

Ad Infinitum 201

Chapter 201: “Face Paralysis”

Behind the door, Brand was rather surprised. “Helvig is dead?”

Without waiting for Han Wanghuo’s answer, he laughed and said, “Unfortunately, I’ve already become a Tenebrarum. Otherwise, I really should celebrate with a cup of First City’s finest wine.”

Helvig is so detestable? Long Yuehong was speechless.

Brand quickly stopped laughing and sighed. “I haven’t gone out since I entered this room. Harbinger Song can testify in this regard.”

Song He nodded. “Swearing to become a Tenebrarum implies that one will forever belong to the darkness; they are to be separate from the world. This is a promise made in front of the Kalendaria; violation is equivalent to blasphemy. I believe Brand won’t do that.”

He paused and said, “My room is just a little ahead. I never noticed Brand leaving.”

Song He was using his reputation as a guarantee, and he was one of the most trustworthy people in Redstone Collection.

“Then, I have no problems.” Han Wanghuo chose to believe him.

Tan Jie didn’t say a word.

Behind the door, Brand took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “There are many people who hate Helvig. It’s not too strange for an Awakened to occasionally appear among them. In addition, DiMarco from underground is also a suspect. Leave; I can’t control my emotions any longer.”

Han Wanghuo glanced at Tan Jie and saw that he didn’t object. He then said, “Let’s return to the hall first.”

Under Song He’s guidance, they walked away from the room where Brand cloistered himself.

Jiang Baimian looked back, and there was only silence behind the dark-red wooden door.

After entering the hall, Baz was the first to sigh with emotion. “I didn’t expect that Brand was the one who did those things back then. The Awakened are really terrifying.”

As Helvig’s trusted aide, he also knew a lot about Awakened. However, he had never gained such a deep understanding of them like today.

Song He looked at Baz and nodded slightly. “Continue searching for Viel.”

Baz wasn’t stupid; he understood that the Harbinger didn’t want him to hear the subsequent conversation. Therefore, he waved at Shang Jianyao and smiled. “I have to defeat Viel this time.”

With that said, he wore that iron-black mask.

“All the best!” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely. He didn’t hide his urge to participate.

After Baz left the hall, Song He switched to Ashlandic and said to Tan Jie, “You can come to seek revenge on Brand at any time. You just need to inform me in advance.”

“Alright, Harbinger,” Tan Jie replied calmly. “I need to go back and discuss it with them.”

Song He then asked, “When did you awaken?”

“More than a year ago,” Tan Jie replied frankly.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao interrupted. “Is being emotionless the price you paid?”

“How many times have I told you? You can’t ask what the price an Awakened paid is!” Jiang Baimian immediately reprimanded Shang Jianyao. “He clearly had emotions when facing Brand just now.”

Team Leader, I think you're just putting on a show with Shang Jianyao... Long Yuehong cursed silently. He turned his head to look at Bai Chen and realized that there was a smile on his petite companion's lips.

Tan Jie fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "My price can't be targeted. You can discuss it as you wish. What I paid with was my ability to make expressions."

"No wonder..." Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. He then became excited and actively gave suggestions. "You can wear a bunch of masks with different expressions. When you need to smile, wear a smiling mask. When you need to cry, wear a crying mask."

This was the best solution he came up with after combining it with Redstone Collection's folklore.

Jiang Baimian immediately thought of a term from the Old World: Emoji pack.

Although the definition of this term was quite different from Shang Jianyao's description, she felt that the two were somewhat similar.

"I don't have a mental illness." Tan Jie tactfully rejected Shang Jianyao's suggestion.

Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up as he said, "You are indeed good at Provocation!"

Tan Jie's eyes revealed a slightly strange expression as he ignored the fellow.

Jiang Baimian saw that the Ashlander was rather friendly by his propensity to answer any question and decided to remind him. "I heard that the price paid will also increase when an Awakened's abilities become stronger. Being incapable of producing expressions doesn't seem dangerous, but it's hard to say when you progress further."

"Yes." Song He confirmed. He looked at Tan Jie—who wasn't wearing a mask—and said, "You should've come to the cathedral earlier to listen to the bishop's sermon. This can allow you to grasp more general knowledge regarding the Awakened and avoid unnecessary risks. It's very easy for problems to arise if you trial and error by yourself."

As if sensing Song He's friendliness, Tan Jie fell silent for a moment before saying, "Back then, the aftermath of the previous cases hadn't subsided. I felt that the Church was protecting the Red River people and didn't want to expose their secrets."

"Fortunately, you don't have abilities in the Terror domain; otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to explain away Helvig's death," Song He said with a kind sigh.

"Why?" Shang Jianyao's curiosity was covered by the monkey mask.

Song He glanced at him, smiled, and didn't answer.

From the looks of it, this is secret knowledge that's passed on within the Vigilance Church... Can a person with the ability of Provocation not awaken Extreme Terror at the same time? Or is this a deduction based on the corresponding price? Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered to scold Shang Jianyao. Her thoughts raced as she analyzed the situation.

Song He looked at Tan Jie and calmly said, "Since you are already an Awakened, you can choose to become a clergyman of the Church or maintain your current status. This won't prevent you from listening to the bishop's sermon and grasping the corresponding knowledge."

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao raised his hand and put it down again, looking very hesitant.

Tan Jie thought for a few seconds and replied, "I'll consider it."

After settling Tan Jie's matter, Song He turned to look at Han Wanghuo. "There's movement from the merfolk and mountain monsters?"

Han Wanghuo nodded solemnly. "I've sent people to investigate. They show signs of an alliance. Before I came to the cathedral, I had already arranged for the town guards to set up the first and second lines of defense."

Song He nodded and sighed. "Actually, with such a large city ruin and so many farmlands that are still open for cultivation, it won't have much of an impact on the townsfolk's lives if they accommodate a few Subhuman communities. Unfortunately, the hatred between the two parties has already been sown, and it has become increasingly firm after being watered with blood."

Upon sensing Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and the others' gazes, Song He laughed self-deprecatingly. "In front of the Kalendaria, all living beings are equal. As Eidolon Nun's clergy, merfolk and mountain monsters can also become qualified believers in my eyes. However, I'm a little timid. I don't dare to enter the Subhuman settlement to preach alone."

Han Wanghuo fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "I heard that this place was even messier when you first came to Redstone Collection. There were gunfights almost every day. You aren't timid at all."

Song He laughed. "Don't mistake my youthful bravado for bravery. I had just registered my faith in Eidolon Nun then; all I wanted to do was show my piousness. But now, there's a saying that goes: the older one is, the more timid they are."

After ending the topic on Subhumans, Han Wanghuo and Tan Jie bade farewell and left.

As the Old Task Force followed outside, Shang Jianyao suddenly looked back. "One last question: Why is Viel still in the cathedral?"

He paid special attention to this hide-and-seek champion.

Song He knew that they were foreign Ruin Hunters and replied casually, "This is the reward for every Mass's victor: they can stay in the cathedral for a period of time, bathe in the Goddess's grace, and listen to the teachings."

Jiang Baimian—who was wearing a graceful monk mask—immediately raised her eyebrows.

Shang Jianyao meant it when he said that it was the last question. He didn't stay any longer and left the Vigilance Cathedral.

Han Wanghuo stopped in front of his derelict SUV and asked the Qian Bai Team, "I'm going to the Ashlanders. What about you?"

Tan Jie stood by the side and watched expressionlessly.

"We'll continue investigating Helvig's death," Jiang Baimian replied.

Han Wanghuo nodded. “Be careful then. The merfolk and mountain monsters might attack the town at any moment.”

“Thank you,” Jiang Baimian replied politely.

After watching Han Wanghuo and Tan Jie drive away, the Old Task Force got into their jeep.

Jiang Baimian sat in the passenger seat. As she signaled for Bai Chen to start the car, she grunted. “From the looks of it, it’s unlikely that Helvig was killed by Anhebus.”

Long Yuehong didn’t ask why and tried to understand his team leader’s train of thought. “Because Anhebus wasn’t too enthusiastic about silencing Baz?”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian expressed her affirmation. “If Anhebus really killed Helvig, he would definitely eliminate Baz and the others quickly. He wouldn’t let the secret be exposed at all. When we brought Baz to the cathedral, we didn’t encounter any obstruction. It took some time before Lopez arrived with his people.

“This means that Anhebus probably sent his subordinates to ask Baz and the others about the exact situation because Helvig had suddenly died. He had felt uneasy.”

Bai Chen—who was driving—looked ahead and said, “It’s more like what Brand said. Helvig’s enemies or DiMarco’s people did it.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and sighed. “Forget it. This isn’t the problem that needs the most attention right now. The focus now is on what to do with the batch of firearms. If Anhebus really donates them to the town guards, will it count as us completing the mission?”

Long Yuehong hesitated and said, “I don’t think so.”

“As long as Anhebus doesn’t say that it’s the batch of firearms that Helvig lost, it definitely doesn’t count,” Bai Chen replied firmly.

And Anhebus was not stupid.

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth. “Shall we think of a way to obtain that batch of firearms and complete the mission first?”

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and deliberated. “Based on the present situation, Redstone Collection’s town guards really need this batch of firearms.”

“No problem. After we get half, we’ll donate this half and the supplies we previously saved to the town guards. We’ll also negotiate to have them give us a military exoskeleton after we resolve the problem regarding the merfolk and mountain monsters. When the time comes, the Subhumans will be severely injured. Redstone Collection will temporarily have no external enemies, and there will be plenty of time to get a new one from United Industries. This will be Anhebus’s chance to atone for his crimes.” Jiang Baimian revealed her plan. “Perfect!”

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily. “Anhebus is going to donate that batch of firearms to the town guards anyway, so between donating it to the town guards and us, it doesn’t make an actual difference to him.”

“Besides, Anhebus might not be willing to donate it to the town guards. He might have other solutions.” Jiang Baimian clapped her hands and said, “Let’s go to the lakeside villa and find an opportunity to complete the mission.”

Shang Jianyao echoed excitedly, “Let’s stir shit up! Let’s stir shit up!”

Chapter 202: Battle Strategy

Jiang Baimian looked down at the underground parking lot’s entrance from the top of a building relatively close to the lakeside villa.

“I just reconnoitered with Shang Jianyao. There are many people inside; this means that Anhebus lives here today.”

“You can’t blindly believe such a claim.” Shang Jianyao seized the opportunity to say this.

Long Yuehong wanted to agree with him with “yeah, yeah,” but he ultimately restrained himself.

Jiang Baimian didn’t lose her temper and took the opportunity to educate her team members. “Under normal circumstances, I definitely wouldn’t dare make such a judgment. With the Redstone

townsfolk's vigilance and their own conditions, it's very likely that Anhebus will gather a portion of his subordinates somewhere and disguise himself as being there.

"But things are different now. Baz exposed his and Helvig's plot and made him take the blame for colluding with the mountain monsters and betraying Redstone Collection. We all know that this is true. Under this premise, as a believer of Eidolon Nun, Anhebus will definitely lack a sense of security and be constantly vigilant against accidents.

"Based on this logic, Anhebus will definitely strengthen the defense around him while he seeks a solution. Once something goes wrong, he will rely on numbers to stall for time and take the opportunity to escape Redstone Collection."

Bai Chen echoed, "The more afraid a normal human is, the more they will keep all the strength they can wield by their side."

Long Yuehong gradually understood. "At a time like this, Anhebus definitely won't dare to scatter his subordinates and get them to disguise themselves elsewhere. This is because he's not on guard against us but the Vigilance Church. There's a high chance that the people around him will directly betray his hiding spot, easily destroying his plans. In that case, he might as well keep everyone by his side. At the very least, he can compel some of them to stall for time."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "That's about it."

Shang Jianyao raised another possibility. "Anhebus can put his subordinates from Redstone Collection in one place and hide himself and the foreign refugees in another. Those refugees shouldn't be believers of Eidolon Nun, so they won't betray him."

"That's right." Jiang Baimian nodded in approval. "If Anhebus isn't a resident of Redstone Collection and a parishioner of the Vigilance Church, he might very well choose to do so. But with his vigilance, will he be completely at ease with the foreign refugees? It's not like he can make 'friends' like you and make Lopez trustworthy."

Bai Chen recalled and said, "I've seen too many small factions that rely very much on mercenaries. The best outcome is for them to be robbed by the mercenaries before being protected."

Yes, if Anhebus was prepared to escape, he would definitely bring along the supplies he had accumulated over the years. Why didn't the foreign refugees directly snatch from him and leave Redstone Collection to go elsewhere? The Ashlands is huge, and he has so many supplies in his

hands. There are plenty of places for him to survive in... Long Yuehong confirmed what choices Anhebus wouldn't make after some thought.

"Alright." Jiang Baimian clapped her hands. "We'll take turns monitoring the lakeside parking lot and observe the changes while waiting for an opportunity."

As she spoke, she picked up the military binoculars beside her and handed them to Long Yuehong. "You first."

Long Yuehong excitedly took the binoculars. As he walked to the railing where the window frame had fallen, he asked in confusion, "Why don't we directly get Shang Jianyao to go knock on their door and 'make friends' with Anhebus? In any case, that batch of firearms has already become a hot potato. It's better to leave it to us to deal with."

Jiang Baimian smiled. "This is to prevent you from relying too much on Shang Jianyao's abilities. Try your best to use normal methods if you can resolve them using normal methods. This can effectively improve the lot of you. Besides, you've seen the chaos in Redstone Collection. It's good to have more trump cards."

Team Leader, there's no need to say 'the lot of you.' You can directly say my electronic card number... Long Yuehong replied silently in his heart.

While he monitored the lakeside parking lot, Jiang Baimian spoke to Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen. "Find a place to sit down and conserve your energy."

The sky gradually darkened after repeated shifts, and the winter night arrived early.

The Old Task Force had already changed their binoculars and started using night-vision goggles.

Around 10 p.m., Bai Chen—who was in charge of surveillance—whispered, "There's movement."

She didn't deliberately raise her voice because she knew that her team leader could determine the situation by observing Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's reactions.

As expected, Jiang Baimian followed when Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao walked to the window.

With the help of the night-vision goggles that allowed them to see into the distance, they realized that two cars had driven out of the lakeside parking lot.

One was the earthen-yellow, all-terrain vehicle that Lopez had previously been in, and the other was a light truck with red and black colors.

The two cars drove east of the city ruin along the relatively intact roads.

Jiang Baimian guessed thoughtfully, “Are they getting the foreign refugees to retrieve that batch of firearms in preparation to donate them to the town guards?”

“Shall we chase after them?” Long Yuehong was a little excited.

They could find the batch of firearms if they tailed them. If they found the firearms, they would have a chance to exchange them for a military exoskeleton. If they exchanged for a military exoskeleton, it would greatly enhance his survivability.

Jiang Baimian laughed. “How? If we go downstairs now, they would’ve driven far away and escaped my range.”

As she spoke, she sighed. “Unfortunately, I didn’t exchange for a drone with Xu Liyan back in Weed City. Otherwise, things would’ve been much simpler.”

Back then, they had wanted to save up supplies to exchange for a military exoskeleton. A drone was useless to the Old Task Force most of the time.

Long Yuehong asked in concern, “Then, what should we do?”

“Find a place to ambush them and wait for their return.” Jiang Baimian had long thought of a plan.

Long Yuehong nodded before showing his confusion. “But there’s more than one road to the lakeside parking lot.”

Nobody stipulated that the foreign refugees had to return the way they came. It was more likely that they were sufficiently vigilant and would switch paths for their return trip.

“This depends on your running speed.” Shang Jianyao looked like he wanted to race Long Yuehong.

Uh, does this mean that we should observe the foreign refugees’ return route in advance from the high tower before running down and speedily set up an ambush? Long Yuehong guessed Shang Jianyao’s thoughts.

After a few seconds, he reacted. “Why don’t we leave one person upstairs and set up ambushes with the other three!?”

We have walkie-talkies! How simple is this!?

“That’s a plan, but we have to consider the possibility of them constantly changing their route. In that case, we still have to keep running around according to our latest observations.” Jiang Baimian smiled. “There are better solutions now.”

Without waiting for Long Yuehong to ask, she directly said, “We’ll ambush outside the lakeside parking lot entrance. No matter which route they take, they have to enter the underground parking lot through the entrance.”

Long Yuehong stammered, “B-but there are many of Anhebus’s subordinates hiding around the entrance. W-we don’t have enough manpower.”

This was the enemy’s base camp! Who would ambush at the other party’s headquarters?

Jiang Baimian smiled. “That will have to depend on battle strategy. Strategies are schemes that come from thinking.”

...

After confirming that the all-terrain vehicle and light truck were returning to the lakeside area, the Old Task Force members followed Jiang Baimian’s instructions and descended from the tall building. They then infiltrated a low building not far from the underground parking lot.

Although this building wasn't destroyed by the war, it clearly lacked subsequent maintenance. Its walls were mottled, and glass was everywhere.

"Remember your mission?" Jiang Baimian asked again.

Of course, she was asking Long Yuehong while looking at him.

"Yes," Long Yuehong replied with a suppressed voice as he carried the Death rocket launcher. He had already roughly understood his team leader's plan and found it magical and unbelievable. But after careful thought, he realized that it matched the reality of Redstone Collection and Anhebus's gang. It was a plan that most likely wouldn't work in other places, but it had a high chance of being effective here.

Jiang Baimian then looked around. "Take your positions!"

After they entered their designated positions, time seemed to slow down. The clouds in the sky moved bit by bit, making the ground sometimes dark and sometimes bright.

In the yellow all-terrain vehicle, Lopez held the walkie-talkie and made the light truck behind him change its route.

This was his third time changing paths in order to avoid any possible ambush.

Although he was tall and muscular and looked like a barbarian with more muscles than brains, this was only superficial. Furthermore, years of formal training and a refugee lifestyle had given him sufficient experience to know what to do depending on the occasion.

After driving for a few minutes, the lakeside area entered his sights.

Upon seeing the underground parking lot's entrance approaching, Lopez put down the walkie-talkie and leaned back in the passenger seat. He then heaved a sigh of relief.

They were safe here. There were countless hidden sentries here, and the number of armed personnel in the underground parking lot was astonishing.

On the third floor of the low building to the left of the vehicle, Bai Chen wore night-vision goggles and had an Orange rifle mounted as she aimed at the red-and-black light truck.

After calculating the distance, she pulled the trigger.

With a puff, the bullet accurately drilled into the light truck's front wheel.

The tire burst and deflated. The truck—which was originally driving normally—suddenly tilted, making the driver frantically spin the wheel.

With a screeching sound, the truck stopped.

In the yellow, all-terrain vehicle ahead, Lopez was shocked and angry. He raised his light machine gun.

The hidden sentries in the lakeside parking lot also reacted.

At this moment, a voice that didn't sound like a human's sounded from the right side of the short building.

“I'm the Church's Harbinger, here for the matter of Anhebus's collusion with the mountain monsters! We have completed the investigations. Anhebus committed the act because he was deceived by foreign refugees. The evidence is on that truck! All Redstone townsfolk, give up resisting and standby to await orders!”

Ever since Lopez returned from the cathedral at noon, Baz's accusation had gradually spread among the Redstone townsfolk under Anhebus. They didn't blindly believe it, but they didn't blindly not believe it either.

At this moment, they hesitated when they heard the loudspeaker repeatedly play the content.

As Eidolon Nun's believers, they clearly trusted the Church more and were more willing to listen to the bishop and Harbinger. Furthermore, they were only dealing with foreign refugees, not themselves.

Lopez's mind buzzed when he heard the radio's contents. He suspected that Anhebus had betrayed them and wanted to use them as scapegoats!

Without hesitation, Lopez pushed open the door, held the light machine gun, and called for the other foreign refugees to charge toward the loudspeaker.

To them, there were only two choices: The first was to disperse the group of ambushers and identify them as the Ashlanders who were impersonating the Church's troops—it didn't matter if it wasn't the case. It was to buy time!

The second was to break out of the encirclement immediately and drive away.

In his haste, Lopez instinctively believed that they were most likely fake due to the fact that the Harbinger didn't report his name. Therefore, he chose the first option.

Chapter 203: Slowly and Smugly

Long Yuehong hid in the attached building of the short building and saw the giant Lopez—wrapped in glistening yellow bullets—holding a light machine gun and a group of foreign refugees armed to the teeth. As he provided suppressive fire, he rushed to the main door and felt considerable pressure.

He half-kneeled there with the Death rocket launcher on his shoulder. He took a deep breath and fired a projectile at the group of outsiders according to his team leader's instructions.

His goal wasn't to kill the target group on a large scale. After all, there was no deep grudge between the two parties. His mission was to 'intimidate' them, divide them, and scatter them.

Of course, Jiang Baimian also told Long Yuehong that he should prioritize his own safety in an emergency situation. He didn't have to worry about whether he killed anyone or the number of confirmed kills.

Boom!

Crimson flames surged like blooming flowers.

As the powerful shockwave blasted out, the foreign refugees reacted and searched for cover.

Long Yuehong calmly reloaded and fired another projectile at the area.

Amidst the loud explosions, Bai Chen fired several rounds with ease.

This shattered the yellow, all-terrain vehicle's driver seat windows, forcing the driver inside to lower his body, crawl out from the other side, and hide behind the tires.

While Bai Chen switched targets to the light truck, the driver quickly changed position.

After a few shots, there was nobody around the two cars. They either tried to counterattack or fled elsewhere in the city ruin under the night's cover.

In the lakeside parking lot, Anhebus—who had a thick beard that made him look like he was wearing a mask—already knew what was happening outside.

He had heard the voice repeatedly echoing through the loudspeaker.

“It's fake, it's fake!” Anhebus instinctively denied it. He wanted to get a group of trusted aides to reinforce Lopez and the others and defeat the attackers. But as his thoughts raced, a sentence flashed in his mind: Anhebus only did this because he was deceived by the foreign refugees...

Anhebus's eyes flickered. He hesitated for a long time but didn't give the order.

At this moment, in the area overseen by the Death rocket launcher, Lopez finally broke away from the zone covered by the ordnance and rushed into the low building with his agile skills and sufficient courage.

“I'm the Church's Harbinger, here for the matter of Anhebus's collusion with the mountain monsters...”

The person speaking through the loudspeaker continued to repeat himself, his voice sending reverberations across the lakeside.

Lopez's expression warped. He held the light machine gun and ran toward the sound.

He didn't just hate the other party, but he felt that he had to finish off the target first and use the target's loudspeaker to explain himself in order to escape the current predicament.

After circling around a wall, the sound echoing in Lopez's ears became louder.

He looked over, but he didn't see anyone.

On a pile of broken bricks and tiles, a small black speaker with a blue bottom stood quietly. It constantly broadcasted: "I'm the Church's Harbinger..."

Lopez's pupils suddenly dilated, and the hair on his back instantly stood on end. At this moment, only one thought echoed in his mind: A trap!

Traps often meant terrifying ambushes!

Ignoring the light machine gun in his hand, Lopez didn't hesitate to pounce to the side and scrambled away from the speaker.

During this process, he gave up on the light machine gun because he couldn't hold onto it. However, the concentrated gunfire and loud explosions that he expected didn't sound until he returned to the entrance hall.

In confusion, Lopez hid behind a bunker. As he drew the two United 202 pistols at his waist, he looked at the spot where he had just fled from.

The next second, he saw a figure descend from the sky and land gently on the ground.

This figure wore a short, dark-blue down jacket and a pair of pants made of a thick, blue twill. He wore a smug monkey mask and curled his finger at Lopez's hiding spot. "Are you still holding a grudge over the previous combat outcome, believing that I won against you by launching a sneak attack? Now, I'll give you a chance to prove your point."

Are you crazy!? Lopez was angry and amused. He found it funny that the other party was clearly hiding high above, allowing him to see the small, black speaker with the blue bottom. During his

momentary flabbergasting, the other party could've shot him a few times using a sneak attack. In the end, the other party didn't do anything and instead requested to engage in a fair fight.

This didn't seem like something a normal human would have in their minds.

Lopez was angry because the other party was belittling him. Do you really think the gun in my hand is a toy? You may be crazy, but do you think I'll join you in your madness?

Without a word, Lopez raised his hands and repeatedly pulled the triggers at the fellow in the monkey mask.

Just as he moved his hand, Shang Jianyao had already begun running to the side.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The bullets dragged out a firing line behind Shang Jianyao, but they failed to catch up to him before coming to a halt at the wall.

Lopez had already determined that this was a trap. The Vigilance Church had no intention of dealing with foreign refugees like them. Therefore, he didn't want to stay any longer.

He took the opportunity to turn around and rush out of the building to hide elsewhere. He would explain to Anhebus after the attackers retreated. He knew that he couldn't convince Anhebus's Redstone townsfolk no matter what he said before this.

They would definitely suspect the identity of the attacker, but they wouldn't blindly believe in him.

Damn customs! As Lopez cursed, he ran out along the path that blocked his hunched figure.

Just as he reached the door, a figure suddenly jumped down from the second floor; it was wearing a furry mask with a pointy mouth.

Lopez was just about to raise his two guns when the other party twisted his waist and swung his legs, producing the sound of a lashing whip.

Bam!

Lopez didn't have the time to fire. He could only block with his arms.

His two United 202s were kicked away as he staggered a few steps to the side.

The person that jumped down from the second floor was Shang Jianyao, who had previously dodged the gunshots. After circling around the wall, he ran up the stairs and intercepted Lopez in time with his perception.

Shang Jianyao didn't stop. He rushed in front of Lopez and spread his arms. Sometimes he threw a side hook, sometimes he delivered a straight punch, sometimes he clenched his fists and pummeled down like a hammer, and sometimes he swung his arms like a whip.

This series of attacks exhausted Lopez. His eyes were filled with the smug monkey mask that kept darting around.

Finally, he felt that the other party's attack had softened to a certain extent. It was as if the other party had reached his limit and was catching a breather.

Lopez—who had been suppressed—took the opportunity to unleash a violent combo punch.

Upon seeing that the fellow in the monkey mask was forced to retreat repeatedly and could only muster parries, his attacks became increasingly ferocious.

After a long period of attacks, Lopez reached his physical limit and slowed down.

Oh no! He knew that something was amiss and quickly retreated.

Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have allowed himself to fall into such a situation and would adjust in advance. However, he had been too anxious just now.

Just as Lopez was about to retreat, Shang Jianyao had already come in front of him. He stretched his arms, gripped his joints, and tripped him.

Thud!

Lopez slammed onto the ground, and he saw stars.

Shang Jianyao quickly bent down and completely restrained the Yargai.

“You lost again,” Shang Jianyao announced with a smile.

The next second, Lopez felt a heavy blow behind his ear. His vision immediately turned black as he lost consciousness.

Before he fainted, he heard the fellow in the monkey mask sigh. “What a pity...”

...

Outside the short building, Long Yuehong slowed down the frequency of firing the Death rocket launcher when he saw that a large number of foreign refugees had given up on charging and were fleeing.

This made the remaining two to three people feel that he had run out of ammunition. They boldly left their cover and approached him.

Long Yuehong’s heart instinctively tightened before he found it funny.

He calmly put down the Death rocket launcher, picked up the Berserker assault rifle, and fired.

Amidst the gunfire, the foreign refugees finally recognized the ‘reality’ of the situation. They stopped resisting stubbornly and fled into the distance.

Long Yuehong didn’t stop attacking. He pulled the trigger, aiming at deserted areas in a scattered manner; he also fired a rocket occasionally.

This made Anhebus’s subordinates in the lakeside parking lot instinctively believe that the battle hadn’t ended. For a moment, nobody had any questions.

At this moment, a figure bent down and rushed to the earthen-yellow, all-terrain vehicle from behind the evergreen trees at the side of the short building.

This figure was Jiang Baimian—who was wearing a grayish-blue camouflage uniform and a graceful monk mask.

Through the shattered glass, Jiang Baimian slowly opened the door and sat inside. She then used the key left behind by the driver to start the vehicle and drove it to the back of the light truck.

With the truck's cover, she jumped off the all-terrain vehicle. With the inhuman strength afforded to her by her left arm, Jiang Baimian pulled the brown wooden crates filled with weapons off the truck and stuffed them into the all-terrain vehicle.

Towards the end, even the passenger seat had three boxes stacked atop it—the vehicle barely managed to carry most of the firearms. Only some of the less valuable ones were left in their original spots.

After transferring the items, Jiang Baimian looked back at the lakeside parking lot and sat in the driver's seat with a smile. She then drove the yellow all-terrain vehicle and leisurely left the scene.

In fact, it would be easier to drive the truck directly. However, she was worried that the other party's driver would drive the truck away in agitation. Therefore, the first thing she got Bai Chen to do was blow up the truck's tire.

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen—who was wearing her night-vision goggles—immediately put away her Orange rifle, took out her walkie-talkie, and pressed the button. "Retreat."

Soon, the gunshots, explosions, and 'broadcast' by the lakeside subsided.

Upon seeing that the Vigilance Church's troops didn't appear again, Anhebus and his subordinates finally confirmed that they had been deceived.

...

At the agreed rendezvous point, Jiang Baimian only waited for about a minute before she saw the military-green jeep belonging to the Old Task Force.

“Team Leader, Shang Jianyao brought Lopez along.” Long Yuehong reported the situation through the walkie-talkie.

Shang Jianyao immediately emphasized, “I didn’t use my abilities!”

“Not bad,” Jiang Baimian praised.

If he had used his abilities, it would’ve been perfectly normal for Shang Jianyao to capture Lopez alive. However, it was definitely worthy of praise if he relied solely on a setup and combat.

Lopez wasn’t ordinary.

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian added, “Capturing Lopez is a good thing. It will save us a lot of effort in the future.”

Long Yuehong asked, “Team Leader, where are we going next? Will it be unsafe to return to the hotel camp? When Anhebus reacts and confirms our identities, will he take revenge during the night?”

Jiang Baimian immediately laughed. “Let’s go to the Vigilance Cathedral!”

Chapter 204: Confession

In the underground parking lot by the lake.

Anhebus’s trusted aide had already returned and was briefing him on the situation. “The all-terrain vehicle has been driven away, and the firearms in the truck are basically gone...”

Upon hearing this, Anhebus came to a realization. The true goal of the ‘massive attack’ was to snatch away the batch of firearms! Everything about eliminating foreign refugees and our collusion with the mountain monsters was fake! Those people went one big circle just for that batch of firearms!

“Damn it!” Anhebus cursed.

His trusted aide—who had gone out to investigate the situation—had also roughly figured out the truth. He asked in confusion, “Boss, who could have done it? The Ashlanders? DiMarco’s butler?”

Anhebus thought for a moment and said, “It’s not them. If it were them, they would directly target me.”

After settling Anhebus, would they be afraid of not getting the batch of firearms? There were even more supplies in store for them and countless other benefits!

Anhebus’s trusted aide agreed with his boss’s judgment. “Who could it be?”

“In Redstone Collection, there are only three groups that value the batch of firearms more than internal strife.” Anhebus’s brain was definitely not bad. As he thought, he said, “First, it’s Lehman and the others. Second, it’s Theresa. Third, it’s the Ruin Hunter team that took on the mission.”

Lehman was a smuggler from United Industries. He was the one who sold the batch of firearms to Helvig.

“Before we determine a winner, Lehman won’t easily state his stand. It’s impossible for him to move his home to Redstone Collection unless he has already completely sided with the Ashlanders or DiMarco’s butler. But this way, his focus will also be on attacking us.” Anhebus’s trusted aide analyzed the situation, following his boss’s train of thought. “Helvig’s subordinates don’t have a leader now, so it’s unlikely that they can do such a thing.”

Anhebus—whose beard was thick like a natural mask—nodded slightly. “From the looks of it, it can only be the Ruin Hunter team.” With Han Wanghuo setting up the defense line, the foreign Subhumans and bandits could be discounted.

“They sure are brave...” Anhebus’s trusted aide suddenly fell silent after saying that. He had recalled the corresponding information.

Anhebus asked in confusion, “What’s wrong?”

He previously didn't mind the Ruin Hunters who had taken on the mission to retrieve the firearms. As the team didn't consist of many people and didn't pose any threat to him, he directly handed them over to Lopez to handle.

From the looks of it, he had to reevaluate this team's strength.

Yes, they seem to have beaten up Lopez in the afternoon. Not only do they have some confidence, but they also like to take risks... It's no wonder they dared to launch an attack suddenly and snatch the firearms... Anhebus felt enlightened.

At this moment, his trusted aide stammered, "Th-they only ha-have four people."

"What? Anhebus suspected his ears. "Four people?"

With just four people, they dared to snatch firearms in front of dozens of armed personnel right under my nose? And they had succeeded!

From the situation and the final result, Anhebus thought there would be at least ten people.

"Yes, only four." Anhebus's trusted aide swallowed his saliva with difficulty. "I've asked the Hunter's Guild. It's recently winter. Apart from them, there aren't any foreign Ruin Hunters. It's unlikely that they can find helpers."

He had just thought that this Ruin Hunter team was gutsy, but from the looks of it, it couldn't be described as courage. They were simply crazy!

The four of them easily robbed the firearms under the deterrence of dozens of armed personnel at their headquarters!

Anhebus was momentarily speechless. He had never encountered such a thing in his life.

After dozens of seconds, he asked, "Are there really only four people?"

His trusted aide nodded heavily.

Anhebus asked, "What about Lopez and the others? How many died?"

"I-I don't think anyone died. Th-they all ran away." Anhebus's trusted aide became more and more shocked as he spoke.

Apart from the madness, the entire matter also revealed a sense of absurdity.

Anhebus fell silent for a long time before saying, "That Hunter team has experts who play with people's minds and hearts. The most important part of this play is that announcement. It magnified our internal suspicions, fears, and precautions to the extreme. It also cleverly utilized everyone's habit of being too vigilant and not blindly believing.

"After that announcement, the townsfolk felt that it was possible that they were really armed personnel sent by the Church. They suspected that the foreign refugees were indeed colluding with the mountain monsters, and the 'extermination' didn't eat into their interests. Lopez and the others definitely believed that I had betrayed them and wanted to use them as scapegoats. They naturally wouldn't stop the enemy with all their might...

"Be it in terms of numbers or firepower, we are far stronger than them. But after what they did, we became as fragile as a dilapidated house. We collapsed upon a mere touch..."

He didn't mention his thoughts back then. Those thoughts weren't suitable to be exposed to his subordinates.

His trusted aide was shocked and angry. "Do they think they can be fearless in Redstone Collection by playing with people's hearts? Boss, should we take revenge and let them know that the most important thing in the Ashlands is strength?"

Anhebus tersely acknowledged it. "We'll see if an opportunity crops up. However, there's something else to do now."

"What?" His trusted aide was a little confused. "Shouldn't we be going all out now to retrieve that batch of firearms?"

Anhebus picked up a white mask with black eyes and wore it. "To the Vigilance Cathedral."

With that said, he instructed in a deep voice, “Find Lopez and the others and kill them!”

...

Outside the fortress-like Vigilance Cathedral, Long Yuehong escorted the awakened Lopez out of the jeep.

Long Yuehong looked at the cardboard boxes that filled every space in the vehicle and felt something called ‘happiness’ in his heart. He still found it surreal, believing that they had succeeded too easily.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—had already rushed to the Vigilance Cathedral’s tightly shut door and slammed it.

The door soon opened.

A cathedral guard in a black cloak held a submachine gun and asked warily, “What’s the matter?”

“Something very important,” Shang Jianyao emphasized seriously. “We’re looking for Harbinger Song.”

Clunk!

The door closed in front of him.

After a few minutes, Song He—who wasn’t wearing a mask—personally opened the slightly heavy door and looked around.

His gaze quickly landed on the handcuffed Lopez and the yellow all-terrain vehicle. After some thought, Song He asked, “Everyone, did he attack you?”

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, “We attacked them and retrieved that batch of firearms.”

Song He's gaze swept between them a few times. "You tracked Lopez and found that batch of firearms?"

He gave an explanation based on his understanding.

"Something like that." Jiang Baimian stopped Shang Jianyao's retort and said loudly, "Harbinger Song, we want to stay in the cathedral for the night. We will return the firearms tomorrow and complete the mission. We will also discuss a deal with the town guards."

Song He smiled in enlightenment. "No problem. Nobody dares to cause trouble under Eidolon Nun's watch."

Jiang Baimian turned around and pointed at Lopez. "You can ask him about the specifics; we won't bother. Oh yes... give us a four-person room."

"Alright." Song He agreed.

...

Seven to eight minutes later, Anhebus brought a few trusted aides to the Vigilance Cathedral.

He immediately saw the earthen-yellow, all-terrain car parked in the wilderness outside the door, but it was empty inside. There were no longer any firearms.

Anhebus's eyelids twitched. He took a deep breath and walked to the door.

The door was ajar.

Before Anhebus could knock, Song He's voice sounded from inside. "Please come in."

Anhebus and his trusted aides entered the hall. They first raised their arms, crossed them, and took a step back.

After bowing to Eidolon Nun, Anhebus looked at Song He—who was beside the gigantic symbol—and fell to one knee.

“Harbinger, I want to repent!” he shouted in a tone filled with self-reproach.

Song He’s expression didn’t change. “Speak; Eidolon Nun is watching you.”

Anhebus explained how he had been deceived by the foreign refugees and how he had stolen Helvig’s firearms.

Towards the end, he said with tears flowing down his face, “Greed blinded me. I’m willing to accept the Lady’s punishment.”

Song He nodded slightly. “Knowing how to repent is the first step in redemption. In the future, you have to contribute sufficiently to Redstone Collection’s defense against the Subhumans.”

“Yes, Harbinger.” Anhebus heaved a sigh of relief.

Song He continued, “Redstone Collection lacks manpower now. We can replenish the forces with the foreign refugees and get them to redeem themselves with their contributions.”

Anhebus agreed without hesitation.

After his trusted aides finished repenting, he bade Song He farewell and prepared to leave.

Just as he turned around, a smug monkey mask suddenly appeared in front of him. Shang Jianyao had already snuck behind them at some point in time.

“I have a few questions.” Shang Jianyao announced his goal.

Without waiting for Anhebus to agree, he looked into the other party’s eyes behind the mask and asked seriously, “Why did you sell the firearms to the mountain monsters? Don’t you know that the mountain monsters will attack Redstone Collection and make everyone lose their families and friends after they have many weapons? Aren’t you worried that you and your family will die because of this?”

These three questions seemed to pierce through the emperor's new clothes, making Anhebus stammer and not know how to answer.

After a few seconds, he said loudly, "I-I didn't sell them!"

After retorting, he strode past Shang Jianyao and rushed to the door.

Outside, he swept his gaze and saw Lopez in a black cloak.

"You?" Anhebus was a little surprised.

Lopez, a foreign refugee, smiled at his former boss. "I'm a cathedral guard now."

...

Outside the hall's side door, Long Yuehong watched Anhebus leave with his subordinates and saw Shang Jianyao walk back. He then grumbled, "Didn't you say we were going to the bathroom together?"

Shang Jianyao laughed. "I happened to bump into them."

Chapter 205: Late Night

Long Yuehong didn't say anything else and went to the cathedral's public bathroom with Shang Jianyao.

As Shang Jianyao wanted to do a number 2 in the process, Long Yuehong didn't want to wait in the bathroom. Therefore, he came to the door, took in the cold wind that wafted over from the other side of the corridor, and looked at the plants outside the window.

The night was so quiet.

As he scanned the area, he suddenly saw a window slowly open. A figure quietly flipped into the corridor from the outside.

Long Yuehong's heart tightened as he drew his Ice Moss pistol.

With the help of the cold and bright moonlight, he quickly saw the intruder's appearance.

The intruder was only 1.6 meters tall. His blond hair clung limply over his head, and his green eyes were bright and spirited. He was a boy of about 15 to 16 years of age.

Viel... Long Yuehong recognized the hide-and-seek champion.

Viel looked at Long Yuehong at almost the same time and smiled innocently. "Do you outsiders have the custom of sleeping outside a bathroom?"

Long Yuehong always had a good temper. He ignored the mockery in the other party's words and simply explained, "I'm waiting for someone."

"The fellow in the monkey mask?" Viel walked toward the public bathroom.

"Yes." Long Yuehong nodded frankly.

Viel looked at him for a few seconds before suddenly smiling. "Do you hate that fellow? He's harsh with his words and tall."

Long Yuehong didn't expect the other party to ask so directly. He stammered, "H-he's actually a nice guy. He doesn't mean it. Sometimes, he deliberately mocks you to agitate you and give you the motivation to improve. Sometimes, he's just pointing out your flaws and giving you suggestions that he finds very good. This is all for your own good."

As Long Yuehong spoke, he gradually became eloquent. "He never really discriminates against anyone. He even believes that Subhumans can be befriended."

Viel frowned. "Don't you have a temper?"

Long Yuehong thought for a moment before saying, "This depends on the situation. I can't be angry about everything. I'm trying my best to change. If I don't like certain methods, I'll just say it."

He paused and laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’ve always been mediocre. I’m only 1.75 meters tall after g... Uh... I’m considered average among the males in the race. I’m not smart enough, and my grades are only average. In the past, I always had a slight inferiority complex. I felt that I had nothing comparable to the people around me. Even luck didn’t stand on my side, and I was often secretly sad and angry. But now, I’ve learned one thing. First, I have to compare myself with myself. As long as I’m stronger than myself from yesterday, it’s worth being happy and proud.”

Long Yuehong still didn’t know the Redstone townsfolk’s attitude toward genetic enhancement, so he rationally hid the corresponding content.

Viel listened quietly and fell silent for a moment. “You’re really a disgustingly good person.”

With that said, he took a few steps to the side and used the window frame to crawl into the ventilation duct.

“Aren’t you sleeping?” Long Yuehong was a little curious.

Viel stuck his head out of the ventilation duct and smiled. “This world is very dangerous; there are many people who will harm you. I can’t let others know where I rest.”

Without waiting for Long Yuehong’s response, he rubbed his blond hair and bragged, “The ventilation duct system is another world. When you use it to crawl to different places and see the situation in different rooms, you will discover many interesting things. This is something you usually don’t see...”

As Viel spoke, he frowned and made a face behind Long Yuehong. He then crawled back into the ventilation duct and quickly left the area.

Long Yuehong snapped to his senses and turned around. He realized that Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—had come out at some point in time and was standing at the public bathroom’s entrance.

“I thought for a moment. Didn’t he just describe a peeping tom?” Shang Jianyao seriously evaluated the words Viel said before leaving.

Long Yuehong was stunned. “When did you come out?”

Shang Jianyao didn't answer and sincerely suggested, "You can eat more every meal."

"Why?" Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

Shang Jianyao explained, "This way, you can get heavier and stronger than yesterday every day."

...How much did this fellow hear? The corners of Long Yuehong's mouth twitched, and he was speechless.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao rubbed his stomach. "I wasn't done with my dump just now. I'll continue."

Long Yuehong was first stunned and amused before he understood what was going on. He sensed that someone had flipped into the cathedral from the outside, so he quickly ended and came out to meet me to fight alongside me?

Long Yuehong immediately felt the warmth from the word 'companion.'

After they were done at the bathroom, the two of them returned to the room where the Old Task Force was.

They took turns guarding during the night and sleeping.

...

In the southeast area of the city ruin, on the top of a tall building near the edge.

This place had electric lines and had been maintained. It had lights and an elevator. It was one of the watchtowers that Han Wanghuo had meticulously built after becoming sheriff.

Scheler was of the Red River heritage. His hair was golden brown and shaved very short. He was young, only in his twenties. However, he had experienced many battles and wasn't a fledgling that had never seen the world.

At this moment, he carried an automatic rifle and night-vision binoculars. He observed the fields and distant hills—which had long been abandoned—beyond the city.

Although Redstone Collection was only on the edge of the lake to the west and was the easiest for the merfolk to attack, Han Wanghuo didn't ignore the other areas.

North of the Vigilance Church was another line of defense against the mountain monsters in the mountain range. On the other edges of the city ruin was a watchtower used to prevent any accidents.

The Lake of Wrath was very large. With the merfolk's characteristics, they could easily reach the shore from elsewhere and circle around to attack.

As he observed, Scheler turned his head to look at his two companions not far away.

They were all members of the town guard. One was an Ashlander named Tan Tianen, and the other was a mixed-blood named Gaudi. At this moment, they were guarding different directions with night-vision binoculars.

This was a deliberate arrangement by Sheriff Han Wanghuo. He averaged the assignment of the Ashlanders, Red River people, and mixed-race members to each team. First, he hoped that they could form friendships and develop trust in each other while fighting against foreign enemies together. Second, he wanted them to supervise each other and prevent any party from taking the opportunity to do something nasty.

With a high nose, deep eyes, black hair, and brown eyes, Gaudi smiled and started the conversation when he saw Scheler looking at him. "The Ruin Hunters I previously led into town are pretty good at causing trouble. They seem to have figured out what happened to Helvig's firearms robbery."

Gaudi spoke in the Red River language.

Scheler frowned and said, "That's only Baz's accusation."

Harbinger Song He didn't forbid the cathedral guards from spreading Baz's accusation, and the town guards were organized together not to hide. Therefore, many of them heard the truth about the firearms robbery in the evening.

Tan Tianen—who was silently listening to their conversation—looked into the distance and interrupted, “Don’t you know what kind of people Helvig and Anhebus are?”

He deliberately spoke in Ashlandic, not caring if Scheler understood him.

The mixed-blood Gaudi sighed and was momentarily at a loss for words.

At this moment, Scheler’s voice suddenly became loud. “Something’s wrong!”

Gaudi and Tan Tianen forgot the conversation. They held their night-vision binoculars and looked at the area under Scheler’s surveillance.

At the intersection of hills and farmland, a group of people appeared from the darkness under the dim moonlight and approached the city district.

Some of them were in cars, some were pushing carts, and some were walking. There seemed to be a lot of them.

The moonlight brightened a little as Scheler saw the exact situation.

Some of these humanoid creatures were covered in grayish-black scales, and their eyes protruded severely. They were like fish that had grown legs and had come ashore. Some had blue skin and were wrapped in animal skin.

They carried submachine guns, assault rifles, and other weapons. Some carried cannons, scaffolds, ammunition, and other things. Some pushed artillery, and some sat in armored vehicles like a group of ghosts in the deep night.

Merfolk and mountain monsters!

“Inform Captain Han!” Gaudi blurted out when he saw this scene.

Scheler and Tan Tianen remained silent and didn’t answer him.

They were the only team in this area. Once an alarm was sounded, the enemy would immediately lock onto their location.

After a few seconds, Scheler and Tan Tianen replied at the same time. “Alright!”

After they exchanged looks, they watched Gaudi take out the military alarm that had been indented from United Industries.

“Woo!”

“Woo!”

“Woo!”

A sharp, ear-piercing sound echoed from the top of the building and spread in all directions.

The merfolk and mountain monsters—who were lurking in the darkness—stopped and looked over.

They quickly assigned a group of people to push the artillery forward or set up light mortars.

After setting off the alarm, Gaudi, Scheler, and Tan Tianen began to evacuate the rooftop.

Boom! Boom!

The artillery spewed out crimson light.

...

With the alarm’s sharp blaring, the three sleeping Old Task Force members instantly woke up.

Bai Chen—who was on night duty—calmly said, “It’s coming from the southeast. It should be an enemy attack.”

“The merfolk and mountain monsters have attacked?” Jiang Baimian thoughtfully straightened her clothes.

In such an environment, they slept in uniform.

Bai Chen didn't dare give an affirmative answer. “It should be. They chose to bypass the defense line.”

“Team Leader, what should we do? Should we stay in the cathedral or return to the hotel camp?” Although this was Long Yuehong's first time experiencing a large-scale battle, he was forged in the crucible of war during the chaos in Weed City.

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, Shang Jianyao suggested solemnly, “Didn't we say that we are 'selling' half of the firearms and the accumulated supplies to the town guards? Now's the time.”

Huh? Long Yuehong was a little surprised.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Shang Jianyao and stared at him for more than ten seconds.

In the silence, Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and smiled. “Since we've talked about it, let's do it. Ask Harbinger Song first and figure out where to find Han Wanghuo and the town guards.”

Just as she said that, continuous salvo sounded from the same direction.

Boom! Boom!

Chapter 206: Map

“Are you going to deliver firearms to the town guards?” Harbinger Song He was a little surprised when he heard Jiang Baimian's words.

His room was very spartan. It was about the same size as the one Shang Jianyao and the others had stayed in at the hotel camp. There was no additional furniture; there was only a bed, a few chairs, a set of cabinets, a bookshelf, and a table with pen and paper.

What reflected his clergyman characteristics the most was the Sacred Emblem of Eidolon Nun on the wall opposite the bed—a darkness behind a white ajar door that seemingly hid a faint female figure.

This arrangement made Long Yuehong's scalp tingle because he couldn't help but imagine the scene when he slept: The Kalendaria hid in the darkness while quietly watching him.

Fortunately, the Sacred Emblem is on the opposite wall and not on the ceiling. Otherwise, there would be no way to sleep! As Long Yuehong muttered to himself, Shang Jianyao replied on Jiang Baimian's behalf.

"It's not a gift, but a transaction."

Song He understood what Shang Jianyao meant and didn't mind. He smiled and said, "I'm talking about escorting, not giving."

"I misunderstood." Shang Jianyao admitted his mistake. Even without a mask, he didn't care about this.

The black-robed Song He nodded and sighed. "Regardless, I can sense your kindness. I'll thank you on behalf of Redstone Collection's residents in advance."

He didn't harp on the topic and directly said, "From the current situation, the merfolk and mountain monsters are attempting to break through from the ruins' southeast. Han Wanghuo should've already organized most of the town guards to reinforce them."

As he spoke, he walked to the desk, took out a map, and unfolded it. "Han Wanghuo's plan is to set up a new defense line around Aiur Supermarket and Sixth Day Mall to stop the enemy. A large area of roads there have been seriously damaged, and many buildings have collapsed. If the merfolk and mountain monsters don't want to take a long detour, they can only force their way through."

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and reminded him, "Mountain monsters are good at climbing cliffs and cliffs. Such terrain can't stop them."

"Yes, Han Wanghuo has considered this. He wants to use this opportunity to set a trap." Song He indicated that this was indeed a problem.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at the desk. “Is this a map left behind from the Old World?”

The city layout was very clear.

Song He tersely acknowledged it. “I found it when I first came to Redstone Collection; it’s a tourist map of the city itself. Look, the park where the town is located is called Redstone Park in the Old World. This is the reason why it’s called Redstone Collection.”

“Saying ‘is the reason why’ is a redundant sentence,” Shang Jianyao pointed out.

Song He laughed involuntarily. “I’m used to saying that.”

Jiang Baimian sized up the map and curiously asked, “You made quite the number of labels.”

There were many markings on the map. Some were red crosses, some were black circles, and there were all kinds of symbols.

The blank area on the side had the different symbols’ corresponding meanings.

“I’ve marked out which buildings have collapsed and which paths are impossible to pass through.” The elder—who had been in Redstone Collection for 40 to 50 years—suddenly sounded a little disappointed. “When more and more labels are added, I really find it difficult to mark it again when I look at the original map.”

Song He retracted his gaze and sighed. “My parents were survivors of the Old World, but they never lived through the years of war. They once taught me a phrase: ‘the blue sea turns into mulberry fields.’ I could understand the meaning—everything will be changed in time—but I didn’t understand it deeply. It was only when I began to make these maps and conduct field exploration...”

Jiang Baimian pursed her lips and laughed self-deprecatingly. “I asked so much because I wanted to borrow this map from you. Now, I can’t bring myself to ask for it.”

Song He was stunned for a moment before he laughed. “Take it. It’s not like I only have one.”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian was a little stunned.

Song He casually explained, “I didn’t get the map purely for myself. Sometimes, townsfolk also need this.”

Jiang Baimian came to a realization. “Then, I won’t stand on ceremony.”

When have you ever been polite... Long Yuehong criticized his team leader inwardly, but he didn’t dare say it aloud.

Shang Jianyao looked at Song He and sincerely said, “Thank you.”

Upon seeing them put away the map, Song He smiled and reminded them, “If the enemy’s attacks are overwhelming, you don’t have to hold on. Retreat as soon as possible. Don’t worry; the town guards will do the same.”

Amidst Long Yuehong’s surprise, Jiang Baimian thoughtfully asked, “What’s the goal of the merfolk and mountain monsters’ attack on Redstone Collection?”

Song He looked at her in admiration. “They want to destroy the town, kill all the native humans, or drive all humans out of this ruin to occupy this place.”

“I see...” Jiang Baimian didn’t ask any further.

Song He added, “Once the merfolk and mountain monsters break through the defense line, they will definitely head to Redstone Collection and destroy it. It’s fine if it’s destroyed. There aren’t many supplies there, and people don’t live there at night. After we defeat the merfolk and mountain monsters, there are still several underground shops and bomb shelters in the ruins that can be used to rebuild the town.

“As for everyone, heh heh, they are used to hiding. It’s not easy for us to find each other, much less the merfolk and mountain monsters. When the time comes, they can rely on their familiarity with the environment. With seven to eight people in a team, they can take turns ambushing the enemy and tire them out. Unless the merfolk and mountain monsters can quickly destroy the entire ruin, they won’t be able to resolve this problem in the short term.”

Upon hearing Song He's words, Long Yuehong was first surprised before he completely understood one thing. Why did the residents of Redstone Collection advocate hiding so much? Even if the hide-and-seek ritual looked ridiculous, it didn't affect their devotion.

This was indeed one of their abilities to ensure their safety!

When he heard Jiang Baimian's analysis, Long Yuehong had a preliminary understanding of the folklore here and knew its inevitability.

The Subhumans' attack had now revealed the reason behind the townsfolk's actions. There was no need to make any additional deductions.

As long as one hid well, they could escape an invasion, find an opportunity to counterattack, and have the last laugh.

In a large city ruin and with both parties having limited manpower, this was one of the best ways to deal with an invasion!

At this moment, Long Yuehong recalled something his team leader had said: Behind all the absurdities exist a reason.

...

In the southeast corner of the city ruin, Tan Tianen, Gaudi, and Scheler hid behind a collapsed building. They listened to the nearby merfolk and mountain monsters communicate in strange languages with various dialects as they walked over.

After they fled the high-rise building that was on the verge of collapse due to the bombardment, they imagined that they could use their familiarity with the terrain to widen the distance and return to their designated defense line. However, the merfolk and mountain monsters seemed to know where they were hiding and where they were going to pass by.

They successfully intercepted them.

Upon seeing the enemy approaching, Tan Tianen lowered his voice and said, "We can't go on like this."

This time, he used the Red River language.

Gaudi fell silent for a moment before saying, "It's a little strange. We have to report this situation."

Due to their vigilance, they didn't get Mechanical Paradise to set up a local base station in Redstone Collection. They could only rely on walkie-talkies to communicate remotely.

Now, the distance between them and Aiur Supermarket and Sixth Day Mall had clearly exceeded the corresponding range.

After Scheler heard that, he gritted his teeth and said, "Let's draw lots for one person to lure them away. The other two will go to the parking lot."

With a car, they could quickly distance themselves and returned to Aiur Supermarket and Sixth Day Mall.

"Alright." Gaudi took out a silver coin from First City. "Everyone will toss it once. Whoever has a different one will go."

This made Scheler suddenly feel a little dazed as he recalled many things in the past.

The Vigilance Church would organize children of about the same age to play together and nurture their hiding abilities until they reached adulthood. Such a coin was often used to determine who was the hider and who was the seeker.

"I'll go first." Tan Tianen took the silver coin and casually tossed it before putting it in his pocket. He then said in a deep voice, "I lost."

"Tianen?" Gaudi blurted out in surprise.

Scheler's eyes widened in surprise as if he had just gotten to know Tan Tianen for the first time.

Tan Tianen turned his head to look at them and took a deep breath. "After I rush out, run in the opposite direction immediately."

At this point, his gaze landed on Scheler's face. With a stoic expression, he roared, "It's my fault for liking your sister!"

Just as he said that, he turned around, picked up the automatic rifle, and rushed out of the hiding spot.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

As he fired, he moved in another direction. Although he was bait, he still tried his best to survive.

Upon seeing this, Gaudi and Scheler couldn't be bothered with their inner emotions. They bent their backs and used the cover to run toward the spot where they had parked their cars.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

Tan Tianen was just about to roll into the building opposite him when everything he saw was suddenly 'pulled' out of the real world.

This was the same feeling he had when he almost drowned while learning to swim. The scene in front of him degenerated into shimmering images, and the sounds around him seemed to come from the horizon.

Tan Tianen's thoughts gradually scattered. He seemed to be sinking in the water slowly, unable to breathe.

Before his vision returned to darkness, he saw a murloc.

This murloc was very tall, and his eyes weren't bulging that much. He wore a crown made of tree branches on his head, and the grayish-black scales on his body seemed to have an aqueous glow under the moonlight.

...

After leaving the Vigilance Cathedral and moving the batch of firearms into the earthen-yellow, all-terrain vehicle, Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment and gave out instructions using full names. “Long Yuehong, you and Shang Jianyao drive the jeep.”

This time, she didn’t fill up the passenger seat of the all-terrain vehicle. Instead, she moved the corresponding boxes to the backseat of the jeep.

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong didn’t ask why, but Shang Jianyao eagerly opened the jeep’s door.

Jiang Baimian turned to Bai Chen—who was beside her—and said, “You drive. I’ll monitor the surroundings.”

As she still had to observe the commotion outside her perception range, she had to try her best to stay focused.

“Alright.” Bai Chen held a gun and sat in the all-terrain vehicle’s driver seat.

Jiang Baimian got into the car and took out her walkie-talkie. “You can turn on the lights and illuminate the way now. Listen to my orders when we approach the battlefield. Let’s set off!”

Chapter 207: “Mercenaries”

As the jeep followed the road illuminated by the yellow car headlights in the deep night, it drove toward the southeast area of the city filled with abandoned buildings.

Long Yuehong’s heart involuntarily palpitated. Although he was no longer considered a rookie in the Ashlands, this was his first time directly going to the front line.

This was different from the riot in Weed City. It could barely be considered a formal battle.

Just as Long Yuehong quietly took deep breaths to calm his nerves, Shang Jianyao held the steering wheel with one hand and took out the small, black speaker with a blue bottom from his tactical backpack with the other.

After pressing it a few times, a passionate melody echoed in the jeep.

The music this time wasn't mixed with human voices, but it made Long Yuehong's blood boil. It was as if he had become a lone hero about to fight 100 people alone.

Long Yuehong turned his head and asked curiously, "What's the name of this song?" Compared to before, he was clearly much calmer.

"I don't know. Pure music." Shang Jianyao swayed his body and replied with a smile, "You can call it a 'going forth' song."

As Long Yuehong felt the passion and excitement brought about by the music, he looked at the earthen-yellow, all-terrain vehicle ahead as it steadily moved through the ruins filled with collapsed buildings and destroyed roads.

He couldn't help but sigh. "Team Leader previously made us drive around Redstone Collection. It turns out it's really useful..."

Although it was impossible for them to clearly grasp the situation of each path in such a short period of time since this city ruin wasn't small, they still had a clear understanding of the buildings and common roads in the main areas.

Coupled with the map provided by Song He, they could easily reach their destination even though it was already late into the night.

Upon hearing Long Yuehong's sigh, Shang Jianyao turned his head to glance at him and asked in confusion, "I thought you should've understood the importance of familiarizing yourself with the environment back in Weed City."

"It was mainly Bai Chen who led the way. I didn't experience it too deeply," Long Yuehong explained rather honestly.

Shang Jianyao expressed his understanding and seriously suggested, "Hide and seek is the best way to familiarize yourself with the environment. I'll bring you to the Vigilance Church's Mass next time."

You are the one who wants to participate, right? Long Yuehong didn't voice his thoughts. He stopped chatting and tried his best to prep himself.

After an unknown period of time, Jiang Baimian issued an order through the walkie-talkie. “Turn off the headlights, slow down, and turn on the sound system.”

They had already arrived at Aiur Supermarket and Sixth Day Mall, but they didn’t hear any gunshots or salvos.

Shang Jianyao immediately rolled down the window and adjusted the content on the small speaker before increasing the volume to its maximum.

Soon, a loud male voice sounded from the jeep that seemed to blend into the darkness. “We are a Ruin Hunter team. We were entrusted by Harbinger Song He to deliver firearms!”

“We are a Ruin Hunter team. We were entrusted by Harbinger Song He to deliver firearms!”

As the volume was loud, Long Yuehong’s ears buzzed. This sentence kept echoing in his mind.

He opened his mouth and subconsciously wanted to say something, but his words were drowned out by the sound.

In the yellow, all-terrain vehicle ahead, Bai Chen’s expression turned a little strange.

Jiang Baimian sensed her change and asked loudly, “What’s wrong?” She manually closed all the windows, reducing the ‘noise pollution’ from Shang Jianyao to a level that didn’t affect the conversation.

Bai Chen took a deep breath in and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Back when I wandered the Ashlands, I often drove to different settlements to exchange items. Sometimes, in order to save time, we will also get a loudspeaker and constantly blast it to inform others about what they want.”

As Jiang Baimian observed her surroundings, she curiously asked, “For example?”

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds before looking ahead. “Rice, flour, and canned food for kitchen knives, pistols, bullet shells, and all kinds of metallic items.”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Were you the one who suggested Auntie Nan and the others to ‘take in broken pistols, broken rifles, and broken submachine guns’ at their entrance?”

Bai Chen pursed her lips and said, “Every nomad with similar experiences knows a few sentences.”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian’s response, she said in a deep voice, “Team Leader, we’re almost at our destination. Pay attention to your surroundings.”

“Oh, you’re pissed...” Jiang Baimian muttered in a relaxed manner.

Bai Chen looked ahead and quickly replied, “I’m not.”

“Then, are you embarrassed?” Jiang Baimian asked with a smile.

Bai Chen fell silent.

Jiang Baimian knew when to stop. As she sensed the electric signals, she constantly sized up the buildings and ruins on both sides of the road under the moonlight.

In less than a minute, she picked up the walkie-talkie and said, “You can turn off the speaker now and maintain a sufficient distance from us.”

Every muscle in her body tensed up slightly as she prepared to deal with any accidents.

After dozens of seconds, two figures drilled out of a collapsed building in front of them. They carried their assault rifles and went down the cleared path to the all-terrain vehicle that had stopped.

In the surrounding darkness, countless guns were trained on them.

The two figures wore animal masks and hoods, making it impossible to tell if they were Red River people or Ashlanders.

After sizing them up for a while, the woman in a bull mask said in Ashlandic, “Are you the Ruin Hunters who took on Helvig’s mission?”

“That’s right. We found Helvig’s firearms and want to sell our portion to the town guards. I would like to know where Captain Han is.” Jiang Baimian didn’t feel uneasy about guns being pointed at them at all as she explained with a smile.

“You’ve found them?” The woman in the bull mask was a little surprised.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Harbinger Song can testify.”

The woman in the bull mask fell silent for a few seconds before picking up the walkie-talkie and reporting this matter to Han Wanghuo.

Before long, the sheriff came over. He was wearing black clothes and no mask.

After checking Helvig’s firearms and the Old Task Force’s supplies, Han Wanghuo—who was carrying a rifle and had two United 202s—didn’t waste his breath and directly asked, “What do you want in exchange?”

“The town guard’s military exoskeleton,” Jiang Baimian—who was wearing an elegant monk mask—replied frankly. “Just one. Payment can be made after this war ends.”

Upon seeing Han Wanghuo frown, she smiled and added, “Anhebus has already confessed in the cathedral and is willing to contribute more to Redstone Collection’s resistance against the Subhumans. When the situation stabilizes, you should be able to obtain a new military exoskeleton through him. This might take a year or so, but you can afford to wait. We can’t.”

Han Wanghuo fell silent for a moment before saying, “I can’t agree directly. I’ll discuss it with the others.”

Jiang Baimian—who knew that he couldn’t make a decision in Redstone Collection—expressed her understanding. “Alright, but please be quick. We can wait, but the merfolk and mountain monsters won’t wait.”

Han Wanghuo nodded slightly and walked to the side.

After a few steps, he turned around and asked, “Aren’t you afraid that the town guards will forcefully expropriate the items or even kill you to snatch the goods?”

Jiang Baimian smiled.

But before she could answer in accordance with her ultimate villain identity, Shang Jianyao—who had driven the jeep over—shouted, “We believe in you!”

Han Wanghuo was stunned for a moment. After a while, he said bitterly, “There are some things that I can’t stop.”

He didn’t say anything else and walked to the side of the collapsed building. He then used the walkie-talkie to communicate with the town guards who had true authority.

After ten minutes, he walked back to the all-terrain vehicle and said to Jiang Baimian and the others, “Deal.”

“Happy to cooperate.” Jiang Baimian wanted to extend her right hand and shake his hand, but she gave up on the idea after considering Redstone Collection’s customs.

Although she knew that Han Wanghuo wasn’t a believer of the Vigilance Church and that shaking hands was nothing to be concerned about, the surrounding Redstone townsfolk believed in Eidolon Nun. What if they became vigilant and decided to stop the transaction because of their handshake?

It was better to be safe than sorry!

Han Wanghuo exhaled and described the exact plan. “Leave the firearms and supplies to me first and distribute them. After we defeat the merfolk and mountain monsters and seriously deal a blow to them, we’ll transfer an AC-42 military exoskeleton to you.”

“No problem.” Jiang Baimian didn’t hesitate to agree.

Han Wanghuo felt a little uneasy and asked after some deliberation, “Aren’t you afraid that we will lose the war with the Subhumans and have the two exoskeletons fall into their hands?”

What he really wanted to ask was: Aren't you afraid of us reneging on our debt later?

Shang Jianyao replied first again. "We'll get it back." He spoke with abnormal confidence.

Jiang Baimian laughed and added, "We can collect debts, armed."

Upon seeing the other party's confidence, Han Wanghuo began to inform the town guards everywhere in the defense line to find time to come and collect new supplies.

This didn't mean that they no longer had any guns or bullets. Instead, they had to be prepared to split up and make use of the city ruins to fight a prolonged battle.

As the supplies were distributed, Han Wanghuo looked at Jiang Baimian and the others. "Is there anything else?"

Jiang Baimian had a plan and asked with a smile, "Do you want to hire mercenaries? Just give us food for a week. The main reason is that we have to look after our property and not let it be lost."

She wanted to take this opportunity to let the team endure some hardships so that they could have experience dealing with such situations in the future.

Han Wanghuo picked up the walkie-talkie again and walked to his previous position to discuss with his nominal subordinates.

This time, he quickly returned and nodded. "Alright, just follow me."

As soon as she was hired, Jiang Baimian immediately got into the groove. She looked southeast and said, "Captain Han, don't you find it strange? The merfolk and mountain monsters haven't attacked yet. How long has it been?"

They had all come from the Vigilance Cathedral north of the city. The supplies they had brought were almost done being distributed.

Along the way, they didn't hear any obvious gunshots or salvos.

“This is also why we hired you,” Han Wanghuo said with a solemn expression. “The team that discovered the merfolk and mountain monsters hasn’t returned.”

The southeast corner of the city ruin was eerily silent.

Chapter 208: Asphyxiation

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and sincerely suggested, “You should mark out your experts and form a team to scout the area.”

She didn’t volunteer because this wasn’t within the Old Task Force’s scope of work. It was already a little risky for them to take the initiative to be ‘hired’ and deliver the supplies over. However, she could at least exchange for a military exoskeleton and train the team. Furthermore, the danger level was acceptable.

As for forming a reconnaissance team and heading to a clearly strange place while risking their lives for a settlement that had just arrived, it was clearly not something the Old Task Force should do.

A mercenary had to have a mercenary’s ‘professional ethics.’

If Jiang Baimian were alone, she might’ve taken on the reconnaissance mission out of interest. However, she was now a team leader. Any order from her would affect the team members’ personal safety.

She couldn’t be willful.

When she gave the suggestion, Jiang Baimian quietly turned her head and glared at Shang Jianyao, preventing him from volunteering.

Even though Shang Jianyao was wearing a mask, she could sense his eagerness.

After hearing Jiang Baimian’s words, Han Wanghuo sighed helplessly. “I’ve long raised this matter, but they were too vigilant and couldn’t make up their minds. They kept arguing over whether to send a reconnaissance team or not and who to send.”

It's really difficult to reach a consensus when there's a lack of trust between parties. Without a figure with authority, it might drag on until danger slaps them in the face... Jiang Baimian replied inwardly but didn't say anything.

She knew that Han Wanghuo knew this.

As expected, Han Wanghuo asked them to hide the jeep and the all-terrain vehicle before saying worriedly, "When we previously encountered such a situation, it was always Bishop Renato who made the decisions. Both parties still listened to him, but he had to be summoned back to headquarters of all times. Nobody else—no matter which Harbinger it is—can replace him. The weight of his words is just different!"

Upon mentioning this, Han Wanghuo was clearly not satisfied with the Vigilance Church.

Uh, is this how the Vigilance Church is temporarily explaining Bishop Renato's Heartless disease? Jiang Baimian revealed a thoughtful expression, but it was obvious that Han Wanghuo couldn't sense her reaction because she was wearing a mask.

They had spent the afternoon and night watching the lakeside villa. They didn't come into contact with any Redstone Collection townsfolk and didn't know the corresponding situation well.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao interrupted. "Harbinger Song is almost here."

When they set off from the Vigilance Church, Song He was already organizing the Church's armed forces and preparing to rush over.

Han Wanghuo nodded. "I hope they won't go head-to-head against Harbinger Song."

'They' referred to the Red River people.

"You can also gather them. I'll persuade them." Shang Jianyao gave another solution.

Han Wanghuo glanced at the fellow suspiciously, not finding his eloquence outstanding at all. Of course, he didn't say it directly. Instead, he smiled bitterly. "With their vigilance, no one can gather them for such matters."

“Then, where are they hiding? I’ll visit them one by one.” Shang Jianyao wasn’t afraid of suffering any hardships.

Han Wanghuo immediately became vigilant and smiled patronizingly. “Let’s see if Harbinger Song can persuade them first.”

As he spoke, Han Wanghuo had already led the four members of the Qian Bai Team to the defense zone he was in charge of.

This was a relatively intact building, but the building in front of it had completely collapsed. It blocked the few floors below it, forming a natural fortification—a fortification made of concrete.

Standing on the sixth floor of this building, one could see the southeast corner of the city ruin from the window. Once the other party counterattacked, they could crouch down and be virtually impossible to hit.

“You guys are in charge of the left.” Han Wanghuo reassigned the positions and gave Jiang Baimian and the others orders, treating them all as equals.

He and his subordinates quickly moved to the right window and set up two machine guns.

Shang Jianyao put on the night-vision goggles and squatted down excitedly. He switched the Berserker assault rifle to an Orange rifle. He mimicked Bai Chen and assumed the posture of a senior sniper.

Long Yuehong glanced at him and squatted on his left. He was assigned the Tyrant grenade launcher.

On Shang Jianyao’s right were Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen. One was holding a Death rocket launcher, and the other was using the Orange rifle she was most familiar with.

It was late at night. The moonlight flickered, making the entire city ruin seem like it had sunk into an abyss.

As time passed, Han Wanghuo frequently picked up the walkie-talkie and communicated with the town guards in charge of different defense zones. This included a temporary meeting that Harbinger Song He presided over.

Finally, the Redstone townsfolk came to a consensus: They would send out a five-person team composed of Tan Jie, Hamil, and other experts to investigate the situation in the southeast corner of the city ruin.

At this moment, Bai Chen—who had been monitoring the area ahead—saw a blurry figure quietly approaching through the night-vision goggles.

His grayish-black scales flickered in the moonlight.

A murloc... Bai Chen adjusted the muzzle's position and was about to pull the trigger with her finger.

Bang!

The murloc's head exploded, and he fell face up.

Bai Chen turned her head in surprise and looked at Han Wanghuo—who wasn't far away.

She didn't fire that shot just now.

Sheriff Han Wanghuo had reacted faster than her. Furthermore, he accurately hit the murloc's head from that distance.

Han Wanghuo sensed Bai Chen's gaze, glanced at her, and nodded slightly.

Retracting her gaze from his slightly yellowish-white eyes, Bai Chen confirmed something—Han Wanghuo's shot was definitely not a result of luck.

Han Wanghuo was a true sniper. Be it his observation skills or shooting skills, he wasn't inferior to her. In fact, he might even be slightly better.

It's no wonder he became a Senior Hunter and was chosen by Redstone Collection to be a sheriff... Bai Chen came to a realization and stopped being distracted.

At this moment, Han Wanghuo picked up the walkie-talkie and reminded the town guards elsewhere. "The merfolk are here. There's no need to send out the reconnaissance team."

Is it that simple? This thought suddenly flashed across Jiang Baimian's mind.

Long Yuehong's body tensed up slightly. He held the grenade launcher and focused on the road ahead.

Gradually, he felt suffocated. This was something that usually happened when he was especially nervous.

But I'm not that nervous. Why... Long Yuehong was a little confused. After his experience in Weed City, he didn't think the current situation could make him so nervous. Most importantly, his heartbeat didn't accelerate much.

He examined his condition in confusion and realized that breathing had truly become a little difficult. He slowly felt like he was holding his breath.

"Something's not right!"

"Are we competing in lung capacity?"

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao's voices sounded at the same time. They also realized that there was a problem with their respiratory system.

The air they were inhaling was decreasing!

Upon hearing the reminder, Han Wanghuo and the others realized that something was amiss. They had previously thought that a war was imminent and subconsciously held their breaths.

Huff, huff... They opened their mouths and panted heavily. But no matter what they tried, the feeling of impeded breathing couldn't be relieved. It was even clearly getting worse.

This was like sinking into water. As long as one couldn't float and didn't carry an oxygen tank, it was impossible to obtain fresh air. The more one struggled and the more they tried to breathe, the worse the situation became.

"It should be an Awakened," Jiang Baimian said again. She had a strong ability to hold her breath, and she was the one suffering the least impact.

As she spoke, she looked at Shang Jianyao. The two of them shook their heads at the same time.

They sensed that there was no life in the southeast direction up to a certain range.

Even if an Awakened could hide their consciousness and hide from their own kind, the corresponding electric signals couldn't be removed as long as they still had a body unless they completely hid themselves in the metal cage.

But without knowing Jiang Baimian's genetic modification abilities, nobody would make such a cumbersome and useless preparation.

After eliminating all the possibilities, there were only two answers: The first was that the person who caused the asphyxiation was a traitor and was somewhere in the current defense line.

Second, the other party was already close to the Mind Corridor at the Awakened level. He had even entered it, and the range of his abilities had undergone a qualitative change.

In a relatively empty area, Jiang Baimian's range for sensing electric signals wasn't small. Dealing with the mechanical monk, Jingfa, back then was clear evidence of her capabilities. But now, she was affected by the other party's abilities without discovering their existence!

Han Wanghuo knew how powerful Awakened were and had his fair share of encounters, but he had never imagined that they would be this powerful.

He made a prompt decision and ordered, "Retreat! Engage in guerrilla warfare."

They were going to split up and rely on their familiarity with the terrain and hiding abilities to engage in guerrilla warfare with the merfolk and mountain monsters.

If they gathered together, everyone might suffocate to death at the same time. No one would be spared.

“That will just lead to a slow death.”

“He’s better at finding people than you are.”

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao warned him in unison. Their words were different, but the meaning was the same.

An Awakened with such a large ability range wouldn’t have a small detection range. He could completely lead a team to find the hiding ‘rats’ one by one or directly suffocate them to death in their hiding spots without having to do so.

At this moment, someone shouted through the loudspeaker, “Useless cowards only dare to hide in the distance and secretly harm others! Come over if you dare!”

This was spoken in the merfolk dialect.

Although it was a Subhuman dialect, it had evolved from the Red River language. Jiang Baimian couldn’t speak it, but she could barely understand the general meaning.

“Phew, Tan Jie...” Han Wanghuo said a name with some difficulty.

Tan Jie? His Provocation ability’s range can be enhanced with a loudspeaker? Jiang Baimian immediately had a guess.

As the loudspeaker wasn’t aimed in their direction, she didn’t feel any anger, nor could she verify this guess.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao sighed heavily and said, “It’s really useful to grasp an additional foreign language.”

Otherwise, the merfolk and mountain monsters wouldn't understand, even in the face of a provocation.

Tan Jie switched to 'mountain monster language' and cursed again. Everyone's suffocation didn't ease at all and became worse.

Tan Jie didn't stop. He took turns cursing in the merfolk and mountain monster language. During this process, he constantly changed directions and changed the areas he could influence.

When he shouted for the sixth time, everyone suddenly felt like they had crawled out of the water.

The air was so fresh, and the world was so beautiful.

"In the parking lot behind the technology building!" Tan Jie's voice sounded again.

With the help of the feedback, he roughly determined the terrifying Awakened's location.

The map Jiang Baimian obtained from Harbinger Song He surfaced in her mind. The map quickly enlarged, revealing the layout of the area.

The parking lot behind the technology building was almost 100 meters away from her.

Jiang Baimian quickly adjusted the rocket launcher in front of her and fired at the spot Tan Jie had described.

Shang Jianyao hunched his body and stood up.

Chapter 209: Heartbeat

Boom!

In the parking lot behind the technology building, a ball of fire expanded and illuminated the area.

Bai Chen and the others vaguely saw merfolk that had hidden pretty well. Their grayish-black scales reflected the crimson glow.

With the help of the many obstacles in the city ruin and the lack of a wide field of vision, they had already advanced to an area 100 meters away at some point in time.

Jiang Baimian's rocket didn't cause any damage because she didn't know the enemy's exact location.

But before the explosion subsided, rampageous firepower poured from all over the defensive line.

The firing continued as cannonballs rained down one after another, forcing the merfolk to hide in the natural fortifications around them. Five to six corpses were left behind.

Right on the heels of that, Long Yuehong, Han Wanghuo, and the others immediately had difficulty breathing again.

Although they were surrounded by air, they felt like they had been dunked in water.

Tan Jie's loudspeaker sounded again. "F*ck! Fight me if you dare! Have you lost your balls from hiding in the lake all day?"

This time, he only repeated it in merfolk language.

Tan Jie had already roughly determined the target's general location. He could use the loudspeaker to transmit his voice—which was mixed with Provocation powers—to enrage the other party completely and make him lose his mind. This was so that the other party would target only him.

This way, the Redstone townsfolk around the defensive line wouldn't gradually suffocate and could focus on facing the enemy.

Of course, this was a very dangerous endeavor because Tan Jie didn't know what other abilities the Awakened murloc or mutant opposite him had or how large their range was. However, Tan Jie was already a little accustomed to such situations after he successfully awakened and obtained the Provocation ability.

In addition to making the target angry and losing their rationality in a one-on-one battle, making it easier to resolve the situation, his Provocation ability often made him a target for everyone and placed him in a dangerous situation. But at the same time, this also made the other party unable to care about others and be successfully dispatched by his companions.

Although it was called 'Provocation,' Tan Jie felt that it was essentially triggering the other party's anger. Not only could it be matched with words, but it could also be achieved through actions and poses. However, he had yet to figure out a way to expand his range of influence with electronic products other than by sound.

Just two times after the sentence was repeated, Han Wanghuo and the others felt like they had surfaced again and breathed in fresh air.

Almost at the same time, two figures jumped out of the defense line. They were a man and woman, who were each wearing an iron-black exoskeleton. The armor covered their heads, backs, necks, and chests.

On the backs of these two exoskeletons were obvious energy packs. Their arms were equipped with grenade launchers, assault rifles, and other weapons. There were no laser firing muzzles or electromagnetic weapons. It was obvious that these exoskeletons were very ancient models.

The two town guards—who were wearing exoskeletons—seemed to have springs in their joints. With a few jumps, they jumped to the ground from the collapsed building and headed straight for the parking lot behind the technology building.

They wanted to finish off the dangerous Awakened Subhuman before everyone suffocated and fainted.

At this moment, Tan Jie—who was about to continue his Provocation—suddenly felt his heart thump.

His heartbeat quickened.

Badump! Badump! Badump!

This pumped his head full with blood, making it difficult for him to breathe. His vision gradually turned black.

Mustering what was left of his strength, Tan Jie shouted through the loudspeaker, “He can... accelerate heartbeats!”

Badump! Badump! Badump!

Tan Jie could no longer stand and fell to the ground. His heart was beating so fast that it seemed like it would explode at any moment.

Heartbeat acceleration... An Awakened in the Arbiter of Fate’s realm? Jiang Baimian instantly recalled the corresponding information when she heard Tan Jie’s words.

She then came to a conclusion—that powerful Subhuman Awakened couldn’t cause a person to have a ‘cardiac arrest.’ At the very least, they couldn’t do anything at that range. Otherwise, he could’ve easily finished Tan Jie off without wasting so much time.

With this in mind, Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at the two exoskeletons that quickly approached the parking lot behind the technology building.

She felt that it was unlikely they would solve the problem. It was also unknown how much damage they could cause to the merfolk in that area.

This brought about a new problem—what should the Old Task Force do?

Jiang Baimian’s mind raced as she came up with two plans. One, they had to make the best use of their time and retreat immediately to escape the Subhuman Awakened’s abilities. Then, they would drive out of Redstone Collection and never return.

With the merfolk and mountain monsters’ target being Redstone Collection, the Old Task Force didn’t have to worry about being pursued. The Ashlands was so vast, so the chances of them encountering each other again were almost zero.

The problem with this plan was whether they could escape the other party’s range of influence in a timely manner. Jiang Baimian’s judgment was that they could. She believed that the current distance was already the Subhuman Awakened’s limit. At most, they could add an additional ten meters or so. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have taken such a risk and rushed to the front of the defensive line. The

other party could've completely hidden in a safe area and first resolved the dangerous targets by accelerating their heartbeats before suffocating the Redstone town guards.

In addition, once they evacuated, the Old Task Force would no longer be able to obtain the military exoskeleton they had reserved. They also wouldn't be able to collect the supplies that had been distributed. It would be a terrible loss.

The second was to advance instead of retreating. They would enter the Subhuman Awakened's vicinity, finish him off, eliminate all the latent dangers, and bring Redstone Collection's situation under control.

However, this plan was filled with variables and dangers. One could die if they weren't careful.

As Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced, she saw Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—look at her.

Without needing to say anything, she knew that Shang Jianyao wanted to ask if she wanted to attack.

No, he might just be informing me of his decision and wants me to be prepared... Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced as she suddenly became vigilant.

The next second, Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—jumped out of the glassless, frameless window with a Berserker assault rifle in hand. He landed on a collapsed building not far away.

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth and no longer hesitated. She abandoned the Death rocket launcher, grabbed the spare assault rifle beside her, and jumped out of the window as well.

When has our Old Task Force ever suffered a loss without getting revenge? Unless we can't find it. After this matter is resolved, I'll let this bastard know what the color of blood is! Just as she found her footing, Jiang Baimian turned around and shouted, "Suppressive fire!"

This was not only meant for Long Yuehong and Bai Chen, but it was also to seek help from the Redstone town guards.

Amidst the sound of gunfire were the explosions from grenades. It sent the emerging merfolk and mountain monsters back into cover.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian seized the opportunity to adroitly climb and jump onto the concrete piles formed by the collapsed building. They then quickly approached the ground.

This showed their athletic nerves and balance that exceeded normal humans, making them comparable to apes. If Han Wanghuo hadn't seen their skin color, he would definitely suspect that they were spies sent by the mountain monsters.

At this moment, the exoskeleton in front dodged the merfolk's bullets and grenades by jumping, running, and changing directions in an exaggerated manner. They quickly approached the parking lot behind the technology building.

He raised his arms and crazily sent grenades and bullets into the area. Several merfolk couldn't change positions in time and became incomplete corpses under the ordnance.

Upon seeing that the real target was about to appear, the exoskeleton-wearing town guard's heartbeat suddenly accelerated.

It sounded like a drum as the blood vessels on his body surface protruded.

In just a few seconds, the town guard's vision had turned blood red. His breathing couldn't keep up with his body's condition.

If not for the fact that Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, Han Wanghuo, and the others were using firepower to suppress the area, he—who had slowed down and was on the verge of collapsing—might've been hit by the merfolk's gunfire in unprotected areas, causing him to die on the spot.

But even so, he quickly fainted and fell to the ground with a thud.

Right on the heels of that, the female town guard—who was wearing the other exoskeleton and killing the merfolk in the area—heard her heartbeat. It seemed to echo in her ears.

Amidst the thumping sounds, the town guard's heart couldn't take it any longer, making her black out.

At this moment, she had already entered the parking lot behind the technology building. She saw a thick armored vehicle blocked by the walls and pillars.

Beside the car stood a tall murloc wearing a crown of twigs.

Nearly ten of his kind remained around this murloc. They were either hiding in bunkers or beside the armored vehicle. Their commonality was that they were all holding weapons.

Clunk!

The town guard fell to the ground, and the metal bones and black armor on her body emitted a crisp sound.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian confirmed two things. One, the Awakened Subhuman's ability to accelerate heartbeats could only affect one target at a time. Otherwise, he wouldn't have dealt with the two nearby exoskeleton-wearing hostiles separately, resulting in the deaths of many merfolk guarding him. Second, he didn't have the ability to cause a cardiac arrest. This could be determined from the time the two exoskeleton-wearing town guards lasted.

This realization made Jiang Baimian a little more certain, but she also had new concerns.

The price Shang Jianyao paid could effectively weaken an Awakened's mental and thinking abilities, but he couldn't deal with the type that targeted the body directly.

With this thought in mind, Jiang Baimian shrank and hid behind a heavy stone pillar.

With Long Yuehong and the others' suppressive fire and the two exoskeletons' 'cover,' she and Shang Jianyao had already bypassed many obstacles and ran to the parking lot behind the technology building.

They then separately found cover.

She knew that the Awakened Subhuman had definitely discovered her. Without hesitation, she removed a grenade, pulled out the ring, and threw it in the direction she had observed.

With a loud explosion, she stuck to the ground and jumped out horizontally. During this process, she aimed her Berserker assault rifle at the merfolk and pulled the trigger.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

Shang Jianyao also took the opportunity to dash out of his hiding spot and fire crazily at the merfolk.

The merfolk—which had been forced to escape by the grenade—swayed and fell to the ground, bleeding profusely.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian—who had just landed and was rolling for cover—heard her heartbeat.

Badump!

Chapter 210: Background Music

Badump! Badump!

Jiang Baimian's heart raced from 50 bpm to 180. This made her chest tighten, her breathing difficult, her vision turn black, and her head spin.

Unlike Tan Jie—who could still muster his strength and broadcast the enemy's abilities to everyone—Jiang Baimian felt like she could faint at any moment. It wouldn't be long before she suffered heart failure.

She wasn't too surprised by this. The ability's effects at close to 100 meters were clearly different from those at a dozen meters.

She just didn't expect that her body—which had undergone genetic modification—would show signs of collapse so quickly.

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth, took out another grenade, pulled out the ring, and threw it at the murloc wearing the laurel wreath with her left hand.

She wanted to use an explosion to interrupt the other party!

At this moment, the area where she, Shang Jianyao, and the remaining merfolk were was mostly blocked by the technology building. The suppressive fire from the rear was no longer effective, and they could only rely on themselves.

Before the grenade could be thrown, the tall murloc wearing the wreath laurel had already begun moving.

His destination was the car covered in thick armor. He wasn't fast, and it seemed like he had to divert his attention to maintain the effects of Heart Acceleration.

At this moment, one of the two remaining merfolk guards suddenly jumped out from behind their cover, threw him to the side of the armored vehicle, and covered him with their bodies.

Boom!

The grenade exploded where the tall murloc had been standing. A crimson wave of fire swept through a large area with shrapnel.

The murloc—who used his body as a shield—didn't feel any pain as he died on the spot. He vaguely seemed to see the hometown that his great-grandfather's generation often described: It was fertile land by the lakeshore, a city that was brightly lit. Although it wasn't spacious, it was an abode that belonged to them...

Badump! Badump!

Jiang Baimian's speeding heartbeat didn't ease at all. She felt like she would faint at any moment or even go into shock.

The tall murloc wearing the wreath laurel pushed away the incomplete corpse and looked at Jiang Baimian with hatred.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already seized the opportunity to roll into the seven-meter radius of the armored vehicle.

He didn't waste any time. He found cover, turned his back to the target, opened his mouth, and shouted, "If you have what it takes..."

Before he could finish speaking, Jiang Baimian couldn't hold on any longer. She collapsed behind the abandoned flower bed and entered a half-conscious state. This was another place she had chosen as cover.

The main reason she took the risk and did so many things was to protect Shang Jianyao until he entered the range where he could use his abilities.

The next second, Shang Jianyao's heartbeat also began to accelerate. It sounded like someone was drumming beside his ear.

He resisted the discomfort and continued shouting, "Suffocate us to death!"

Combined, it was: 'If you have what it takes, suffocate us to death.'

This was not Provocation, but Corny Person. However, Shang Jianyao was using a mild method in an attempt to make the effects last longer. Furthermore, it wasn't so easy to be discovered. If he forced the other party to do something irrational, the murloc would quickly come to a realization. Before that, he might not have a good opportunity to attack.

As for how to use Corny Person, it mainly depended on which method suited the situation.

To make the other party's relatively mild corny behavior evolve in the direction he wanted, Shang Jianyao deliberately said this to induce him into doing so.

This was the experience he gleaned from his battle with the fake Father.

As his heart raced to the brink of losing control, Shang Jianyao's voice became softer and softer as if it came from the horizon.

Suddenly, gunfire, booms, and rumbling sounds drilled into his ears.

His heartbeat had returned to normal at some point in time.

Shang Jianyao panted heavily, but he realized that the air around him seemed to be being sucked out by someone, becoming thinner and thinner.

His breathing became difficult.

At the same time, the Redstone town guards along the defensive line at Aiur Supermarket and Sixth Day Mall felt the world being flooded again, trapping them beneath with no way to surface.

Experienced, Long Yuehong no longer wasted his precious energy breathing heavily. He held his breath and fired a grenade.

However, muted fire appeared in many areas of the defense line. The interweaving firepower could no longer suppress the merfolk and mountain monsters not far away.

They pushed out artillery—the temporarily assembled mortars—picked up their rocket launchers and grenade launchers, and attacked Redstone Collection's defense line.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Countless salvos sounded at the same time, sending Long Yuehong and the others scrambling to the ground, not daring to show their heads.

Seizing this opportunity, the mountain monsters with blue skin and sharp teeth carried submachine guns and assault rifles as they ran through the collapsed buildings like they were on flat ground.

When the salvos stopped, Long Yuehong looked up and mounted the grenade launcher on the windowsill.

Under the dim moonlight, he saw distorted and hideous faces covered in blue skin. He also saw black guns and occasionally blooming blood.

Some mountain monsters fell, but the mountain monsters behind didn't stop. They drowned their companions like a tide and continued surging toward Redstone Collection's defense line.

Long Yuehong had never seen such a scene before, leaving him deeply shocked. However, he didn't fall into a daze. A certain fear drove him to fire the grenade.

Amidst the loud explosion, Bai Chen and Han Wanghuo calmly aimed at the gunners and the leader of the vanguard.

Each shot took away a life.

The salvos soon sounded again. Coupled with the vanguards' shots, the defenders—who were increasingly lacking in oxygen—sprawled to the ground again.

They opened their mouths in an attempt to breathe in more oxygen, but it was useless. Some people had already begun retching, and some were getting dizzy.

In the parking lot behind the technology building, the tall murloc wearing a wreath laurel and his last guard each held a submachine gun. As they fired at the spot where Shang Jianyao was hiding, one of them approached the unconscious Jiang Baimian's flower bed. They planned on killing her directly so that they didn't have to deal with her using Heartbeat Acceleration when she woke up.

Similarly, the two town guards—who were unconscious at the edge of the parking lot—had to be dealt with together to eliminate any future problems. After all, they were wearing exoskeleton equipment. Once they woke up, it was enough to reverse the situation.

The tall murloc wearing the wreath laurel was in a rush to deal with other enemies just now, so he stopped his abilities before the target developed heart failure.

Of course, this was only a thought, and it wasn't pressing. This was because Asphyxiation wouldn't stop when one fainted. As long as it lasted long enough, any unconscious person would die from the lack of oxygen.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was hiding behind cover—was in no rush. He held his breath and casually put down his tactical backpack. Amidst the roaring salvo, he took out the small, black speaker with a blue bottom. He then placed it on a rock pile in the corner and simply protected it.

After adjusting the music's sequence, Shang Jianyao gave up on the assault rifle, unzipped his clothes, took a grenade from his belt, and pulled out the ring.

With his back facing the enemy, he excitedly calculated the distance and casually threw the grenade behind him.

A loud explosion sounded, forcing the tall murloc and his guard to dodge to a certain extent.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao quickly took off his blue coat and threw it out horizontally.

Accompanying this coat's flying out were gunshots from the small speaker.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

Several bullets penetrated the coat.

Seizing this opportunity, Shang Jianyao followed closely behind. He drew his United 202s and jumped out.

The first thing he saw was an ordinary murloc. He was half-squatting there, holding a submachine gun. The gills under his ears and on both sides of his neck kept trembling.

Bang!

The two United 202s in Shang Jianyao's hands fired at the same time.

The murloc's gaze focused as his skull was sent flying, scattering red and white on the ground.

Shang Jianyao fell to the ground with a thud. He rolled around continuously and hid behind a pile of concrete—this was a fortification that the merfolk guards had previously built.

Upon seeing this, the murloc wearing the wreath laurel gave up on using the submachine gun. He maintained the Asphyxiation effect and quickly walked into the thick armored vehicle.

The engine roared as the heavy and sturdy vehicle began moving, attempting to rush out of the parking lot and rendezvous with the troops.

With him alone, the murloc wearing the wreath laurel knew one thing: to stop entangling with these humans—who had already entered the Asphyxiation state—and quickly return to the gunners' ranks to receive a new round of protection.

This was not only because he cherished his life and didn't want to put himself at risk, but also because he was considering the overall situation. Now was the best time for the merfolk and mountain monsters to join forces and break through Redstone Collection's defense line. He definitely could not fumble the ball.

In any case, as long as they maintained the current situation, the people who killed many of his guards would ultimately suffocate to death.

With a whirl, the armored vehicle approached Shang Jianyao and was about to pass him and drive for the exit.

At this moment, the murloc wearing the wreath laurel suddenly felt hot-headed. He felt that he couldn't let the enemies here off just like that.

Without thinking, he turned the steering wheel and made the car rush toward Shang Jianyao, attempting to hit him and flatten him repeatedly.

Corny Person!

When Shang Jianyao had only used his abilities slightly, the murloc wearing the wreath laurel hadn't treated him as an Awakened. Therefore, Shang Jianyao gave up on inducing mild inceptions. After the other party entered his range, he directly made the murloc abnormally corny.

However, the murloc seemed to have a certain level of resistance to this. He didn't stop the car and chose to fight Shang Jianyao as a man. He remained firmly seated in the safe bulletproof car and floored the accelerator.

Amidst the revving engine, the armored vehicle zoomed toward Shang Jianyao like an unbridled horse.

At this moment, the small speaker was no longer playing the gunshots recorded in Weed City. It played the next track.

A striking trumpet sounded as a majestic melody echoed, pumping zeal and ardor through one's veins.

Dagger Group Prelude.