiang Baimian calmly inquired, “Who?”

“Cui En—Vice President Cui En—who is in charge of Hunter’s Affairs.” Oudick pointed at the stairs that led to the second floor. “I’ll bring you to meet him.”

Jiang Baimian was in no rush to mention the man in the trench coat. She signaled to Shang Jianyao with her eyes to get him ready.

They then headed up to the second floor together and met the local Hunter's Guild's vice president, Cui En, in a small room—which only had a long table and a few chairs.

Cui En was tall and thin, with a large nose. Although his hair was sparse, it was still black.

Shang Jianyao observed him for a while before suddenly asking, “Have you dyed your hair before?”

Cui En opened his mouth and forgot the words he had prepared. After a few seconds, he proudly stroked his hair. “No.”

“Is that so...” Shang Jianyao seemed to be a little regretful.

Jiang Baimian deeply suspected that Shang Jianyao was regretful that he had failed to secure a hair-dye job for his sworn brother—Ferlin—who was also the Rootless's convoy leader.

Oudick didn't waste any time and broke the strange silence. “I've just spoken to President Cui. He met Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others about a month and a half ago.”

Cui En trusted Oudick, evidenced by the lack of bodyguards beside him. He pointed at the chair opposite the long table and said, “Have a seat.”

After Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao quickly sat down, Cui En sighed and said, “I originally didn't want to mention this matter. It was worthless and would only bring unnecessary trouble and involvement. In the end, Oudick somehow found out.”

“It was about a month and a half ago,” said the vice president in reminiscence. “One morning, my assistant told me that someone wanted to visit me and discuss a large mission. I had nothing to do back then, and my assistant said that they seemed to have some background. Hence, I agreed.

“I then met Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others in my office. They actually didn't have a large mission to talk about. Their goal was to know about Mechanical Paradise.”

“Mechanical Paradise?” Jiang Baimian was slightly surprised.

Mechanical Paradise was a large faction that had complete control over intelligent robot production technology and many factories. It was located in the coastal area south of Old Mountain Range.

Mechanical Paradise was relatively mysterious. Transactions with the outside world were mainly handled by its robot army, and none of the other factions had entered their area of control.

Pangu Biology was northwest of Old Mountain Range.

“Yes,” Cui En replied in confusion. “I don’t know why they wanted to know about Mechanical Paradise. They were even willing to pay a considerable sum for the information. Unfortunately, I don’t have much contact with Mechanical Paradise. Although the products in the lobby are all from Mechanical Paradise, the ones in charge of the corresponding matters are the Chief President and the local President. Therefore, I could only get them to try and find connections to go to North Street and visit the President.”

The local Hunter’s Guild’s president was Castellan Xu Liyan.

“No wonder...” Jiang Baimian resolved one of the questions in her heart—why did Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others enter North Street?

They had gone to Castellan Manor to seek an audience with Castellan Xu Liyan, the Hunter’s Guild’s President.

Cui En picked up the white porcelain teacup in front of him and took a sip. “I haven’t seen them since, but I’m certain of one thing—they left North Street later.

“Since I was worried that this matter would bring unnecessary trouble to the President, I instructed my assistant and the relevant employees not to leak this information. I wonder how Oudick found out.”

It was obvious that Cui En held a grudge against Oudick for suddenly grasping this secret.

At this moment, Oudick nodded slightly, hinting to Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao that Cui En wasn’t lying.

Jiang Baimian looked at Cui En and smiled. “We roughly understand. Sorry to trouble you, President Cui.”

“It’s fine. If we can solve Liu Dazhuang’s murder through this, I will even express my gratitude.” Cui En stood up and sent Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others out of the room.

When they were outside and walking to the stairs, Jiang Baimian smiled and looked ahead. “Another exchange of information?”

“Sure.” Oudick didn’t refuse.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “We found a temporary teacher, who was threatened by the Anti-intellectualism Church.”

She ignored the sequence of events and described Zeng Guangwang’s address and encounter. Jiang Baimian also mentioned that a man in a trench coat—who had a similar image—had appeared in the crowd after the library explosion.

“This style...” Oudick’s expression gradually turned solemn. “It’s very similar to Father, who was previously active in First City.”

Shang Jianyao’s expression became excited.

Jiang Baimian glared at Shang Jianyao, warning him to restrain himself before saying to Oudick, “Your turn.”

Oudick looked at the stairs in front of him and fell silent for a moment. “I didn’t come to Weed City by chance; I was invited. I didn’t investigate Liu Dazhuang’s death because I happened to bump into it or because he was an intelligence peddler.”

At this point, Oudick stepped into the stairwell and left a sentence: “He was secretly serving the castellan.”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian felt all the clues intertwine in her mind. She didn't seem far from forming the answer.

Chapter 157: Outside the City

Previously, Jiang Baimian always felt that the necessary connection between what had already happened was lacking. Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others didn't have any interactions with the Anti-intellectualism Church on the surface. They seemed like two completely unrelated parties, but they strangely meshed together.

Now, she had finally found the missing point—the point that connected the two parties.

This point was Weed City's Castellan and the local Hunter's Guild president—Xu Liyan!

As she walked and thought, Jiang Baimian directed a question to Oudick, who was in front of her. "Were you invited by the Castellan?"

Oudick didn't answer.

Jiang Baimian muttered to herself thoughtfully, "I want to meet the Castellan. This might help me figure out many things."

Oudick remained silent and walked straight into the guild lobby.

...

At Weed City's entrance, Bai Chen slowly drove the jeep out with Long Yuehong.

During their search for the temporary teachers, they discovered something worth paying attention to. A temporary teacher named Huang Mingtang was supposed to end his vacation yesterday and return to teach the children. However, he never appeared.

Every ten days, Huang Mingtang rested for one day. According to the parents, Huang Mingtang had already taught their children for almost a year. He charged reasonable fees, and he was responsible. There had never been such a situation before. Furthermore, they were often allowed to delay paying their tuition fees for a period of time when certain families had temporary financial troubles.

Originally, these parents had planned to wait for two more days. If Huang Mingtang still hadn't returned by then, they would've gone to the guild and issued a mission to search for him. Although they couldn't afford a high bounty, the mission could at least allow Ruin Hunters to accumulate some credit.

In Weed City, some of the matters—which should've been handled by City Hall and the city's defense forces—had gradually been transferred to the Hunter's Guild as missions.

After bumping into Bai Chen and Long Yuehong—Ruin Hunters that had come to investigate—the parents directly headed to the guild hall to create and entrust the mission to them.

The remuneration was 2 Oray and 10 credit points.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong quickly found Huang Mingtang's rented apartment based on the clues provided by the parents. From the guard, they learned that the temporary teacher had gone to his home outside the city the night before his official leave and had never returned.

Huang Mingtang's parents were servants in a manor outside the city. He had grown up there, and he had learned how to read and write because of the manor owner's benevolence.

Later, he accompanied the manor owner's young son as a Ruin Hunter for a period of time and made some contributions. He was then granted freedom as a citizen.

Huang Mingtang didn't like fighting or killing, nor was he willing to take risks in the wilderness. Finally, he chose to be a temporary teacher to support himself.

Without any delay, Bai Chen decided to head for the manor outside the city before it turned dark to inquire.

After spending a few minutes at the city gate due to a jam, the military-green jeep left Weed City.

In the passenger seat, Long Yuehong subconsciously looked out and was stunned by the scene in front of him.

There were many people.

There were many, many people outside the city.

They knelt or sat on the two sides of the road. They spread out into the distance—an uncountable number.

Further away were the burrows they had dug and the crude, temporary tents that they had pitched. It was as if they had become different wilderness nomad settlements.

These people looked ahead with pale faces and numb expressions. They trembled in the cold wind, but nobody spoke.

From time to time, the sound of children crying could be heard, making them appear all the more powerless.

Every time someone escorted by armed bodyguards walked in between them, coming back and forth to choose candidates, a hint of hope would appear on their faces.

After the lucky few were bought, the remaining people revealed looks of disappointment before returning to their numb expressions.

“Do all of them have infectious diseases? It doesn’t seem like it...” Long Yuehong muttered to himself.

He remembered that the nomads gathered here on the day they came to Weed city. They were allowed entry into the city to search for opportunities as long as they didn’t have any infectious diseases.

Bai Chen sped up the car a little. “There are too many of them. If so many people were to rush into the city, they are equivalent to countless bombs that could explode at any moment.”

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and understood. “So, they can only be left outside, and buyers will personally come out to choose?”

Bai Chen nodded. “Weed City can’t accommodate so many slaves. It depends on whether First City can send people over in time to gather them. Eugene’s slave hunters might’ve booked a batch, but it’s not clear now.”

Long Yuehong was suddenly surprised. “Are you saying that Team Leader and Shang Jianyao have ended up causing a group of innocents’ deaths by killing an evil person like Eugene?”

Bai Chen replied in a senior-like tone, “You have to get used to this. Although Eugene is a villain who deserves to be diced to pieces, and his only goal was to earn money, he can indeed bring life to many people in the current environment.”

Not everyone that was bought would be sent to the mines and die in a few years.

Long Yuehong fell silent for a long time before saying, “This f*cked up world!”

“Eugene’s slave hunters might have a new leader soon. They probably won’t let go of the opportunity to earn money.” Bai Chen also looked to the side. “There are so many people, and new nomads come every day. If this isn’t resolved in a few days, there might be a huge commotion...”

She had seen such things before. Back then, it was truly a tragedy.

As they spoke, the jeep finally drove out of the area and turned into the Turbid River.

After circling around a forest with withered leaves and driving for another four to five minutes, Long Yuehong saw many fields.

These fields similarly appeared desolate during winter.

The jeep soon arrived at the manor’s entrance and was stopped by a team of armed guards.

Bai Chen took out her Hunter’s Badge and explained that she was looking for Huang Mingtang’s parents.

They weren’t allowed into the manor, but a guard helped them send the message and found the couple.

Huang Mingtang's parents looked to be in their fifties, and their hair was mostly white.

"Ah Tang didn't go back? He left two nights ago!" Huang Mingtang's mother was a little anxious after hearing Long Yuehong's recount.

Bai Chen frowned and asked, "Did anything abnormal happen before he left?"

"No." Huang Mingtang's mother shook her head repeatedly. "I rushed him to find a wife."

Huang Mingtang's father looked honest. His exposed skin was a little tanned, and he had many spots with dry cracks. He recalled and said, "Ah Tang was in a rush to leave before five. It would take more than half an hour to walk from here to the city. There will also be some starving beasts after dark..."

At this point, Huang Mingtang's father worriedly said, "Could he have encountered those beasts?"

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong looked at each other and said, "We'll search along the way."

Under the couple's expectant gazes, they got into the car and returned the way they came.

This time, they drove much slower than before. They paid close attention to their surroundings and alighted from the car from time to time to inspect their surroundings.

After a while, the jeep returned to the forest.

Although most of the leaves had fallen during winter, it was still difficult to see clearly from the outside when the trees blocked the view.

Bai Chen stopped the jeep and said to Long Yuehong, "Watch the car."

Long Yuehong was already very familiar with this. He held the Ice Moss pistol and stood beside the jeep, vigilantly guarding his surroundings.

Bai Chen also drew her gun and slowly walked into the forest.

After circling around a thick tree, her pupils immediately dilated.

In the forest's depths, a man in a dark-red cotton coat hung from a tree branch that wasn't considered high up but looked very sturdy. He was motionless.

The man had a brownish-yellow belt around his neck, and his pants seemed like they would fall off at any moment.

As the howling wind blew, the man gently swayed.

...

On the second floor of Ah Fu's Gun Shop.

"Huang Mingtang hanged himself?" Jiang Baimian spoke with lingering fear after hearing Bai Chen's report. "Zeng Guangwang's luck is really good."

Jiang Baimian then explained her investigation progress.

"The Anti-intellectualism Church seems crazy." Long Yuehong sighed sincerely. He felt a little sad when he recalled the reactions of Huang Mingtang's parents when they saw their son's corpse.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. "When did you have the illusion that they aren't lunatics?"

"I-I thought they were just an illiterate organization that would burn books for no reason." Long Yuehong admitted that he was inexperienced.

"Arson is already a serious crime," Jiang Baimian said. She then reminded them, "You have to be careful. That Father is very, very dangerous."

Long Yuehong felt his heart in his throat. "What should we do next?"

“For the time being, we can only see what Oudick can find. I hope he can find at least one Anti-intellectualism Church member.” Jiang Baimian was also waiting for Oudick to give them a reply about whether the Castellan was willing to meet them.

She then asked Bai Chen, “Any progress on the radio transceiver?”

Bai Chen nodded. “I found someone who can personally assemble one. It’s very cheap; I’ll negotiate tomorrow.”

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and smiled at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “Look, look. This is your profession; learn something.”

“I can if I have enough spare parts,” Shang Jianyao immediately replied.

“What do you mean by enough?” Jiang Baimian asked sharply.

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “Enough to give me a chance to practice.”

Jiang Baimian couldn’t be bothered with him any longer.

The sky had already turned dark. Due to Liu Dazhuang and Eugene’s deaths, the number of patrolmen outside had increased significantly.

After the Old Task Force had dinner, they returned to their rooms to maintain their weapons. They also discussed the Anti-intellectualism Church without any limitations.

After lights-out, they quickly washed up and went to bed, prepared to sleep early and wake up early.

At some point in the night, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s door was suddenly knocked on.

As the thumping sounds echoed, Shang Jianyao flipped off the bed and ran to the door. The hand behind his back gripped an Ice Moss.

Jiang Baimian also crawled up silently and aimed at the door.

Outside the door was Gu Changle, one of Ah Fu's Gun Shop shareholders—who had pooled money to hire a temporary teacher.

The lady wore a thick cotton coat, and she seemed to have woken up in a rush. She didn't notice Shang Jianyao's abnormality and anxiously said, "Ms. An came to look for you. She seems to be injured; she's downstairs!"

An Ruxiang? This name popped up in Jiang Baimian's mind.

Chapter 158: "Sense of Ritual"

When they arrived at Ah Fu's Gun Shop's back door, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao saw An Ruxiang waiting there.

In a room on the second floor, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong—who had also been woken up—monitored their surroundings through the window to prevent any accidents from happening.

Under the moonlight at night, An Ruxiang held the lower-left half of her bandaged abdomen. There were obvious traces of blood on her hands and clothes.

"Are you alright?" Jiang Baimian asked in concern.

"It's fine." An Ruxiang was rather calm. It was obvious that her injuries weren't too serious.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. "Let's talk upstairs."

They had a first-aid kit in their room, which could handle the wound better and prevent any subsequent infections.

After she was done, Jiang Baimian said to Gu Changle, "Go back. Don't worry about anything that happens later. If you get involved, it will bring you unnecessary trouble."

Gu Changle thought about her child and didn't put on a brave front. She left Shang Jianyao's room.

After closing the wooden door, Jiang Baimian turned around and looked at An Ruxiang. “What happened?”

Jiang Baimian was in no rush to ask because An Ruxiang was in no rush to answer. This meant that there was no urgency. It was impossible to catch the murderer, even if they learned about it more than ten minutes earlier.

An Ruxiang calmly said, “I was attacked.”

“Attacked?” Jiang Baimian was slightly surprised. From her point of view, a direct attack wasn’t Father’s style.

An Ruxiang methodically explained everything. “I had a job as a temporary teacher elsewhere at night, teaching reading to people who are busy until late. After 11:30, I returned from West Street to where I lived. On the way, I encountered someone.”

After 8:30 p.m., only West Street and North Street didn’t have an electric blackout. The ‘temporary classroom’ was at a student’s home.

Shang Jianyao interrupted and asked, “Did he look very thin and ill while wearing a black trench coat?”

An Ruxiang wasn’t surprised, and she nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s really him.” Shang Jianyao smiled.

An Ruxiang continued, “He walked in front of me and said, ‘Ma’am, knowledge is the root cause of the Old World’s destruction.’ I’ve always been very wary of such baffling people, and I also recalled the investigation you did this afternoon. Without giving him a chance to continue, I directly drew my dagger and told him to stay away from me.”

It’s indeed An Ruxiang’s style... Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, knowing that the development changed from that point onward.

Shang Jianyao inexplicably asked, “Why didn’t you fire?”

“Back then, I only wanted to scare that person away. It was also easier to pull out the dagger,” An Ruxiang explained simply. “Fortunately, I pulled out a dagger, not a gun.”

“Oh?” Jiang Baimian expressed her confusion with her tone.

An Ruxiang pointed at the wound on her left abdomen. “My hand suddenly lost control, and I stabbed myself.”

“Another Awakened ability...” Jiang Baimian wasn’t too surprised, but she became more vigilant.

“I think so too.” An Ruxiang had also seen Superior Heartless, and she had come into contact with Awakened Ruin Hunters. “If I were holding a gun, I might very well have shot myself.”

“Then?” Jiang Baimian asked.

An Ruxiang’s expression changed slightly. “That person didn’t take the opportunity to attack me, nor did he leave directly. He stood there, looked at me, and continued speaking. ‘You are poisoning humans. Please stop this behavior immediately, or the Kalendaria’s noose will come for you.’

“I controlled myself and didn’t attack him again. After he said that, he turned around and left.”

“He’s nuts!” Jiang Baimian cursed sincerely.

Shang Jianyao sighed in understanding. “How ritualistic.”

When Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao, An Ruxiang ended the conversation. “I then bandaged myself simply and came to find you.”

It was just past midnight.

“That’s the Anti-intellectualism Church. The person who attacked you might have a nickname—Father.” Jiang Baimian revealed some of the information she had.

Shang Jianyao then shook his head. "He's so pitiful."

"Huh?" Jiang Baimian failed to grasp Shang Jianyao's thoughts this time.

Shang Jianyao sighed and said sincerely, "This is the consequence of anti-intellectual education. You have to do everything yourself, and your subordinates are useless. They will only be a burden."

Jiang Baimian smiled. "Indeed. The three consecutive attacks were personally carried out by Father. As a leader, that's too degrading. Even I feel tired for him."

At this point, Jiang Baimian muttered to herself thoughtfully, "It's no wonder he wants to control Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others. To the Anti-intellectualism Church, good helpers are too rare... Yes, the other reason might be to frame others and sow discord."

Jiang Baimian suspected that the Anti-intellectualism Church had attacked Lei Yunsong and company because they knew that they were employees of Pangu Biology. They then controlled them to do things that would seriously offend Weed City and First City, thereby inciting a conflict between two major factions.

An Ruxiang often paid attention to the missions issued by the Hunter's Guild, so she knew about Lei Yunsong and Lin Feifei. She didn't find Jiang Baimian's 'muttering' strange.

Jiang Baimian quickly gathered her thoughts and said to An Ruxiang, "Sleep here tonight. Go to the city defense forces at dawn and report the matter. Then, cooperate with them and issue a mission at the guild to find the Anti-intellectualism Church's leader, nicknamed Father."

An Ruxiang was unrelated to Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others. They didn't have to worry about alerting the enemy.

"Why not now?" An Ruxiang asked.

"The city defense forces can't do anything in the middle of the night. We still have to wait for the guild to open," Jiang Baimian explained. "Besides, there's a small problem that needs to be resolved."

An Ruxiang didn't press any further. "Alright."

Shang Jianyao raised his hand. “Where should I sleep?”

“Of course, you’ll sleep in your own bed.” Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him. “An Ruxiang will squeeze in with me.”

“Abusing the injured,” Shang Jianyao said.

“Alright then!” Jiang Baimian bluntly said, “An Ruxiang will sleep on your bed. You can either squeeze in with Long Yuehong—who’s in the opposite room—or sleep on the stool.”

Although An Ruxiang didn’t understand the interaction between the two, she didn’t interfere with other people’s habits. She followed the arrangement and lay on the bed, preparing to sleep.

Shang Jianyao took the opportunity to go next door and told Bai Chen and Long Yuehong what had happened.

He didn’t stay the night. He returned to his room and sat on the stool in front of the table, entering a sleeping posture.

After an unknown period of time, An Ruxiang suddenly woke up and realized that her neck was hanging in a ‘rope loop.’ The hands holding the loop were her own.

The ‘rope loop’ was connected to the bunk bed’s top bunk. It was enough to hang her to death.

The one that woke An Ruxiang up was Shang Jianyao. His eyes were bright and spirited under the moonlight.

Jiang Baimian—who was lying on the top bunk bed—woke up as well. She lay there and looked down.

An Ruxiang let her neck leave the ‘rope loop’ and asked hesitantly, “Did I do it myself?”

“This is the small problem that needs to be resolved,” Jiang Baimian explained with a smile.

According to Zeng Guangwang's experience, there should only be one 'suicide' brought about by hypnosis. Of course, it might not necessarily flare up when sleeping.

An Ruxiang recalled what she had seen and heard. "Hypnosis?"

"Something like that." Jiang Baimian didn't say anything else.

She didn't get Shang Jianyao to use Inference Clowning to eliminate the hypnotic effects. On the one hand, she didn't know the characteristics of Father's ability and was afraid that they would miss something and end up harming An Ruxiang. On the other hand, she didn't want to expose Shang Jianyao's Awakened ability unless necessary.

"Is this matter considered resolved?" An Ruxiang inquired cautiously.

"In theory," Jiang Baimian replied. "Continue sleeping, and we'll observe."

If it were anyone else, they would definitely feel a little uncomfortable when they heard this. After all, very few people could get used to sleeping under the gazes of others. However, An Ruxiang had no problems at all and quickly fell asleep.

This time, she slept until dawn.

After breakfast, they split up and went out just before 8:30. They went to the city defense forces and the Hunter's Guild to find Oudick.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had just entered the lobby when they saw Oudick sitting at the edge of the waiting area.

"Good morning." Shang Jianyao greeted him energetically. There was no sign of him not sleeping the entire night.

Oudick nodded in response. He then pointed at the stairwell and said, "Castellan Xu wants to meet you."

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian agreed without hesitation. This was what she hoped for.

Jiang Baimian followed Oudick to the second floor. After walking for about ten meters, Jiang Baimian suddenly turned her head and looked at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao looked back. After a few seconds, he nodded.

After arriving at the end of the corridor, Oudick stopped outside a room guarded by four armed personnel.

After communicating in low voices for a while, they obtained permission to enter after handing their guns over.

The room was large, and the lighting was sufficient, making it appear rather bright.

Inside were a large desk and two rows of bookshelves. A few key areas were guarded by armed bodyguards.

Sitting behind the desk was a young man in his twenties. He wore a somewhat old black top, and his hair was neatly combed back as if he wanted to appear more mature.

The young man had a medium build and relatively deep facial features—a hint of having some Red River blood in him.

“Castellan Xu, they’re here.” Oudick took two steps forward.

Xu Liyan nodded slightly and pointed at the chairs opposite his desk. “Have a seat.”

Beside Xu Liyan stood a rather tall person. This person wore a hooded robe that concealed him from top to bottom.

After a greeting, Jiang Baimian naturally sat down with Shang Jianyao.

Xu Liyan swept his gaze across their faces, and he thoughtfully asked, “Are you guys together with Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others?”

“We were investigating the reason for their disappearance.” Jiang Baimian avoided the topic and asked, “Castellan Xu, what did they inquire about back then?”

Xu Liyan smiled and said, “Something regarding Mechanical Paradise. They heard from somewhere that Mechanical Paradise had a ‘mainframe,’ which was operating before the Old World was destroyed.”

Chapter 159: Cooperation

Mainframe... Jiang Baimian had specially learned about this, so she knew what it meant.

The ‘mainframe’ meant the city’s brain, a brain in all senses of the word. This was an important goal for the Old World to have smart cities.

The City Intelligence Network Control Center they had previously seen in Swamp No. 1 was its embryonic form.

A complete smart city had all the networks, driverless cars, and non-private intelligent robots controlled by the ‘mainframe.’ Through complicated algorithms, the corresponding resources were allocated to calculate the best routes. All the latent problems that past cities suffered from were eliminated at the root.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian saw Shang Jianyao raise his right arm and wipe the corner of his mouth from the corner of her eye.

“...” She was momentarily speechless.

After a few seconds, she sighed with emotion. “I never expected a ‘mainframe’ to be in operation before the Old World was destroyed.”

This meant that the ‘mainframe’—which had experienced the Old World’s destruction—might very well have recorded some very critical situations.

Due to this, Jiang Baimian completely understood why the Old Task Force—Lei Yunsong, Lin Feifei, and the others—wanted to visit Weed City’s Castellan, Xu Liyan.

“That’s not important, right? The Old World has already been destroyed.” Xu Liyan couldn’t understand Jiang Baimian’s feelings.

He then said, “Back then, I told them that I didn’t know either. We solely have a cooperative relationship with Mechanical Paradise. They provide all kinds of electronic equipment and robots with different purposes, while we sell oil products, high-performance batteries, and the various resources needed for nuclear power plants.”

Weed City didn’t produce the latter items, but they were qualified middlemen.

Jiang Baimian’s professional habits flared up as she asked, “Then, did you discover any details worth paying attention to when you were dealing with people from Mechanical Paradise?”

“They are very businesslike, and they never accept bribes because the ones that come are all intelligent robots.” Xu Liyan shook his head and smiled. “If you are really interested and help me resolve this matter, I can introduce you to them when they come to Weed City to make transactions. If you want to know anything, you can look for the person in question directly.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a few seconds and asked seriously, “Castellan Xu, is someone trying to assassinate you?”

Xu Liyan furrowed his eyebrows, and he was a little surprised. “Oudick told you?”

“I never said that.” Oudick denied it.

Xu Liyan looked at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao and asked in confusion, “Then, how did you know?”

“A guess.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “From what the Anti-intellectualism Church’s Father has done, he became wanted in First City because he assassinated an Elder in the Senate.”

Xu Liyan was stunned for a moment before he exhaled. “To be honest, I felt a little disdainful when I saw the two of you. I thought both of you were just pretty vases without any abilities. I know that such thoughts are unfounded, but I can’t help but think so. Now, I won’t underestimate you.”

After Xu Liyan finished speaking, Shang Jianyao analyzed the situation seriously. “A high-ranking person like you must be very arrogant. When you see someone surpassing you in a certain aspect, you will involuntarily belittle them. The beautiful ones are brainless, and the strong ones are barbarians. From there, you can maintain a psychological sense of superiority...”

Xu Liyan raised his hands and clasped them in front of him. “That makes sense. You’re very good at psychological analysis.”

“I often deal with psychiatrists,” Shang Jianyao replied confidently.

If being treated is considered ‘dealing with...’ Fortunately, we weren’t directly chased out... Jiang Baimian grumbled and decided to get the conversation back on track. “Castellan Xu, are you saying that I guessed right?”

“Yes.” Xu Liyan didn’t hide the truth. “About two months ago, I received news that someone wanted to assassinate me. Such things often happened during the period after my father’s death, so I was used to it. I strengthened the guards step by step and released a large number of intelligence agents. I hoped to discover the mastermind as soon as possible and strive to eliminate the latent dangers.”

At this point, he looked at Oudick. “Mr. Oudick is a helper that I specially hired through the guild. He’s very good at investigations and interrogations. He has nicknames like Tracker and Polygraph.

“Who would’ve thought that my most important intelligence agent in the city, Liu Dazhuang, would be shot to death on the streets the day after he arrived? I believe he was definitely silenced because he found an important clue.”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and explained everything she could reveal. This included them accepting a commission to investigate Lei Yunsong and Lin Feifei’s disappearance. In the end, they discovered that they were still alive but seemed to be under control. They were suspected to be related to the Anti-intellectualism Church’s Father.

She then said, “We’ve already found a victim that has seen Father. She will be here soon to issue a mission.”

“Not bad.” Xu Liyan praised her and said to Oudick, “I hope we can track the target as soon as possible.”

Regardless of whether Father was the real mastermind, he definitely played an important role in this matter.

“I’ll get the information immediately.” Oudick stood up.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao stood up as well and left the president’s office.

“I’ll go see the victim first,” Oudick said. Without waiting for a response, he quickly walked to the stairwell.

Jiang Baimian knew that she had nothing to do with the subsequent tracking. Thus, she slowly walked behind him and waited for a large number of Ruin Hunters to take the initiative to ‘serve.’

When they were far away from the president’s office and about to reach the stairwell, Jiang Baimian suppressed her voice slightly and asked, “Did you understand my question when we just came up?”

She was referring to the question that she had subconsciously asked with her eyes and performance.

Back then, Shang Jianyao nodded as an affirmation.

Thinking back on it, Jiang Baimian wondered if this fellow understood her.

Frankly speaking, if it were her, she wouldn’t have been able to decipher the exact meaning from such a simple look.

Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation. “I understood. When we were walking, we didn’t bump into anyone. The reason you suddenly looked at me must have something to do with what you sensed.

“The room Xu Liyan was in had a large number of people. This reminds me of the last time when we were sitting below and how many people passed by above us. One of them had a human consciousness and a robot’s electric signal.

“If you had sensed human electric signals from all of them, you definitely wouldn’t have looked at me for confirmation. Therefore, the answer is very simple—you’re asking if they all had a human consciousness.”

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a few seconds before opening her mouth. “A complicated train of thought, but you are right...”

She had to admit that Shang Jianyao was not stupid in certain aspects. He could even be said to be very smart. However, he always made things very simple or complicated.

After entering the stairwell, Jiang Baimian looked down and whispered, “The person in the robe beside Xu Liyan should be an Eternal.”

Whether this person was a mechanical monk or not remained to be determined.

“I wonder if he knows Zen Master Jingfa,” Shang Jianyao suddenly said.

“You really can’t forget Zen Master Jingfa,” Jiang Baimian teased him in amusement.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “Zen Master Jingfa was chasing after Qiao Chu. Qiao Chu took away our exoskeleton and ate lots of our canned food, compressed biscuits, and energy bars...”

“I understand.” Jiang Baimian nodded heavily.

As they spoke, they walked down the stairs and returned to the lobby.

At this moment, the blond-haired, blue-eyed Vice President Christina happened to enter from the side door with four bodyguards in black.

Her eyes lit up when she saw Shang Jianyao; she quickly took a few steps forward and smiled. “Today, I’m in Room 308 on the third floor. You can come and find me at any time.”

With that said, she looked at Jiang Baimian and slowly swept her gaze across Jiang Baimian's face.

Christina's smile became increasingly obvious as she asked Shang Jianyao, "Is this your companion?"

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao's response, she turned to Jiang Baimian. "You can come and find me with him."

Jiang Baimian brushed Christina off by tersely acknowledging her words.

When the two parties brushed past each other, Jiang Baimian took a step to the side, prepared, and avoided Christina's hand—which was secretly reaching for her ass.

After watching the vice president and her bodyguards enter the stairwell, Jiang Baimian clicked her tongue. "She sure has a wide range of preferences."

"Maybe she just wants enough people to play cards with," Shang Jianyao said thoughtfully.

"Are you forgetting the bodyguards around her?" Jiang Baimian scolded jokingly.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "Bodyguards have to do their jobs."

They chatted as they walked to the edge of the lobby. They found a chair and sat down, waiting for new clues to appear.

Before long, the mission was updated. They began searching for the sick man in the trench coat.

The sketch was lifelike, not much worse than the photo.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian didn't move because a large number of Ruin Hunters would do it in their place.

At 10 a.m., new information appeared.

Someone had seen the sick man in a trench coat near East Street's Warehouse 1 to 3 several times.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao immediately stood up, accepted the mission, and walked to the door.

When they were about to reach the street, Shang Jianyao suddenly stopped and shouted at a passerby. "Wait!"

The passerby stopped and looked over in confusion. This person was a man in his late twenties. He was Ashlandic and was about the same height as Jiang Baimian. He wore a black shirt and pants, and he had short hair that was commonly seen. His looks weren't bad, but the dark circles around his eyes were severe—he looked very tired.

Under Jiang Baimian's slightly surprised gaze, Shang Jianyao came in front of the person and asked, "Did you not sleep well last night?"

The person raised his eyebrows. "My sleep quality hasn't been good recently, but what has this got to do with you?"

Shang Jianyao sincerely said, "You won't be in good shape if you can't sleep well. It's very easy for accidents to happen when completing missions. You better rest more."

With that said, Shang Jianyao turned around and walked back to Jiang Baimian's side, leaving the person stunned in his spot.

Jiang Baimian raised her right hand and pointed at her head, using her actions to ask if his brain had spasmed again.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly, indicating that it was indeed so.

Chapter 160: Approaching

Jiang Baimian was already accustomed to Shang Jianyao going off the rails occasionally.

She didn't say anything else and rushed to East Street with Shang Jianyao.

On the way, they encountered Bai Chen and Long Yuehong. However, they continued pretending not to know each other.

At this moment, many Ruin Hunters had already rushed to East Street and were searching the surrounding area for more clues.

The most critical area—Warehouse 1 to Warehouse 3—was sealed off by the city defense forces, and entry was temporarily prohibited.

Jiang Baimian looked up at the buildings around her. Upon seeing that snipers were in position at key spots, she nodded and said, “Rather professional.”

Even if the city guards didn’t know that Father was an Awakened, they still had to do their best in the face of such a person, who was labeled as ‘extremely dangerous.’

As she couldn’t enter the warehouse area for the time being, Jiang Baimian could only stand across the street with Shang Jianyao and wait while leaning against the wall.

After a while, a few Ruin Hunters—who had close ties with the city defense forces—received the news first.

This piece of news then spread through the guild hall.

“A basement was discovered in Warehouse No. 2. Signs of people living in the room were found—fresh marks. There are also several old pieces of printing equipment and a large number of pamphlets.”

Without needing to ask, Jiang Baimian could guess what was written on the pamphlets. It was nothing more than words like ‘thinking is a trap’ that were filled with spelling mistakes.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but complain to Shang Jianyao. “How many years has it been since it stabilized? Why aren’t the people in Weed City vigilant anymore? Energy is so precious, so why didn’t they discover the increased electricity usage in this area?”

Whether Warehouse No. 2 was private or came under Weed City's jurisdiction, the corresponding management couldn't escape the blame.

Shang Jianyao agreed with this very much. "They should be executed by cannon fire."

Within Pangu Biology, everyone used electricity according to their energy quota. Thus, they could immediately discover and react to just a tiny blip in the readings.

Jiang Baimian was just about to ask whether Shang Jianyao had a deep impression of 'execution by cannon fire' when she saw Oudick walking over in a thick coat.

The black-haired, blue-eyed Advanced Hunter directly said, "The guards at the city gate recalled something. About an hour ago, a pale man in a black trench coat left the city."

At this point, Oudick deliberately added, "He looked like he would've collapsed from an illness at any moment. This left a deeper impression on the guards."

I know, I know... You actually saw it through a dream... Jiang Baimian immediately understood, and she asked with a smile, "You want two helpers?"

Since Father seemed to have left the city for some time, exchanging a few words didn't change things.

"Your abilities are trustworthy," Oudick said frankly.

When have we ever shown our abilities in front of you? Jiang Baimian grumbled inwardly before saying, "Is it because we look tall and can fight better?"

In the current environment, be it her or Shang Jianyao, they were considered relatively tall for their respective genders.

Oudick replied simply, "Confidence. You guys are very confident."

There was no mistake about this. Furthermore, the duo didn't seem like two rookies.

Someone who could stay sufficiently confident after passing the rookie stage definitely had some ability.

“I can’t wait any longer.” Shang Jianyao agreed with Oudick’s explanation.

Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else and nodded. “Lead the way.”

Oudick turned around and quickly walked into a nearby parking lot before driving a red SUV out.

This car had clearly been modified. It had thick armor and bulletproof glass, making it appear very ostentatious.

“What a babe.” Jiang Baimian almost whistled.

Shang Jianyao helped Jiang Baimian make up for her regret.

This was a bad habit that they had developed during their two-day stay at the Rootless camp.

Jiang Baimian ‘whispered’ to Shang Jianyao, “I never expected a calm and reserved person like Oudick to drive such a car. Tsk, he might be very wild deep down.”

Oudick rolled down the window and spoke with a straight face. “Get in the car.”

With that said, he looked ahead and said, “Before you are that powerful, you have to use whatever car you get your hands on.”

After carrying out repeated modifications, it wasn’t that easy to abandon the SUV.

When Shang Jianyao opened the backseat door, he sincerely suggested, “If you dislike it, you can sell it to me. I have a group of friends that will definitely like it.”

Jiang Baimian—who had already gotten into the car—frowned slightly. “Why does that sound strange...”

At this moment, Oudick suddenly regretted hiring these two people as helpers. If it weren't for the fact that the two of them were deeply involved, he wouldn't have made such a choice. After all, it was good for one less person to know about the Castellan's matters.

The red SUV drove back to Central Square, turned into South Street, and drove out of the city gate.

Although they had already heard Long Yuehong and Bai Chen describe the situation outside, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao still fell silent when they saw countless wilderness nomads gathered on both sides of the road, kneeling or sitting.

Under the cold wind, their faces were blueish-white, and there was almost no light in their eyes.

Further away in the dug-up holes and tents, some people were still lying there. It was unknown if they were alive or dead.

At this moment, the red SUV stopped.

With a whoosh, countless gazes looked over from all directions.

Oudick pushed open the door and walked to a man in his thirties, who looked relatively sober. He took out Father's portrait and asked, "Have you seen this person?"

In the car, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao drew their pistols and guarded their flanks.

As the man in his thirties examined Father's portrait, an older man in the crowd behind him stood up and approached as if he wanted to snatch the job. However, he staggered and fell to the ground before falling silent.

His face was pale, and his eyes were listlessly open.

Shang Jianyao sensed that this person's consciousness had vanished.

With just a light fall, this older man died.

On the other side, Jiang Baimian also saw a few wilderness nomads sitting there before collapsing to their sides, never to get up again.

Amidst the howling winter winds, the withered yellow weeds around them either collapsed weakly or were swept into the air.

At this moment, the man in his thirties weakly replied, "I've seen him; very few people left the city today. He kept walking until he reached the end."

Oudick nodded, took out an energy bar, and handed it to the man.

Almost at the same time, the pairs of eyes looking over were bloodshot and suffused with an indescribable glow.

After the man in his thirties received the energy bar, he quickly unwrapped it and folded it in half.

He thought for a moment and broke one half into two again. He then shook the little girl leaning on him awake and stuffed three-quarters of the energy bar into her hand before urging her, "Hurry up and eat! Hurry up and eat!"

The girl looked about seven or eight years old. Her face was dirty, and only her eyes were bright.

She was still a little confused, but she was very obedient. She took two portions of the energy bar—one long and one short—and quickly swallowed them.

The man in his thirties felt relieved, and he ate the remaining portion of the energy bar in a few mouthfuls.

He looked up and incoherently said to Oudick, "Thank you... Thank you..."

It was only then that Shang Jianyao saw the man's face clearly. He was a square-faced and honest man with bronze skin.

Oudick didn't stop. He quickly returned to the car and drove to the end of the crowd.

After a few inquiries, they confirmed that Father had turned left.

Just like that, they questioned people along the way and realized that Father had gone one big circle outside before heading to the northern city wall.

At the northern city wall was a city gate that allowed nobles to enter and leave.

“Yes, there was such a person.” The guard at the city gate looked at the portrait that Oudick handed over and said very firmly, “He has a passage permit specially approved by the Castellan. We didn’t dare to stop him.”

Father left from the south gate early in the morning and circled around before entering the city through the north gate? Jiang Baimian immediately became vigilant. This behavior is too abnormal!

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it and spoke in a tone as though he completely understood. “This might be a form of training. Walk 100 steps after a meal to live to 99.”

Oudick ignored Shang Jianyao’s joke and voiced his thoughts. “Just past the north city gate is North Street.”

Jiang Baimian muttered to herself thoughtfully, “Then, why didn’t he enter North Street from the bridge behind the municipal hall? After all, he has a pass. Was what he did more concealed?”

“Possibly.” Oudick didn’t say anything else. He showed his pass and entered North Street.

At a glance, the street was wide, and the houses on both sides were buildings. Some were surrounded by a courtyard, and there were artificial mountains. Some had towering walls that included gardens. It was different from East Street, West Street, and South Street.

After asking the armed guards at the different manors, Oudick, Jiang Baimian, and Shang Jianyao followed the trail and arrived at a large building complex.

This was Weed City’s First Hospital.

There was also a Weed City’s Second Hospital on East Street.

“Have you seen this person?” Oudick took out Father’s portrait and asked the guard at the hospital’s sentry post.

The guard glanced at it. “Him? He comes here often.”

Oudick immediately asked, “Did he come today?”

“Yes. He came in about 20 to 30 minutes ago.” The guard pointed at the building in the innermost area. “He seems to be in charge of the old building’s renovation; he should be over there.”

After thanking the guard, Jiang Baimian and company entered the hospital and went straight to the old building that had been emptied and was awaiting renovation.

The old building was five stories tall, and all the outer walls were painted white. The lighting inside wasn’t too good, and it looked gloomy everywhere. Furthermore, it was filled with the unpleasant smell of antiseptic.

After walking for a while, Shang Jianyao and the others saw a child-like drawing on the green-white wall beside the stairwell in the hall’s depths.

This drawing was a stick figure with no facial features.

This ‘person’ stood there upright. On his hands—which were raised to his chest—were words written in chalk: “May you lose your intelligence too.”