

Ad Infinitum 221

Chapter 221: Landing on the Island

“What’s this?” Beside the milky-white speedboat, Jiang Baimian saw the town guards following Han Wanghuo push four bicycles over.

Han Wanghuo looked into the distance—at the lake dyed in golden sunlight—sniffed in the cold and humid winter wind, and smiled. “There’s still quite a distance to the temple after you get ashore on the island. It’s not wise to waste time on the road. A few of our town guards came up with a plan to lend you a few bicycles for transportation.”

It was obvious that a small and simple speedboat couldn’t carry a car.

Shang Jianyao was deeply moved by his words and seemed like he would shout ‘brother’ at any moment.

Jiang Baimian pinched the mask on her face before he could and jested, “It’s rare for all of you to be so generous.”

Han Wanghuo frankly said, “We also hope to figure out the sleeping deity as soon as possible. Otherwise, we will be in trouble if a powerful Awakened like that day occasionally appears among the merfolk. When the time comes, our only hope will be Eidolon Nun’s protection of Redstone Collection and that the Vigilance Church is willing to send a Terror Bishop over.”

Jiang Baimian understood their wariness toward the latent dangers. “That’s true.”

Han Wanghuo then pointed at the four bicycles and said, “These are all new products from United Industries. They haven’t been used for a year. Look, they all have a backseat; they mimic the Old World’s early style. Heh heh, I’ve always found it strange that the Old World’s bicycles can’t carry people anymore. Isn’t it a waste? It’s not practical at all.”

Jiang Baimian had never studied this problem, so it wasn’t her place to echo his thoughts randomly. She could only deliberate for a moment before saying, “Since there’s a backseat, two will be enough. Otherwise, the speedboat will be very crowded.”

Han Wanghuo had no objections to this and casually added, “Previously, the United Industries smuggler even promoted something called an electric balance scooter to us. It’s very small and

convenient to carry. However, doesn't he know what kind of road conditions plague the ruins? One can fly out if they aren't careful.

“The murloc captive said that the island's roads are well-preserved. They should be suitable for electric balance scooters. Unfortunately, we didn't buy them back then.”

Jiang Baimian smiled and suddenly said, “Captain Han, you seem to be more talkative than before?”

Han Wanghuo was stunned for a moment before he laughed self-deprecatingly. “Maybe it's because you guys have shown your strength, and I want to curry favor with you.”

After chatting for a while, Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen each pushed a bicycle to the speedboat. Long Yuehong laboriously carried the cardboard box that contained the exoskeleton.

In order to save electricity, he didn't wear it.

Jiang Baimian was the last to jump onto the speedboat. She waved at Han Wanghuo and the others as the engine sputtered.

Ten seconds later, the milky-white yacht drove into the endless Lake of Wrath, leaving a long trail in the golden-scaled water.

The wind on the lake was clearly colder, making Long Yuehong shrink back.

He looked around and saw that the shore was reduced to a single line. The various islands were lurking deep in the lake like monsters.

“Team Leader, why don't we come at night? Isn't it too eye-catching in the middle of the day? It's very easy for the merfolk to discover us...” Long Yuehong asked whenever puzzled. In his imagination, such operations were usually carried out on dark and windy nights.

Jiang Baimian laughed and looked at Shang Jianyao—who was squatting at the edge of the speedboat and trying to fish with his outstretched hand—and said, “Explain to Little Red.”

She paused and added, “Hey.”

Shang Jianyao turned around and raised a question to Long Yuehong in his smug monkey mask. “Do you know the way?”

“What way?” Long Yuehong was stunned.

“The way to Lake Heart Island,” offered Bai Chen.

“No,” Long Yuehong subconsciously replied before coming to a realization. “We won’t be able to find that island at night?”

Jiang Baimian observed the ‘landmark’ that Han Wanghuo and the others had marked out and confirmed that there was nothing wrong with the route. She then nodded and said, “Yes. We can still use a map, the descriptions, and our surroundings to compare during the day to follow the planned route to the island. At night, even Han Wanghuo and the others won’t be able to find their way, much less us.”

The lake was where the merfolk had the absolute upper hand. Redstone Collection’s townsfolk didn’t venture too deep.

This speedboat was very simple and didn’t have any so-called smart navigation.

“Besides, if you were a murloc, when would you be most vigilant?” Jiang Baimian continued. “It must be late at night. You’d be worried that the people from Redstone Collection will sneak an attack under the night’s cover. You will instead be a little lax during the day.”

“The Lake of Wrath is so large. As long as we don’t go to the main area where the merfolk are active, there shouldn’t be any danger before we approach that island.”

Long Yuehong listened carefully and concluded, “The exact situation determines the actual analysis.”

After the speedboat circled a large area to the west, it gradually ventured deep into the Lake of Wrath.

As time passed, the sunlight became less bright.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao and the others saw a large island.

A mountain stood in the middle of the island like a boundary stone.

“We’re almost there.” Jiang Baimian compared Lake Heart Island’s characteristic descriptions given by Redstone Collection and confirmed that their destination was right in front of her.

Bai Chen slightly adjusted the speedboat’s direction to ensure that it didn’t deviate at all.

The wind from the lake came blowing, messing up their hair and clothes.

Finally, they approached the island and discovered a slightly dilapidated dock. Not far from the dock, a small river gurgled.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao stood up, bent his back, and looked at the water on the left excitedly. He then said, “Human consciousness, three.”

“It looks like merfolk.” Jiang Baimian had long discovered it, but she couldn’t determine if they were large fish.

“What should we do?” Long Yuehong’s heart tightened before he suggested, “Make the best use of our time to dock?”

As long as they didn’t clash with the merfolk over water, he had nothing to fear.

“They’re coming over very quickly,” Jiang Baimian said calmly. “It seems like the merfolk haven’t completely given up on this island. They will send people over from time to time to check on the situation.”

At this moment, Shang Jianyao assumed the posture of jumping into the water.

As Bai Chen controlled the speedboat, she drew a United 202 and tried to shoot into the water. However, she couldn't find the merfolk under the rippling lake surface.

Long Yuehong was the same; he even had a strange thought: I wonder how waterproof the exoskeleton is...

Jiang Baimian broadcasted the merfolk's actions. "They dove a little deep. It looks like they want to cause damage to our boat's bottom."

She stepped on the wooden deck and said to Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen, "Stay away from the sides of the boat. Don't touch anything except the wooden planks. There's no need to fight the merfolk in the water; it's not worth it."

Shang Jianyao sighed and moved away.

After the Old Task Force members stepped on the wooden planks, Jiang Baimian squatted down and pressed her left hand to the lake.

The next second, the side of the ship suddenly lit up as if it were noon when the sun was its brightest.

Countless silver-white electric arcs erupted and darted down the lake.

This lasted for more than ten seconds before several fish flipped over and floated up.

Further away, the three merfolk approached the water surface and crazily swam into the distance.

Their bodies twitched uncontrollably, and their eyes were abnormally blank. It was unknown what had happened.

Jiang Baimian knew when to stop and stopped releasing high-voltage electric currents. She still had to leave a portion of her power to explore the temple.

While the merfolk were away, Bai Chen drove the speedboat to the dock and tied it to a pole.

Jiang Baimian jumped off the speedboat and looked around. Just as she was about to speak, she saw Shang Jianyao jump out, rush to the nearby river, and help up a rusted metal board.

On this board were words written in Ashlandic: “Electrocuting fish is prohibited here!”

Jiang Baimian was instantly stunned.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Long Yuehong and Bai Chen—who had taken off their masks—purse their lips tightly. Their bodies trembled slightly as if it were very difficult for them to hold in their laughter. As for Shang Jianyao, he wore a mask, so it was impossible to tell if he was smiling or not.

“Merfolk aren’t fish!” Jiang Baimian defended herself.

As soon as she finished speaking, she laughed as well. The dock was filled with liveliness.

This was a strange coincidence.

After Bai Chen moved the two bicycles to the dock, Long Yuehong put on the exoskeleton with Shang Jianyao’s help.

Jiang Baimian stopped smiling and instructed seriously, “Little White, Little Red, stay here. First, prevent the merfolk from coming again and destroying the speedboat. Second, be a backup team. I don’t know what will happen in the temple. What if we go in together and get wiped out? Stay here; if something really happens, we can still look forward to your rescue and support. Yes, pay attention to my signal flare. In addition, come for us immediately if we exceed the time limit.

“If you ultimately discover that something is amiss, go back and inform the company.”

This was a normal division of labor for a team. Leaving behind manpower was also one of the effective measures in an exploration. Bai Chen had no objections.

Long Yuehong naturally didn’t object.

Jiang Baimian then slung the Tyrant grenade launcher and the Berserker assault rifle over her shoulder. She led the bicycle over and sat on it.

She then subconsciously turned her head to look at Shang Jianyao and realized that he was already prepared.

The only problem was that Shang Jianyao—who was wearing gray camouflage and black leather boots, with an assault rifle slung across him, and an Ice Moss and United 202 at his waist—didn't match the actions of 'riding a bicycle.' He looked inexplicably comical.

Upon realizing that she was the same, Jiang Baimian found it funny and couldn't help but say, "We—who are armed to the teeth and prepared to explore the unknown—actually advance on bicycles... This feels strange."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and replied, "At least it's not a tractor."

"...That's true." Jiang Baimian imagined the scene and decided to accept the current conditions.

The two of them then huffed and puffed as they pedaled, fully armed as they rode their bicycles in the direction of the temple.

Chapter 222: Temple

It was already four in the afternoon. The winter sky was no longer as bright, but it was in no way close to evening. Bright light scattered across the ground, and the lake breeze blew gently, giving the illusion that they had returned to the early morning.

The highway on the island was indeed as the murloc captive had described. The damage wasn't too serious, but some parts had cracked due to the elements. Some parts of the road had more soil and dust.

For Jiang Baimian—who was riding a bicycle—the cold wind that blew at her face made her feel like she was experiencing the early morning. On the left was a large number of farmlands that extended all the way to the foot of the mountain. On the right, she could see the vast, misty lake through the two rows of withered trees.

Such a scene and such a feeling broadened her heart and refreshed her mind. If not for the grenade launcher and the assault rifle slung across her, she would've almost forgotten the purpose of this trip.

Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion as she pedaled. “Unfortunately, it’s winter now. There’s not much greenery in the farmlands and woods. Otherwise, it would definitely feel better.”

Shang Jianyao tried his best to keep his bicycle from overtaking her by too much. He thought for a moment and said, “Autumn might be more beautiful.”

“Why?” Jiang Baimian never expected Shang Jianyao to select a season.

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “There must be many fruits on the trees.”

“...” Jiang Baimian decided not to continue the topic and said, “It seems like the merfolk have all evacuated this island. I wonder if it’s because of the Oracle’s instructions or because something terrifying would happen after three days...”

This was one of the things Pangu Biology had warned them about—they couldn’t stay on the island for more than three days.

Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—thought for a moment and said, “I didn’t ask the captive that question back then.”

“We didn’t know either.” Jiang Baimian subconsciously consoled him.

When Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong went to interrogate the murloc captive, she was still sick and had yet to report the matter to the company. Thus, she had yet to receive any notice regarding any taboos when exploring temples.

The morning after Pangu Biology replied, Redstone Collection had exchanged POWs with the merfolk and mountain monsters.

Shang Jianyao—who was trying his best to control himself and not speed up the bicycle—turned to look at Jiang Baimian. “I believe it should be a result of the Oracle’s instructions.”

“Oh?” Although Jiang Baimian had made the same judgment, she was still rather interested in Shang Jianyao’s inference process. She felt that it was necessary to learn a different train of thought and not restrict herself to her own ways.

After all, many Awakened had certain mental problems. It was difficult to guess their behavior patterns with normal logic.

Shang Jianyao truthfully answered, “He had already made friends with Harbinger Song. When he mentioned Lake Heart Island and the forbidden temple, he wouldn’t not mention that something terrifying would happen if one stayed on the island for too long unless he didn’t know the exact situation.”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian was a little disappointed because this was a normal inference.

Ding ring ring!

At this moment, Shang Jianyao rang the bell on the bicycle with interest as if he wanted to play a piece of music with it.

Unfortunately, the bell couldn’t do such a thing.

“...” Jiang Baimian retracted her disappointment.

The two of them rode past the abandoned houses by the lake. After about ten minutes, they finally saw a town.

Its style was very similar to Weed City’s. It had white walls and black tiles, with eaves arched over them. It was filled with the charm of the Old World’s ancient times.

Of course, this place also had differences from Weed City. The first was the lack of city walls. The second was that the houses were generally not tall, with the majority being two to three stories.

In the town, limestone slabs were laid out. The dry yellow weeds were occasionally plucked up by the cold wind and blown into the sky.

For some reason, Jiang Baimian felt like the light had dimmed a little the moment they entered this town. This made her see an ancient, quiet, and slightly creepy scene.

Without a doubt, there were no signs of human activity in the entire town. If not for the fact that it was winter, this place might've become a paradise for vegetation and wild animals.

Even now, Jiang Baimian could still see dried animal feces in the corners and ditches.

"There's no smell." Shang Jianyao sniffed and made a judgment.

Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered with him. She flipped her wrist and looked at her watch. "It's 4:16. We have to leave this town before 4:42, regardless of whether we find anything valuable."

"You made a mistake," Shang Jianyao pointed out.

That didn't add up to half an hour.

As Jiang Baimian identified the way according to the murloc's statements and searched for the temple, she scoffed. "This is called leaving some redundancy. Who knows if this place is different from the ones the company previously discovered? We can't completely follow the company's precautions; we have to raise the standards."

"You're very suitable to join the Vigilance Church," Shang Jianyao praised.

Jiang Baimian glanced over and muttered, "I think you're making a snide remark at me. How can the Vigilance Church's vigilance be the same as a normal person's?"

After confirming the general direction, she rode her bicycle along the ditch by the side of the road to the center of town.

According to the murloc's description, the temple was in the alley east of the town square.

Just like outside of town, it was quiet inside the town except for the howling wind and the sound of the advancing bicycles. It was so quiet that it made one's scalp tingle.

“I didn’t feel it while in the wilderness, but it’s really strange when there’s no sound here.” Jiang Baimian looked around and attributed part of the reason to the narrow road, cramped environment, and oppressive atmosphere.

Shang Jianyao then sighed. “Unfortunately, Long Yuehong didn’t come.”

“What will happen if he comes?” Jiang Baimian casually inquired.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “Then, I can tell him a ghost story.”

“You’re really his good friend,” Jiang Baimian said sincerely.

The area in front of them widened as they conversed, and a small square appeared. On the east side of the square was a half-meter-tall platform—there was nothing on it.

After crossing this cement platform, they could see a narrow alley. The alley entrance had a putrid smell as if it had been a long time since the winds blew in.

Jiang Baimian quickly got off the bicycle and leaned it against the side.

They had arrived at their destination.

As Shang Jianyao alighted, he spoke of his worries. “Should we lock them? It won’t be good if we come out and find our bicycles missing.”

“If you lose your bicycle, I’ll give you a ride!” Jiang Baimian didn’t mention how anyone could steal a bicycle in such a godforsaken place. She directly replied according to Shang Jianyao’s train of thought.

Ten seconds later, the two of them left their bicycles, picked up their assault rifles, and walked into the alley in front of them.

The deeper they went, the stronger the smell of rot in the air. It felt like it was about to freeze, but this didn’t stop Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian from breathing.

All the doors and windows in this alley were tightly shut, unlike the other areas of the town.

Many doors were open as if they had been searched. Furthermore, all the doors here were painted black.

As she walked, Jiang Baimian heard her and Shang Jianyao's footsteps. They constantly echoed in the alley, layering upon one another.

"This place is indeed rather strange." As Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion, the temple appeared in front of them.

The temple was located at a higher spot at the end of the alley. Its architectural style was essentially the same as the surrounding buildings.

Its black door was tightly shut. Above it was a black tile, and a white paper lantern hung on each side.

Perhaps it was because of the eaves, but the lanterns weren't affected by the rain. It was as if they had been hung up last night.

The door to the temple was taller than that of the other buildings. Under the eaves was a plaque with black and white words.

Jiang Baimian casually glanced at it and saw the words on the plaque clearly: "Yama Hall."

"It does have the looks," she commented objectively, but this didn't stop her from moving forward.

Soon, she and Shang Jianyao arrived at the temple's entrance.

When she was close, she felt a strange feeling—a fear that went straight to the bottom of her heart.

Jiang Baimian didn't hesitate to stretch out her left hand and softly press it against the door before exerting some strength.

Before riding the bicycle, she and Shang Jianyao had already worn latex gloves.

At this moment, she even used her left hand out of caution.

With a creak, the temple's black door slowly opened, revealing the scene inside.

The first thing Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao saw was a well. There was a water vat in each corner.

Beyond the well was a temple hall; a white curtain hung from the door.

After crossing the doorsill and entering the temple, the fear Jiang Baimian felt dissipated instantly. However, her heart felt like it was weighed down by several heavy rocks, making her feel extremely stifled.

Even the wind seemed to have vanished. It was so quiet that it didn't seem like she was in the real world.

Suddenly, Shang Jianyao asked, "Can I get the speaker?"

"Huh?" Jiang Baimian—who was completely focused—was momentarily stunned.

"Music," Shang Jianyao quickly explained.

Playing music with a speaker in this gloomy, mysterious, quiet, stifling, and strange temple? Play those strange songs? Although Jiang Baimian believed that this could effectively destroy the current atmosphere, she felt that it was too strange.

It was crazy to have a place—which could show signs of a phantasm at any moment—echo with lyrics like 'you are my little apple.'

She deliberated for a moment and said, "Not yet, but we can prepare."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao became excited.

The duo—who was carrying assault rifles—immediately took up position as they entered the main hall’s entrance.

After lifting the white curtain and tying it up, they saw the offering table, the incense burner, ashes, a praying mat, and white candles. However, there was no statue on the offering table.

The actual situation behind the offering table couldn’t be seen at a glance.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly said, “There’s human consciousness not more than ten meters away.”

He uttered a relatively vague description as if he didn’t dare be too sure of the exact distance.

“You only sensed it after coming in?” Jiang Baimian asked in surprise. She remembered that Shang Jianyao’s abilities covered a maximum range of 20 meters.

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily.

Jiang Baimian then focused. After a while, she hesitantly said, “Indeed, there are electric signals. Very weak... It has extremely low biological activity?”

As she spoke, she held her gun and circled behind the offering table with Shang Jianyao.

They then saw a coffin—a black coffin.

The coffin was open, and a person was lying inside.

Chapter 223: Sleeping “Deity”

The sunlight outside passed through the tied-up curtains and shone into the temple’s depths, barely allowing Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao to see the person in the coffin.

He had long black hair and wore a white linen shirt. He was as thin as a skeleton that resembled a corpse that had been smeared with preservatives and desiccated for many years.

In such a state, Jiang Baimian couldn't tell what his true appearance was like.

It was like a skull. Without using a computer to do restoration work, one could only determine if he was abnormal or atavistic. She couldn't tell if he was handsome or not.

If not for the fact that she could sense a weak electric signal and confirm that the other party still had biological activity, Jiang Baimian would only believe that this was a mummy that hadn't rotten due to the special environment and not a so-called sleeping deity.

She even vaguely sensed the smell of preservatives wafting toward her nose. This was especially terrifying when compounded by the current environment.

Jiang Baimian slowly looked down and realized that the sleeping deity wore a bracelet made of tree branches on his right wrist.

Her heart palpitated as she turned to look at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao wore a monkey mask with a furry face and a protruded mouth. He stared straight at the corpse-like sleeping 'deity.'

Jiang Baimian hesitated for a moment before asking, "What are you thinking about?"

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "Cardiopulmonary resuscitation, mouth-to-mouth, and FECA injection."

"..." Jiang Baimian once again confirmed that she was mentally fine—in a completely different world from Shang Jianyao.

After a few seconds, she spoke with exasperation and amusement. "Didn't the company mention matters to take note of? Unless necessary, we can't touch this so-called sleeping deity."

"It only said not to move it." Shang Jianyao always had a good memory.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Didn't I just say? There has to be redundancy; it has to be treated with higher and stricter standards."

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to retort, she spat. “I almost forgot about important things because of you. Don’t you find this tree branch bracelet familiar?”

Shang Jianyao had long noticed it. “The Awakened murloc’s wreath laurel.”

“From the looks of it, his strength came from the laurel.” Jiang Baimian then proceeded to ask, “You should’ve touched the laurel back then. Didn’t you notice anything abnormal?”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “It was very ordinary.”

“That’s true. If it were special, you wouldn’t have left it behind.” Jiang Baimian looked down at the mummy’s skin-covered face and analyzed it thoughtfully. “According to Harbinger Song’s description, powerful Awakened—who have explored the Mind Corridor’s depths—can leave their auras in the Mind Corridor or the real world and fuse with items or even humans...

“The aura had originally fused with the wreath laurel, but the aura seeped into the Awakened murloc’s body after he obtained it, making him relatively stronger? However, this also left behind latent dangers. Back then, it was as if he were producing a monster...”

At this point, Jiang Baimian suddenly had an idea. “If we didn’t forcefully fire back then and allowed the changes to continue, what would’ve happened in the end? Would this sleeping deity wake up because of this?”

“But if it’s really that simple, his former believers could’ve done it. Isn’t it reasonable to use the items carried by deities to protect oneself? Could it be that the prerequisite for the fusion of aura and body requires an Awakened of the same domain?”

This was purely a random guess without much evidence because there were other explanations. For example, before this so-called Yama descended into a slumber, he didn’t know that such a thing would happen. He didn’t leave behind any instructions. His believers revered him and didn’t dare to touch his body or take away his items.

Shang Jianyao suggested a way to verify Jiang Baimian’s guess. “We’ll know by trying.”

“...There’s no need.” Jiang Baimian suppressed her eagerness.

She knew what Shang Jianyao meant: He was clearly not in the same domain as the Awakened murloc.

Jiang Baimian herself wasn't even an Awakened. If they removed the bracelet, many things could be explained if an aura didn't fuse with them when they used the bracelet. However, this was very, very dangerous.

After exhaling, Jiang Baimian held the gun in one hand and flipped her wrist to look at her electronic watch. "Nine more minutes."

From the moment she stepped across the temple doorsill, she had already begun counting down. She also gave herself some leeway; she didn't give herself 15 minutes, but 13 minutes.

Shang Jianyao quickly raised an idea. "Do you think he can hear us? Will he appreciate the music if I play something? Will there be any song that can make him stand up from his coffin and dance with me?"

With a fellow like you, no matter how eerie, sinister, and terrifying a scene is, it will become strange and even comical... Unless you happen to want to give me a scare as well... When Jiang Baimian first saw the mummy in the coffin, she was a little terrified. But now, she didn't know what kind of expression to face the target with.

After hesitating for a moment, Jiang Baimian replied, "We can try a conversation; forget the music."

Shang Jianyao sighed regretfully. He took a step forward and looked into the coffin. "Can you hear me? If you can, blink."

He spoke in Ashlandic and Red River language.

The skinny 'sleeping deity' in white linen clothes didn't react.

Shang Jianyao suddenly raised his voice. "Your hat has been stolen!" He was referring to the wreath laurel.

The 'sleeping deity'—who was like a mummy—still looked like he had been dead for many years.

“It seems useless.” Jiang Baimian made a judgment.

Shang Jianyao still didn't give up and shouted, “Your wife ran off with someone!”

? The radio broadcasts these days sure dare to broadcast anything... Jiang Baimian forced herself not to laugh.

The 'sleeping deity' lying quietly in the coffin remained motionless.

After Shang Jianyao switched to the Red River language and tried again, Jiang Baimian sighed. “If it weren't for the fact that you were sure that he had residual human consciousness and that I can sense some weak electric signals, I wouldn't believe that he's still alive. He has been asleep for at least 30 to 40 years, right? Yet, his body still retains a certain level of activity; this is unbelievable. Could it be that someone is injecting him with glucose and nutrients regularly?”

Even if humans recovered the hibernation abilities buried in their genes, they couldn't accomplish such a feat.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “Human cryonics technology.”

Jiang Baimian wasn't unfamiliar with this term. She pondered for a moment and said, “Are you saying that he used some ability or something to allow his body to enter a state similar to a deep freeze?”

This clearly wasn't a real deep freeze. Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao only felt a little cold as they stood in front of the coffin.

“We have to wake him up to be sure.” Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. Just as he said that, he suddenly turned his head and stared at Jiang Baimian. “Look...”

“Stop, what do you mean by look?!” Jiang Baimian was instantly alarmed. “What are you trying to do?”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, "I want to try using my Awakened abilities on him. Look, think about it. My Awakened abilities can be used on creatures with human consciousness, and he still has human consciousness."

Without Inference Clowning's help, Jiang Baimian already understood Shang Jianyao's thoughts.

She really felt that it was of some practical value and had a chance of success.

"The company only said that we aren't to move the sleeping deity's body unless necessary. The additional condition I added was that it's best not to even touch it..." Jiang Baimian thought for a moment before saying, "Psychological influence and contact isn't something to pay attention to."

Shang Jianyao became excited when he heard this. He even took off his mask and prepared to do his best.

Jiang Baimian immediately added, "Inference Clowning won't do. He shouldn't be able to hear you. In theory, Corny Person and Hands Immobility should work. However, I suggest using Hands Immobility. This is because the former will directly produce a corny effect and might bring about unnecessary accidents. The latter will first establish a connection before affecting his hands.

"Yes, his hands can't move in the first place. This way, there won't be any obvious changes during the entire process, minimizing the risk."

Jiang Baimian didn't want to see this mummy suddenly sit up.

"Alright." Shang Jianyao had no objections.

Jiang Baimian took off the rubber glove on her left hand and flexed her fingers. She then smiled and said, "I won't touch anything here, but I can jolt you. I'll closely observe your condition later. I'll wake you up if anything goes wrong."

As she spoke, electric currents emitted from her left hand.

Shang Jianyao glanced at her and cast his gaze at the 'sleeping deity' in the coffin again. His consciousness quickly extended over and connected with the other party's consciousness.

With a bang, Shang Jianyao's vision turned pitch black. He felt like he had returned to the Sea of Origins—all he could see was a faint glow.

With the help of this light, he discovered a window. A hazy tower that reached into the clouds stood very far away.

Under the window, a figure lay prone in the darkness without moving.

He suddenly looked up at Shang Jianyao, and his eyes suffused a strange glow as he weakly said, "Save me!"

Chapter 224: Message

"Save me!" The figure in the darkness stretched out his hand to Shang Jianyao like a drowning person attempting to grasp the last straw.

Shang Jianyao's body was cold as if he was slowly sinking in the winter water. As the hand approached him, the glimmering darkness in front of him shook violently.

Finally, the darkness silently shattered. Rays of sunlight shone in, allowing the black coffin and the mummy in linen clothes to appear in Shang Jianyao's eyes again.

His consciousness returned to the real world. At the same time, his body was still clearly numb, and many of his nerve endings were throbbing.

"What happened?" Jiang Baimian retracted her left hand—which still had some electric sparks—and asked in concern, "I only tried to wake you up when I saw your expression distort."

At this point, she sighed thankfully. "Fortunately, you took off your mask!"

"How long has it been?" Shang Jianyao asked in response.

"About three minutes." Jiang Baimian didn't need to flip her wrist and look at her watch to answer. She had been paying close attention to Shang Jianyao's situation and the exact time. After all, they couldn't stay in the temple for too long.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, "I felt like only about ten seconds had passed." He then described the dark environment he had 'seen,' the window in the faint light, the distant blurry tower, and the figure crawling under the window.

"That figure was shouting 'save me?'" Jiang Baimian asked in surprise.

Shang Jianyao gave an irrelevant answer.

"He spoke in Ashlandic."

Jiang Baimian looked around the temple's layout and looked down at the mummy's black hair and rough linen clothes. After that, she nodded slightly. "It's very normal."

She then muttered to herself with interest, "He actually shouted 'save me'... Does this mean that his current state isn't natural? Something went wrong when he explored the depths of the Mind Corridor; he's trapped inside, and his consciousness can't return to his body? Previously, he wanted to be born when his aura fused with the Awakened murloc. It was an attempt to open a passage between the mind world and the real world?"

Every time Shang Jianyao entered the Sea of Origins, she would have similar worries. At this moment, she naturally made an inference.

"It's also possible that he was carrying out some experiments and ended up trapping his consciousness in his subconscious." Shang Jianyao gave another possibility.

At this moment, he seriously did an academic analysis.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "But this doesn't explain why his body can survive until now. Could it be that humans or Awakened bodies will naturally enter a suspected deep freeze when in such a predicament?"

She couldn't get an answer to her question, so she could only say, "I wonder what that window and the tower outside means. Based on your guess, it should be a kind of reflection of the psyche. And if I'm right, it might be a scene deep in the Mind Corridor..."

At this point, Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her watch. “There’s not much time left. Let’s search for other clues. We won’t be able to figure out anything here by making empty theoretical talk.”

Shang Jianyao agreed deeply. He put on his mask again and removed the flashlight from his belt.

The yellow beam of light quickly shone into the black coffin, scattering the shadows and revealing more details.

Jiang Baimian held a gun with one hand and lowered her body. With the help of the flashlight, she checked the sleeping deity named Yama Tiger from top to bottom.

As her gaze moved down inch by inch, she suddenly realized that the mummy’s right hand had a few broken nails that were dyed red.

“He’s injured?” Jiang Baimian’s heart palpitated as she signaled for Shang Jianyao to focus the flashlight’s beam on the inner part of the coffin beside the mummy’s right hand.

As the light ruled the area, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao saw scratches at the same time. Some of these scratches were normal, some were disconnected, and some were dyed red.

“Did he forcefully make these with his fingers after he fell asleep? Could he still move his fingers occasionally in the early stages?” Jiang Baimian couldn’t figure out what the scratches meant because they might’ve been produced after several attempts, not something that was done in one attempt.

She no longer held up her rifle and allowed it to be slung over her body. She then took out a pen and paper from her pocket and replicated the scratches onto the paper according to the layout on the coffin’s innerboard. She also took the initiative to scale it relatively.

After the replication, Jiang Baimian finally recognized the scratches.

They were four Ashlandic words: ‘A,”Brand,”New,”World.’

“A brand new world?” Jiang Baimian never imagined that the hint left behind by the deity, Yama Tiger, after he fell asleep would be such a short sentence.

Shang Jianyao came to a realization. “He’s trapped in a brand new world!”

Jiang Baimian didn’t blindly deny Shang Jianyao’s guess. She only raised more questions. “Isn’t this a little too simple? Besides, what does the brand new world represent? Where is it?”

“I don’t know.” Shang Jianyao was rather honest.

Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her watch. “We’ll discuss it when we get back. Continue.”

She and Shang Jianyao quickly checked the coffin’s situation and didn’t discover any more clues.

They seized the last moment to quickly pass through the temple’s corridor on both sides. However, there was barely any dust here.

“It’s about time; it’s time to back out.” After returning to the place where the coffin was placed, Jiang Baimian made a rational decision.

Shang Jianyao seemed a little reluctant, but he still chose to obey his team leader’s orders.

Jiang Baimian looked at Yama Tiger—who was sleeping in the coffin—one last time. Her gaze swept past his tightly shut eyes, his emaciated face, and the slightly yellowish-white linen shirt before landing on the tree branch bracelet on his right wrist.

Jiang Baimian guessed that it was also an item that could produce magical effects. However, the Awakened murloc’s final mutation prevented her from rashly making any attempts.

Who knew if Yama Tiger’s remains had a similar backdoor or ‘virus!’

Phew... She exhaled and suppressed the greed in her heart. She then turned around and walked out of the temple without looking back.

It was better to leave such high-risk matters to the Vigilance Church or a team that specialized in such matters.

Shang Jianyao was in no rush to follow her. He put away the flashlight, took a diagonal step, and propped up the coffin lid with his rubber-gloved hands.

After doing this, he stood in front of the coffin—which no longer provided a view of the sleeping deity—and bowed solemnly three times.

Jiang Baimian—who had already decided not to look back—stood by the well and watched this scene speechlessly.

“He’s not dead yet...” Jiang Baimian sighed.

“It’s warmer this way, and he won’t be harassed by insects.” Shang Jianyao gave his reason. He then lowered the white curtain at the hall’s entrance.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Then, why did you bow?”

“Out of politeness,” Shang Jianyao replied truthfully.

After the two of them left the temple, Shang Jianyao turned around and gently closed the pitch-black door.

“How polite,” Jiang Baimian commented in an ambiguous manner. She continued, “While we still have time, let’s search the other houses and see what clues we can find.”

It was far better to conduct a simple investigation in the alley outside the temple. Unfortunately, this place seemed to have been sifted through by the merfolk, leaving nothing word-related.

The only thing that could be seen was that there were traces of a fight in many places, with blackened bloodstains.

“From the looks of it, they really suffered an attack from the Heartless. In the end, no one survived...” Jiang Baimian made a judgment based on the information provided by the murloc captive.

After the Heartless disease erupted in town, the remaining humans became prey for the Heartless.

Due to their limited time, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian didn't stay long. They left the alley and rushed to the spot where the bicycles were parked.

When they were about to reach the alley, Jiang Baimian looked back at the doors she deliberately didn't close and thoughtfully said, "Then, who closed the door for them?"

The Heartless—who had entered and hunted—probably didn't have any instinct to close the door after walking through.

"Automatic," Shang Jianyao replied seriously. Just as he said that, he pointed out of the alley and happily said, "The bicycles are still here."

"Did you really think that they would be stolen?" Jiang Baimian's voice gradually softened as she turned her head to look at the mountain on Lake Heart Island.

There might still be some Heartless living there, and they might really be capable of riding bicycles.

Without any further delay, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao mounted their bicycles and left town via the same route.

At this moment, the winter evening had quietly arrived, and the sky had dimmed significantly.

After riding for a distance, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but look back at the town where the temple was.

This town—filled with the Old World's ancient charm—was silent and lifeless in the gradually darkening environment.

For some reason, Jiang Baimian suddenly thought of Moat Town's evening.

A large number of townsfolk returned from the farmlands and wilderness woods behind the town. In the square that had many buildings that failed to meet any building code, they fired up their stoves

and cooked food. Some of the children—who were out of school—ran around and chased each other. Some looked at their stew pots in anticipation...

...

After an unknown period of time, in the alley where the temple was located in the silent town.

A howling gale blew past as the opened doors slammed shut one after another.

Chapter 225: Subduing the Enemy Without Fighting

The sun was already setting in the west, dragging out the two bicycles' shadows as they zoomed across the path between the desolate farmlands and the withered trees.

As they cycled, Jiang Baimian suddenly gestured for Shang Jianyao to slow down. She then cycled to the side of the road, parked her bicycle, and plucked some relatively soft branches.

“What are you weaving?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

Jiang Baimian—who was not wearing a mask—smiled maliciously. “Preparing to carry out domestic discipline.”

Shang Jianyao agreed deeply. “That’s right. Things have been getting to Little Red’s head recently; we have to let him know how difficult life is.”

Jiang Baimian chuckled and placed the tree branches into the backseat. She didn’t explain further, got onto the bicycle, and said, “Let’s go.”

When the sky was dyed the color of fire, the two of them returned to the dock.

Upon seeing them return safely, Long Yuehong—who was wearing the exoskeleton—heaved a sigh of relief. “How was it? Any discoveries?”

“There was something; we’ll talk about it when we get back.” Jiang Baimian looked up at the sky. “We have to hurry; we can’t wait for the sky to darken completely.”

When the time came, it would be difficult for them to determine the bearings on the lake. The merfolk would be even more elusive.

Although the Old Task Force had two human-shaped radars that could sense the enemy's presence, this was still an era ruled by firearms. It would be relatively troublesome if the merfolk drove a boat over and fired rockets at them from a distance of 100 to 200 meters under the cover of night.

In addition, Jiang Baimian was unwilling to share the rather terrifying exploration experience in such an environment, lest it affected Long Yuehong and Bai Chen.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong had no objections to her suggestion because the sun was setting with every second.

After Bai Chen loaded the bicycles and started the speedboat, Jiang Baimian sat down, took the tree branches she had previously plucked, and seriously began weaving.

"Team Leader, what are you doing?" Long Yuehong was also curious.

"Carrying out domestic discipline." Shang Jianyao deliberately took off his mask so that Long Yuehong could see his sunny smile.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "It might come in handy later. It's best not to fight if we can avoid fighting the merfolk."

At this point, she paused and praised herself. "We are ultimate villains. We have to learn how to subdue the enemy without a fight."

Long Yuehong was confused. He didn't know what weaving branches had to do with subduing the enemy without a fight.

At this moment, Bai Chen—who was in charge of steering the speedboat—whispered, "It seems like they want to deceive the merfolk."

Perhaps because the wind's interference wasn't that strong, so Jiang Baimian acutely captured this sentence and widened her eyes. "How can it be called deception? This is a tactical deception."

“What’s the difference between the two?” Long Yuehong subconsciously asked.

Shang Jianyao helped provide an ‘explanation.’ “The latter sounds better.”

“Great, now you guys are echoing each other.” Jiang Baimian glanced at them. “It seems like I really have to consider enforcing domestic discipline!”

As they chatted and laughed, the speedboat followed its original route and sailed toward Redstone Collection.

Before long, Jiang Bohemian finished weaving a bracelet with half a thin branch.

“So you didn’t forget it.” Shang Jianyao came to a realization.

Jiang Baimian almost choked. “What a terrible line.”

“What do you mean?” Long Yuehong was confused and curious.

Jiang Baimian casually explained, “We found a tree branch bracelet in that temple, but we didn’t dare to take it.”

“Yes, you can’t randomly take things from a place like that.” Long Yuehong indicated that this was the way it should be.

After putting the tree branch bracelet on her left wrist, Jiang Baimian stretched her left hand in front of Bai Chen and gestured. “How is it? Am I skilled?”

Bai Chen immediately replied, “Don’t block my view while I’m driving.”

She paused and added, “I could weave better than you when I was seven.”

Jiang Baimian smiled casually. “How can it be the same? I didn’t even know what real trees looked like when I was seven; I thought they were similar to cotton.”

The speedboat sailed for a while longer, and the sky turned darker.

Upon seeing the approaching lakeside, Jiang Baimian frowned slightly.

Shang Jianyao quickly said, "There are many people underwater."

"Heh, they're pretty careful. The ones here might not be merfolk, right?" Jiang Baimian smiled and replied with a relaxed expression. "There's about 30."

"That many?" Long Yuehong wasn't sure how much combat strength his old antique could unleash after entering the water.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian walked to the edge of the speedboat and raised her left hand in the direction with the most merfolk.

She shook her wrist and loudly said, "We went to the forbidden temple and obtained this item. You should know what your Oracle took back then, and you should also know how powerful he is. Want to give it a try?"

With that said, she turned her head and signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes.

At this moment, the merfolk underwater weren't too sensitive to the sounds outside. They could only barely hear the words 'temple,' 'Oracle,' and 'powerful.' At the same time, they saw the tree branch bracelet on Jiang Baimian's wrist through the ebbing water.

This naturally made them connect the dots and recall the Oracle's terrifying performance.

Right on the heels of that, a large number of merfolk suddenly lost their 'senses' and couldn't move their hands in the water.

This made them sink a little, but they quickly relied on their kicking legs to maintain their balance.

The truth was right in front of them, so they had no choice but to believe it. Furthermore, resisting a powerful enemy like the Oracle was something they didn't want or dare to do.

Furthermore, they had just experienced a war and lost many people. They were definitely unwilling to have 30 to 40 young adults die for no reason.

The merfolk—who had experienced Hands Immobility—quickly informed their companions of the situation through hand gestures.

Seven to eight seconds later, they dived down at the same time, distancing themselves from the water.

Jiang Baimian then retracted her gaze and smiled at Long Yuehong, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen. “Like I said, subduing an enemy without a fight.”

Long Yuehong was impressed.

Shang Jianyao suggested a new plan. “If we tell them that we killed the Oracle, will they be scared off?”

“There’s also a possibility of a suicidal charge.” Jiang Baimian exhaled.

After this conversation, she confirmed one thing—Shang Jianyao didn’t feel any guilt or psychological burden from killing the murloc Oracle.

Indeed, when one’s life is on the line on the battlefield, there’s no need to take it to heart as long as one doesn’t deal any friendly fire. Yes, Shang Jianyao didn’t deal a fatal blow to them. If not for the sudden anomaly, he would’ve been prepared to capture them alive... Jiang Baimian canceled the psychological counseling session she had originally wanted to schedule.

The sky darkened. When only half of the sun was above the horizon, the speedboat returned to Redstone Collection dock.

...

In Room 05 of the hotel camp.

Jiang Baimian shared her findings with Long Yuehong and Bai Chen.

Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine as he listened; he couldn't help but shiver.

He then glared at Shang Jianyao. "When did you open the door?"

What made him feel cold was the winter night's wind that poured in from the outside.

"A minute ago." Shang Jianyao expressed his thoughts. "I'm helping you simulate the environment back then so that you can experience it."

"There's no need!" Long Yuehong indicated that he didn't want to experience it at all.

After Shang Jianyao closed the door, he sighed. "This sounds magical."

It didn't make sense at all.

"That's right." Jiang Baimian exhaled. "The lifeforms of the powerful Awakened deep in the Mind Corridor and even the Kalendarium are really puzzling. There are actually so many unimaginable things happening around them. Back then, I really felt that it might be haunted."

She looked around and continued, "This also tells us that we can firmly believe that science can explain everything, but we definitely can't pretend that something that science can't explain and verify doesn't exist or define as erroneous. It's even more so today since science is far from perfect. The spirit of science is to make bold assumptions and carefully verify them. It's about seeking the truth; it's not about anachronism, complacency, and blind resistance."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly applauded.

Jiang Baimian glared at him and looked at Bai Chen. "What do you have in mind?"

“When we return to the company, we have to request for the corresponding information,” said Bai Chen calmly. “In this regard, the company definitely has more information than us. The more we know, the safer our subsequent investigations will be.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Unfortunately, we are outside now. We can only receive the company’s response if we encounter any specific problems.”

She continued, “After this visit, I am certain that the Vigilance Church will send experts to explore the temple. Although we have a friendly relationship with Harbinger Song and the others, we still have many secrets. There’s no need to meet the Vigilance Church’s experts.

“In any case, our main goal in Redstone Collection has been achieved. All we have left to do is to gather information on Mechanical Paradise. It will be completed soon. When the time comes, we will leave directly.”

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen had no objections. Shang Jianyao hesitated for a moment before nodding.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. “We have to find the real murderer who killed Helvig while we still have time. We can’t just take their firearms and not do anything.”

Bai Chen deliberated for a moment. “We might have to reorganize the list of Helvig’s enemies.”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian had just replied when she cast her gaze at the door.

Shang Jianyao quickly looked over.

After about ten seconds, someone knocked on the door.

Shang Jianyao put on the monkey mask and opened the door. He realized that the people who had come were the black-cloaked Harbinger Song He and the playboy forensic doctor from the Public Security Department, Weiler.

After entering the room, Song He looked at Jiang Baimian and the others and sincerely said, “I have a mission for you.”

“What is it?” Jiang Baimian asked in confusion.

Song He glanced at Weiler and said, “We previously suspected that someone had sold information to the merfolk and mountain monsters, allowing them to know that Bishop Renato had been urgently transferred back to headquarters. We have now locked onto a suspect; we hope that you can conduct a secret investigation.”

Jiang Baimian nodded in enlightenment. “Who is it?”

Song He sighed and said with a serious expression, “Han Wanghuo.”

Chapter 226: Opportunity

“Captain Han?” Not only were Long Yuehong and Bai Chen surprised, but even Jiang Baimian was rather surprised.

She remembered that she had found many corpses strewn on the ground and blackened spots everywhere when she and Shang Jianyao returned to the defensive line that Han Wanghuo was in charge of.

In such an environment, Han Wanghuo could’ve died at any moment. Like the other town guards, his luck wouldn’t be better just because he was a sheriff.

If he had sold the information regarding Bishop Renato’s return to headquarters to the merfolk and mountain monsters, there would’ve been no need for him to be at the frontlines. He could’ve found an excuse to move to a relatively less vulnerable spot.

Not only was this akin to tying the noose for himself but also sticking his head inside.

That’s unless Han Wanghuo’s true strength is much greater than what he has shown and is sufficiently confident that he can survive the Subhuman Alliance’s assault to the end. However, people with such strength don’t need to be so ingratiating... Amidst Jiang Baimian’s surprise, this thought flashed across her mind.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao firmly replied, “I don’t believe you.”

Song He's explanation was left stuck in his throat.

Dr. Weiler couldn't help but say, "You haven't even heard the reason. Why are you saying that you don't believe us?"

"I trust him." Shang Jianyao gave his reason.

"Then, why do you trust him?" Weiler seemed eager to argue with Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. "A man's intuition."

"..." Weiler immediately had the contradictory feeling that the other party was filled with flaws, yet there was also none.

Shang Jianyao sincerely taught him. "You can refute the statement with: what kind of man are you?"

"Then?" Weiler subconsciously asked.

Shang Jianyao frankly revealed the subsequent response. "I'll take off my pants and show you if I'm a man. After that, you won't be able to take the insult and will become very angry. Then, we can go out and have a fight under the accompaniment of music."

What the heck... Weiler was confused.

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao had successfully diverted the topic, Jiang Baimian sighed helplessly and looked at Song He. "Harbinger Song, what's your reason?"

As Weiler was around, their conversation continued in the Red River language.

Song He retracted his gaze, and his expression became serious again. "He might be a Subhuman."

"Subhuman?" Jiang Baimian didn't expect to receive such an answer.

Similarly, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen were rather surprised. Upon recalling Han Wanghuo's yellowish eyes, they fell into deep thought.

"Subhumans are also humans." Shang Jianyao tried his best to express his point of view.

Song He ignored his words and pointed at Weiler beside him. "Dr. Weiler discovered this."

Weiler took over the conversation and sighed. "To be honest, I don't want to believe it either. I have a good relationship with Captain Han. He will inform me which smuggling caravans come with prostitutes."

At this point, his expression became a little serious. "Wasn't Captain Han previously injured in the battle? His left arm."

"Yes." Long Yuehong indicated that he had seen it with his own eyes, and Bai Chen nodded slightly.

Weiler continued, "I'm a doctor after all. I wanted to take a look at his wound and treat it. It wouldn't be good if it got infected, right? Yet, he rejected me and said that he could handle it himself. Later, when he went to the room in the Public Security Department to change his dressing, I thought that it wouldn't be convenient for him to do it alone. Hence, I finished the rest of my water and prepared to enter to help him when he encountered trouble.

"We are all men, so I didn't knock, just opened the door, and went in. Who knew that I would see pieces of something on his arm. It was like... not very dense scales that were amber in color. Back then, Captain Han had pulled down his sleeve—there was no wound at all. He then looked at me and asked me why I suddenly came in. Back then, his eyes looked very dangerous—just like how my superior reacted when he saw me lying in bed with his wife.

"I quickly pretended not to notice anything and said that I wanted to come in and help him change his dressing. Captain Han's eyes quickly returned to normal as he said that he was already done.

"The more I thought about it when I came out, the more I felt that something was amiss. I rushed to the cathedral as soon as I got off work and found Harbinger Song. Harbinger Song then told me not to panic and to pretend that nothing had happened. I was to secretly carry out observation."

After Weiler finished, Song He added, “Things were different today. It involves the selling of information to merfolk and mountain monsters. I couldn’t wait any longer, so I came to you for help.”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and smiled. “Harbinger Song, you can actually find him yourself. I believe he won’t hide anything from you.”

He won’t do anything unfriendly to you either.

Song He sighed and said, “I have a pretty good impression of Han Wanghuo. He has done many good things in the past three years. As you know, as a clergyman, I can’t make the Redstone townsfolk trust each other and work together against outsiders because of the teachings. Han Wanghuo has at least done the latter.

“I’ve also seen how serious and responsible he is. If I were to ask him personally, everyone would have a rift in their hearts regardless of the outcome. It might not be easy for us to coexist in the future. But you are different; you are outsiders. Even if you know something, you will soon leave, and the secret will be buried.”

Weiler and Shang Jianyao agreed with Song He’s words and nodded at the same time.

Harbinger Song is implying that he wants to give Han Wanghuo a chance? As a clergyman of the Vigilance Church and Redstone Collection’s current mayor, he definitely can’t be biased. We are outsiders, so we can do whatever we want... Is this the real reason he commissioned us? Jiang Baimian thoughtfully organized her words.

“I think we should clarify something first. Whether Captain Han is a Subhuman or not has nothing to do with whether he sold information. Even if he’s really a Subhuman, it doesn’t mean that he betrayed Redstone Collection. Back then, he did risk the rain of bullets to stop the enemy.”

Song He smiled gently. “Yes, I think so too.”

Indeed... After this conversation, Jiang Baimian confirmed her guess and tersely acknowledged it. “I’ll split the mission into two parts. The first is to find Captain Han to confirm if he’s a Subhuman. The second is to find the person who sold the information to the merfolk and mountain monsters.”

“Very good.” Song He was rather impressed with this plan.

Jiang Baimian then smiled. “Since it’s a mission, what’s the reward?”

Song He swept his gaze across the four masks and said meaningfully, “I wonder if you are interested in some Awakened knowledge? I don’t dare to reveal too much confidential information either; I can only say that you’ll learn everything Tan Jie knows.”

It seems that by finishing off the Awakened murloc and safely returning after exploring the forbidden temple, it has made this Harbinger confirm that at least one of us is an Awakened. From an Awakened’s inevitable strange behavior, it’s not difficult to guess that Shang Jianyao is most likely the one... Jiang Baimian didn’t need to turn her head to guess that Shang Jianyao definitely looked eager.

She coughed and said, “Knowledge is always valuable; this payment isn’t bad. Harbinger Song, we trust you, so we don’t have to do it through the Hunter’s Guild.”

Song He smiled again. “Alright.”

Since she had already accepted the mission, Jiang Baimian quickly entered a professional state. “Harbinger Song, you have to give us a list. Bishop Renato’s urgent transfer back to the headquarters before the merfolk and mountain monsters invaded should be a secret that only a few people know.”

“I’ve already prepared it.” Song He took out a folded piece of paper from the pocket of his black cloak. “There are two parts to this. One is the people who were in the cathedral and witnessed the entire matter, and the other is the people who were later notified.”

The former knew that Bishop Renato had contracted the Heartless disease.

It’s so easy to talk to smart people... Jiang Baimian happily took the piece of paper, but she was in no rush to read it. She first sent Song He and Weiler out of the room and said that the investigation would begin tomorrow morning.

After closing the door again, Jiang Baimian spread the piece of paper on her bed.

The first part included the Qian Bai Team members' fake names. They were Qian Bai, Zhang Qubing, October Xue, and Gu Zhiyong.

“We can ignore this for the time being,” Jiang Baimian said as she looked at the information. “But we can’t rule out the possibility that someone deliberately changed the information regarding Bishop Renato’s contracting of the Heartless disease to that of Bishop Renato being urgently transferred back to headquarters to prevent him from exposing himself later. After all, there’s no fundamental difference between the two matters for the merfolk and mountain monsters.”

As she spoke, her gaze landed on the lower portion. This included a few heads of the Ashlanders, a few relatively influential smugglers among the Red River people, and town guard brass like Tan Jie and Han Wanghuo—who were very capable.

If it weren’t for the fact that Helvig was already dead and that Anhebus was suspected of selling firearms to Subhumans, they would definitely be on the list of people who had learned of the cathedral’s unforeseen event in advance.

As her gaze moved down bit by bit, Jiang Baimian suddenly saw a familiar yet unfamiliar name: DiMarco.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before muttering to herself, “Sigh, how could I have forgotten about the Underground Ark...”

As part of a tripartite of Redstone Collection, the Underground Ark might be stronger than the Ashlanders and the Red River people. It was a faction that would be immediately informed if anything happened at the Vigilance Cathedral.

Long Yuehong immediately echoed, “That’s right. They stay underground all day. Apart from coming out to do business, they don’t even care about the Subhuman invasion...”

Upon saying that, Long Yuehong was stunned.

Bai Chen helped him finish his sentence. “They are quite suspicious.”

Long Yuehong tersely acknowledged her words and asked, “Team Leader, are you suspecting them?”

“A little, but that’s not the most important thing.” Jiang Baimian smiled as she spoke. “Weren’t we worried about how to contact DiMarco and investigate the Old World’s destruction? This is an opportunity.”

Before Long Yuehong and Bai Chen could respond, Shang Jianyao praised, “You’re so nasty.”

Chapter 227: Human

The next morning, the Old Task Force went straight to Redstone Collection after having breakfast and entered the Public Security Department.

Regardless, they felt that it was better to resolve Han Wanghuo’s problem first. The longer this dragged on, the easier it was for accidents to happen. For example, if Weiler had a loose tongue and accidentally told the other town guards what he had seen, news that Han Wanghuo was a Subhuman would spread throughout Redstone Collection.

It would be fine if Han Wanghuo wasn’t a Subhuman, but it would be troublesome if he really was. Even if he didn’t do anything that let down Redstone Collection, he might be forced to explain himself to prove his innocence.

The Old Task Force had fought alongside him before, so they naturally had some good intentions toward him. They hoped to resolve this problem in the best possible way.

However, Weiler was the only one sitting in the Public Security Department.

“Captain Han didn’t come?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Weiler shook his head. “It’s not like he punctually reports to work every day. He still has a bunch of things to handle with the town guards. There were many problems left behind from the war.”

The simplest and most straightforward way of putting it was: with so many people dead, Han Wanghuo had to comfort the deceased’s families and cheer the other town guards on.

Jiang Baimian carefully sensed the area and confirmed that there was nobody else in the Public Security Department. She then suppressed her voice and asked, “You didn’t reveal anything in front of him, right?”

Weiler thought for a moment and said, “I don’t think so. My mental fortitude is quite strong.”

That’s right. He even dares to get into someone else’s bed and sleep with someone else’s wife... Long Yuehong had always despised this playboy.

After a pause, Weiler hissed. “But I’ve subconsciously been avoiding him these past two days. I don’t joke with him as much as I used to.”

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen looked at each other and asked solemnly, “Where does Captain Han live?”

Weiler stood up and pointed in a direction. “The park’s north exit. There were originally a few small buildings there, but they collapsed until only one was left. Captain Han lives inside. He said that it’s relatively close to Redstone Collection and that he can rush over quickly if anything happens.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else. She led the three other Old Task Force members out of Redstone Collection and drove toward the park’s north.

Before long, they arrived at the exit and saw a row of lone buildings hidden among the trees.

Unfortunately, the trees and leaves had withered in the winter cold. There was no scenery to speak of, and the buildings had either collapsed or were damaged in many places. Only one building was relatively intact.

Jiang Baimian looked over and saw no cars parked outside the dark-blue building. She immediately frowned.

At this moment, a thought flashed across her, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong’s minds: Is there really a problem with Han Wanghuo? Has he already fled because of his crimes?

As the jeep drove toward Han Wanghuo’s residence, Bai Chen looked at the ground and said, “There are relatively fresh tire tracks.”

There was a drizzle last night, and part of the road was very muddy.

“Han Wanghuo just left not long ago?” Long Yuehong understood what Bai Chen meant. “Team Leader, should we turn around and chase after him now?”

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao smiled. “You really don’t have any talent in hide and seek.”

Long Yuehong glanced at him and thoughtfully asked, “You mean these tracks are a disguise?”

“After driving for a distance, Han Wanghuo found a relatively dry spot on the road and hid the car. He then sneaked back here and waited for the team chasing him to leave before fleeing in the opposite direction?”

Shang Jianyao gave an objective evaluation. “You also listen to a lot of radio programs.”

Jiang Baimian spoke as she drove. “A reasonable guess; this can be considered a possibility. Yes, it’s best not to casually change targets when we carry out investigations. Eliminating them one by one is the most reliable choice; otherwise, it’s very easy to make the mistake of losing the forest for the trees. In short, let’s go to Han Wanghuo’s house and search. If he’s really gone, we’ll chase after his tracks.”

The jeep soon arrived in front of the three-story building.

Jiang Baimian sighed as soon as she alighted. “There’s someone inside; the tire tracks are indeed a deliberate diversion. It seems like Han Wanghuo has plenty of anti-tracking experience. Yes, he should have more than one car.”

As Jiang Baimian spoke, Shang Jianyao walked to the small building, bent his finger, and knocked on the door.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

No one replied.

After knocking thrice, Shang Jianyao stretched out his right hand and pushed open the unlocked door.

Long Yuehong held the assault rifle and asked in surprise and amusement, “When did you discover that it wasn’t locked?”

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “Before I knocked.”

“...” Long Yuehong was speechless. “I understand. It gives a sense of ritual, right?”

“You’re wrong. Shang Jianyao today is no longer the Shang Jianyao from yesterday. It’s politeness this time,” Shang Jianyao explained seriously.

This fellow’s condition seems to have worsened a little... Long Yuehong didn’t continue the conversation. He followed Jiang Bohemian, walked past Shang Jianyao, and entered the building.

Jiang Baimian stopped in the hall, looked in the direction of the kitchen, and shouted, “Come on out.”

There was still no response this time.

Shang Jianyao clapped and smiled. “Determination is needed for hide and seek. One can’t just come out from a little ruse.”

With that said, he jumped into the kitchen, squatted in front of a cabinet, and knocked on it thrice.

The next second, the cabinet’s door opened. Han Wanghuo—who had two scars on his face—was huddled inside, pointing a pistol at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao went with the flow and dutifully played the role of a captive. He raised his hands, slowly stood up, and slowly retreated.

Han Wanghuo crawled out and swept his yellowish-white eyes around. He lowered the muzzle and said, “It’s actually you guys who came... I thought Weiler would lead the town guards to surround this area.”

“We took on a mission.” Jiang Baimian’s attitude was calm, and her voice was normal.

“A mission to capture me?” Han Wanghuo smiled bitterly.

Jiang Baimian shook her head. “The mission is very simple; it’s to find you and ask you a question.”

Han Wanghuo fell silent for a few seconds before asking, “What question?” At this moment, he seemed to be waiting for the final judgment.

Jiang Baimian looked at his slightly yellowish-white eyes and asked in a deep voice, “Are you a Subhuman?”

Han Wanghuo’s expression immediately became a little strange. He looked disappointed and a little relieved. He then laughed and looked around. “Yes, I’m a Subhuman.”

With that said, he pushed up his left sleeve, revealing his arm. From the middle of his arm, amber scales protruded. They weren’t that dense, and they intersected with the strange hard flakes on his skin.

Han Wanghuo smiled and said, “A nomadic subhuman without an ethnic group.”

At this point, his expression suddenly warped. “But aren’t Subhumans human? According to this method of categorization, are Red River people and Ashlanders also not humans?”

“They are all humans,” Shang Jianyao said factually.

Han Wanghuo didn’t expect to receive an affirmative reply and was momentarily at a loss for words.

After a few seconds, he sighed. “Actually, I can understand why the merfolk and mountain monsters insisted on fighting their way back to Redstone Collection and seize this place. Although there aren’t many of them who have truly experienced the Old World’s destruction or have memories of their hometown, the lakeside in the city ruin is a symbol of their normal lives as humans. It’s where they find sustenance in all that’s beautiful.

“If they give up just like that and don’t pass down their beliefs of reacquiring this place generation after generation, their descendants might accept the fact that they are monsters in a few more generations and forget that they should be humans...”

After listening quietly, Shang Jianyao seemed like he wanted to take off his tactical backpack, but he ultimately resisted the urge.

Jiang Baimian opened her mouth, wanting to say something, but she was momentarily unable to organize her words.

A sentence flashed across Long Yuehong’s mind again: This f*cked up world!

At this moment, Bai Chen suddenly said, “Then, why are you standing opposite them? You also said that you killed many merfolk and mountain monsters.”

Han Wanghuo was stunned for a moment before he revealed a self-deprecating expression. “Maybe it’s because I’ve always treated myself as a human, but in the years before my parents passed away, they kept telling me that we are humans—humans who have contracted strange diseases.

“Later, I began wandering the Ashlands. I always looked forward to interacting with humans, but once they discovered my secret, they would look at me strangely as if they were looking at a monster. Among them, the better ones only stopped interacting with me. The worse ones even wanted to kill me.

“In order to be a good human, I found many books left behind by the Old World and requested myself to act according to the descriptions. Sometimes, I’m very afraid, but I still have to bravely rush up to save humans. Sometimes, I have the deep wish to acquire all the valuable things, but I ultimately chose to distribute them fairly. Sometimes, I clearly wish that a person died, but I had to tolerate it because he didn’t commit any crimes. Sometimes, I almost can’t control myself and curse at Redstone Collection’s abnormally vigilant people. In the end, I still maintain my emotions and reason with them. I organize them and use my actions to serve as an example.”

At this point, Han Wanghuo’s eyes lost focus. “Once, a mountain monster discovered my secret before he died. He looked at me and said: You’re so selfish...”

“Haha.” Han Wanghuo laughed crazily. “Yes, I’m very selfish. I did all of this for the sake of being treated as a human, for the sake of obtaining recognition. But I’ve done so much and put in so much effort. In the end, all I hear is the word ‘Subhuman.’”

His gaze swept across Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others' masks, and he said in a mocking tone, "If humans have a set of standards, then compared to Helvig and Anhebus—who can sell their weapons to hostile groups for their own benefit—those cowards who are still a burden when the enemy invades, or the Vigilance Church believers who can't even afford basic trust, I think I'm not bad at being a human. Even if I'm forcing myself most of the time, I ultimately demanded myself to use human standards."

Han Wanghuo laughed again loudly. "Yes, I'm a Subhuman. But compared to most people in this town and this world, I'm more like a human!"

Jiang Baimian was at a loss for a response. She even regretted asking the previous question.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao took two steps forward and looked at Han Wanghuo. He fell silent for a moment before saying, "I don't know what to say, so I'll dance for you."

With that said, he did a few dance moves before turning around to leave.

Chapter 228: Han Wanghuo's Decision

Upon seeing this, not only Han Wanghuo, but even Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were stunned.

This was no longer a matter of whether they could keep up with Shang Jianyao's train of thought. Instead, both parties seemed to be in two different worlds. Their conditions and expectations were completely different.

The next second, Jiang Baimian suddenly realized that following Shang Jianyao to walk away seemed to be the best choice.

After hearing Han Wanghuo's confession, she was momentarily at a loss, unsure about what expression or words she should use.

An apology was unwarranted since the Old Task Force didn't do anything excessive. They only came over to make a simple inquiry. If they just brushed it away with a laugh to smooth things over, it would appear insincere. Jiang Baimian felt that it was even worse if she skipped the topic and asked about something else. Han Wanghuo had said so much in such an agitated manner, but to have everyone treat it as if nothing had happened would simply be an insult.

If she really wanted to respond, Jiang Baimian felt mixed. She felt that nothing she said was comparable to Han Wanghuo's life to date. After all, they were pure 'humans.' Whatever she said would appear to be cheap. Therefore, it was better to follow Shang Jianyao—who suddenly danced and left—so as to end the story with absurdity.

This was good for both parties.

As her thoughts raced, Jiang Baimian turned around and followed Shang Jianyao out of the building.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen naturally chose to follow when they saw that their team leader had made a decision.

In just ten seconds, Han Wanghuo was left alone in the room.

Han Wanghuo looked at the kitchen with the remaining footprints, then at the empty living room. Finally, his gaze landed on the open door.

He was still a little confused, unsure if a group of visitors had really come and left after dancing in front of him.

He subconsciously pulled down his sleeve and covered the amber scales on his arm again.

At this moment, a mask suddenly popped out from the door; it was a graceful monk mask.

Jiang Baimian chuckled dryly and raised her index finger. "Final question."

Just as she said that, a monkey mask with a furry face and a protruded mouth and a fat pig mask with nostrils that could stuff garlic in them appeared beside her.

In addition, Bai Chen—who was wearing the ferocious man mask—also walked back to the door.

Han Wanghuo felt mixed emotions. He didn't know whether to be angry or smile as he replied, "Speak."

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and pretended to be nonchalant. “Did you betray information about Bishop Renato’s return to the Vigilance Church’s headquarters to the merfolk or mountain monsters?”

Han Wanghuo scoffed. “What’s the benefit of selling that information to them? To be welcomed back as a Subhuman?”

“I knew it wasn’t you!” Shang Jianyao said happily.

Although it was possible that Han Wanghuo was lying, Jiang Baimian felt that what he had previously said was likely true. In other words, he stood on the side of humans.

This wasn’t a confirmation based on an Awakened’s ability, but a judgment based on Han Wanghuo’s usual performance and the logic behind his words.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. “We still believe you, but there are things we still have to ask. Actually, we have a suspect, and it isn’t you.”

Han Wanghuo had been investigating this matter yesterday. He forgot his explosive emotions and asked, “Who do you have in mind?”

“DiMarco or someone who represents the Underground Ark,” Jiang Baimian replied truthfully.

Han Wanghuo nodded thoughtfully. “I’ve also considered it. The Subhuman invasion is a disaster for the Red River people and the Ashlanders, but not for the Underground Ark.”

“As long as the Subhumans can’t enter the Underground Ark and as long as the Underground Ark’s exchange of supplies to the outside world still takes a majority of this area’s smuggling business, there’s a high chance that the Subhumans will negotiate with them and eventually reach a certain cooperative agreement. After all, to merfolk and mountain monsters, these fellows won’t be an eyesore if they continue hiding underground,” Jiang Baimian echoed. “And to DiMarco in the Underground Ark, does it matter who he cooperates with?”

At this moment, Bai Chen interrupted. “The merfolk, mountain monsters, and the Underground Ark have a closer relationship than Redstone Collection’s current townsfolk and the Underground Ark.”

“That’s true. Their ancestors were the same as DiMarco’s ancestors; they were all natives of this city.” Jiang Baimian recalled the information and agreed.

Han Wanghuo added, “Due to the competition for the smuggling business in recent years, both the Red River people and the Ashlanders have an unpleasant relationship with the Underground Ark. It’s also normal for the Underground Ark to take the opportunity to shuffle the cards.”

At this point, Han Wanghuo suddenly laughed self-deprecatingly. “I don’t think I have to worry about this matter. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Jiang Baimian immediately said, “Actually, you don’t have to think that way. Harbinger Song has always been very moderate with Subhumans. He doesn’t mind your background. Besides, he appreciates your previous performance and believes that you have truly become Redstone Collection’s sheriff. He has hinted to us that he will pretend not to know that you are a Subhuman as long as you have never betrayed Redstone Collection.

“You know Weiler; he’s very easy to talk to. As long as you don’t have a beautiful wife, he’s still trustworthy. Yes, only Harbinger Song, Weiler, and the four of us know for the time being. We will leave Redstone Collection in a few days, and we might not have a chance to return in this lifetime.”

Han Wanghuo fell silent. After a while, he slowly said, “I can’t get over myself. When my identity as a Subhuman is discovered, even if only a few people know about it, I will still feel like I’m walking outside naked. This is especially so when I try my best to appear brave, upright, and fair. The thought of someone here knowing that I’m a Subhuman makes me feel like a clown performing a comical act.”

He paused, and his voice deepened. “Besides, I can’t help but think about it. What if—what if Harbinger Song tells the new bishop about me one day? What if Weiler gets alcohol from a smuggler, gets drunk, and accidentally divulges this matter one day... In the end, my thoughts will definitely become: If neither Harbinger Song nor Weiler are in this world, there won’t be any accidents or risks.”

Han Wanghuo exhaled and chuckled. “Malicious thoughts can be a very terrifying thing. It’s better for me to distance myself from it as soon as possible.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian couldn’t persuade him any further. She could only say, “We’ll try our best to investigate the matter before you leave.”

Han Wanghuo nodded solemnly. “Since Harbinger Song has no ill intentions, there’s no need for me to be in a rush to flee. I can stay for a few more days and settle everything that needs to be handled. Heh heh, including the information regarding Mechanical Paradise that I agreed to help you gather.”

...

After bidding Han Wanghuo farewell and returning to the jeep, Long Yuehong looked back at the small building with the ajar door and sighed sincerely. “This is the first time I’ve learned that the identity of a ‘human’ is actually so important.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. “Weren’t those Subhumans’ ancestors normal humans back then as well? But when disaster descended, mutations happened, and the Old World was destroyed. That changed their fate and their descendants’ fates forever. I quite admire Han Wanghuo; he didn’t succumb to such a fate, and he has been working hard to resist it.”

Shang Jianyao leaned against the window and watched the building grow further and further away. He suddenly said, “Should we rope him into the company?”

“We can give it a try.” Jiang Baimian didn’t object. “I’ll send a report back in the afternoon and see what the company says. We can’t take matters into our own hands; otherwise, it will be troublesome if we bring him to the door, only for him not to gain entry.”

Although there was no lack of Pangu Biology employees showing contempt or discrimination toward Subhumans, they at least didn’t go as far as having hatred for them.

Among the major factions in the Ashlands, this was considered very enlightened. Pangu Biology even took the initiative to take in Subhuman ethnic groups as vassals.

Furthermore, strictly speaking, most of Pangu Biology’s employees were no longer considered pure humans. In some factions that believed that genetic enhancement violated the laws of nature, the Chosen Ones had a similar status as Subhumans.

After settling this matter, Jiang Baimian suddenly smiled. “I discovered something interesting.”

“What?” Long Yuehong was very cooperative.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror. “Han Wanghuo kept saying that he’s selfish and that all his beautiful performances were faked to make him look like a human.”

At this moment, Bai Chen—who was driving—calmly interrupted, “As a wilderness nomad and a Subhuman who’s not considered very strong, he’s definitely not a good person to be able to survive until he joined Redstone Collection.”

In that case, Bai Chen would also use the same evaluation on herself. At most, she would remove the word ‘sub.’

“I understand.” Jiang Baimian expressed her understanding. “Back then, he definitely couldn’t avoid using adjectives like ‘fierce’ and ‘cunning.’ But haven’t you realized it now? After pretending for so long—Uh, after being a Knight—his perspective on the problem has completely changed. Yes, I’m referring to the sentence ‘malicious thoughts can be a very terrifying thing. It’s better for me to distance myself from it as soon as possible.’”

Long Yuehong recalled and asked in surprise, “Did the act become real?”

“Something like that.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “This can practically be used as a research blueprint. It can be used to determine how one’s behavior changes one’s mind.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Shang Jianyao—who had taken off his mask—asked with a smile.

Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted around. “If it weren’t something good, I wouldn’t even consider reporting to the company and asking if I could obtain a spot for further observation.”

At this point, she turned her head and looked at Bai Chen. “Little Bai, how did you come into contact with the company back then?”

Bai Chen deliberated for a moment. “I-I applied for a job...”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian was shocked.

Shang Jianyao then excitedly imagined the scene back then. “The company set up a stall on Weed City’s streets and raised a banner with the words ‘Pangu Biology Recruitment’ written on it?”

Jiang Baimian wanted to curse at the ridiculous scene, but she was too embarrassed to say anything because she had similar thoughts.

Bai Chen shook her head and said, "I joined a Ruin Hunter team, hoping to take on missions that needed the numbers. Later, after completing a few missions, the leader came to me and asked if I was willing to join Pangu Biology.

"After a preliminary inspection and entering the underground building, I learned that a Ruin Hunter I knew had recommended me to the company and said that I knew a lot about the Blackmarsh Wilderness. The requirements for the Ruin Hunter team's search for new members were tailored for me."

Jiang Baimian nodded. "I see. I thought you encountered a team that was carrying out a mission for the company. No discord, no concord."

As they spoke, their jeep drove at an adequate speed toward the Vigilance Cathedral north of the city ruin.

Chapter 229: Violent Person

Upon seeing Song He, Jiang Baimian roughly recounted the conversation between her team and Han Wanghuo.

After Song He heard that, he sighed. "In my eyes, he's a real human. What a pity..."

Jiang Baimian didn't know if Song He was sad that Han Wanghuo had finally decided to leave, or if he was sad that he didn't dare to take the next step to become bishop. He couldn't offer a promise to persuade Han Wanghuo to stay, so he could only sigh.

After Song He sighed, he shook his head and smiled. "It's no wonder that despite my repeated requests for Han Wanghuo to find a lady in Redstone Collection, he was unwilling to do so. He said that a sheriff would definitely offend many people and that it would put his wife in danger. He said it was better to wait until the town guards were truly established and until a public security law that everyone is willing to acknowledge and obey is established. He said he would consider it after saving up a sufficient sum of money and resigning as sheriff."

It was obvious that Han Wanghuo was afraid that his scales would be seen by people close to him, so he would rather not get married.

“Liar!” Shang Jianyao said with emotion.

Jiang Baimian knew why Shang Jianyao said that. He had previously treated Han Wanghuo as his bosom buddy because of his belief of ‘how can family be possible without public security.’ Of course, this was only a one-sided confidant.

At the thought of this, Jiang Baimian casually consoled him. “At the very least, Han Wanghuo is very serious and hardworking when it comes to maintaining order in Redstone Collection and fulfilling his duties as sheriff and town guard captain.”

At this moment, Long Yuehong suddenly thought of a question. “Then, why didn’t he find a Subhuman to marry before he came to Redstone Collection? In the Ashlands, it’s better to have two people helping each other than be alone.”

This way, there wouldn’t be any discrimination.

As the others thought about the answer, Bai Chen calmly said, “He might not fancy other Subhumans.”

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before strongly agreeing. “That’s true.”

Although Han Wanghuo was a Subhuman, he always treated himself as a real human deep down. Therefore, he naturally looked down on other Subhumans. At most, he had sufficient sympathy, friendliness, and understanding for them. However, marriage was off the table.

In a sense, he was also a racist. However, he stood on the human side while naturally showing mercy to other races.

Long Yuehong thought about the merfolk and expressed his understanding of Han Wanghuo.

If Han Wanghuo were to find a female murloc to be his wife, Long Yuehong felt that it was better for him to remain single.

As for the mountain monsters, he could barely accept them. At most, they wouldn’t kiss much.

Upon seeing that the conversation was getting off-topic, Song He returned to the topic at hand. “Therefore, your final conclusion is that Han Wanghuo didn’t betray the information to the Subhuman Alliance?”

“Based on preliminary conclusions.” Jiang Baimian didn’t give a definite answer. “I can only say that based on the current situation, Han Wanghuo has no reason to betray Redstone Collection considering his motives and position. But as the investigation progresses, there might be new clues. When the time comes, there might be different answers.”

Her words were flawless, leaving Song He stunned.

He thought for a few seconds before suddenly smiling. “I was wondering why it sounded so familiar. Isn’t this what I often say when reporting to headquarters? It seems like you guys are also from an organization...”

Only when one reached a certain scale and had an internally well-functioning organization would such an ‘official style’ of speaking appear.

Jiang Baimian didn’t expect herself to expose a little of their background. She could only laugh dryly. “Ruin Hunters will also be careful when dealing with clients with a certain background.”

The two parties exchanged a few words on this topic, but they tacitly didn’t mention whether they wanted to restrict Han Wanghuo’s actions. They treated it as if the other party had been cleared of suspicion.

“I’ll chat with Han Wanghuo again later and see if I can dispel his thoughts of leaving.” Finally, Song He expressed his attitude.

If you don’t use your amiable powers, there’s a high chance that it won’t work... Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and said, “Harbinger Song, we have a suspect in mind. I would like to request permission to make contact with them.”

“Request?” Song He thought for a moment and asked, “Someone from the Underground Ark?”

You are smart. Years of life experience have really filled you with wisdom... Jiang Baimian frankly replied, “Yes, it’s best if we can get in touch with Mr. DiMarco directly.”

Song He hesitated and said, “The Underground Ark has a high status in the Church. I can’t force them. Well, I’ll first try to get Mr. DiMarco’s butlers to come to the cathedral and have a chat with them. I’ll report to headquarters if I discover any problems.”

“Do you need our help?” Jiang Baimian was eager to give it a try.

Song He glanced at them suspiciously. “Not for the time being. Wait here.”

They were now in the corridor behind the main hall—a small living room with sofas, coffee tables, and chairs. The walls here were also painted red and mixed with gold.

After watching Song He leave, Jiang Baimian sighed. “Unfortunately, I shouldn’t have mentioned this. I should’ve gone straight to the elevator downstairs and made contact with the Underground Ark. Act before getting permission!”

As long as they had non-video interactions, there were infinite possibilities.

After many experiments, Shang Jianyao confirmed that Inference Clowning couldn’t expand its range of influence through overly complicated electronic products. All he could use now was a loudspeaker.

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao indicated that he thought so too.

Bai Chen looked at them and reminded them, “Didn’t you do this to maintain a good relationship with the Vigilance Church?”

Upon thinking of the gaze behind the door, Jiang Baimian nodded with a pained expression. “We can’t be too willful when facing such a religion.”

Fortunately, she was wearing a mask, so no one could see her expression.

“You defeated the fake Father,” Shang Jianyao pointed out.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “How can the Anti-intellectualism Church be the same as the Vigilance Church?”

At least Last Man didn't seem to 'observe' his territory like Eidolon Nun did. Furthermore, the Old Task Force had never broken into the Anti-intellectualism Church's formal cathedral.

After chatting and laughing for a while, Jiang Baimian suddenly looked up at the ventilation duct in the small living room.

Shang Jianyao quickly became excited and shouted, “I found you!”

The ventilation duct's mesh was quickly removed. Viel stuck out his freckled face and looked down with his green eyes. “Do you want to investigate the Underground Ark? I heard Harbinger Song contact DiMarco's butler.”

Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “Do you have information that you want to sell to us?”

Viel revealed his signature smile. “Beg me, and I'll tell you.”

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao suddenly jumped up and rushed over. Shang Jianyao then jumped with the help of the chair and grabbed the panels on both sides of the ventilation duct.

This scared Viel into retracting his body and retreating a long distance. He then anxiously asked with abnormal anger, “What are you doing?”

Shang Jianyao looked up and smiled. “Catch you, tie you up, and then beg you.”

“...” Viel frowned at this fellow, unable to understand his logic.

Jiang Baimian and the others had no intention of stopping their interaction. They seemed happy to see it happen.

Viel quickly retreated until he was almost in another section of the ventilation duct before he stopped.

He looked at the entrance that was illuminated by light, hesitated, and said loudly, “The Underground Ark’s guards mentioned something during their idle chat: DiMarco is a very violent person. No matter what mistakes the servants make, they will be executed as long as he happens to see it or discover it. Sometimes, they will be killed if they encounter him in a bad mood, even if they don’t make any mistakes.”

Upon hearing this information, Jiang Baimian frowned slightly and resolved her previous doubts.

Why would the Underground Ark periodically buy and train servants? Considering the scale of the Underground Ark, it would be enough to get a batch of servants every decade or so. Due to DiMarco’s brutality, the servants are depleted at an astonishing rate, so they need to be replenished regularly? As Jiang Baimian’s thoughts raced, she signaled for Shang Jianyao to come down.

She then asked in the direction of the vent, “Where are the corpses of the dead servants?”

It’s impossible for so many corpses to be piled up in the Underground Ark’s cold storage, right?

Viel’s voice echoed in the ventilation duct. “The Underground Ark has another exit near the mountain range. The corpses seem to be buried nearby.”

Another exit means another entrance... Jiang Baimian was just about to continue asking when Viel shouted, “That’s all I know. You guys lucked out!”

His voice gradually faded as if he had already used the ventilation duct to move elsewhere.

The Old Task Force looked at each other and waited for a while before finally waiting for Harbinger Song He to return.

Song He spoke without much change in expression. “I’ve already spoken to Mr. DiMarco’s three butlers face-to-face. I’ve preliminarily confirmed that they didn’t reveal anything to the merfolk or the mountain monsters about Bishop Renato. In the entire Underground Ark, apart from them, only Mr. DiMarco knows about this. As for whether Mr. DiMarco has told anyone else, they don’t know.”

Jiang Baimian deliberated and asked, “Can I have a chat with Mr. DiMarco via a video call?”

“No.” Song He shook his head. “Unless a new bishop arrives.”

This disappointed the Old Task Force; they could only investigate the others on the list.

At noon, they returned to the hotel camp and used the ingredients they had bought to cook their meals.

While they were busy, the smuggler from United Industries, Lehman, visited them again.

This merchant—who looked like a Red River farmer and had a clear brandy nose—rubbed his hands and spoke in awkward Ashlandic. “I heard from my friend that you seem to be investigating DiMarco of the Underground Ark?”

“It’s a mission we previously accepted that has something to do with Mr. DiMarco,” Jiang Baimian replied immediately.

Lehman smiled and said, “Perhaps you aren’t aware that the matter I want to entrust you with happens to be related to the Underground Ark.”

Chapter 230: Search

Upon hearing Lehman’s words, the masked Jiang Baimian laughed. “What a coincidence.”

After a pause, she added, “I previously thought that your commission was related to United Industries and that we needed to go elsewhere.”

Upon seeing the mysterious Ruin Hunter team show their kindness, Lehman smiled and said, “If you are willing, I also have many requests related to United Industries.”

Shang Jianyao asked excitedly, “What’s there?”

I was just being polite... Lehman was momentarily speechless. Regarding United Industries, he had always believed that having good skills was inferior to having good relationships.

Jiang Baimian chuckled to herself. As she instructed Long Yuehong to continue cooking with Bai Chen, she said to Lehman, “Tell us about your commission, but we might not accept it.”

Phew... Lehman heaved a sigh of relief. “Here’s the thing: I was saved by a Ruin Hunter when I was still an employee of a military enterprise in United Industries. His name is Lars. He’s a little younger than me, and he has good marksmanship and outstanding combat skills. He’s a Senior Hunter. Later, we often met. He helped me a lot, and I also commissioned him with many missions, allowing him to lead a pretty good life...”

After briefly recounting the past, Lehman finally said, “In short, he’s my best friend.”

“What happened to him?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Long Yuehong—who was helping Bai Chen cook—pricked up his ears.

This story sounded interesting.

Lehman’s expression slowly turned solemn. “He went missing. About a year ago, he disappeared in Redstone Collection.”

“Did he say anything to you before he disappeared?” The person who asked this question was not Jiang Baimian, but Shang Jianyao—who had one hand crossed over his chest and the other rubbing his chin.

He was just short of a pipe to mimic a famous detective from a radio show.

Lehman slowly exhaled and said, “The gathering point he was born in was previously attacked. His only surviving sister was abducted and enslaved. He had been searching for his sister’s whereabouts constantly. One day, he happily told me that he had found clues and confirmed that his sister had been sold to Redstone Collection. Furthermore, she might very well have already become an Underground Ark servant.

“With the opinion that it wouldn’t be too difficult to redeem a person from the Underground Ark, I told him that as long as he could confirm that his sister was here, I could sponsor him with a sum of supplies so that he could complete the transaction. He soon set off for Redstone Collection. A friend of mine told me that he did come, but he stopped appearing after a few days.

“He disappeared just like that.” Lehman’s tone was very gloomy toward the end.

“You suspect that his disappearance is related to the Underground Ark?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“Maybe he had a conflict with someone from Redstone Collection and was secretly killed. He was tied to a rock and thrown to the bottom of the lake.” Shang Jianyao provided another possibility.

In the Ashlands, apart from the few large factions, order and chaos coexisted everywhere. Plundering and murder often happened.

Lehman shook his head. “This might happen in other settlements, but as you know, all the Redstone Collection townsfolk like to hide. Without any business conflicts, it’s very difficult for outsiders to have any conflict with them. Uh, I also had Lars carry my letter with him to my friends to request their care.”

“For example, Helvig?” Jiang Baimian asked with a smile.

“Yes.” Lehman didn’t deny it.

Before Helvig died, he was Lehman’s main business partner in Redstone Collection. It wasn’t too much to call him a friend.

Shang Jianyao was immediately excited. “Could Helvig have done it? Helvig’s wife doesn’t have a good relationship with him. Lars lived in their house and is a very capable hunter. Could the two of them quickly develop a relationship that Helvig discovered and accidentally killed in his anger?”

What the hell are the company’s radio dramas and radio stories usually broadcasting... Uh, why does this story sound so familiar? He cooked up this tale using the fact that Weiler had an affair with his superior’s wife and was exposed on the spot—as well as the fact that Bishop Renato contracted the Heartless disease and how Helvig was scared to death in the ventilation duct? Jiang Baimian gradually understood the source of Shang Jianyao’s inspiration.

Lehman shook his head without hesitation. “Impossible.”

“What evidence do you have?” Shang Jianyao expressed his disbelief.

Lehman hesitated and clasped his hands. “It’s impossible for him to have an affair with Theresa because he likes men.”

This... Jiang Baimian looked at the arms dealer in front of her and gave Shang Jianyao a look, telling him not to continue his ‘inference’ and saying something like, ‘I understand. It was Lars and Helvig who had an affair. They were discovered by Theresa, who flew into a rage. She then got her adulterer, Bishop Renato, to help kill the male third party.’

Ignoring the chaotic and complicated nature of the story, these words would definitely hurt Lehman emotionally.

Shang Jianyao returned a regretful gaze and shut his mouth.

Jiang Baimian then inquired, “Did you discover any clues later?”

Lehman paused for a few seconds before saying, “I found out that he visited the Visa Trading Company and met one of DiMarco’s butlers. The butler’s name is Ulrich. Apart from this, there are no other clues. I mobilized my men and got many people from Redstone Collection to help me investigate the Underground Ark, but it was to no avail.

“I even personally looked for Ulrich, but he said that Lars disappeared when he learned that his sister had unfortunately died of an illness. Yes, Lars’s sister did enter the Underground Ark and became a servant inside. However, she died from an infection a few months later.”

Died from an infection? Jiang Baimian suddenly recalled Viel’s words.

DiMarco was very brutal and liked to vent his anger on servants; he thought nothing of human lives.

Lehman looked at the woman in the elegant monk mask and deliberated before saying, “Recently, I learned something through Helvig. The Underground Ark has an exit somewhere in Iron Mountain. People often come and go through that exit.”

Iron Mountain was north of the city ruin, where mountain monsters lived. On the other side of the Iron Mountain range was a relatively famous ruin from the Chaotic Era—Iron Mountain City.

This matches the information Viel provided... Jiang Baimian thoughtfully asked, "How did Helvig know?"

Lehman had no intention of hiding the truth for the deceased. "He learned it from Anhebus, and Anhebus heard it from the mountain monsters."

That's right. Anhebus and the mountain monsters have been secretly trading... Wait a minute; the Underground Ark has an exit somewhere in Iron Mountain... That place is definitely not far from where the mountain monsters reside. If DiMarco wants to sell information on Redstone Collection, he can do it without anyone knowing... Jiang Baimian quickly connected the dots.

"Where exactly is it?" she asked.

Lehman took out a hand-drawn map and pointed at a red circle. "Here."

He then described the symbols on the map so that the Qian Bai Team could accurately find their destination. After saying that, Lehman took out another photo. "This was taken shortly before Lars disappeared."

Jiang Baimian took the photo and glanced at it. She realized that Lars was a very masculine man.

Lars had short, flaxen hair, a high nose bridge, light-blue eyes, and a short beard around his mouth. His most prominent characteristic was a small cyan birthmark on his forehead. As for his height, it was not obvious from the photo.

After Jiang Baimian finished looking at the photo, Lehman deliberated for a moment and said, "I don't expect you to agree to it right now. I only hope that you can help me keep an eye out while investigating the Underground Ark. If you can discover his whereabouts in passing or any related clues, you can come to me at any time to ask for payment."

He sure knows how to conduct himself... Yes, otherwise, he wouldn't have become a rich arms dealer... The only problem is that he only weighs the situation and lowers himself toward those stronger than him... Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "We'll help you keep a lookout."

"What payment can you give?" Shang Jianyao interrupted and asked.

This time, Jiang Baimian didn't glare at him because this was also what she wanted to ask.

Lehman smiled and said, "For example, a relatively new exoskeleton model, but this might take about a year to obtain. Similarly, there's also the T1 type multifunctional mechanical arm. You have to give me more than half a year. Uh, I'm not in charge of transplantation. In addition to these, there are armored vehicles, tanks, and many types of cannons..."

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and said, "You shouldn't have high hopes either."

...

After sending Lehman off and having lunch, the Old Task Force drove the jeep north—toward Iron Mountain.

On the way, Long Yuehong asked warily, "Could this be a trap?"

Jiang Baimian smiled. "Ignoring the fact that there's no reason to deal with us, even if there is, our team's strength has increased. We are now a team that can truly destroy a nomad settlement."

Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little happy, knowing that his team leader was talking about the military exoskeleton.

As they spoke, they used nearly two hours according to the map's instructions before they finally arrived at Iron Mountain and found the Underground Ark exit hidden at the foot of the mountain.

This was a valley, and a small path led to a cave. The Underground Ark entrance was deep in the cave.

Jiang Baimian didn't get Shang Jianyao and the others to approach immediately. Instead, she found a convenient vantage point to monitor the area and hid themselves, watching the cave entrance closely.

Time passed minute by minute, and the sky gradually turned dark. Long Yuehong was a little impatient from waiting.

He turned his head, looked at Shang Jianyao—who was hiding behind a few trees—and asked casually, “Don’t you find it boring?”

Shang Jianyao looked straight ahead and said, “I’m a rock now. Rocks don’t have feelings like boredom.”

“...” Long Yuehong couldn’t help but reply, “Rocks can’t speak either.”

“I’m acting the role of a talking rock,” Shang Jianyao explained calmly.

I’m really stupid, seriously... Long Yuehong cursed himself inwardly. He felt that it was more interesting to wait.

At this moment, two people came out of the cave; they were carrying a heavy sack.