

Ad Infinitum 181

Chapter 181: Mission

The employee in the tiger mask didn't say much. She spoke quickly as if she wanted to end the introduction as soon as possible so that others wouldn't remember her voice.

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, "After confirming the mission, I'll bring my badge over to accept it?"

She already had a relatively deep impression of Redstone Collection's customs, so she wasn't angry about being slighted.

"Yes." The employee in the tiger mask nodded heavily.

Just as Jiang Baimian and the others took a few steps back and looked at the large screen, the cloth-masked Gaudi asked, "Can I go now?"

"Sure," Jiang Baimian replied casually.

Gaudi thought for a moment and emphasized, "After you leave Redstone Collection, you can't tell anyone about the underground entrance's location. You can only give a general range. Every person who can enter here must find a Redstone Collection resident in the ruins outside and have them lead the way."

Shang Jianyao curiously asked, "What if someone finds their way here without anyone leading the way?"

"The guards will stop you and interrogate you about where you learned of the underground entrance's location. They will then blacklist the people and factions who leaked the information to you." Gaudi didn't stutter as though he had said this many times. "If you are really lucky, they will allow you to return on your own and come back after finding a Redstone Collection resident."

"How ritualistic," praised Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian agreed with this because she couldn't tell if such actions could reduce external dangers.

This was closer to a religious ritual.

At this point, she also understood why Shang Jianyao's sworn brother, Ferlin—the leader of the Hometown caravan—wouldn't give them any specific location information.

Gaudi nodded with pride at Shang Jianyao's praise. "This can please the Kalendaria, Eidolon Nun."

He frankly admitted that this was a ritual.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked a question. "If every town resident has Viel's ability to hide and outsiders can't find them, won't there be no new hunters or smugglers coming to your Redstone Collection?"

"If that happens, Redstone Collection's vitality will slowly weaken before it is eventually abandoned."

You remembered the name quite clearly... I suspect that you want to play hide and seek with that Viel... Jiang Baimian couldn't help but criticize inwardly.

Gaudi fell silent for a few seconds as if he had never pondered this question. After a while, he said, "Not everyone can reach Viel's level. Besides, if everyone forgets about Redstone Collection, it means that we hid well, and we will be rewarded by Eidolon Nun."

"We have farmland in the surrounding hidden areas. There are also many fish in the lake. A moment of forgetfulness won't starve us."

Jiang Baimian smiled. "But you won't have any oil or other industrial supplements. Do you want to go back to the Old World's agricultural era? People who have enjoyed the afterglow of civilization can't adapt."

"In the future, Eidolon Nun will lead us into the New World. There will be no more danger there, so there's no need to be so vigilant," Gaudi replied very firmly.

Jiang Baimian couldn't persuade Gaudi otherwise, nor did she want to. She waved her hand and said, "You can leave now."

"Thank you." Gaudi—who was wearing a cloth mask—looked at them and left the Hunter's Guild one step at a time.

After the distance between the two parties became sufficiently large, Gaudi suddenly turned around and ran into a safety passage by the side.

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and asked, "Any thoughts?"

Shang Jianyao immediately said, "How inflexible. He was comprehensive in his vigilance, but he only cared about guarding against us and didn't consider the danger behind him. If I had known, I would've thrown a piece of banana peel at his back. He definitely would've stepped on it and fallen with a thud. From then on, he'll remember this lesson."

Jiang Baimian laughed involuntarily. "First, you have to have a banana."

In this season, such fruits didn't exist in the Lake of Wrath's climate.

She didn't take Shang Jianyao down a notch because of this. Instead, she nodded in approval. "Although it's very likely that Gaudi has already observed the environment and isn't worried that he will step on something he shouldn't step on if he walks backward, this direction of thinking is rather valuable."

As she spoke, she looked at Long Yuehong. "What do you have in mind?"

Long Yuehong deliberated before answering, "Their philosophy sounds reasonable at first, but the more I understand it, the more extreme I find it."

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Anything good will go in the wrong direction once it becomes extreme. This is also one of the reasons why many religions in the Ashlands can be spread. They package some very reasonable theories of the Old World into what they want and add a lot of personal interests into it."

After evaluating Long Yuehong's thoughts, Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen and smiled, asking, "Tell me something as well."

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, "I think their philosophy is a little similar to some of the Old World philosophy you've told us about. Oh... Small government doesn't burden its citizens?"

After their cooperation in Weed City, the three Old Task Force members were much more relaxed than before on the way to Redstone Collection. Jiang Baimian took the opportunity to teach her team members some knowledge regarding the Old World.

"Indeed, but it's also extreme." Jiang Baimian smiled and looked around. "Remember, a single human is puny. Only by cooperating with each other can the collective be considered civilized."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped as scheduled.

Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered to look at him. "Alright, let's find some missions worth taking on."

She knew very well that, unless Shang Jianyao made 'friends,' they couldn't buy a military exoskeleton with half of the supplies they exchanged for using Xu Liyan's bulletproof SUV, even if it was an old model.

Therefore, her plan was to take on some guild missions at Redstone Collection and save up another batch of hard currency.

As the team leader, Jiang Baimian racked her brains to improve every team member's strength and survivability. Hence, the Old Task Force was divided into two groups.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao remained in their spots. They looked at the missions displayed on the large screen. Bai Chen and Long Yuehong went to the surrounding tables to check the corresponding paper records.

Jiang Baimian deliberately said, "Actually, we can get your good brother, Xu Liyan, to provide one. Didn't he say that he wanted to equip his guards and city guards with a few more after this matter?"

The military exoskeleton was lost at South Street this time, and it almost wasn't put to use. The only good thing was that the wilderness nomads didn't know how to use military exoskeletons.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. "Even blood-related brothers should have their accounts squared."

"I'm relieved." Jiang Baimian smiled.

"Although I'm more steel-hearted than you, my bottom line when it comes to morals isn't low," Shang Jianyao replied.

"Huh? What did you say?" Jiang Baimian touched her ear, not wanting to continue the topic. She knew that Shang Jianyao was referring to how she hadn't killed the man who had killed Time-Honored Noodle Restaurant's boss in order not to starve to death during Weed City's chaos.

Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian's left arm and wisely didn't continue.

As they spoke, Jiang Baimian discovered an interesting mission: "Survey on Redstone Collection and the surrounding area's Heartless."

Jiang Baimian read the mission's contents and said in amusement, "The reward is that you are in charge of basic protection during the mission. You will then be given half a month's worth of food. You can choose any type of food you want, but you are personally responsible for the preservation of the food. Heh heh, that's not strict. If it were to encounter someone like you who has a big appetite, the cost might double!"

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "I'm only worried that they won't be able to produce the food I choose."

"Let me see who issued this... Fire Eye? Are these missions issued by code names?" Jiang Baimian gained a deeper understanding of Redstone Collection's style.

Of course, this had definitely been reviewed by the guild; their credibility was still guaranteed.

At that moment, Long Yuehong walked back with Bai Chen, a document in his hand. “Team Leader, this mission isn’t bad.”

He handed the document in his hand to Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian curiously took it and quickly browsed through it.

“Mission: Help Helvig retrieve stolen firearms.

“Description: Gunfire’s boss, Helvig, had a batch of firearms enough to arm hundreds of people. They were stolen from the lakeside district; it’s said that the bandits numbered almost ten.

“Reward: 1/5 of the batch of firearms.

“Mission rank: C, 100 credit points.

“Note: There are certain dangers. Please try your best to form a team.

“Mission requirements: Official Hunter and above.

“Commissioned by: Helvig.”

“One-fifth of that batch of firearms? That’s not a small sum.” Jiang Baimian’s eyes lit up slightly.

“Furthermore, the number of people is quite suitable,” Long Yuehong added happily. He felt that, with his team’s strength, it wouldn’t be a problem for them to fight three or even four people per person.

Shang Jianyao immediately ‘analyzed’ and said, “Maybe a hundred people were lying in ambush when the robbery happened.”

Long Yuehong no longer showed instant depression on his face like before. Instead, he asked in amusement, “How can there be a hundred people ambushing, only to have about eight people attacking?”

It would take at least 40 to 50 people to be normal. Only then would it conform to human logic!

“What if their leader is a mental patient like me?” Shang Jianyao said confidently.

Jiang Baimian interrupted him and thoughtfully said, “In the Old World, there’s a saying that describes such a situation. What’s it called? Uh, the bystander effect. Besides, there will be many people escorting that batch of firearms. Either the bandits are very powerful, or there were definitely more than eight.”

Without waiting for Long Yuehong to speak, she smiled and said, “However, we can still take the mission. It’s not like we won’t do our homework. If the opponent really has too many people, we can still invite other Ruin Hunters to participate.”

Jiang Baimian wasn’t worried that she couldn’t take on the mission because Bai Chen was an Intermediate Hunter.

After a round of communication, they accepted this mission in the name of Qian Bai Team. They obtained Helvig’s photo and learned where his shop was. It was on the third floor of the underground building, near the C1 Security Passage.

Without a doubt, Gunfire didn’t have guns or anyone.

“From the looks of it, we have to find the person who commissioned the mission first.” Jiang Baimian helplessly raised her right hand and looked at the photo—it was a chubby man in his thirties to forties. He had a pair of dark-green eyes and a shaved head.

“There’s no one here,” Shang Jianyao immediately concluded.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and smiled. “Then, why are you still staying here and not going to the side to search?”

“It has to be handled according to the procedure. We can’t completely rely on our abilities,” Shang Jianyao replied firmly.

“Not bad,” Jiang Baimian praised sincerely.

As they spoke, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong had already spread out. One looked up at the ventilation duct, and the other carefully pulled open the cabinet.

A few seconds later, Bai Chen pointed up and said, “Something’s not right there.”

Some black cloth was poking out of the ventilation duct’s exhaust rail.

Jiang Baimian’s expression immediately turned solemn.

Since Shang Jianyao didn’t sense any human consciousness and she didn’t discover any human electric signals, it meant one thing: The person hiding in the ventilation duct was already dead.

He had been dead for a while.

Chapter 182: Public Security Department

Jiang Baimian pulled a table over and nimbly jumped up. She then used her left hand to dismantle the ventilation duct’s railing.

Behind the duct was indeed a person in black—a dead person.

She slowly dragged the corpse out and placed it on the table.

Long Yuehong looked over and saw a bald head, a chubby face, and round, dark-green eyes. He compared the corpse to the photo and blurted out, “Helvig—it’s really Helvig!”

Jiang Baimian jumped off the table and calmly made a judgment. “It’s been a while since he died. The fetid smell has dissipated, but the corpse hasn’t decayed.”

She sighed, looked at Long Yuehong, and laughed self-deprecatingly. “I knew such a lucrative mission wouldn’t go smoothly.”

The employer was already a corpse shortly after they began!

Of course, Jiang Baimian wanted to sigh with emotion about how unlucky they were, but she changed her words after considering Long Yuehong. In order to prevent Shang Jianyao from ‘spouting nonsense,’ she instructed, “Get the person in charge of Redstone Collection’s public security here.”

Although they had long heard that Redstone Collection was messier than Weed City, they still believed that there were armed personnel here to maintain order.

For such a town to be maintained, there had to be a certain order and the corresponding organizations.

“Where can we find them?” Long Yuehong recalled that most of the people here were hiding. Who knew where the person in charge of public security was?

What a magical but exasperating place!

Shang Jianyao’s expression didn’t appear troubled at all. He smiled and asked, “Haven’t you played hide and seek before?”

With that said, Shang Jianyao rushed out of Gunfire, came to the glass railing, and shouted ahead, “Someone’s dead! Someone’s dead! Gunfire’s Helvig is dead!”

Shang Jianyao’s voice was like rumbling thunder that echoed through the entire underground building.

Long Yuehong listened dazedly and muttered to himself in confusion, “What has this got to do with whether we’ve played hide and seek?”

“What did you say?” Jiang Baimian touched her cochlear implant.

Bai Chen repeated it on behalf of Long Yuehong. “I think he means—” Bai Chen said after some thought, “—when we played hide and seek when we were young, we might shout, ‘time for meals; it’s time to go home.’ Then, the people that are in hiding might come out.”

Long Yuehong's expression changed slightly as he recalled the past. He felt like he had probably been duped in such a manner.

Not long after Shang Jianyao shouted, an iron suitcase behind the glass railing opposite him—used to showcase the shop's layout—suddenly opened. A man holding a Short Neck submachine gun walked out.

He walked around and asked Shang Jianyao, "Helvig's dead?"

"Maybe he can still be saved," Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

For example, make every second count and upload his consciousness to turn him into a mechanical monk.

The man looked at the corpse inside Gunfire and took out a walkie-talkie. "Captain Han, something happened in Gunfire. Helvig is dead."

...

At the lowest level of Redstone Collection, in the Public Security Department diagonally opposite the Hunter's Guild.

Jiang Baimian and the others met Redstone Collection's sheriff.

"Han Wanghou," he introduced himself.

Han Wanghou was a tall, thin man. Of course, his tallness was only based on the average height in the Ashlands. He was about Long Yuehong's height.

His hair was black, and he had a buzz cut. His eyebrows were messy, and he looked very fierce. There were two scars on his face—one horizontal and one vertical. The most eye-catching thing about his facial features was his eyes. The whites of his eyes were a little yellow, and his eyes were pure black, not dark brown.

After Jiang Baimian introduced herself, she asked, "There's nothing else needed from us, right?"

“Although we haven’t carried out the autopsy, we can determine from the current situation that Helvig died before you entered Redstone Collection.” Han Wanghuo had no intention of charging random people for the crime.

“How are you sure about this?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

Han Wanghuo—who had two pistols at his waist—pointed at the other man beside him. “Weiler, a doctor. At the same time, he’s also the coroner of our Public Security Department.”

Weiler was of Red River descent. He was about the same age as Han Wanghuo. He was in his thirties, and he had blond hair and blue eyes. His skin was rough, and his eye sockets were deep. He also had a full beard.

“Education persists here? You are even training doctors?” Jiang Baimian asked with interest.

Han Wanghuo shook his head. “Weiler comes from United Industries.”

Weiler spread his hands and said in Ashlandic, “My superior never had a child, and I tried to help him. My enthusiasm ended up almost having me thrown into prison and tortured to death.”

“The way you helped was wrong,” Shang Jianyao criticized solemnly.

“Huh?” Weiler was a little stunned.

Shang Jianyao gave a perfect solution. “You should’ve done an organ transplant, a neural reconstruction, and install an artificial uterus to help him give birth to a child. This way, not only will he not send you to prison, but he will also develop feelings for you.”

“...” Although the words the other party said were relatively unfamiliar, as a medical student, Weiler easily understood what he meant.

“I’m not. I’m...” Weiler suddenly didn’t know how to explain. He was clearly mocking himself, but the other party was so serious.

Faced with such a serious person, Weiler was embarrassed to say that his real goal wasn't to help his superior give birth to a child but to covet his superior's young wife.

Long Yuehong glanced at Weiler sympathetically and didn't say anything.

Jiang Baimian held in her laughter and nodded at Han Wanghuo. "Then, can we leave?"

"Sure," Han Wanghuo gave an affirmative answer.

Jiang Baimian then flipped her wrist and looked at her electronic watch. "Is there a hotel or something similar here?"

It was getting late. If they were to take on another mission, they would have to consider their accommodation for the night.

Han Wanghuo pointed at the ceiling and said, "On the other side of the entrance are a few rows of simple houses. You need to go to the Kesha Hotel on the fourth floor and exchange your supplies for an electronic card before opening the door. If you attempt to force your way in, you will soon see me again."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and smiled. "Thank you."

Weiler glanced at her and volunteered, "I'll take you there. Have you guys not had dinner yet? It's on me. I'm not bragging, but I'm very good at finding people in Redstone Collection. I won't make you wait too long."

"Not for the time being." Jiang Baimian rejected him without hesitation.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao asked excitedly, "How good are your hiding skills?"

Weiler didn't hide his regret and shook his head. "I'm not as neurotic as them; I won't hide for no reason."

"Aren't you a parishioner of the Vigilance Church?" Jiang Baimian asked.

“No.” Weiler turned to look at Han Wanghuo. “Neither is Captain Han.”

“Having the sheriff hide is not conducive to maintaining order. Therefore, Redstone Collection specially hired me,” Han Wanghuo explained simply.

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully asked, “Aren’t you from Redstone Collection?”

Han Wanghuo tersely acknowledged it. “I was originally a wilderness nomad and a Ruin Hunter for many years.”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at Bai Chen as if she was using her eyes to say that he was similar to Bai Chen.

The only difference was that Bai Chen ended up joining a large faction, Pangu Biology. In contrast, Han Wanghuo could only become a member of a smuggling node, Redstone Collection.

After bidding Han Wanghuo and Weiler farewell, Jiang Baimian left the Public Security Department and led Shang Jianyao and the others into the Hunter’s Guild diagonally opposite them.

“With Helvig dead, will our mission automatically be invalid?” she asked the female employee in the tiger mask.

After the mission became invalid, there would be no restrictions for them to take on subsequent missions.

The employee in the tiger mask quickly said, “There’s no rush. Helvig still has family, so the mission of retrieving the firearms might very well continue. Besides, you might also receive a new mission from the Public Security Department about helping to investigate the cause of Helvig’s death. It can be accepted together.”

“Is that so... Then, when can we have a definite answer?” Jiang Baimian naturally couldn’t bear to give up on this lucrative mission.

In particular, they had yet to be officially involved. They didn’t even know the bandits’ general situation.

The employee in the tiger mask replied, “Tomorrow afternoon at the latest.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian waved her hand and prepared to leave.

At this moment, the employee in the tiger mask spoke with a slightly trembling voice. “Everyone, it’s better if you buy some masks. It’s very dangerous for you to walk around showing your faces. Just seeing them makes me afraid. Helvig must’ve been killed because he didn’t hide well.”

Although Helvig’s murderer might not have found Helvig and wouldn’t have killed him if Helvig had hidden himself better, by saying that, you give me the nagging feeling that a person who fails in ‘hide-and-peek’ will silently die... Jiang Baimian inwardly criticized before nodding, having fully accepted the customs. “Thank you.”

“Then, where can I buy a mask?” Shang Jianyao asked with bright eyes.

“Aren’t you guys going to Kasha Hotel? You can exchange for masks while getting the electronic cards,” said the employee in the tiger mask quickly.

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao replied happily.

After leaving the Hunter’s Guild, Jiang Baimian glanced at him. “Doing as the Romans do?”

“Don’t you think it feels good to play music on a speaker while wearing a mask to deal with the enemy?” Shang Jianyao tried his best to describe the scene he imagined.

“It’s a little like the Old World’s masquerade ball...” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “As for the feeling, it depends on what song you play and the mask you wear.”

After the ‘ball’ in Castellan Manor’s Aristocratic Council Chamber, she confirmed that Shang Jianyao had many strange songs stored in his speaker. It was unknown if they came with the speaker or if he had obtained them from the Rootless caravan.

In short, she didn’t dare to recall those scenes because she was afraid of corrupting herself.

As they spoke, they returned to the parking lot and took a box of supplies. They then went to the fourth floor and found the Kesha Hotel.

Without a doubt, there was no one here either.

They entered to see a row of chairs that seemed to be used for waiting. The room didn't reach deep in. At the end was a wall, and there was a window-like metal door on the wall.

On both sides of the metal door were notices in Ashlandic and Red River language: "Please knock on the door."

Shang Jianyao whizzed over, bent his finger, and rapped on the metal window—which was called a door.

After a few seconds, the loudspeaker in the room sounded. A deliberately modified female voice sounded. "How many rooms do you want? How many nights are you staying?"

"Impressive," Shang Jianyao praised sincerely. He could sense that the hotel owner was behind the wall, but there were at least three thick obstacles between them.

In other words, apart from Awakened, nobody could attack the hotel's owner in a short period of time. This was a way of hiding.

Jiang Baimian shook her head. "Crude. Wouldn't it be safer to get some surveillance cameras from Mechanical Paradise and lay out a few wires so that they can hide outside Redstone Collection and operate it remotely?"

The loudspeaker in the room sounded again. "Ma'am, yours is a hiding method for the rich. You need a robot's help; the robot has to be in charge of collecting supplies and distributing electronic cards. Without money, this is all I can do."

Chapter 183: Contractor

Jiang Baimian seemed to have expected the hotel owner's retort. She said with a smile, "I thought that it would be easy to obtain cheap robots, military exoskeleton devices, and smart armor in Redstone Collection considering how it's a smuggling center."

Through the loudspeaker on the ceiling, the owner of the hotel said, “These aren’t cheap goods, and they are in high demand. To me, this is very good. There’s no need to waste large amounts of resources and rare connections for an improvement.”

“I see...” Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. Through this conversation, she confirmed two things: Firstly, it was indeed possible to obtain a military exoskeleton device in Redstone Collection.

Secondly, it was in high demand. Without a corresponding network and sufficient resources, it was impossible to obtain one.

Jiang Baimian had deliberately ‘raised her voice’ with her comment just to get the information out of the hotel owner. She wasn’t as foul-mouthed as Shang Jianyao, who couldn’t control himself.

The hotel owner was rather wary and didn’t say anything else. She simply repeated her previous question. “How many rooms do you want? How many nights are you staying?”

“Two, double beds with a bathroom. Let’s do it for a week.” Jiang Baimian had already considered this problem.

The hotel owner answered through the loudspeaker, “What resources can you pay with?”

“Military canned food.” Shang Jianyao answered without any hesitation.

During this period of time in the South, the Old Task Force had gotten sick of eating canned food.

“It has to be unopened.” The hotel owner emphasized this to prevent others from successfully poisoning her. She continued, “One can per night for each room, totaling 14 cans. Open the metal door on the wall, place the cans in, and close the door.”

Jiang Baimian gestured for Shang Jianyao to open the window-like metal door on the wall.

Inside was an empty platform with a similar metal door on the other side.

Shang Jianyao wasn’t in a rush to retreat. He took the initiative to say, “We still want masks.”

“The four masks are complementary,” the hotel owner answered.

Shang Jianyao was delighted and asked curiously, “If I didn’t ask, would you take the initiative to give them to me?”

“No.” The hotel owner was very calm.

Just as Shang Jianyao was about to say something, Long Yuehong—who had received Jiang Baimian’s signal—took a few steps forward with a cardboard box. He counted 14 cans and placed them on a tray on the platform.

Following that, he closed the outward-facing metal door.

With a click, the metal door seemed to be locked.

Shang Jianyao immediately heard a grinding sound coming from inside, so he asked seriously, “What if she takes the cans and runs?”

Jiang Baimian cackled like a villain. “Then, take our rocket launchers out and blast open the walls!”

After another few seconds, the loudspeaker in the room crackled. “You can open the door and take out the electronic cards and masks.”

Shang Jianyao—who had been standing guard by the wall—excitedly opened the metal door.

The cans on the tray were gone. In their place were two electronic cards—which were inside white plastic covers—and randomly stacked cloth masks.

Shang Jianyao didn’t even look at the two electronic cards. He directly shook open the cloth masks and began choosing seriously.

The four masks were: a graceful monk, a monkey with a pointy mouth, a fat pig with nostrils so big that they could fit garlic cloves, and a ferocious man with a full beard.

“Boring, boring...” Shang Jianyao first excluded the monk and the man. He clearly felt that they were too ordinary.

After some comparison, he chose the proud monkey and wore the mask.

Jiang Baimian shook her head helplessly. “You’ve never seen a real monkey; you can’t emulate its essence.”

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao was very regretful.

Jiang Baimian approached and immediately eliminated the pig mask. Finally, she chose the elegant monk mask.

Long Yuehong held back his anxiety and said to Bai Chen humbly, “You first.”

Bai Chen didn’t stand on ceremony and took away the fierce-looking man mask.

Long Yuehong sighed silently and could only accept the outcome.

“These masks remind me of some Old World story.” Jiang Baimian reached out to grab the electronic cards and casually said, “I’ll tell you the story when I’m free.”

The two electronic cards were labeled. One was 05, and the other was 06.

Following the hotel’s owner’s instructions, the Old Task Force quartet drove away from the underground Redstone Collection and circled to the other side of the hill.

This was a flat area surrounded by trees, and there were many simple houses with blue and white walls.

At this moment, the sky had already darkened. The surrounding area appeared quiet and cold as if no one existed. However, be it Jiang Baimian or Bai Chen, they could sense that people were hiding nearby and monitoring them.

Rooms 05 and 06 were close to the hill, and they were relatively spacious. Apart from two single beds, tables, chairs, and sofas, there was also a bathroom that could be used for showering.

“Let’s rest and recuperate. We’ll make do with our meals later.” Jiang Baimian was relatively satisfied with the simple hotel’s environment. She didn’t want to enter Redstone Collection to search for a hiding restaurant boss.

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong and Bai Chen replied in unison.

Shang Jianyao felt rather regretful.

...

After the sky turned completely dark, cold, humid air seeped into the room, making Long Yuehong—who was listening to his team leader’s narration of an Old World story—feel cold. He felt a little regretful that he didn’t come over with an additional set of clothes.

At this moment, someone knocked on Room 05’s door.

Shang Jianyao—who had sensed something—had already put on the monkey mask. He came to the door and asked, “Ook! Ook! Ook!?”

“...” The person outside was clearly stunned.

“Speak human.” Jiang Baimian sighed helplessly. Don’t imitate a monkey!

Shang Jianyao returned to normal. “Who is it?”

“Is Qian Bai here?” Outside was a man who spoke Ashlandic.

Qian Bai was Bai Chen’s registered name as a Hunter.

“What’s the matter?” Bai Chen stood up and put on her mask.

The man outside the door lowered his voice. “I have a mission for you.”

“Why?” Bai Chen subconsciously asked.

“Because you’re an Intermediate Hunter, and you’re about to become a Senior Hunter,” explained the man outside.

Bai Chen looked at Jiang Baimian and saw her nod slightly. She then said to Shang Jianyao, “Open the door.”

Shang Jianyao immediately opened the door and stretched his monkey-masked face forward a little.

The man outside the door was about 1.7 meters tall. He wore a black cloak and a white mask with black patterns. He wasn’t surprised to see a terrifying ‘monkey.’

In Redstone Collection, this was basic ‘etiquette.’ What kind of mask had he not seen before?

After entering, the man crossed his arms in front of himself and took a step back. “Always be vigilant.”

“Are you from the Vigilance Church?” Bai Chen led the conversation, and Jiang Baimian chose to listen in with interest.

The man in the cloak and mask nodded. “I’m Renato, the bishop of the Vigilance Church in Redstone Collection.”

“Have a seat.” Bai Chen pointed at the empty seat on the sofa.

Shang Jianyao continued guarding the door. He crossed his arms and acted like he was a bouncer.

After Renato sat down, Bai Chen asked, “As a mainstream religion of Redstone Collection, you should have considerable strength. Why are you commissioning my team and me?”

Renato fell silent for a moment before saying, “Some things are inconvenient for the believers to know, so I didn’t do it through the Hunter’s Guild.”

“If it’s too difficult, there’s no need to say anything.” Bai Chen chose to communicate in her own style.

Renato said rather honestly, “I don’t know if it’s difficult or how dangerous it is.”

“Then, brief me a little.” Bai Chen nodded.

Renato looked at the others in the room. “You should’ve heard Gaudi mention our Church. We held a Mass a few days ago. The theme was still ‘hiding,’ and this was to please the deity—who is also the Kalendaria of our faith—Eidolon Nun. In this hiding competition, there’s still one person we haven’t found yet.”

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao quickly replied, “Viel!”

“Yes,” Renato affirmed. “Because he has been hiding for almost three days while the others have also been found, I decided to end Mass and make him come out from hiding. However...”

At this point, Renato’s tone changed a little. As for his expression, it couldn’t be seen because he was wearing a mask. “In the end, I didn’t find him either. He also didn’t take the initiative to come out.”

What do you mean by ‘I didn’t find him either?’ You make it sound like you’re better at finding people than the other believers? Is it because you’re an Awakened who can sense the existence of consciousness? Is Viel already dead, or has he awakened on his own and can hide his consciousness? Jiang Baimian grasped Renato’s words and analyzed them inwardly.

Bai Chen nodded slightly. “You want us to help you find Viel?”

“Yes.” Renato sighed. “If anything happens at Mass, the believers will question my piousness and think that I have disgraced the goddess.”

Bai Chen pretended like she needed to discuss it with her team members. She first glanced at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong before looking at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

Bai Chen then replied to Renato, “We can take on this mission, and we believe you are trustworthy. However, I can’t guarantee that we can complete it without knowing the details.”

“I understand.” Renato expressed his understanding. “What kind of payment do you want?”

“Introduce me to an arms dealer who can sell heavy weapons and advanced military equipment,” Bai Chen said calmly. “This is part of the deal. We’ll discuss the rest after we survey the scene. Payment can be made after we find Viel.”

A simple introduction didn’t burden Renato at all. He replied without hesitation, “No problem. When do you guys plan on visiting the scene in question?”

“It’s already dark. Let’s do it tomorrow morning.” Bai Chen was in no rush.

“Not bad; very vigilant,” Renato praised. He stood up and said, “Drive along the road outside the park to the lake tomorrow morning. There will be people waiting there.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen stood up as well. “Happy cooperation.”

Renato crossed his arms again, placed them on his chest, and took a step back. “Wariness is a hint from the Goddess.”

After watching him leave, Shang Jianyao closed the door and announced with bright eyes, “The final battle has begun.”

Jiang Baimian took off her mask and chuckled. “If you dare hide to the point of me being able to find you, I’ll leave you in Redstone Collection!”

“I’m a spear.” Shang Jianyao emphasized that he didn’t want to hide but to break the other party’s ‘shield.’

There were still other guests in the hotel camp; they were likely smugglers or Ruin Hunters that operated in the area. However, Jiang Baimian was in no rush to make contact with them. After all, they were unfamiliar with the area, and vigilance was popular here.

The other party might not be willing to communicate with them, and it might result in unpleasant misunderstandings. Therefore, after she was done narrating the Old World story, Jiang Baimian got everyone to return to their rooms and keep themselves in optimal shape.

After a simple breakfast the next morning, they drove their old companion along the road outside the park and headed to the lake.

A gray car that ‘harmonized’ with the environment was already parked here. Inside was a person wearing a thin muslin cloth over his head.

Although Jiang Baimian knew that this was a tradition of Redstone Collection—brought about by the Vigilance Church—she still found it weird when actually seeing this scene.

At this moment, a line of lyrics sounded from Shang Jianyao’s beloved small speaker. “I’ll blow up the school...”

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian looked ahead and ordered, “Stop! Turn it off; it’s time to get to work.”

After they approached, the person in the hood rolled down the window and shouted, “Follow me!”

“On what basis?” Shang Jianyao replied without showing any weakness.

The hooded person was stunned. “Didn’t the bishop invite you here?”

“Always be vigilant!” Shang Jianyao shouted the slogan that he had been eager to say for a long time.

The hooded person was dumbfounded, momentarily unsure how to persuade the other party. However, he wasn’t willing to give up and return to get Bishop Renato to come over.

In the jeep, Long Yuehong had to admit that the effects of Shang Jianyao's 'joke' wasn't bad when Shang Jianyao was not targeting him.

Jiang Baimian decided not to tolerate Shang Jianyao's antics. She rolled down the window and shouted, "Lead the way!"

The Redstone Collection townsfolk in the muslin hood heaved a sigh of relief and started the sedan car.

They drove along the lakeside, advancing toward the mountains at the city ruin's edge.

The roads along the way seemed to have been leveled. There weren't many potholes or any obstacles. Nearly 20 minutes later, they left the 'city' and arrived in front of a two-story building that resembled a fort.

Renato—who was wearing a black cloak and a white, black-patterned mask—stood on the fort's second-floor balcony and said to Bai Chen and the others, "Please come in."

Jiang Baimian compared the contents of the auxiliary chip and said, "The data characteristics match. We can preliminarily confirm that it's the same person as the one from last night."

In a place where nobody liked to show their faces, Jiang Baimian could only determine if it was the same person by recording their physical characteristics, vocal characteristics, and electric signals.

Electric signals couldn't uniquely identify a person like fingerprints or irises, but there were differences in electric signals among people as a result of one's physical conditions and habits. On the other hand, the change in the same person's physical condition and actions would also result in changes in electric signals. Therefore, electric signal data could only be used as a reference.

After receiving Jiang Baimian's confirmation, Long Yuehong and the others pushed open the door and alighted. They followed the guide—who was wearing a thin muslin hood—into the sturdy, grayish-white 'fort.'

At this moment, Renato had already come down from the second floor and was waiting for them in the hall.

“Is this your cathedral?” Jiang Baimian looked around with interest.

Red was the primary color used, giving off a very dangerous feeling that required one to be sufficiently vigilant. Amidst the red was gold, looking as if it represented a certain holiness.

On the wall in the deepest part of the hall was a large symbol—it was a white door. The door was half-closed, and behind it was darkness, hiding a faint female figure.

“Yes for whatever’s on the ground,” Renato said truthfully.

“There’s an underground area?” Jiang Baimian asked.

She didn’t mind being identified as the team’s leader. This was because she would be the first to be attacked if anything happened. Furthermore, she believed that she had a faster reaction speed and a higher chance of survival than the other members, including Shang Jianyao.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao was muttering to himself, “Tomato scrambled eggs.”

Shang Jianyao was clearly referring to the colors here. However, he didn’t raise his hand to wipe the corners of his mouth.

This made Jiang Baimian suspect that he was missing his friend, Xiaochong. This child—who was suspected to be the King of the Heartless—had a set of clothes that matched the colors of tomato scrambled eggs.

Renato answered Jiang Baimian’s question. “The underground area might be ten times larger than the ones aboveground. It belongs to Mr. DiMarco.”

“Ten times? Was this repaired after the Old World was destroyed, or did it originally exist?” Bai Chen asked on behalf of the Old Task Force.

Renato explained simply, “Mr. DiMarco’s ancestors were apocalyptic preppers, who believed that a disaster would eventually descend upon the world. He spent a large sum of money and hired specialized personnel. It took many years before he finally built an underground shelter that could accommodate hundreds of people. It’s said that there are ten floors.

“He didn’t manage to use this shelter himself, but it was a blessing for his descendants. Mr. DiMarco’s great-grandfather relied on this shelter to escape the Old World’s destruction and the Chaotic Era’s war successfully.”

Long Yuehong felt inexplicably relieved when he heard that. It turns out that many people in the Old World had a sense of danger and had built underground shelters in advance. The only difference between the company and them is that the former is a little larger... Uh, a little bit too much...

Renato’s recount didn’t stop. “After that, he converted to our Lady—Eidolon Nun—before his death and rented out the land above to our Church forever. With this cathedral, we gained a foothold in Redstone Collection.”

At this point, Renato couldn’t help but praise, “Wariness is a hint from the Goddess.”

“You speak excellent Ashlandic,” Shang Jianyao praised.

Renato smiled and said, “More than half of Redstone Collection speak Ashlandic.”

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian asked, “Is Mr. DiMarco considered a resident of Redstone Collection?”

She had considerable interest in the DiMarco family. After all, a family that had been passed down since the Old World’s destruction might have some important information.

“Yes, he’s an honorary mayor,” Renato explained simply. “In the beginning, Redstone Collection existed because Mr. DiMarco’s great-grandfather and grandfather exchanged supplies with outsiders, attracting a group of merchants and wilderness nomads. If it weren’t for the fact that Mr. DiMarco was unwilling to leave his Underground Ark, he would definitely be the bona fide mayor now.”

“Mr. DiMarco hasn’t been to the surface?” Bai Chen didn’t expect such a person to exist elsewhere apart from Pangu Biology’s employees.

“Not only is he unwilling to come to the surface, but he also forbids others from entering the Underground Ark, apart from when he accepts slaves once a year. Even those slaves will undergo at

least six months of inspection and training at the Underground Ark's top floor. How vigilant!" Renato praised sincerely. "If it weren't for the fact that we need your help here, no one would take the initiative to mention Mr. DiMarco to you."

If it weren't for the fact that he couldn't enter the Underground Ark, he might've wanted to give DiMarco a Pious medal personally.

"Who's in charge of the DiMarco family's external transactions?" Jiang Baimian asked.

"Mr. DiMarco's three stewards are each in charge of something." Renato pointed at an elevator at the edge of the hall. "Let's go to the place where Mass is held."

When he conversed with the four Old Task Force members, not a single believer was in the hall. Even the man that had led the way had disappeared, having hidden somewhere.

This made the cathedral appear extremely quiet, empty, and terrifying.

Of course, Jiang Baimian and the others could detect many key areas where people were hidden.

After entering the elevator, Renato pressed B1.

"Didn't you say that the underground section belongs to Mr. DiMarco?" Bai Chen asked acutely.

Renato tersely acknowledged it. "This floor is actually a separate area between the Underground Ark and the buildings on the ground. Mr. DiMarco lends us this place for Mass when he isn't using this level to train and inspect the slaves."

Shang Jianyao immediately asked, "Is this floor suitable for hide and seek?"

"You mean hiding ritual," Renato emphasized.

As he spoke, the elevator had already descended and opened its door.

In front of them was a small hall with many tunnels extending in different directions.

Renato—who was wearing a white mask with black patterns—continued speaking. “This place is huge. There are many rooms and many corridors; it’s a suitable place for hiding. If it weren’t here, we might’ve demarcated an area in the city ruin for Mass. That would make people even harder to find.”

Bai Chen looked around and said, “Take us around first. It’s best not to miss anything.”

They could only discuss the subsequent payment after they finished exploring the scene.

“Alright.” Renato didn’t hesitate and led the Qian Bai Team into the first passage on the right.

This was likely a planned residential area. There were many rooms of the same size, with old single beds, double beds, bunk beds, and various cabinets and chairs.

“We’ve already searched everywhere we can,” Renato emphasized as he led the way. “During Mass, we also had people guard the elevators and stairs.”

“We won’t blindly believe you!” Shang Jianyao had waited for this opportunity for a long time.

This rendered Renato momentarily speechless.

Bai Chen—who had temporarily become the leader in the ground—could only help add, “The prior search process can only be used as a reference. Otherwise, it will interfere with our judgment and make us leave out some important details.”

Renato expressed his understanding and praised, “Professional.”

At this moment, Jiang Baimian frowned indiscernibly and looked at the corner at the end of the corridor. “Let’s continue forward.”

No one had any objections.

As they walked, Shang Jianyao and Renato simultaneously cast their gazes at the air around the corner ahead.

It was the ceiling.

Renato quickened his pace and asked loudly, “Who’s up there?”

The grill around the ceiling vent soon moved away, and a person jumped down.

This person was a boy who looked about 15 or 16 years old. His blond hair limply hung above his head, and his green eyes were filled with a joyous glow. He—who was about 1.6 meters tall—looked at Renato and smiled innocently. “Good morning, Your Grace.”

This boy spoke in the Red River language.

Renato’s voice sank as he replied in Red River language, “Viel, where were you hiding previously?”

Chapter 185: The Essence of Hiding

Viel? Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen and the others in surprise. The mission is over just as soon as it began?

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and struck it against his left palm with a regretful expression.

Before he could show his skills, the target had already run out!

All of them had learned the Red River language. Even Bai Chen knew a little due to the overarching environment. Although their standards were different, there was no problem with basic literacy.

At this moment, Viel answered Renato’s question with a smile. “I’ve been in the ventilation duct the entire time. None of you know the essence of hiding—choose a place and stay still. I change locations depending on the situation. When you come over, I’ll go elsewhere. When you leave, I’ll return. The only problem is that one has to learn to go in circles. I can’t let you hear me while I’m crawling about.”

The masked Renato fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “You don’t look like you’ve been starving for three days.”

“I prepared food in advance.” Viel smiled smugly. “After circling to the furthest spot from you, I can still crawl to the bathroom, drink some tap water, and use the bathroom.”

Viel waved his arm and said, “This is real hiding. We clearly live in the same place, but we seem to be in two different worlds.”

“You didn’t wear a mask,” Shang Jianyao suddenly pointed out; he spoke in the Red River language.

The short Viel glanced at the tall ‘monkey.’ “I’ve mastered a complete set of disguise techniques. You wouldn’t recognize me if you encountered me in the future.”

“Your characteristics are too obvious,” Shang Jianyao reminded sincerely.

The smile on Viel’s face vanished.

In just a second or two, he returned to his previous expression. “There’s nothing that can’t be made up for.”

“Yes, there is.” Shang Jianyao pointed at himself. “I can’t pretend to be short.”

Viel narrowed his eyes and suggested with a smile, “You can break your legs.”

The corners of Long Yuehong’s mouth twitched as if he were watching two children quarrel.

Jiang Baimian was unwilling to let the two continue bickering. She coughed twice and signaled for Bai Chen to interrupt.

Bai Chen understood her thoughts. She took two steps forward and asked Renato of the Vigilance Church, “We’ve already found Viel. Is our mission over?”

She didn’t use the phrase ‘Viel has already come out.’ Instead, she emphasized that Viel had ‘been found.’

In any case, this had happened after they took on the mission. Even though they didn't contribute much, they had done something. Furthermore, Renato might even commission them to investigate Viel's true hiding situation in the past few days.

Renato touched the mask on his face. "Yes, the mission is complete. But in such a situation, the payment won't be much."

"It doesn't matter; just fulfilling the previous promise is sufficient. We'll consider the DiMarco family's story as the final payment." Jiang Baimian interrupted in a tone that suggested she enjoyed hearing stories.

Being able to establish a relationship with the Vigilance Church definitely helped the Old Task Force's journey in Redstone Collection.

Bai Chen then tersely acknowledged it, indicating that she shared the same thoughts as her teammate.

"You guys are honest, just, and humble. You make me feel like I'm looking at a second Captain Han." Renato gave a high evaluation of the Old Task Force's act of not forcing a payment.

"Captain Han? The one from the Public Security Department?" Jiang Baimian was rather curious about the latter half of the sentence.

Renato nodded. "Yes, he has most of the Old World's virtues of a knight. If it weren't for that, the townsfolk wouldn't have unanimously agreed to invite him to be sheriff just because he's a Senior Hunter and doesn't always hide because he doesn't believe in our Lady."

"Unbelievable!" Shang Jianyao always spoke his mind.

Long Yuehong could completely guess what Shang Jianyao was commenting on because he had similar thoughts.

A senior Ruin Hunter—who started off as a wilderness nomad—actually had most of the Old World's virtues as a knight—humility, compassion, just, honesty, and heroism...

This was like saying that mechanical monks were passionate and infatuated. They didn't let their teachings down.

Even Bai Chen—who was also a wilderness nomad—found it ridiculous and funny. She was already considered a person with a relatively high moral bottom line in this group, but she was still very far from those virtues.

Bai Chen knew that her sense of compassion was reserved only to specific targets. Her 'heroism' was barely passable.

"There are always exceptions in this world." Renato didn't harp on the topic. "Even if Han Wanghuo's performance is a disguise, he will still be a true knight as long as he can continue the farce."

"Yes." Jiang Baimian agreed.

She was more interested in something else. Although many people here spoke Ashlandic, they seemed to be more influenced by Red River culture.

Of course, after the Old World's destruction and the migration of a large number of people, the two cultures were reduced to little of what's left in many places before blending together.

Renato looked at Viel—who was much shorter than him. "Go to the Lady's altar and pray before completing this Mass."

"Yes, Your Grace." Viel skipped toward the exit. As he passed by Shang Jianyao, he suddenly turned his head and made a face.

After watching the manchild leave, Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. "What a pity..."

Jiang Baimian secretly rolled her eyes. She knew that Shang Jianyao found it a pity that he couldn't make a face back at Viel because he was wearing a mask.

Renato didn't ask what Shang Jianyao found a pity. He pointed ahead and spoke in Ashlandic. "The largest arms dealer in Redstone Collection is here."

“Mr. DiMarco?” Jiang Baimian was a little excited. Does this mean that we can see the honorary mayor, who has never left his underground shelter? It is good even if we meet through electronic products. As long as we can communicate, we can ask the DiMarco family about the Old World’s destruction!

“Yes, strictly speaking, it’s Mr. DiMarco. However, the actual person in charge of one of his three stewards, Mr. Carl,” explained Renato in a black cloak. “I’ll introduce you to him later.”

“Sure, sure!” Jiang Baimian mimicked Long Yuehong’s catchphrase.

“She’s so excited,” Shang Jianyao whispered to Long Yuehong.

“Remove ‘so’ and change it to ‘a little,’” Jiang Baimian replied.

Upon hearing their conversation, Renato turned his head to look at Bai Chen as if he were saying, ‘how tiring it must be to have such immature and unreliable teammates.’

Bai Chen was too embarrassed to tell him that the team leader was the one who had started the whole thing.

When they couldn’t change Shang Jianyao, they could only join him.

Also, mental illnesses had always been chronic.

After leaving this corridor and circling around for a few minutes, Shang Jianyao and the others saw another elevator lobby.

There were three thick, grayish-black elevators here, and two small LCD screens were embedded in the space between them.

Renato took a few steps forward, pressed a button, and patiently waited.

After a while, the LCD screen to the left flickered and revealed a middle-aged man.

The middle-aged man wore an Old World black suit and a meticulous bow tie. His black hair was a little gray, but it was neatly combed back. His facial features were typical of Red River people. His eyes were light blue, and although his looks were average, he had an indescribable bearing.

He definitely couldn't be considered noble or elegant. However, his existence made the Underground Ark's owner, DiMarco, gain such attributes.

“Ah, what a coincidence. Mr. Carl, I have a few friends who wish to meet you and discuss business.” Renato wanted to get the person opposite the screen to relay the message, but he realized that it was the steward, Carl, who was on duty today.

This time, Renato spoke in the Red River language again.

Through the camera, Carl glanced at the four masked people behind Renato. “Please get them to meet me in my office between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. tomorrow. I still have to busy myself with the tasks assigned by Sir today.”

Bai Chen glanced at Jiang Baimian and nodded at Renato.

“Alright,” Renato agreed.

Carl then asked, “Has Mass ended?”

“It's over.” Renato's tone was relaxed.

“Always be vigilant.” Carl crossed his arms, placed them on his chest, and took a step back. He then politely added, “See you tomorrow.”

After the scene on the LCD screen disappeared, Renato turned to Bai Chen and said, “Mr. Carl's office is on the fifth floor of Redstone Collection. It has a signboard—Visa Trading Company—hanging from it.”

“Visa? Why is it called that?” Jiang Baimian always looked like a curious baby when she found herself somewhere new.

“This is Mr. DiMarco’s grandfather’s name,” Renato explained.

Jiang Baimian then looked at the elevator and the LCD screen. “Are these all items left behind by the Old World?”

“Yes for the framework. It was later modified by Mechanical Paradise to replace some of the old and damaged items.” Renato knew a lot about this. After all, his presence was needed before people could go underground.

Jiang Baimian wasn’t surprised that the DiMarco family had a partnership with Mechanical Paradise. This was because this place was an important smuggling node, and there were many resources that Mechanical Paradise needed. Furthermore, it was closer to the southern coastal area than Weed City, which was also where Mechanical Paradise was located.

She curiously asked, “Humans can’t enter the Underground Ark, but robots can?”

“Yes, but it has to be robots without artificial intelligence,” Renato answered casually. “Back then, Mechanical Paradise specially established a small, non-intelligent engineering team. Yes... Mr. DiMarco also should’ve nurtured talents in this regard. With the two combined, it didn’t take long for them to complete the renovation and modification of the Underground Ark. When the engineering team left, the corresponding data and information were destroyed.”

As they spoke, they returned to the fortress-like cathedral on the ground.

After bidding Renato farewell, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—suddenly smiled. “Do you think Viel was telling the truth?”

Bai Chen—who was driving—calmly replied, “At least some of it was a lie.”

Chapter 186: “Final Villain”

When Long Yuehong nodded slightly in the back seat, Shang Jianyao—who was beside him—clapped. “His acting was very good.”

Shang Jianyao seemed to appreciate it.

Jiang Baimian turned her head and looked at Long Yuehong. She then asked with a cheeky grin, “Then, which part do you think is most likely a lie?”

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and said, “I remember Bishop Renato mentioning that he had made the decision to end Mass and requested Viel to come out. However, he didn’t receive a response.

“I observed the area just now; there are loudspeakers in many places. Renato’s voice should be able to reach the entire basement level, so it’s impossible for Viel not to hear him. He only came out after an entire night.”

“Very good.” Jiang Baimian praised him. “You have passable observation skills.”

She then asked, “What if Viel fell asleep back then?”

“The sleeping Viel wouldn’t have been able to hide from the bishop’s search, right... Isn’t it the case that Awakened can sense consciousness within a certain range?” Long Yuehong—who had been praised—felt much more confident. “An asleep person can’t move.”

As there was an Awakened like Shang Jianyao in the team, he didn’t lack ‘general knowledge’ in this regard.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Can’t he be an Awakened too?”

After asking the question, his expression turned serious. “I suspect that the hide-and-seek ritual is an Awakening Ceremony.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Shang Jianyao began to analyze the situation. “Look...”

Long Yuehong’s scalp tingled when he heard the word. “Stop! Don’t talk about looking; just say it.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at Long Yuehong and raised his finger. “First, the Vigilance Church’s hide-and-seek competition is very ritualistic. Second, there are clearly more Awakened in religions that believe in the Kalendarium. So...”

Long Yuehong clapped his hands and said very firmly, “Therefore, the hide-and-seek ritual is an Awakening Ceremony!”

Jiang Baimian—who had been watching the entire time—exhaled silently and pinched her face. “Don’t bully Little Red...”

“...” Long Yuehong’s eyes flickered as he turned to look at Shang Jianyao in confusion.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian added, “There’s no evidence that a religious organization’s Mass is equivalent to an Awakening Ceremony.”

Only then did Long Yuehong come to a realization. “Uh...”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “See, I can persuade you without using the word ‘look.’”

“How can that be considered persuasion?” Long Yuehong retorted angrily.

As Jiang Baimian stared at the road ahead, she stopped the two of them from ‘arguing.’ “Then, here’s the problem. Can Awakened maintain their disguises while sleeping and not be sensed?”

“I’ve never tried it.” Shang Jianyao had a look of regret.

Jiang Baimian continued asking, “Regardless of whether Viel is an Awakened, why didn’t he come out when the bishop decided to end Mass?”

Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation, “It’s fun!”

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong answered seriously, “It depends on one’s personality. If it were someone like Shang Jianyao, they might’ve deliberately chosen not to appear for fun. If not, what good will it do him if he keeps hiding? Will it be easier for him to awaken if he doesn’t get found by the bishop?”

“You’re indeed my good friend,” Shang Jianyao praised.

Long Yuehong realized that he had unknowingly used the theory of ‘a hide-and-seek ritual might be equivalent to an Awakening Ceremony.’

He paused and said, “I-I’m making a normal inference, and there’s indeed such a possibility.”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded and asked with a smile, “Any other possibilities?”

“He didn’t hear it,” Shang Jianyao interrupted again.

Long Yuehong was just about to say that Viel wasn’t deaf or had hearing problems when he suddenly felt like he would be talking bad about his team leader. Thus, he forced himself to shut his mouth.

Bai Chen—who was driving—looked ahead and participated in the discussion. “There are only two possibilities if Viel doesn’t come out. The first is that he doesn’t want to, and the second is that he didn’t hear it.

“Whether he wants to or not is subjective. You guys have just analyzed the situation. It’s difficult to make any further guesses at the moment. With the number and layout of loudspeakers in the Mass venue, if Viel really didn’t hear anything, it can only mean that he wasn’t in the basement level back then.”

“That’s right!” Long Yuehong came to a realization. “Did Viel use the ventilation duct to enter DiMarco’s Underground Ark?”

This way, nobody outside could find him, and he wouldn’t be able to hear the bishop’s proclamation that Mass was over!

“That’s a possibility in theory, but it’s actually very unlikely,” Jiang Baimian explained. “With the DiMarco family’s style, I don’t believe that the ventilation duct they designed can be infiltrated so easily. The corresponding exits inside must be specially guarded.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian laughed. “I also suspect that the Underground Ark has ventilation ducts, not only in the cathedral but also elsewhere. Furthermore, they’re very hidden. Otherwise, the Underground Ark wouldn’t last long if enemies outside besieged this place. Think about it. Under normal circumstances, companies that can establish internal ecosystems wouldn’t dare to completely turn off air circulation with the surface.”

It was another story if they encountered a situation where the corresponding surface was seriously polluted.

“Yes, yes.” Long Yuehong agreed.

Jiang Baimian smiled and continued, “It’s unlikely going down, but it’s not necessarily the case going up. As many people like to choose ventilation ducts when hiding, I specially observed the area before and after entering the cathedral. I realized that the Vigilance Church didn’t specially send people to guard those places.

“Yes, we can’t rule out the possibility that they are already hiding inside. But according to my perception, they aren’t completely covered.”

Long Yuehong thoughtfully added, “In other words, it’s very likely that Viel used the ventilation duct to leave the cathedral from a spot that the guards couldn’t see shortly after Mass began and hid in a nearby city ruin. He returned after he felt that it was almost time?

“His goal was to become the final winner? Is this a great honor for believers?”

Shang Jianyao immediately gave an ‘answer’ excitedly. “The hide-and-seek champion can receive divine grace and awaken their abilities?”

“Who knows?” Jiang Baimian replied. “Strictly speaking, Viel is clearly violating the rules. However, the Vigilance Church’s internal affairs have nothing to do with us. We can use this opportunity to train our thinking abilities. Alright, alright. Let’s return to Redstone Collection and see what other missions we can take on.”

Upon seeing that the city ruin was nearby, Bai Chen suddenly said, “After hearing about the DiMarco family, I feel that the investigation of the cause of the Old World’s destruction has to begin inside the company, starting with Big Boss, the board members, and the earliest files.”

How could Jiang Baimian not have considered this? However, she didn’t have the right or authority to do so at the moment.

Who would believe that the company didn’t predict or have any connection to the Old World’s destruction when it had gathered a large number of resources and used unimaginable technology to build such a grand underground building with a complete ecosystem prior to the destruction?

Even Pangu Biology’s employees wouldn’t believe it!

Long Yuehong—who was good at lying to himself—didn’t believe it either. He only often found various reasons to help the company shirk any responsibility.

Jiang Baimian could only laugh dryly at Bai Chen’s words. “Let’s wait for an opportunity. Little White, for you to say such things means that you trust us enough!”

As Jiang Baimian spoke, she beamed with pride.

Bai Chen continued looking ahead as if she was focused on driving. After a few seconds, she said, “I didn’t think so when I roamed the Ashlands. When I discovered that the company had such an underground building, I suspected that I had joined the final villain’s camp.”

“That’s a good thing,” Shang Jianyao emphasized.

Long Yuehong sighed as well. “Fortunately, the large factions on the surface don’t know where the company is or what its interior looks like. Otherwise, it would be difficult for them not to suspect that the company is related to the Old World’s destruction...”

He suddenly fell silent at this point, realizing how solid the company’s villainous image was.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “If others are unwilling to get along with our Old Task Force in the future, we will properly showcase what a final villain is like!”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao replied abnormally enthusiastically.

...

After entering Redstone Collection, the four of them arrived at the Hunter’s Guild again because it was still early for lunch.

Although they were all wearing masks, it was relatively rare to see a man as tall as Shang Jianyao and a woman as tall as Jiang Baimian in Redstone Collection. They were uniquely identifiable when in a team.

“There’s a follow-up to the firearms mission,” greeted the employee in the tiger mask.

“You saw through my disguise?” Shang Jianyao was shocked.

“Breaking your legs will give you a better disguise.” Long Yuehong naturally wouldn’t let go of the rare opportunity to deride Shang Jianyao.

“I’ve been bending my knees ever since I entered Redstone Collection!” Shang Jianyao emphasized.

“I didn’t.” Jiang Baimian sighed. She then smiled and teased, “You look more like a monkey when you walk like this.”

At this moment, the employee in the tiger mask weakly interrupted. “Are you still continuing with the firearms mission?”

Bai Chen walked up and replied calmly, “Yes.”

The employee immediately said, “Helvig’s widow, Mrs. Theresa, had come. She said she wanted to continue this mission; she’s waiting for you at Gunfire.”

After understanding the situation, the Old Task Force quickly arrived at Gunfire on the third floor.

Theresa didn't hide. She wore thick black clothes and a hat with a long, hanging black veil while she quietly sat in the chair.

Through the black veil, Jiang Baimian could vaguely tell that Theresa had Red River lineage—her eyes were green, and her nose was high. Therefore, she switched to fluent Red River language. “Good morning, Mrs. Theresa.”

“Good morning,” Theresa replied in a slightly hoarse voice. She then pointed at the chairs beside her. “Have a seat.”

She was indeed using the Red River language.

After the four people from the Old Task Force sat down, she directly said, “I hope to add one more mission: Investigate the true cause of my husband's death.”

“Isn't this the sheriff's job?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Theresa's voice became a little louder. “Han Wanghuo is an Ashlander, so he will definitely side with them!”

When she said the name ‘Han Wanghuo,’ it was purely an imitation of the pronunciation, not replacement words.

“Ashlander?” Jiang Baimian frowned slightly.

“It's those people in the town who speak Ashlandic,” explained Theresa. “They're jealous that we Red River people monopolize the arms trade and have always wanted to deal with us. They were the ones who seconded Han Wanghuo. Heh heh, he looks like an outsider on the surface, but isn't he also an Ashlander? He actually said that Helvig died from shock!”

Chapter 187: Folklore

Just as Theresa finished explaining, Shang Jianyao—who was beside Jiang Baimian—laughed. “It's so interesting wearing a mask.”

Shang Jianyao spoke in the Red River language. Although he couldn't be considered fluent, the Red River language had changed in many different places years after the Old World's destruction.

Theresa's accent was also different from the common one used in Weed City.

"What?" Theresa looked at Jiang Baimian in confusion, seeking an answer.

He means that, because of the mask we are wearing, you can only determine if a person is an Ashlander or of the Red River race by their commonly used language. This leads you into talking bad about Ashlanders in front of the few of us... It's good to disguise yourself. When you disguise yourself to the point that nobody can tell the difference in appearance, things become interesting...

This is like a material embodiment of the psychology concept of a persona... Heh heh, how are you to distinguish between friend or foe and form alliances when Ashlanders all master the Red River language while you master Ashlandic? Will you form an Animal Mask Party, a Human Mask Party, or a Monster Mask Party? At this moment, thoughts flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind.

Finally, these thoughts only formed one sentence: "He has never played with masks before."

Without giving Theresa a chance to question any further, Jiang Baimian let out a terse grunt. "Was the cause of death given by the Public Security Department shock?"

Theresa nodded slightly. "They were brushing me off. I'm not convinced by this cause of death."

The cause of death might not be fake. The point is what caused the shock... Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, "Does Mr. Helvig have a history of heart problems?"

"No, he has always been healthy. He did well, be it running, jumping, or combat," replied Theresa firmly.

Shang Jianyao raised his hand and—without waiting for Jiang Baimian's permission—asked curiously, "You only mentioned his performance in running, jumping, and combat. What about other aspects?"

Theresa shook her head. "I was only giving a few simple examples. To be honest, he wasn't too good in bed."

Pfft... Jiang Baimian almost choked on her saliva. What the heck are you talking about!?

Long Yuehong coughed as well, and only Bai Chen remained calm.

Theresa then explained, “This is also a common problem for all our believers. We have to be constantly vigilant. Even when doing the deed, we have to pay attention to our surroundings and be wary of any abnormal reactions from our partners. In order to ensure our own safety to the greatest extent, everyone’s consensus is to reduce the time taken.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

This time, apart from Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian was also clapping. She felt that it wasn’t enough to express her feelings.

She never imagined that the word ‘vigilance’ would change Redstone Collection’s daily lifestyle in such a profound manner when carried out to the extreme.

The only reason Long Yuehong didn’t clap was that he was stunned.

Even Bai Chen was a little curious. “Will you guys sleep together?”

“No,” Theresa replied truthfully. “Distance is our true friend. When someone has needs, they will need to make an appointment in advance.”

“What about children?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“They can sleep with one of their parents before the age of one. They have to part ways after that.” Theresa looked around. “Let’s not waste time on these questions.”

Jiang Baimian realized that she had been obsessed with understanding folklore and had forgotten her Hunter Mission.

She glared at Shang Jianyao. “What did you want to ask?”

“I wanted to know if Helvig is good at holding his breath,” Shang Jianyao replied matter-of-factly.

“Holding his breath... He knows how to swim; he’s average.” Theresa expressed her understanding. “In short, there’s nothing wrong with his body. Weiler also said that he didn’t discover any other problems.”

“Are Weiler’s autopsy results trustworthy?” Jiang Baimian quickly became professional.

If Helvig didn’t have any latent problems, there was a high chance that dying from shock was related to an Awakened.

At the very least, Jiang Baimian now knew about two abilities that could induce a similar cause of death.

Nightmare Horse’s Real Nightmare and the Arbiter of Fate’s domain, control of the heart.

“Although Weiler is an outsider, he’s also from the Red River. He won’t be too biased. Unfortunately, his skills are limited. He’s only an ordinary doctor, and his profession isn’t in this regard.” Theresa tried her best to voice her contradictory thoughts.

As Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, Shang Jianyao asked, “Why do you say ‘Ashlander’ and not ‘Ashlandic?’”

In the Red River language, the former had an additional suffix, which was even more awkward-sounding.

“The Ashlands belongs to everyone,” replied Theresa.

Jiang Baimian secretly clicked her tongue. “If we take on this mission, how will the payment be calculated?”

“I’ll go to the guild and combine this mission with the mission of retrieving the firearms. The reward will be half of that batch of firearms,” said Theresa without hesitation.

That's plenty. After this mission—combined with the supplies we previously saved—we can almost buy an old military exoskeleton model... Jiang Baimian nodded. "We'll do our best."

She then asked, "What do you know about the firearms robbery? Are those bandits often active in the surrounding area, or did they suddenly appear?"

Theresa became a little agitated again. "It must've been done by that group of Ashlanders! They want to snatch back the arms trade business! Other than them, how can there be bandits with such firepower around Redstone Collection?"

After speaking in a slightly hysterical manner, she panted and said, "Helvig didn't mention much about this to me when he was alive. He only said that those people had very strong firepower and tacit cooperation. They were all wearing masks and disguised. About ten people appeared, with some hiding in the dark.

"If you want to know more, you can return to the hotel camp and ask Lehman in Room 127. He's a smuggler from United Industries, a business partner of my husband. He and his caravan brought this batch of firearms over, but it was snatched away not long after the transaction was completed."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian asked for more details. She then stood up, pointed at the ventilation duct where Helvig died, and said to Shang Jianyao, "Climb in and take a look."

"Han Wanghuo has checked it; he didn't find anything." Theresa stood up as well. "He might've found something and destroyed it."

"We won't be at ease until we check it ourselves." Jiang Baimian didn't give up because of this.

Shang Jianyao immediately pulled a table over and took down the ventilation duct grill. He then shone the flashlight at the ventilation duct for a while before crawling in.

The duct wasn't too dirty; people clearly hid here often. There were no obvious traces left.

Shang Jianyao crawled along the duct for a while. The deeper he went, the more cramped it became.

With the help of the flashlight, he carefully examined the area. Finally, he retreated and jumped onto the table.

“There’s no sign of any human activity.”

“Okay.” Jiang Baimian looked at Theresa. “Is the sheriff around?”

“He went to the area where the Ashlanders often hide. He said that there would be procedures that need to be followed no matter what.” Theresa couldn’t find any fault with Han Wanghuo.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. “Then, let’s visit Mr. Lehman first.”

“Alright, do it as soon as possible. I don’t know when he will return to United Industries,” urged Theresa.

Just as the Old Task Force quartet was about to walk out of Gunfire, Shang Jianyao suddenly turned around and spoke with the monkey mask on him. “Final question. Do you have children?”

“Yes, two.” Theresa was confused. “Why are you asking?”

“Body functions are normal,” Shang Jianyao evaluated in all seriousness.

Jiang Baimian knew that this fellow had a screw loose again. She used the topic to ask casually, “How old are the children?”

“The older one is 15, and the younger one is 12. We then agreed not to have any more children and used certain products produced by United Industries.” Theresa didn’t hide the truth.

After bidding the widow farewell, Jiang Baimian led Shang Jianyao and the others back to the fifth floor, prepared to enter the parking lot.

At this moment, she looked back at the silent Redstone Collection that seemed vacant and sighed. “It’s indeed necessary to accept the Vigilance Church’s beliefs here.”

“Why?” When Long Yuehong heard Gaudi’s explanation, he felt that they had joined the Vigilance Church too easily, even if the corresponding teachings did improve their chances of survival.

It wasn't like they couldn't raise their guard and hide themselves if they didn't believe in the Vigilance Church!

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and sighed with a smile. "Redstone Collection is a town formed by the DiMarco family's exchange of supplies with the outside world. Its members come from everywhere. They speak different languages and have different customs. Their looks and characteristics are also different. They will definitely be divided into small enclaves.

"These small enclaves were mostly competitors because of the single trade source back then. They might've often had conflicts with each other. You assassinate me, and I assassinate you; you ambush me, and I ambush you.

"Normally speaking, this will slowly evolve into a situation similar to that of Weed City. But when the Vigilance Church arrived in a place filled with extreme mistrust between people, their teachings became like fish in water. Not only do they improve people's chances of survival, but they also rationalize, sanctify, and soften this mistrust. This is why a relatively stable Redstone Collection exists."

"Gaudi is of mixed blood." Bai Chen pointed out a fact.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "No matter how hostile the two groups are, it's possible that love will arise. There will also be neutral parties. Gaudi should represent the third-largest group in Redstone Collection, the mixed faction."

As they spoke, they got into the car, left Redstone Collection, and returned to the hotel camp.

Room 127 was on the other end, closer to the small lake in the Old World's park.

Outside this unsophisticated room were two muscular men. They were of the Red River heritage and were dressed in black. They were armed and stoic.

Shang Jianyao approached and 'looked down' at the other party. "We are Ruin Hunters; we are here for Lehman in our investigation of the firearms robbery."

Shang Jianyao was the one to 'make contact' because he might need to make 'friends.'

As he asked, Jiang Baimian scanned the area and realized that gazes were coming from several unsophisticated rooms around Room 127.

Lehman has many subordinates... As Jiang Baimian muttered to herself, a guard knocked on the door and entered the room to report.

After waiting for a few minutes, the guard walked out and said to Shang Jianyao, "Mr. Lehman has two sentences for you: First, we had already left back then. We have no idea what happened next.

"Second, if there are only four of you, it's better to give up early and change missions."

Chapter 188: Threat

Shang Jianyao didn't show any embarrassment or anger at Lehman's warning. Instead, he seriously suggested, "If you join us, there will be more than four of us."

As Shang Jianyao spoke, he looked back at Jiang Baimian, filled with eagerness.

Jiang Baimian understood that he was asking if there was a need for him to 'make friends.' She thought for two seconds and shook her head.

There was no need for that for the time being.

After leaving the area where Lehman and his subordinates lived, the Old Task Force prepared to head to their next destination: Lodge District near the lake in the city ruin.

One of Helvig's trusted aides, Baz, lived in this area. He had experienced the entire process of the firearms robbery.

Before leaving the hotel camp, they returned to Rooms 05 and 06 because Shang Jianyao wanted to use the bathroom.

Just as she opened the door, Jiang Baimian saw a piece of paper flutter to the ground. It was slightly larger than a palm and had a row of Ashlandic written on it: "Mind your own business!"

“There are no spelling errors.” Shang Jianyao picked up the paper with a look of surprise.

“Not everyone is from the Anti-intellectualism Church.” Jiang Baimian took the piece of paper and flipped through it a few times under the winter sun.

After Bai Chen and Long Yuehong relieved themselves and walked out of the room, Jiang Baimian handed the piece of paper over and asked with a smile, “Any thoughts?”

“Are they stopping us from investigating the cause of Helvig’s death, or are they stopping us from searching for the snatched batch of firearms?” Long Yuehong analyzed the situation step by step according to his team leader’s instructions.

“If it’s the latter, it means that the bandits are very likely inside Redstone Collection. Otherwise, they would’ve long retreated elsewhere and only sent one or two people over to discuss any transactions. There would be no need to threaten us. If it’s the former, wouldn’t it be too rushed? We haven’t found any clues, so it’s better to warn the Public Security Department’s Han Wanghuo than to threaten us.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao—who had come out of the bathroom—clapped enthusiastically, expressing his admiration.

The applause made Long Yuehong a little happy but also a little uncomfortable.

“Not bad.” Jiang Baimian smiled and praised him. “You’ve finally learned how to analyze problems.”

With that said, she looked at Bai Chen. “Any thoughts?”

After washing her face, Bai Chen—who was not wearing a mask—frowned and said, “I find it a little strange. It’s too early... There’s no need for that, right?”

Bai Chen meant that there was no need to warn them.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Indeed. There are only four of us, with only one Intermediate Hunter among us. We didn’t find any useful clues, so why are they in a rush to threaten us? Didn’t the arms dealer, Lehman, say the same? With our ‘strength,’ it’s better to give up the mission as soon as possible.”

Smack!

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “I get it!”

“What do you get?” Jiang Baimian asked in exasperation and amusement.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao said seriously, “They must’ve seen through our disguises and know that we are the World Salvation Team sent by the final villain, Pangu Biology. They are afraid of our strength and don’t dare to fight us head-on, so they can only give us a warning.”

Jiang Baimian exhaled deeply. “You think too highly of us.” She deliberately used honorifics in her tone.

She then casually said, “Even if the Hunter’s Guild’s branches exchange data periodically, it will still take some time for our achievements in Weed City to reach here. Besides, Shang Jianyao’s Weed City Brotherhood branch should still be operating normally. No outsiders will know what we’ve done.”

As a genetically modified person who could sense electric signals, Jiang Baimian was very sure that there was no wiretapping equipment in Rooms 05, 06, or the surrounding area.

“Final villains aren’t related to saving the world either...” Long Yuehong muttered.

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to retort, Jiang Baimian grumbled, “Seriously, you broke my train of thought. Yes, since they warned us when there’s no need to threaten us, I can preliminarily guess that this is actually a form of protection.”

“Protection?” Long Yuehong was shocked.

Jiang Baimian smiled and explained, “In detail, it’s that they see us as being too weak and are afraid that we won’t be able to withstand the consequences of being sucked into the vortex. Therefore, they gave us a warning in advance to let us distance ourselves from trouble.

“Uh, apart from that, there are two other possibilities. The first is that the conflict has escalated to a certain extent. Any external faction joining in will cause the scales to tilt. Hence, they have to take some precautions. But from Theresa’s reaction and her choice, the possibility of this happening is very low.

“The second possibility is that someone deliberately wrote a warning letter to frame someone. If that’s the case, someone will definitely question and investigate even if we don’t disclose the fact that we were threatened. When the time comes, the clues will come knocking on our door.”

Long Yuehong was impressed and couldn’t help but sigh inwardly. Sigh, I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My brain is far inferior to Team Leader’s. Uh, she has undergone genetic modification. There’s no way to compare; there’s no need to compare...

“If it’s the first possibility, why protect us?” Long Yuehong asked.

Shang Jianyao seriously replied before Jiang Baimian could. “Because I’m 1.85 meters tall and good-looking...”

“Stop!” Jiang Baimian stopped the reverse recital. She smiled and said, “Maybe it’s because we didn’t disguise ourselves when we first entered Redstone Collection. It’s obvious that we’re Ashlandic—no, Ashlanders.”

Long Yuehong looked at the warning letter in his hand in surprise and realized that it only had Ashlandic and no Red River language.

He nodded thoughtfully. “I see...”

...

The Lodge District in the city ruin where Redstone Collection was located was made up of three to four-story buildings with courtyards and walls. It had another name before the Old World was destroyed. However, it had long been forgotten, and no one mentioned it again.

In the entire Redstone Collection, probably only DiMarco or the information passed down in his family—which was stored in the Underground Ark—still remembered.

According to Theresa's description, the Old Task Force found the ancient tree that had hundreds of years of history and had been struck by lightning at least twice.

Behind the ancient tree was a three to four-story building with a courtyard and perimeter wall.

Jiang Baimian alighted from the car, walked to the door, and pressed the doorbell.

After nearly a minute, a male voice sounded from the ancient tree's seemingly dead trunk. "Who are you looking for?"

Before this, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had already cast their gazes over.

"We are Ruin Hunters who have taken over the mission regarding the firearms robbery." Bai Chen—who was sitting in the driver's seat and facing the ancient tree—replied loudly, "Mrs. Theresa told us to come over."

"Wait a moment." The male voice in the tree trunk fell silent for a moment.

After waiting for two to three minutes, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao looked at another building with a courtyard and perimeter wall.

The wall there suddenly raised a wooden plank, revealing a large hole. Behind the large hole was not a garden but a deep passage.

The next second, a man crawled out of the large hole. He wore an iron-black mask that shimmered with a metallic luster. His flaxen hair was messy as if he hadn't combed it in a long time.

Just as he stood firmly, he saw a monkey mask baring its teeth—Shang Jianyao had rushed over with a whoosh.

"Stop! Distance is our friend!" The man in the iron mask jumped in fright and quickly took a few steps to the side.

"Is your mask bulletproof?" Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

“No,” the man in the iron mask answered in confusion.

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao was a little disappointed.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian had already approached the iron-masked man. “You’re Baz.”

“Yes.” Baz nodded.

“Were you the one who spoke just now?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“That’s right.” Baz wondered if there was something wrong with the other party’s ears.

Jiang Baimian immediately became intrigued. “You dug many tunnels and connected many nearby places?”

“I learned this from the Ashlanders.” Baz was rather proud. “There are tunnels and exits everywhere, so nobody can corner me! I can even circle behind the enemy and fire at them from places they can’t imagine.”

“Good idea.” Jiang Baimian praised him. “With the terrain and soil here, it should be relatively difficult to dig a tunnel.”

“We have machines obtained from United Industries.” Baz took the opportunity to ask, “Do you want them? We can exchange them for many things if we go to a war zone that requires dug tunnels.”

“First, we have to wait until we retrieve the batch of firearms and receive the corresponding payment,” Jiang Baimian replied with a smile. “Besides, we might encounter bunker buster and thermobaric rounds at any moment in a real war zone. It might not be a good thing to hide in underground fortifications.”

She didn’t continue chatting and seriously asked, “Did you see what those bandits looked like? Do you know their origins?”

Baz shook his head. “They were all wearing masks, hoods, and sunglasses.”

At this point, he suddenly sneered. “This actually raises some questions. If they were foreign bandits, why would they need to disguise themselves so well? They probably didn’t want others to see their hair color, so they wore hoods...”

At this moment, Shang Jianyao interrupted. “This can also be achieved by dyeing their hair. I can introduce you to a professional team, but it’s a little far..”

Jiang Baimian cut Shang Jianyao off. “It seems like you have a suspect.”

“It must be those Ashlanders!” Baz said angrily. “After that, a few people and I chased after the tire tracks the entire way and realized that they had gone south. After leaving the city ruin, they circled to the east!”

With that said, he roughly explained what east meant.

The DiMarco family’s Underground Ark and the Vigilance Church’s cathedral were north of the city ruin. Most of the Red River people were in the lake area to the west. The Ashlanders mainly hid in the buildings east of the city ruin. The area to the south was where the mixed-race people lived.

The park corresponding to Redstone Collection was slightly center-west.

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian didn’t comment. “Apart from that, what else did you discover?”

“Nothing.” Baz shook his head again. “Uh... There were nine people involved in the robbery. Their height was nothing special, and there were seven to eight people lying in ambush around us...”

After asking for further details, Jiang Baimian simply replied, “We’ll go to the Ashlanders to investigate.”

After bidding Baz farewell and getting into the jeep, Long Yuehong sighed. “From the looks of it, that batch of firearms really might’ve been stolen by the Ashlanders...”

Jiang Baimian looked ahead and chuckled. “A strict disguise might not necessarily hide an Ashlander’s characteristics. It might also be the hair and eye colors of someone from the Red River race.”

Chapter 189: Slacker

Long Yuehong’s mouth slightly opened when he heard Jiang Baimian’s words, unable to hide his shock. There’s actually such an angle... Isn’t this too sinister? But it’s indeed possible!

After a while, Long Yuehong asked another question. “The essence is internal strife?”

Shang Jianyao expressed a different opinion. “Maybe it’s just another form of hide and seek.”

Hiding the firearms for everyone to find.

“How is that possible?” Long Yuehong blurted out before he was suddenly stunned. He thought for a few seconds and said in disbelief, “Could it be that the batch of firearms wasn’t robbed at all but hidden by Helvig and the others, and their goal was to frame Redstone Collection’s Ashlanders?”

“We can’t rule out that possibility.” Jiang Baimian looked at the ruins that quickly flashed past in the rearview mirror and replied with a smile. “Look, uh—think about it. Helvig has many subordinates. Just based on the number of trusted aides that Theresa told us, he has four to five. Furthermore, they are only considered the team’s core members.

“Therefore, why did he choose to issue a mission at the guild when he was alive? Wouldn’t it be more convenient and more efficient for him to organize people to find the firearms than to commission Ruin Hunters?”

Bai Chen—who was driving—added, “Normally speaking, merchants who are arms dealers aren’t weak. They can at least match four or five ordinary Ruin Hunter teams.”

This was based on their numbers and available firepower.

Although the Old Task Force was definitely not included in the ranks of ordinary Ruin Hunter teams, others didn’t know that. On the surface, they were only an Intermediate Hunter and three most common Official Hunters. There wasn’t even a Senior Hunter, much less an Advanced Hunter.

The only achievement to their name was the successful investigation of Liu Dazhuang's murder in their badges.

"That's right. Why?" Long Yuehong also realized that things weren't logical after Jiang Baimian said that.

Jiang Baimian had just smiled and didn't have the chance to speak when Shang Jianyao interrupted her. "Because we represent justice!"

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth. "This mission is definitely not specially prepared for us, nor is it provided to the Ruin Hunters that belong to Redstone Collection. To the Vigilance Church's believers, forming a relatively large team of Ruin Hunters is a very dangerous matter. It might be harder to guard against companions than against enemies. Without a large team, the townsfolk who know Helvig's strength probably won't take on this mission.

"In other words, this is a mission that is open to outsiders without any special restrictions. Then, what advantage do outsiders have over the locals?"

Long Yuehong deliberated before answering, "They are relatively objective and have no prejudice. The investigation results are trustworthy, and they are easier to control..."

He vaguely grasped something in the latter half of his sentence.

Jiang Baimian smiled and continued, "Actually, the situation is rather clear. Whether the bandits are Ashlanders or of Red River heritage, this matter only worsens Redstone Collection's internal conflict. If our investigation results point to the Ashlanders, the Red River people will have an excuse to attack."

Long Yuehong came to a realization. "Is that so... Then, what should we do? It's definitely very dangerous to be involved in such matters..."

Although he felt that each Old Task Force member could, on average, deal with three or four bandits, allowing them to deal with a bandit team that numbered more than ten, the storm very likely implicated hundreds of armed personnel. Four people—who weren't made of steel—couldn't do much.

Due to their faith in the Vigilance Church, the residents of Redstone Collection had hidden themselves, preventing Long Yuehong from determining their exact numbers. But considering the town's size, he believed that there were definitely 200 to 300 adults.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "Of course, we have to find an ally first."

"An ally?" Long Yuehong was confused.

"Think about it. Which faction would you hate most if Redstone Collection were to fall into chaos, leaving only the Red River people or the Ashlanders?" Jiang Baimian guided him patiently.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and eliminated the possibilities one by one. "The Vigilance Church?"

"Yes." Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. "As far as the Vigilance Church is concerned, it's the best situation if there's constantly small unrest but never big ones—everyone is vigilant and wary of each other. It's the best way to allow their teachings to be reflected and adhered to. Once Redstone Collection only has a single faction, the 'need' to hide will be of much lower importance.

"Otherwise, why do you think Helvig found outsiders for the investigation? Who was he trying to persuade? Without a valid reason for war, they won't be able to break through the Vigilance Church's restraints."

With this connection, Long Yuehong no longer had any doubts. He looked back at Lodge District and asked, "Shall we return to the cathedral now?"

He inexplicably felt that it was very likely that Bishop Renato had been given an opportunity by commissioning them to search for Viel. Not only would it resolve his problems, but he would also establish a connection with the personnel in charge of the firearms investigation to accentuate the Vigilance Church's existence.

"There's no rush. This is only an analysis, not a fact." Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "Let's just do a patronizing job for the next two days. Let's see who jumps out from failing to hold it in."

As she spoke, she raised her hands and stretched.

Long Yuehong was speechless.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “Seriously, they don’t know that harmony is the most precious thing. If I were a bishop, I would add the ritual of finding friends to play hide and seek at every Mass. Searching, finding, finding friends...”

As Shang Jianyao spoke, he started singing.

That Shang Jianyao Brotherhood’s Redstone Collection branch is on the cusp of establishment... Long Yuehong criticized inwardly and interrupted, “Then, why did Helvig die? They hid the firearms and framed the Ashlanders. In the end, one of their accomplices became greedy and found an opportunity to kill Helvig?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly applauded. “You finally have the qualifications to be a radio or drama scriptwriter.”

Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted over. “The premise is that very few people know about the hiding of firearms. Otherwise, there’s no way to commit the murder. Let’s see who will die next.”

At this point, she turned to look at Bai Chen and asked with a smile, “If they distribute all the firearms, with each person having a few weapons, we won’t be able to determine if they are our target goods. It’s not like there are any markings. How did you deal with it in the past?”

A piece of paper had appeared in her hand at some point in time. It was a list of firearms provided by the Hunter’s Guild. “200 United 202s, 200 Tronge assault rifles...”

Bai Chen immediately replied, “What the client cares about is whether they retrieve enough of the goods, not where the goods came from or how they came to.”

Jiang Baimian laughed. “Then, it might be faster for us to snatch it directly. Since it’s a snatch fest, why should I return them to the client?”

Shang Jianyao immediately suggested excitedly, “We can drag the goods to our client and get him to shout out the items. Those that respond will belong to him.”

Jiang Baimian shook her head with a tsk. “You’ve never seen smart machines. Not only will they respond to you, but they will also quarrel with you.”

...

It was almost noon when the Old Task Force—which had visited Helvig’s trusted aides—returned to Redstone Collection.

They were in no rush to go to the Public Security Department to consult about Helvig’s death. Instead, they found a shop named ‘Poisonless Restaurant’ according to the markers on each floor.

There were six to seven tables in the shop. Some were large, and some were small. Each had a few chairs and stools.

As expected, there was nobody inside. Not to mention the chef, even the boss couldn’t be seen.

“Sigh...” She sighed in amusement.

At the same time, Shang Jianyao strode into the kitchen and squatted in front of the stove.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

He knocked on the cabinet under the stove.

The cabinet door soon opened, and a slightly chubby man crawled out. He wore a rather fluffy cotton coat and a white apron. He wore a mask from an Old World play that had thick, white eyebrows.

As the man came out, he muttered in Ashlandic, “The food is in the freezer. You can cook them yourself or let me cook.”

Some of his black hair was standing up as if it was caused by him sleeping without drying his hair after showering.

“What do you need in exchange?” Jiang Baimian interrupted Shang Jianyao’s possible fantasy. She switched to Ashlandic.

The cook heaved a sigh of relief and thought for a moment. “I don’t lack food. Let’s exchange for First City’s gold and silver coins or weapons.”

“Weapons.” Among the supplies that Jiang Baimian exchanged using the bulletproof SUV was a batch of firearms that were easier to carry.

“You guys decide what to cook first.” The cook walked to the large freezer and lifted the lid. There were many ingredients inside, but the variety was not plentiful. The meat consisted of pork, beef, lamb, chicken, duck, and fish. The vegetables were cabbage and radishes.

“There’s quite a number,” Jiang Baimian praised sincerely.

In the Ashlands, this was one of the signs of being well-to-do. Of course, restaurants definitely had to prepare ingredients, but the amount of food they prepared reflected their ‘strength.’

The cook smiled and said, “Our restaurant mainly does food transactions. The restaurant is just a side business.”

Great, he’s also a smuggler in food and meat... As expected of Redstone Collection... Jiang Baimian muttered to herself as she began choosing. “One serving of pork ribs, braised. One chicken, something similar to potato roasted chicken. I’ll leave it to you to decide on the condiments...”

As she ordered, she saw Shang Jianyao rub his stomach as if the names of the dishes alone made him drool.

After she was done ordering, Jiang Baimian asked the cook, “What specialty dishes does your Redstone Collection have? Oh right, how should I address you?”

“Just call me Old Chen.” The cook paused for a moment before saying, “Our specialty is the mixing in of Red River cooking styles. For example, steak. It just takes too much time for us to stew it. Also, there’s more gravy for our modified pea stewed mutton. It’s suitable for a situation with plenty of rice...”

“Then, give me one serving,” Jiang Baimian said generously. “How much is that in total?”

Old Chen thought for a moment and said, “One United 202. Other pistols will do too, as well as 30 corresponding rounds.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian agreed and got Bai Chen and Long Yuehong to return to the jeep to retrieve the gun and ammunition.

As she watched Old Chen busy himself, she casually asked, “Have you heard about what happened to Helvig?”

Old Chen paused. “I heard. Heh, what’s that saying? He who is unjust is doomed to destruction!”

Chapter 190: Shaking Hands

He who is unjust is doomed to destruction? Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted around slightly as she laughed. “It seems like he has done many bad deeds.”

As Old Chen lowered his head to process the ingredients, he said in a deep voice, “He caused the deaths of countless people for his firearms business.”

Old Chen wasn’t angry at Jiang Baimian’s act of watching him cook at the kitchen door because it was completely in line with the Vigilance Church’s teachings.

One had to remain constantly vigilant and not have blind faith. One definitely had to watch the cooking process of things that needed to be eaten; they couldn’t give the cook a chance to play tricks.

As they chatted, Old Chen prepared one dish after another. Every time he finished a dish, he would pick up a piece with his chopsticks and stuff it into his mouth in front of Shang Jianyao and the others.

To this, his explanation was: “If I don’t try the food, will you dare to eat it?”

“I dare,” Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation. He had already taken out a few plastic bottles.

These were all drugs that were separately stored in the first-aid kit, including but not limited to Bio Cleansing Capsules and Neutralizers.

Old Chen was speechless when facing this customer in a monkey mask.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao's thought process was always jumpy, so he had already changed the topic. "This isn't good for the stomach."

"?" Old Chen was confused.

Jiang Baimian sighed and helped explain. "Every time a customer comes, you have to try all the dishes. You eat so much and in such bits and pieces. It's always past your meal times; it's not good for your stomach."

Old Chen pointed at his face. "How do you think I gained weight?"

In the Ashlands, not many people were qualified to be fat.

Jiang Baimian and the others were rather satisfied with this meal. Although Old Chen's culinary skills were only considered average, and he had an inclination of abusing spices, food that reached a certain standard was still delicious for the Old Task Force after they ate days of canned food, biscuits, and energy bars.

After putting down her chopsticks, Jiang Baimian smiled and praised, "This stewed mutton with peas is not bad. It also has the characteristics of Ashlands vegetables and Red River vegetables. It's the best when combined with rice."

"An exclusive recipe." Old Chen was a little pleased with himself. The way to make the soup have more gravy and be thick enough while maintaining the same taste was a technique he had slowly figured out.

After leaving Poisonless Restaurant, the Old Task Force took the escalator down to the ground floor and entered the Public Security Department.

Han Wanghuo had already returned from the area where the Ashlanders hid. He was sitting behind a desk in the innermost corner, flipping through some documents under a lamp.

If not for the two relatively deep scars on his face and the messy eyebrows that made him look rather fierce, Long Yuehong would've thought that he had returned to Pangu Biology and was meeting his parents' superior at their workplace.

"Good afternoon." Jiang Baimian greeted with a smile.

Han Wanghuo looked up at them. "Have a seat."

Shang Jianyao didn't stand on ceremony at all and immediately brought over a few chairs from elsewhere.

There was only one chair in front of Han Wanghuo's desk.

After the Old Task Force sat down, Han Wanghuo tersely grunted and asked, "Are you here to ask me about this morning's investigation?"

Han Wanghuo was staring at Jiang Baimian. This was because he had seen the Old Task Force without masks. His intuition told him that Jiang Baimian was the team leader. Of course, he had also hesitated about Shang Jianyao's position, but the other party's performance had successfully dispelled some of his thoughts.

"Yes, this is one of the requests," Jiang Baimian replied with a smile.

Han Wanghuo put down the information in his hand and leaned back in his chair. "I basically didn't gather anything. No one admitted to it, nor did I get any clues. If I weren't an Ashlander, I definitely would've been chased out."

Han Wanghuo obscurely pointed out Redstone Collection's internal conflict.

"You lost," Shang Jianyao suddenly interrupted.

"Oh?" Han Wanghuo frowned slightly in confusion.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “It’s considered a loss for you to admit that you’re an Ashlander. We’re all humans; we shouldn’t form enclaves.”

Han Wanghuo didn’t know how to respond and could only cast his gaze at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian skipped the topic and raised her second request. “Can we read some of the information?”

Han Wanghuo’s gaze suddenly turned sharp. “What information?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Cases involving deaths from shock in the past few years.”

This was to see if there was an Awakened or a murderer who could induce the corresponding cause of death.

Han Wanghuo’s gaze swept across the masks on the four Old Task Force members’ faces before saying, “You guys are smarter than I imagined. This makes me a little confused. Why do smart people like you take on the mission of retrieving stolen firearms? Can’t you tell that there’s a lot of danger hidden in this case? Or are you very confident in your strength?”

He’s also a smart person... Long Yuehong was a little impressed.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Jiang Baimian replied cleverly.

Shang Jianyao took the opportunity to help her add, “As a great villain, why should we be afraid of such dangers?”

Is this fellow’s brain abnormal? The reason their team took on the mission of retrieving stolen firearms is that their brains are abnormal? I heard that the crazier they are, the smarter they are... Han Wanghuo looked at the four people opposite him vigilantly and didn’t say a word.

After a while, he spoke to Bai Chen—who was wearing the ferocious man mask. “The magical thing is that there’s only one Intermediate Hunter in your team, and it’s you.”

“She was kidnapped by us!” Shang Jianyao explained.

Bai Chen was a little unaccustomed to this joke, but she didn't say anything given her personality.

Long Yuehong couldn't help but mock, “You can make up a more reasonable story.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped as if he were praising Long Yuehong for his tacit cooperation.

While Long Yuehong was confused, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “We kidnapped her with friendship and trust.”

“Pfft...” Jiang Baimian laughed out loud.

Bai Chen pursed her lips.

Han Wanghuo increasingly couldn't understand the group of people opposite him. He could only sigh and point at the stack of documents in front of him. “This is the information you want. In the past two years, the Public Security Department has never taken on such cases. They haven't received any news of anyone dying from shock. But if you go back three years...”

At this point, Han Wanghuo said with a serious expression, “There were four cases.”

“What if we go even further back?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Han Wanghuo shook his head. “The Public Security Department's management was very messy three years ago. There were many cases that weren't recorded, and a lot of information was lost.”

“You took office three years ago?” Jiang Baimian came to a realization.

“Yes.” Han Wanghuo nodded slightly. “However, I've asked some of my colleagues. They all said that there were definitely such cases three years ago, but they aren't sure about how many there

were. The teams that attacked Redstone Collection seem to have people with similar causes of death.”

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and the others. “Any other questions?”

Bai Chen didn’t give Shang Jianyao a chance to ‘spout nonsense’ as she asked, “Are the four cases two-plus years ago related to Helvig’s death?”

“This is what surprises me the most.” Han Wanghuo pushed the information in his hand over. “These four cases have something in common. For example, the ones who died were all Ashlanders. For example, they either did some nasty things to the Red River people or occupied a large part of the corresponding business, suppressing the Red River people. These are things Helvig didn’t do.”

Jiang Baimian took the information and casually read it as she flipped through it. “Bao Xuan was 27 years old when he died. He was a radical among the Ashlanders and had once killed three Red River people in several conflicts... He died in a basement after hiding for a long time. It was only a few days later that his wife, Wang Xian, discovered him... Cause of death: excessive shock... Investigation of the situation...

“There’s quite a number of annotations... Are you still investigating these cases?” After reading the information for a while, Jiang Baimian looked up at Han Wanghuo.

Han Wanghuo replied with a serious expression, “Since I’ve agreed to be Redstone Collection’s sheriff, I have the responsibility to capture the murderer. As for his background, abilities, and how dangerous he is, they’re not questions to be considered. I’ve never given up in the past two years.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped again.

“Aren’t you worried that it will affect your family?” Jiang Baimian asked curiously.

Han Wanghuo laughed self-deprecatingly. “As a former wilderness nomad and Ruin Hunter, I no longer have any relatives. My former companions also went elsewhere when I chose to be sheriff.”

“You don’t have a wife?” Long Yuehong acutely sensed a problem.

Han Wanghuo tersely answered in the affirmative. “I’ll consider it after I quit when I have savings and Redstone Collection’s public order is established.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Shang Jianyao had already stretched out his hand.

While Han Wanghuo was confused, Jiang Baimian sighed and explained, “You have a goal, and so does he. You are willing to make a certain sacrifice for this, and so is he. Therefore, he feels that he should shake your hand.”

...Team Leader has been infected by Shang Jianyao’s Inference Clowning... Long Yuehong found it funny.

Although Han Wanghuo still couldn’t understand the development, he could sense the other party’s kindness. He didn’t refuse and stretched out his right hand to shake Shang Jianyao’s.

Jiang Baimian didn’t give Shang Jianyao any more freedom to perform and asked, “In other words, you suspect that Helvig’s death is different from the previous cases?”

This wasn’t impossible. The previous murderer had been quiet for more than two years, so similar Awakened might’ve appeared recently. The premise was that ‘shock’ was in the Kalendaria—Eidolon Nun’s domain and within the Vigilance Church’s sphere of influence. Otherwise, the probability was very low.

This remained unconfirmed.

“Yes.” Han Wanghuo pushed another stack of paper over. “This is my list of suspects; They all have conflicts of interest with Helvig.”

Jiang Baimian took it and realized that the first one read: “Carl Stlee, Mr. DiMarco’s butler and the largest arms dealer in Redstone Collection, is vying with Helvig for Lehman...”

She scanned the area and asked with a smile, “Do you have a photocopier? We want to make a copy and take our time reading it.”

Han Wanghuo laughed. “One can.”

As one of United Industries’ smuggling nodes, they didn’t lack frequently seen machines, but they just weren’t that common.

After getting the information and leaving the Public Security Department, Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion. “I previously neglected one thing: Helvig might’ve set up a mission to find outsiders and gain the Vigilance Church’s trust. It might not be to incite conflict and deal with the Ashlanders. It might also be to deal with the Underground Ark or DiMarco... Haha, this is all a guess. We still have to carry out further investigations.”

Long Yuehong then asked Jiang Baimian, “Team Leader, where should we investigate next?”

Jiang Baimian replied in amusement, “Didn’t I say? We’ll just slack off for two days and see who will come looking for us apart from Theresa.”

As she spoke, she stretched again. “Let’s go back and take an afternoon nap. Let Shang Jianyao make more attempts at conquering that island.”