

Ad Infinitum 231

Chapter 231: The Deceased

The two people that came out of the cave were wearing olive-green uniforms, and they each carried a submachine gun. They seemed to be the Underground Ark's guards.

They looked around to make sure nobody else was around before carrying the heavy sack deeper into the valley.

Before long, they found a relatively soft spot and took out two shovels from the rucksack.

Jiang Baimian signaled to her team members and quietly led them down from their high ground to a spot not far from the two Underground Ark guards. She then suppressed her voice and said to Shang Jianyao, "Go."

Shang Jianyao did not decline the responsibility. He rushed out of his hiding spot with the Berserker assault rifle and shouted at the two Underground Ark guards, who were digging a hole. "You've been surrounded!"

The two guards were shocked. They abandoned their shovels at the same time and pounced in different directions, attempting to find cover to dodge the first round of shots. But just as they completed the first step, they saw the Death rocket launcher's black muzzle and the grenade launcher that was ready to fire.

As their thoughts raced, they stopped, raised their hands, placed them behind their heads, and slowly squatted down.

Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—walked over and smiled. "There's no need to be afraid; we're just here to make friends."

The two Underground Ark guards looked up at the assault rifle in Shang Jianyao's hand and silently lowered their heads.

The two of them were typical Red River people. One had brown hair, and one had blond hair; one had blue eyes, and the other had brown eyes. They both had beards, and there was nothing special about their looks. If one had to pinpoint a characteristic... One might have a relatively large nose, and the other had thick eyebrows.

Shang Jianyao then smiled. “Look, I didn’t fire at you and spoke to you calmly. I didn’t make you put down your weapons for me to slaughter you. So...”

Upon hearing this, the two guards immediately felt that this fellow was rather friendly. It seemed like he was really just here to make friends.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier? You scared us.” The guard with the larger nose, brown hair, and blue eyes was relatively braver; he quickly stood up.

“How may I address you?” Shang Jianyao showed his friendliness.

The guard casually said, “Just call me Joseph; he’s Paul. What about you?”

“Zhang Qubing.” Shang Jianyao used his fake name in the Red River language.

“Are you Ashlanders?” Joseph asked in understanding when he heard the translated name.

“Humans are humans. There’s no need to differentiate them into different groups.” Shang Jianyao emphasized his opinion.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian had already walked to the sack and squatted down. She then carefully pulled open the mouth of the bag to reveal the contents.

It was a corpse.

He was wearing a black suit. His hair was a little white, and there was a bloodstain on his chest.

“Butler Carl!” Jiang Baimian recognized the corpse. This was one of DiMarco’s three butlers, Carl; he was in charge of the firearms business.

He had just spoken to Harbinger Song He in the morning, indicating that they had never sold information to the merfolk or mountain monsters. Now, his neatly combed hair had become abnormally messy.

In just a few hours, he became a corpse.

“Butler Carl?” Long Yuehong repeated in surprise. He never expected the sack to contain such a corpse. He thought that it was a servant who had offended DiMarco.

Of course, strictly speaking, the butler was also one of the servants.

“How did Butler Carl die?” Shang Jianyao asked the two Underground Ark guards, who he had established a friendly relationship with.

This time, he didn’t directly ‘make friends.’ Instead, he used Inference Clowning to simulate the friendly effects of Harbinger Song He.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian had completed a simple inspection and had preliminarily confirmed that Carl had died from a gunshot to the chest.

The big-nosed Joseph’s expression darkened. “Killed by Mr. DiMarco.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question. He remembered that Butler Carl was a loyal person and was clearly a Vigilance Church parishioner. In order to help DiMarco run the arms business, he chose not to hide.

Paul—who had thick eyebrows—and Joseph looked at each other and hesitantly said, “After meeting the Harbinger from the Vigilance Church in the morning, Butler Carl has been wanting to meet Mr. DiMarco. Back then, Mr. DiMarco was resting in his room. It was only in the afternoon that Carl was allowed in. We don’t know what exactly they discussed; we only know that an argument broke out later. In his rage, Mr. DiMarco drew his gun and killed Butler Carl.”

As Jiang Baimian stood up, Shang Jianyao acted as a famous detective and tacitly asked, “Did you witness the subsequent quarrel?”

Joseph shook his head. “We only heard a sudden commotion inside. When we opened the door to protect Mr. DiMarco, he had already shot Butler Carl. He then casually mentioned the quarrel.”

Could it be that after Butler Carl finished his conversation with Harbinger Song and returned to the Underground Ark, he somehow recalled something and began to suspect that DiMarco had really sold the information regarding Bishop Renato to the mountain monsters? He then tried to seek an explanation, but he ended up infuriating the brutal DiMarco and was directly shot to death? However, this doesn't match Butler Carl's loyal image... A series of guesses flashed across Jiang Baimian's mind.

Suddenly, she acutely noticed a detail. Thus, she asked, "No one was by his side when Mr. DiMarco spoke to Butler Carl?"

He actually needed the guards outside to enter and rescue him.

Joseph replied, "Yes, unless there's something that needs to be communicated, Mr. DiMarco won't let anyone stay in his room. He doesn't like that."

Shang Jianyao immediately clicked his tongue. "He really is an unqualified Vigilance Church parishioner."

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong realized a contradiction in the description.

As a member of the Vigilance Church, DiMarco was actually not afraid of being attacked when he was alone. He chose to have all the guards stay outside; he was too careless!

"Maybe his faith in Eidolon Nun is nominal." Bai Chen felt that this was the most likely and most reasonable explanation.

The guard with thick eyebrows—Paul—quickly denied it. "No, Mr. DiMarco has always been very pious. He often wears a mask, and he has been wearing it every day for the past year. Apart from sleeping, he won't take it off."

Shang Jianyao immediately asked, "How did you know that he takes it off when he sleeps?"

Paul hesitated for a moment and said, "I-I just think so."

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and asked, "Will he sleep with women, uh—including men?"

“Yes, he has many women.” Although Joseph found the topic strange, he still answered truthfully.

Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a monkey mask—laughed. “Then, will he take off his mask when doing the deed?”

Joseph and Paul looked at each other and began to recall.

After a while, Paul said, “I heard a few maids that slept with Mr. DiMarco say that he sometimes wears one but sometimes not.”

“Yes.” Joseph recalled some rumors. “In the early years, Mr. DiMarco often didn’t wear masks. Recently, he seems to wear them more frequently.”

“When did this change happen?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“I don’t know.” Joseph and Paul shook their heads at the same time.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, “Did he wear it when he spoke to Bishop Renato recently?”

“Yes, he has been wearing it every day for the past year,” Joseph replied firmly.

In the past year... Jiang Baimian suddenly thought of something. It has been almost a year since Lehman’s friend, Lars, disappeared! This matter is getting more and more confusing...

As Jiang Baimian sighed inwardly, Shang Jianyao had already changed the topic. “What kind of performance do DiMarco and his ancestors have?”

What kind of performance? Joseph and Paul were a little confused.

Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted up as she exhaled and forcefully ‘explained,’ “How did DiMarco and his ancestors rule the Underground Ark?”

Joseph and Paul looked at each other, but neither of them spoke.

Shang Jianyao looked at them and smiled. “There’s nobody else nearby.”

As if he had found support, Joseph took a deep breath in and said, “Brutality flows in the blood of DiMarco and his ancestors. My parents are also from the Underground Ark. One was a guard, and the other was a maid. They tell me that a large number of servants are killed and buried in this valley every year for various reasons. Only a few lucky people are spared.”

“Are you and your parents the lucky ones?” Jiang Baimian asked cooperatively.

Joseph slowly shook his head.

“No. DiMarco and his ancestors rarely brutally kill guards and their families. Only in the first few years, when Mr. DiMarco lost his son, were a few guards executed for angering him. Under normal circumstances, guards will be given two to three chances when they make a mistake.”

“So he isn’t that crazy?” Jiang Baimian evaluated him without passing any judgment. “How did DiMarco lose his son?”

Joseph recalled. “Although Mr. DiMarco and his ancestors are very brutal, all of them love new life very much. From his grandfather onwards, every generation’s owner of the Underground Ark has a large number of partners and many children. They will then choose the most outstanding one to inherit the Underground Ark. Besides, they also encourage guards and maids to copulate and have children.”

“All...” Shang Jianyao repeated one word.

Joseph nodded. “That’s indeed the case. At least, that’s what my parents told me.”

He paused and continued, “The discontent brought about by the brutality has been accumulating. After Mr. DiMarco’s father fell seriously ill, the servants couldn’t hold it in any longer and started a riot. This resulted in many of Mr. DiMarco’s relatives dying. In the end, only a few survived.

“After quelling this riot, Mr. DiMarco became the Underground Ark’s owner. He found many partners internally, but to our surprise, he only gave birth to three children over the years. Among

them, he loved the youngest the most. Unfortunately, this child died from an illness more than three years ago. During that period, Mr. DiMarco was no different from a madman.”

Chapter 232: Unexpected Reversal

Shang Jianyao didn't agree with Joseph's description. “He isn't considered crazy usually?”

“Apart from being relatively brutal and hot-tempered, Mr. DiMarco is normal in other aspects,” Joseph argued.

Jiang Baimian didn't let Shang Jianyao continue arguing and took the initiative to ask, “During that period of time, how was Mr. DiMarco's performance different from usual?”

“Didn't I just tell you?” Joseph's expression became gloomy again as if he had recalled something bad. “He became even more brutal and was no longer tolerant of the guards. We were jittery when on duty every day, afraid that we would be executed for something as trivial as Mr. DiMarco hearing us farting accidentally.”

The other guard, Paul, echoed in sympathy, “Previously, a guard very trusted by Mr. DiMarco was beaten to death for such a trivial matter.”

Joseph continued, “Apart from that, Mr. DiMarco seemed to go crazy about wanting a child. When the group of lovers couldn't get pregnant, he cast his gaze at his servants' wives—who had experience in giving birth... We—we were very angry, but we didn't dare to say a thing. Fortunately, Mr. DiMarco didn't maintain this state for many years. Otherwise, we would've considered...”

At this point, he stopped and became vigilant. Clearly, even though he felt that Shang Jianyao was friendly enough, he was unwilling to reveal his dark thoughts.

If DiMarco learned of this, he would be the next person to be hastily buried in the valley here.

Jiang Baimian frowned and asked, “Did DiMarco return to normal because he finally had a new child?”

The more she listened, the more she felt that DiMarco's obsession with children was abnormal. He was clearly sick.

It had to be known that apart from the one who died young, DiMarco still had two other biological children.

“No.” Joseph denied Jiang Baimian’s guess. “Maybe Mr. DiMarco slowly regained his clarity of mind after venting his anger time and time again. His clarity also rewarded him. Five months ago, a mistress of his finally got pregnant.”

“It might not be his.” Shang Jianyao raised a possibility.

“That, we aren’t sure.” Joseph didn’t help DiMarco deny it.

Jiang Baimian could tell that the Underground Ark’s guards had similar guesses. They might be secretly betting on who was the child’s real father.

She thought for a moment and asked, “Mr. DiMarco’s other two children are girls, and the one who died was a boy?”

This was the best explanation she could think of for DiMarco to go crazy after his young son died.

“The one who died was indeed a boy.” Joseph scratched his large nose. “But the other two are a girl and a boy.”

Jiang Baimian immediately lost her train of thought.

Shang Jianyao eagerly asked, “Can we follow you into the Underground Ark?”

“No.” Joseph and Paul shook their heads at the same time, looking a little terrified.

“Why?” Shang Jianyao expressed his confusion.

Joseph quickly explained, “There are three rounds of inspection at each entrance, and there are many guards. There’s definitely a problem if two of us come out and six of us go back!”

He understood that Zhang Qubing and the others wanted to use him and Paul to infiltrate the Underground Ark.

“I can communicate with them.” Shang Jianyao sincerely suggested a solution.

Joseph still shook his head. “It’s useless. We are all very afraid of Mr. DiMarco. Without his permission, we don’t dare to let any outsiders enter the Ark. Furthermore, cameras are installed at every inspection point. There are specialized guards in charge of the surveillance room. Once they discover a problem, they will immediately cut off power to the elevators and other facilities, completely isolating the Ark from the outside world.”

The other guard, Paul, added, “One of Mr. DiMarco’s hobbies is watching surveillance cameras. No one dares to be perfunctory in this regard.”

Unfortunately, Shang Jianyao’s Inference Clowning still can’t achieve a certain level of effect with the help of complicated conversions... The cameras can’t record sound either... Jiang Baimian felt regretful and smiled.

“Do you have any unnecessary misunderstandings about us? We don’t plan on using you to sneak into the Underground Ark. Instead, we want you to tell Mr. DiMarco that we wish to visit him and chat with him about the Old World. This is our main goal. Apart from that, there are only a few simple questions.”

Joseph and Paul heaved a sigh of relief, their bodies no longer tense.

The former asked happily, “Can you introduce yourself? Mr. DiMarco will probably ask.”

“A Ruin Hunter team. The team leader is Madam Qian Bai.” Jiang Baimian introduced them in Red River language and pointed at Bai Chen.

Joseph and Paul swept their gaze at them as if they were a little confused that their leader was the quietest and shortest.

Jiang Baimian knew that such an introduction was insufficient and boasted, “It’s the Ruin Hunter team that previously finished off the murloc Oracle and saved Redstone Collection.”

“Huh?” Joseph and Paul were a little confused. It was obvious that they were relatively ill-informed by spending all their time in the Underground Ark and didn’t know much about the outside world.

Of course, this was definitely limited to the lower echelons. Whether it was DiMarco or his butlers and guard captains, they should know about the Qian Bai Team, which had recently been in the spotlight in Redstone Collection.

“Just introduce us to Mr. DiMarco like that,” Jiang Baimian added.

“Alright.” Joseph and Paul agreed.

Right on the heels of that, their gazes landed on the burlap sack containing Butler Carl’s corpse. They seemed to be hesitating about whether they should report to the Underground Ark now or bury the corpse first.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “Don’t worry. We’re all friends now; we’ll do the burying.”

Friends? Team Leader, how did you learn Shang Jianyao’s tricks... Long Yuehong couldn’t help but curse inwardly.

Joseph and Paul felt relieved after receiving the promise. They turned around and walked toward the cave.

After watching them disappear from sight, Jiang Baimian instructed Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, “Move Butler Carl’s corpse into the jeep’s trunk.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was just about to pick up a shovel.

Jiang Baimian casually explained, “Bring it back to Weiler for a detailed autopsy and see if there’s anything strange about the cause of death.”

I see... Long Yuehong really thought that his team leader had decided to play the nice person role to the end.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao looked at the cave and sighed. “What a pity...”

“Are you thinking that with how things went, you won’t be able to use your intelligence and Awakened abilities to sneak into the Underground Ark without anyone noticing?” Jiang Baimian teased with a smile. “Don’t worry. We’re just being polite before resorting to force.”

Shang Jianyao turned his head to glance at her. “I find it a pity that I can’t blast open the Underground Ark’s door with a single rocket launcher.”

“When did you become so fierce?” Jiang Baimian was surprised.

Shang Jianyao replied truthfully, “A few minutes ago. Now, I’m the ferocious and rash me.”

“...” Jiang Baimian sized up Shang Jianyao and rationally gave up on the topic.

After Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong carried Butler Carl’s corpse into the jeep, the Old Task Force waited for a while before seeing Joseph and Paul return.

They were still wearing simple olive-green uniforms and had submachine guns slung across their backs.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao look at him in anticipation, Joseph said guiltily, “Mr. DiMarco told me to tell you that there’s nothing to talk about. He only interacts with the Vigilance Church’s bishops.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian didn’t insist. After all, the person in question wasn’t in front of her.

They began walking toward the spot where the jeep was parked. Shang Jianyao waved goodbye to Joseph and Paul.

After the jeep drove away from the foot of Iron Mountain, Long Yuehong couldn’t help but ask, “What should we do next? Think of a way to sneak into the Underground Ark?”

As Jiang Baimian observed her surroundings, she muttered to herself, “I’m considering a question. Is the contact with DiMarco worth us taking the risk to infiltrate the Underground Ark?”

“His ancestors might not know anything; they just have apocalyptic phobia. Whether it’s the problem of the Redstone Collection traitor or Lehman’s commission, it’s not important to us. It’s naturally good that we can figure out something, but it doesn’t matter if we can’t. After all, we didn’t make any promises and didn’t receive any payment.”

Bai Chen agreed with this. “The main reason we can’t carry out a full investigation is that the Vigilance Church isn’t cooperating and doesn’t give us the right to contact DiMarco directly. This is their problem, and it has nothing to do with us.”

“Yes!” Jiang Baimian immediately felt at ease. She then smiled and said, “Although we won’t take the risk to infiltrate, we can discuss the plan. We might encounter such matters in the future, so it won’t be wrong to develop our thinking more now.”

Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao beside him and didn’t mention the plan to ‘make friends’ with the butler and sneaking in through the supply crates. This wasn’t because Butler Carl was dead but because he now knew that DiMarco was very brutal.

If this method was used, the corresponding butler would not be able to escape death.

“From the ventilation ducts?” Long Yuehong deliberated before saying, “Although Viel said that there are guards at every ventilation duct, I’m sure there aren’t as many as the regular entrances. We can control them before striking them unconscious and quickly resolve them without causing any commotion.”

With Shang Jianyao’s Hands Immobility and Corny Person, it was not a problem.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “It’s feasible, but we need to investigate if there are surveillance cameras in the ventilation ducts in advance. If there are, how should we resolve them?”

During the group discussion, Shang Jianyao remained very silent. It was unknown what he was thinking.

Jiang Baimian noticed his abnormality and hesitated before asking, “Hey, any plan of yours that’s different?”

Shang Jianyao immediately leaned forward and said seriously, “I want to confirm two things first: First, our goal is to establish contact with DiMarco and communicate with him, right?”

After receiving an affirmative answer, he continued, “DiMarco also said that he only interacts with the Vigilance Church’s bishop. In that case, we can obtain a very simple solution: As long as we become bishops of the Vigilance Church, the problem will be solved.”

Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled and said, “This is an idea, but the problem is that it’s not that easy to become a bishop of the Vigilance Church.”

She still had a fresh memory of the gaze at the door.

Before night fell, the Old Task Force—which had gone to Redstone Collection—returned to the hotel camp. They no longer worried about what happened during the day.

However, someone came to visit them early the next morning.

This person resembled Butler Carl; he wore a neat black suit and looked to be in his forties. His black hair was neatly combed, but his hairline was a little high. From his appearance, he gave off a serious feeling.

He swept his blue eyes around and respectfully said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Mr. DiMarco’s butler, Ulrich. He wants to invite you to meet in the Underground Ark’s special reception room.”

Ah? Long Yuehong wasn’t the only one surprised. Jiang Baimian and the others were also surprised.

It had only been one night, yet DiMarco had already changed his mind?

Chapter 233: Reception Room

Translator: CKtalon

As the scene fell silent, Shang Jianyao suddenly said in ‘horror,’ “Are you trying to silence us?”

Ulrich was stunned for a few seconds before responding. “Mr. DiMarco allows you to bring weapons, but you can’t wear the military exoskeleton.”

Very confident... Jiang Baimian snapped to her senses and decided to agree after some thought. “Alright.”

No matter why DiMarco suddenly wanted to meet them, this was a rare opportunity. Furthermore, they could inform the Vigilance Cathedral before entering the Underground Ark to ensure their safety.

As she walked to her jeep, Jiang Baimian didn't hide her puzzlement and directly asked Ulrich, "Why did Mr. DiMarco suddenly change his mind? He just rejected our meeting request yesterday."

Ulrich slowly shook his head. "I'm not too sure either. I'm just following Master's instructions."

Jiang Baimian was just about to ask if anything abnormal had happened in the Underground Ark since last night or if DiMarco learned something new when Shang Jianyao curiously asked, "Are you sure that's still Mr. DiMarco? He has recently been wearing a mask every day."

Good question... Jiang Baimian shut her mouth and waited for Ulrich to respond.

Ulrich turned his head and glanced at the four Old Task Force members. "If any of you were to be replaced, would you not be able to recognize the person in disguise—even if their hair color, height, and figure are very close to the original person, and they are always wearing masks?"

"If it's just a short interaction in an emergency, there might indeed be a mix-up. But with us living together every day, one can't hide one's habits, mannerisms, hobbies, bearing, and accent unless one has observed them for many years in advance. This is very unlikely in the Underground Ark. People know who's dead and who's alive."

"Indeed." Jiang Baimian agreed with Ulrich.

After they got into their respective cars, they headed to the Vigilance Cathedral north of the city ruin.

After exchanging a few words with Harbinger Song He, the Old Task Force quartet followed Ulrich to the underground floor and entered one of the elevator lobbies.

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

After Ulrich communicated via video with the Underground Ark, one of the elevators opened its doors.

The interior was well maintained. The floor was paved with wood, and the metal walls around it were reflective.

“The special reception room is on the second floor underground. This will make it relatively easy for you to escape the Ark,” Ulrich introduced.

“Thank you.” Jiang Baimian didn’t know how to respond and simply mimicked Shang Jianyao.

As they spoke, the elevator door closed in front of them, and the lift slowly sank.

The elevator soon stopped. The Old Task Force quartet saw a long beige carpet outside.

They walked along the thick carpet and a corridor lit with wall lamps before arriving at a room. There were a total of eight people guarding the room.

Two of them were also wearing grayish-black military exoskeleton equipment. It was obvious that they were relatively new models.

No wonder they allowed us to carry weapons... Long Yuehong came to a realization.

The Underground Ark had an absolute advantage in firepower!

Ulrich knocked on the door and waited for two seconds before saying, “Master, the guests are here.”

“Let them in.” A slightly charismatic voice sounded from the room.

After pushing open the carved red wooden door, Jiang Baimian habitually looked around and took in the situation inside.

This seemed to be a very normal reception room. There was a coffee table, a sofa, a carpet, a wooden cabinet, chairs, and a crystal chandelier. Apart from being relatively luxurious, there was nothing special.

At this moment, DiMarco was alone in the room. His sideburns were flaxen, and he wore a black priest robe that had the Old World style. He wore an old-fashioned bonnet of the same color and a black mask with white patterns. As he was seated, it was difficult to tell his height.

With a sweep of his light-blue eyes, DiMarco pointed at the sofa opposite the coffee table. "Have a seat."

After Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others sat down, Ulrich left the room and closed the heavy wooden door.

DiMarco was just about to speak when Shang Jianyao suddenly smiled. "You aren't a qualified Vigilance Church believer."

DiMarco crossed his right leg over his left and asked without anger, "Why do you say so?" His voice was a standard male voice with a charismatic hint. He used the Old World's Lake of Wrath Red River language.

"Your guards are all outside. If we launch an attack without warning, we can subdue you before the two military exoskeleton devices arrive and take you hostage." Jiang Baimian explained on Shang Jianyao's behalf. "This is indeed not vigilant enough."

DiMarco leaned back slightly and laughed. "Maybe it's because I'm confident?"

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao curiously and excitedly asked, "Are you stronger than that murloc Oracle?"

DiMarco was momentarily speechless. After a few seconds, he said, "Maybe there are other contraptions in the room."

He didn't continue the topic. He raised his hand to touch his black mask with white stripes and exhaled. "I called you here to chat about Lake Heart Island and Yama Tiger."

Yama Tiger... The sleeping deity? Jiang Baimian asked in surprise, “You know Yama Tiger—no, your ancestor knows Yama Tiger?”

She didn't expect to receive DiMarco's invitation because of their exploration of the temple.

DiMarco leaned back in the armchair and smiled. “Years ago, when my great-grandfather and grandfather were still alive, I heard about Lake Heart Island and Yama Tiger. It was during the end of the Chaotic Era; the Ark began to connect to the outside world and exchange supplies. My grandfather sent intelligence agents and Ruin Hunters from the surrounding area. Heh, I shouldn't call them that as there was no Hunter's Guild back then. In short, they all noticed the situation on Lake Heart Island and learned of Yama Tiger's existence.

“Yama Tiger displayed abnormally magical and great strength and was treated like a deity. After we accepted the Vigilance Church and believed in Eidolon Nun, we realized that he might be a very powerful Awakened. In the beginning, we had too many things to do. We never had the chance to establish contact with Lake Heart Island. Later, they suddenly sealed off the island, and nobody came out.

“Gradually, my grandfather and father forgot about this matter. After all, the changes in Lake Heart Island didn't affect the Ark. I heard that you guys went to Lake Heart Island last night and explored Yama Tiger's temple. I was suddenly a little curious, so I invited you over for a chat.”

I doubt it's just a little curiosity... This matter can actually make you break the Underground Ark's rules that have been in place for many years and invite outsiders in... You guys definitely have a certain connection with Yama Tiger... At this moment, several thoughts flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind.

“I see.” She put on a posture that said she understood everything and roughly explained her and Shang Jianyao's exploration. The only thing she didn't mention was how Shang Jianyao saw someone crawling in the darkness, asking for help, when he used his Awakened abilities to influence the sleeping Yama Tiger.

DiMarco tapped the sofa's armrest with his right index finger and thoughtfully repeated a short sentence. “A brand new world...”

He seemed to be very concerned about this.

A few seconds later, DiMarco looked around and smiled. “Thank you for sharing. Don’t you want to know about the Old World? You can ask your questions now.”

He didn’t dig any deeper, giving off the feeling that he didn’t care if the Qian Bai Team hid any of their discoveries.

This was very contradictory to the concern he had previously shown.

Jiang Baimian restrained her doubts and asked, “Mr. DiMarco, did your ancestors know in advance that the Old World would be destroyed?”

DiMarco shook his head. “He was only a fanatical apocalyptic enthusiast, and he happened to be relatively rich and influential.”

“Then, were there any signs before the Old World was destroyed? Did you encounter anything before you hid in the Underground Ark?” Jiang Baimian asked.

DiMarco said in a tone of reminiscence, “I heard my grandfather mention that they first decided to hide in the Underground Ark to avoid the sudden war. However, it didn’t take long for the Heartless disease outbreak to erupt outside.

“We weren’t spared either. Many servants became Heartless without any warning, bringing about a bloody mess. My great-grandfather then led my grandfather and other family members into further quarantine. Fortunately, the Heartless disease doesn’t seem contagious.”

As expected, the Lawless War and the Heartless disease were the superficial reasons for the Old World’s destruction... Even people who hid underground in advance contracted the Heartless disease? The company only organized survivors to enter the underground building after the Heartless disease outbreak... Jiang Baimian remembered a few key points and asked about other matters.

After some communication, they gained a certain understanding of Redstone Collection’s city ruin in the Old World.

West and north of the Lake of Wrath belonged to the Ashlandics. East and south of the Lake of Wrath was the Red River zone. The Lake of Wrath was the border between a country that spoke Ashlandic and a country that spoke the Red River language.

Therefore, some of the islands in the lake were inhabited by Ashlandic, and some were inhabited by Red River people.

Redstone Collection was located in the southeast corner of Lake of Wrath. It used to belong to the Red River country, but because it was a border city, many Ashlandics had migrated and settled down. The population ratio exceeded 30%.

DiMarco's ancestor was the city's largest architect and maintained a good relationship with many local councilors.

"Thank you for your answers." After confirming that she couldn't extract any more information regarding the Old World's destruction from DiMarco, Jiang Baimian sincerely thanked him and added, "We still have two simple questions."

Without giving DiMarco a chance to refuse, she directly asked, "Have you seen a Ruin Hunter named Lars?"

As she spoke, she took out the photo Lehman had given her.

"Lars?" DiMarco suddenly laughed. "You can go back and tell Lehman that Lars found his true love in the Ark. If he doesn't believe me, he can come to the Vigilance Cathedral. I'll get Lars to have a video chat with him."

"Huh?" Jiang Baimian and the others didn't expect such an answer.

Chapter 234: An Eye for An Eye

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian asked in confusion, "But Butler Ulrich said that Lars is missing. Why don't you look at the photo again and determine if it's this person?"

As she spoke, she stood up, placed the photo Lehman had given her on the coffee table, and pushed it toward DiMarco.

This was definitely rude elsewhere, but in Redstone Collection, this was respect for others.

Wariness was necessary.

DiMarco uncrossed his right leg, bent down, and picked up the photo. “How can I remember wrong? Isn’t this Lars? Ulrich doesn’t know about this. I have a few long-time masked servants with me, and they are under my command only.”

He casually looked at the photo and placed it in his pocket.

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian didn’t harp on the matter. Lehman was the one who had to eventually confirm the matter.

“Last question.” She raised her index finger, indicating that she was certain of her words.

DiMarco nodded slightly. “Speak.”

Jiang Baimian deliberated over her words and asked, “Did you reveal to the merfolk and mountain monsters that Bishop Renato was urgently transferred back to the Vigilance Church’s headquarters?”

Her question was very direct, but it didn’t carry a questioning tone.

DiMarco clasped his hands and laughed. “I’ll talk to the new bishop about this matter when he arrives.”

He didn’t admit it, but he didn’t deny it either. To Jiang Baimian and the others, this was almost equivalent to giving an affirmative answer. Furthermore, he was fearless and didn’t care about letting it be known at all!

But if that’s the case, why did he execute Butler Carl? Could there be another reason? That child’s real father? Jiang Baimian’s thoughts involuntarily wandered before she quickly retracted them.

She subconsciously glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that her companion was leaning forward slightly as if he were about to pounce forward.

At this moment, DiMarco straightened his body. “Let’s call it a day.”

Since the other party had already spoken so bluntly, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others naturally couldn't continue hanging around. They stood up at the same time and politely bade farewell.

When she was about to reach the door, Jiang Baimian suddenly thought of something and turned her head to ask, "Mr. DiMarco, was it your people who attacked us with rocket launchers and forced us to continue investigating the firearms case?"

DiMarco—who was wearing a black, white-patterned mask—remained seated on the sofa and nodded. "It was Carl who ordered it. He didn't want to hurt you; he only wanted to give you a little stimulation. The more those fellows on the ground obtain, the more greedy they become. We need to teach them a lesson."

"So, you also sent someone to kill Helvig?" Jiang Baimian turned to glance at Shang Jianyao and changed the topic.

DiMarco chuckled. "I'd considered it, but he died before I could make up my mind. There's no need for me to lie about such a trivial matter. Even if I admit it, it won't harm me."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. "Aren't you afraid that Redstone Collection's Ashlanders and Red River people will join forces to attack the Underground Ark?"

DiMarco's gaze slowly swept across the four people from the Old Task Force before he calmly said, "If not for the Church, whoever I want Redstone Collection's owner to be will be the owner of Redstone Collection. The merfolk and mountain monsters are no exception."

At this moment, Long Yuehong and the others could hear the extreme confidence in DiMarco's voice.

DiMarco believed that the Underground Ark could easily finish off the Ashlanders and Red River people in the city ruin.

"The Church's armed forces don't seem especially strong..." Jiang Baimian deliberately replied. She didn't mention that the Bishop and the Harbinger were the Vigilance Church's key strength in Redstone Collection. She wanted to see if she could use this opportunity to learn about the Awakened from DiMarco.

DiMarco laughed. Although he was wearing a mask, his laughter betrayed him. “Not all Kalendarium like Eidolon Nun like to watch their cathedral.”

Ah? It directly rose to the Kalendarium level? Jiang Baimian was shocked. This was different from the answer she expected, but it seemed more explosive.

If not for the fact that she had personally experienced the ‘gaze behind the door,’ she definitely would’ve thought that DiMarco was joking and pointing out the excessive ‘vigilance.’ Now, she believed that the other party had most likely encountered Eidolon Nun’s gaze.

“Why do you say that?” It was Shang Jianyao who spoke; he was very interested in this.

DiMarco laughed. “Can’t you tell from some of the Church’s Awakened? They are always overly sensitive; they are either very easily angered, very self-conscious, or extremely vigilant. They will overreact at the slightest provocation. In contrast, how can the vigilant Eidolon Nun not vigilantly watch her cathedrals and guard against potential accidents?”

“I see...” Jiang Baimian gained a new understanding of the price that those in Eidolon Nun’s domain paid. She even suspected that the price was unconsciously and unavoidably a result of the corresponding Kalendarium’s ‘bestowing’ of ‘Their’ powers.

Of course, this was only a guess. It couldn’t explain everything for the time being.

DiMarco seemed to think of something and added with a smile, “If you can’t find the murderer responsible for Helvig’s death amongst his enemies, you can consider it from this perspective. Maybe he only had a small quarrel with someone, or maybe he only made a few jokes before the other party marked him for it and killed him at the first opportunity.”

Jiang Baimian asked in enlightenment, “An angry person like Brand?”

“Something like that.” DiMarco dismissed them again. “You have asked enough questions.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t stay any longer. She pulled open the red wooden door and walked back to the corridor that was also carpeted.

They then followed Ulrich to the elevator lobby.

As they walked, Shang Jianyao trailed at the back of the team.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and happened to meet his gaze.

Jiang Baimian sighed helplessly.

They soon arrived at the elevator and entered the lift carriage.

At this moment, DiMarco—who was wearing a black, white-patterned mask—also left the room and met up with the guards, including the two who wore military exoskeletons.

Shang Jianyao suddenly turned around and took off the grenade on his belt. Then, he abruptly took a step forward and shouted, “This is a gift for you on behalf of Redstone Collection’s townfolk!”

As he shouted, the muscles on his right arm bulged. He used all his strength to throw the grenade at DiMarco and the others.

The two guards wearing the exoskeletons and the six other guards reacted at the same time. Some wanted to use the auxiliary system to blow up the grenade mid-flight. Some subconsciously raised their hands, prepared to fire at the elevator. Others pounced at DiMarco, wanting to throw their master into the room.

However, all of their hands instantly lost their ‘senses’ at that moment, preventing them from doing what they wanted.

Only two of them barely executed their thoughts and slammed DiMarco into the room. He staggered and almost fell.

Bam!

The grenade landed on the carpet, but it didn’t explode. This was because Shang Jianyao did not pull the ring at all.

At this moment, he had already retreated into the elevator. He raised his hands, covered his eyes from both sides, and bowed at DiMarco and the others.

The next second, the elevator door closed in front of him.

Upon seeing this, the guards were stunned.

...

In the elevator, Ulrich—who was in charge of leading the way—was shocked and angry. “You guys?”

“I’m just scaring them and giving them some stimulation. It wouldn’t explode,” Shang Jianyao replied with a smile.

Ulrich calmed down and looked at the pistol Jiang Baimian was pointing at him. He asked in confusion, “Why would you do that? Help Redstone Collection’s residents uphold justice? But they haven’t decided what to do yet.”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “This is one aspect. Their decision has nothing to do with what I want to do.”

At this point, he laughed again. “On the other hand, our team leader said that we have to use the same method to scare the people who used rocket launchers to scare us. We didn’t bring any rocket launchers. The environment here is cramped, so we can only use grenades.”

The elevator door opened as they spoke, and they returned to the basement.

As Jiang Baimian walked out of the elevator, she replied in exasperation and amusement, “There’s no need to say my name at a time like this. Just say that you want to do it yourself.”

Although she said that, she secretly gave Shang Jianyao a thumbs up. Our Old Task Force will definitely take revenge. It won’t be excessive, but it won’t be lacking either!

...

In the reception room, DiMarco—who was wearing a black, white-patterned mask—stood up.

“Master, are you alright?” asked a guard anxiously.

They had already discovered that the grenade didn’t have its ring pulled out and wouldn’t explode.

DiMarco looked in the direction of the elevator and shook his head. “I’m fine.”

...

Ulrich did not expect such a reason. He immediately wondered if the other party had gone crazy.

Since there was no major problem, he was unwilling to spend another second with them. He quickly pressed the button to escape this group of people.

At the same time, Long Yuehong expressed his opinion of Shang Jianyao. “You were really cool!”

The feeling of an eye for an eye was great!

Although Bai Chen didn’t say anything, it was obvious from her attitude when she kept helping Shang Jianyao guard the surroundings.

After the elevator door closed, Jiang Baimian glanced at Harbinger Song He—who was walking over from afar—and asked Shang Jianyao curiously, “Why did you end with saluting using the Anti-intellectualism Church’s method? Framing them?”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “I thought about it; this method results in the greatest ridicule.”

“...” Jiang Baimian said helplessly, “Why didn’t you awaken the powers of Provocation?”

...

DiMarco had already gone deep underground and returned to his room. Apart from him, there was nobody else here.

In his black priest uniform, he casually took out the picture of Lars that Lehman had provided and looked down.

In the photo, Lars had short, flaxen hair, light-blue eyes, a high nose bridge, a light beard at the corners of his mouth, and a small cyan birthmark on his forehead.

“Heh.” DiMarco laughed and threw the photo into the trash can. He then walked to the full-body mirror and prepared to change into his home clothes.

At this moment, a guard outside the door reported, “Master, the people sent to the lakeside have returned. They said that they have confirmed that nothing abnormal has happened on the island from their remote surveillance.”

“Got it.” DiMarco nodded gently.

With that said, he raised his right hand and took off his mask. The full-body mirror in front of him quickly reflected his face.

Under his flaxen hair were light-blue eyes, a high nose bridge, a cyan birthmark on his forehead, and a slightly pleasant and mocking smile.

At the same time, he gently spat out a name. “Yama Tiger...”

Chapter 235: The Essence of the Mind Corridor

In the Vigilance Cathedral’s basement, the Old Task Force met Harbinger Song He.

“It happened faster than I expected.” Song He asked in a friendly manner, “Why did Mr. DiMarco allow you to enter the Underground Ark?”

He was puzzled by this matter, so he didn’t hide his curiosity.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “He’s very interested in the forbidden temple on Lake Heart Island. He also knows that we definitely won’t share our gains with him if he doesn’t meet us.”

“Is that so...” Song He didn’t expect such a simple reason. But since it involved the so-called sleeping deity, it was normal for anything strange to happen. Perhaps DiMarco has the intention of becoming a similar existence?

Jiang Baimian then mentioned the matter regarding the traitor in Redstone Collection. “Oh right, we asked Mr. DiMarco if he sold out Redstone Collection and leaked the information regarding Bishop Renato’s return to headquarters to the merfolk and mountain monsters. Although he didn’t admit it, he didn’t deny it either. He only said that he would talk to the new bishop about the problem when they arrive.”

Song He revealed a thoughtful expression and nodded slightly. “There’s no need to continue the investigation then. Consider this mission completed.”

With that said, he smiled and pointed at the ceiling above him. “Let’s chat upstairs. It’s not good to keep standing.”

Knowing that Song He was about to make the payment and impart them some general knowledge regarding the Awakened, Shang Jianyao replied before Jiang Baimian could. “Alright!”

He then added, “Do you need someone to massage your back?”

Shang Jianyao looked at Long Yuehong as he spoke.

F*ck... Long Yuehong couldn’t help but curse inwardly.

“Huh?” Song He was clearly a little confused.

Shang Jianyao explained seriously, “This is a treatment that teachers can enjoy.”

“There’s no need. There’s no need.” Song He suddenly wondered if he was really old and had a so-called generation gap with young people.

After returning to the cathedral and entering Song He’s room, both parties took their seats.

Jiang Baimian then eagerly asked, “Harbinger Song, how many islands do you have to challenge and defeat in order to clear the Sea of Origins?”

Although she wasn’t an Awakened, she always had a spirit for research when it came to such matters.

Song He laughed when he heard that. “You guys know a lot too. I’m a little doubtful if I can still provide a sufficiently valuable reward.”

He paused and thought for a moment before saying, “Since you have the basics down, it saves me time. The traumas and fears hidden in everyone’s hearts are different. They are unique to the person; therefore, the number and characteristics of the islands that need to be cleared are different. Some might have to challenge eight to nine islands to find themselves. Some might reach the end after four to five islands, or even two to three islands. This depends on the person.

“To put it simply, people who are courageous and without much psychological trauma will clear the Sea of Origins faster.”

Jiang Baimian resisted the urge to look at Shang Jianyao and asked curiously, “I thought so too, but this raises a question. As you know, an Awakened’s abilities will be enhanced to a certain extent every time they defeat an island. In that case, will the people who clear eight to nine islands be stronger than those who only clear two to three?”

She meant that there might be a huge strength difference between two people—one obtained enhancements eight to nine times, while the other had only obtained enhancements two to three times—after both ended up entering the Mind Corridor successfully.

Song He’s gaze slowly swept past the four Old Task Force members, and he smiled. “There is indeed a strength between the two Awakened when they first enter the Mind Corridor. However, this gap is very small. It mainly comes from their usage of their abilities, their ability to restrain each other, and their combat experience.

“Be it Awakened who have cleared seven to eight islands or Awakened who have only defeated two to three islands, their strength will rise to a similar level after they find themselves and make whole their minds. The more enhancements one receives prior, the fewer obstacles they will subsequently face, and vice-versa.”

He thought for a moment before giving an example. “This is just like when we go from Redstone Collection to United Industries’ headquarters. Be it driving, riding a bike, or even walking, there will always be only one outcome—arriving at one’s destination. The main difference is the time spent on the journey and the experience gained from various encounters.

“For Awakened, the intrinsic goal of defeating the islands of trauma is to cross the Sea of Origins. As long as one can enter the Mind Corridor, everyone will have the same important gains.”

“I understand.” Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “This is just like a race. Some need to jump over more hurdles, and some just need to cross a few shallow pits. Regardless of the method, being the first to cross the finish line is victory.”

Song He nodded. “Something like that.”

He followed Shang Jianyao’s example and continued, “The possible difference between the two is that the more experienced one will find it easier when they encounter a need to cross a hurdle in the future.”

“Will they encounter the possibility of crossing hurdles again in the future?” Jiang Baimian acutely sensed the meaning behind Song He’s words.

Song He tersely acknowledged it. “This involves the essence of the Mind Corridor.”

At this point, he picked up the cup beside him and took a sip. This made the four people from the Old Task Force a little anxious. Although Bai Chen and Long Yuehong weren’t Awakened and didn’t have a strong desire for research, everyone was curious.

This was the most mysterious and magical power that humans could currently obtain.

After drinking the water, Song He slowly said, “The Sea of Origins reflects one’s heart and mind. The islands are the fear or trauma that lurks deep in everyone’s hearts. The Mind Corridor links all Awakened’s hearts and minds. I heard from the Terror Bishop who brought me into the parish that there are many doors in the Mind Corridor. Every door corresponds to a mind world.

“Some of them belong to powerful Awakened who have explored the Mind Corridor’s depths. Some of them even lead to the Kalendarium’s dreams. There are all kinds of strange and varied scenes that

transcend reality, including the reflections of the psychological trauma that the other party has previously defeated.”

It’s no wonder that one will still encounter islands of fear. However, it’s not the person’s but someone else’s... Jiang Baimian came to a realization.

Shang Jianyao excitedly asked, “Then, can we go visiting?”

Song He was stunned for two seconds before answering, “In theory, yes. However, you can’t open a door that corresponds to an ordinary Awakened’s mind—at least not until you explore the Mind Corridor’s depths. As for whether it works for someone like Yama Tiger, I don’t know.”

Upon hearing this example, Jiang Baimian’s eyebrows twitched slightly. She then thought of the ‘strangeness’ that was produced in the murloc Oracle’s body.

Opening the door in the opposite direction and returning to reality through another person’s mind world? The premise is to integrate one’s aura into another person’s body and provide a precise location? Jiang Baimian had a new guess regarding this matter.

She deliberated for a moment before asking, “Then, what’s the goal of exploring the Mind Corridor?”

Song He revealed a slightly wistful expression. “Many people in the Ashlands believe that a new world exists. In the depths of a city ruin is a door that leads to the New World. There is no longer hunger, infection, or war there. Similarly, powerful Awakened believe that a door in the Mind Corridor can lead to a new world, a new world that can allow their lives to undergo a qualitative change.”

Jiang Baimian and the others instantly thought of the words Yama Tiger had carved on the coffin’s inner walls with his nails: “A brand new world.”

This was similar to what Du Heng had said back then.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, “What if the wrong door is taken?”

“You have to face all kinds of strange worlds then. If you can’t smoothly resolve the dangers inside, you might very well lose your life,” warned Song He. “In the Sea of Origins, failure is only a simple failure. At most, it will make people more exhausted and mentally ill. Success results in a higher price. But in the Mind Corridor, failure will often reflect into reality.”

“It’s very dangerous...” Long Yuehong sighed with emotion.

Song He laughed. “Yes. For Awakened matters, you have to face more if you want to obtain more. A coward like me only dares to stay where I am.”

Coward... For some reason, Long Yuehong suddenly recalled Viel’s words. He said that Harbinger Song had a different appearance in private. Maybe this is the price he paid?

As Long Yuehong’s thoughts raced, Song He said, “I only know this much about the Mind Corridor. Ask me something else.”

Jiang Baimian thickened her skin and asked, “Is there a way to stably induce a person’s awakening?” This might be the Church’s core secret.

Song He laughed and shook his head. “No, but if you join the Church, often participate in Mass, and obtain the attention of Eidolon Nun, it will definitely be easier for you to awaken. Yes, if Eidolon Nun directly bestows divine grace, there is a high chance of awakening.”

Is he trying to entice us into joining the Vigilance Church? Heh heh, how can you hook Shang Jianyao without any Holy Communion? Yes, it seems like the Kalendarium have a way to raise the probability of awakening... Jiang Baimian knew that she wouldn’t get an answer if she continued asking, so she rationally shut her mouth.

Shang Jianyao then raised a few more questions regarding the Sea of Origins and obtained good answers.

After bidding Song He farewell and getting into the jeep, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—looked back at the Vigilance Cathedral. “The new bishop should be arriving soon. Let’s try our best to leave before then. Yes, let’s return to the hotel camp and tell Lehman about Lars. Let him confirm it himself. Then, we only have to wait for the information regarding Mechanical Paradise. We can also investigate Helvig’s death while waiting.

“Oh right, we still have to wait for the company’s reply.” Jiang Baimian had already drafted her exploration of the temple and recommendation of Han Wanghuo into a telegram last night and sent it to Pangu Biology.

Chapter 236: No Such Thing As Unscrupulous Merchants

When the Old Task Force returned to the hotel camp, Lehman was already waiting outside Room 05.

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others alight, this smuggler—who looked like an honest farmer—went over and smiled obsequiously. “I heard that you entered the Underground Ark and met DiMarco?”

His eyes were filled with anticipation.

This time, he didn’t bring the bodyguards with him and had them wait for him far away. This was because he had already figured out that the team in front of him was stronger than he imagined. Having bodyguards was almost no different from not having any.

He felt that it was meaningless even if he brought over the military exoskeleton that his client had ordered for him for usage. After all, the other party also had one. Furthermore, how could an exoskeleton device withstand an Awakened at close range?

Therefore, it was better not to bring any bodyguards. In Ashlandic terms, this was ‘showing sincerity.’

Upon hearing Lehman’s question, Jiang Baimian teased him in amusement. “You sure have a lot of friends. You have friends in the Vigilance Cathedral too?”

Lehman didn’t deny it and nodded slightly. “How is it? What did DiMarco say?”

“He said that Lars found his true love in the Underground Ark and won’t return to the surface. If you don’t believe him, you can go to the Vigilance Cathedral; he will get Lars to video call you.” When Jiang Baimian replied, she saw Lehman’s expression change uncontrollably.

He seemed a little unconvinced and a little angry, but he eventually fell silent on the fact that he could video call Lars.

This meant that DiMarco wasn't lying. Very few people would lie in a way that could easily be proven otherwise.

After a long silence, the corners of Lehman's mouth twitched as if he wanted to squeeze out a smile. "I'll confirm it. Thank you for your help."

Although she understood the other party's emotions and felt some sympathy, Jiang Baimian still asked, "Then, what about the agreed-upon payment?"

"What kind do you want?" Lehman quickly returned to normal.

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, he added, "I previously meant that I would do my best to help you get controlled items, including a military exoskeleton and a T1 mechanical arm. This will expend the favors I've accumulated and cause cracks to appear in the relationship I've built with great difficulty.

"In other words, the payment refers to intangible but very valuable things like channels and avenues. The items themselves still require you to pay a reasonable price. Of course, I'll give you a discount—the greatest discount."

Before Jiang Baimian could respond, Shang Jianyao interrupted. "That's your lover!"

Lehman smiled bitterly. "From the looks of it, it's very likely that's no longer the case anymore."

So the value of the information fell? Jiang Baimian was amused by this. She realized that Lehman was essentially an unscrupulous merchant. However, she didn't think that she could exchange for a military exoskeleton or a relatively new mechanical arm with just a few casual questions.

In her imagination, she and the others should've braved a rain of bullets and the interference of a few Awakened to force their way into the Underground Ark and extract Lars before they could rightfully take the payment from Lehman.

Therefore, she didn't feel angry and instead smiled. "Aren't you afraid that you won't make it out of Redstone Collection alive by misleading us?"

Lehman's body froze.

Tsk, the image of us as villains is quite memorable... Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong sighed with emotion and amusement in his heart.

Upon seeing that this development was going to turn into extortion, Jiang Baimian stopped Shang Jianyao's attempt in time and sighed. "On account of you losing your lover, we'll just keep it that way. After you return, use your connections to help us get a military exoskeleton and a mechanical arm through your channels. The model can't be too old. Inform us when the time comes; we'll gather supplies for the trade."

Even if her team couldn't use such controlled items when the time came, they could still earn a lot from selling the items.

"You want both a military exoskeleton and a mechanical arm?" Lehman was a little troubled.

"Yes." Jiang Baimian didn't stand on ceremony.

Upon seeing that the great villain had already given in, Lehman couldn't bargain any further. He could only force a smile and say, "No problem, but it will take a long time. How should I inform you?"

When Jiang Baimian made the request, she had already come up with a mature plan. At this moment, she directly said, "I'll give you a telegraph frequency and the corresponding password. After you obtain those two items, send us a telegram every night at 8 p.m. for a month. If we don't reply, you can freely dispose of those two items after a month."

The electric password she was prepared to give was one of the more common ones in the Ashlands. After all, it was not a confidential matter.

Lehman thought for a moment and agreed.

After sending the arms dealer off, Jiang Baimian looked around and said, "Another matter has been resolved. Next, we'll go to Redstone Collection to find Mrs. Theresa and ask if Helvig has had any disagreements with anyone in the past month."

She reduced 'conflicts' to the level of 'disagreements' so as to prevent any suspects from falling through the cracks.

"I think the investigation will be very difficult." Bai Chen voiced her opinion. "According to DiMarco, just a few jokes can trigger a murderer's malice. In daily life, jokes are something that happens every day. Nobody can remember them clearly, just like how Long Yuehong can't say how many times Shang Jianyao strikes him down every day."

Long Yuehong opened his mouth and realized that he really couldn't say anything.

"What if he can say it?" Shang Jianyao asked, misplacing his priorities.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and didn't answer.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "That means he takes it to heart."

Without waiting for Long Yuehong's response, she added, "Fortunately, our Little Red is optimistic and positive."

"It's nothing." Long Yuehong immediately felt a little embarrassed.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, "You even wet your bed when you were five."

"F*ck off!" Long Yuehong blurted out in anger.

...

In Redstone Collection, in the Gunfire shop, the Old Task Force met Mrs. Theresa again.

She was still wearing the thick black dress and a hat with a long, black veil hanging down.

"Any progress?" Theresa asked calmly. Compared to before, she seemed less terrified, excited, and uneasy. She felt a little more confident.

“Here’s the thing. We’ve preliminarily investigated Mr. Helvig’s list of enemies. but none of them are suspects,” Jiang Baimian lied blatantly. “We want to obtain more information. For example, who has Mr. Helvig had an unpleasant encounter with in the past few months? Or who has he joked in a nasty manner with?”

Theresa thought for a moment and said, “There are too many of them. He likes to mock others very much. If we use excessive jokes as a standard, most people in Redstone Collection are suspects.”

How annoying is this Mr. Helvig... Jiang Baimian opened her mouth slightly, finding it funny and helpless.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “What a pity...”

“What’s the pity?” Long Yuehong asked in support.

“It’s a pity that I didn’t get to see the living Mr. Helvig.” Shang Jianyao raised his hand to touch his monkey mask. “Otherwise, we can compete to see who will anger the other first?”

Theresa didn’t bother with the conversation between Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. She fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “Let’s end this mission here.”

“You’re not investigating anymore?” Jiang Baimian asked with a premonition.

Theresa nodded. “I can tell that the chances of this matter being successfully investigated are very low. Furthermore, it will involve most people in Redstone Collection. I have to consider mine and my child’s future. In any case, he has offended enough people. I was already prepared for his sudden death.”

That wasn’t what you said previously... Jiang Baimian silently retorted.

She suddenly understood why Theresa had changed her attitude. When Helvig died, Theresa was worried that the firearms business would be snatched away. She was worried that her subordinates would change employers, so she naturally showed how important her husband and this matter was to her.

Now, she seemed to have stabilized a small faction and established a friendship with Lehman and the others. She was no longer plagued by internal and external problems. Therefore, how Helvig died was no longer important to her. After all, she and Helvig no longer had any feelings for each other.

Maybe she was one of the people who wanted Helvig dead.

Upon seeing that the Qian Bai Team's four members were silent, Theresa misunderstood their request and quickly added, "I won't ask you to return the corresponding payment. You guys have truly helped me greatly by finding that batch of firearms in a short period of time."

Helvig sure is a failure when it comes to being a human... Jiang Baimian sighed inwardly and nodded slightly. "That's it then. You can just go to the guild and cancel the mission."

After exiting Gunfire, Jiang Baimian looked around, composed herself, and smiled. "Let's go to Poisonless Restaurant to buy some ingredients. We'll roast meat tonight to celebrate!"

They were to celebrate having settled most of the matters during their team's stay in Redstone Collection.

"Sure, sure!" Long Yuehong's eyes lit up as he replied.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Get some spices and coal later. I'll let you experience Chef Jiang's secret roasted meat."

"Want to compete?" Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

"Fine, let's compete!" Jiang Baimian believed that her culinary skills were good enough. With that said, she suddenly became vigilant and asked, "What are we competing in?"

"Competing to see who eats more." Shang Jianyao was very calm.

Jiang Baimian spat and ignored him.

...

In the evening, at the hotel camp, the Old Task Force placed the cured meat on a temporarily assembled grill.

At this moment, Pangu Biology replied with a telegram.

Jiang Baimian quickly translated the telegram and reduced the company's reply into two lines: "First, there's no need for further exploration of Lake Heart Island's temple. Second, observe Han Wanghuo for a while longer."

After reading the telegram, Jiang Baimian cursed in exasperation and amusement. "Observe a little while longer? He's about to leave, so how can we observe him? Seriously!"

Chapter 237: Departure

Another day passed. In the morning, Han Wanghuo drove his derelict SUV to the hotel camp.

"This is all the information I can gather on Mechanical Paradise." He handed a stack of paper to Jiang Baimian—who was wearing an elegant monk mask.

Jiang Baimian was in no rush to read it. She only glanced at it and asked, "Did Harbinger Song look for you?"

"We talked." Han Wanghuo nodded slightly. "But there's no need."

I can tell that you're a very upright and determined person... Jiang Baimian replied inwardly.

As she deliberated over her words, Shang Jianyao interrupted and asked, "Where do you plan on going next?"

Although Han Wanghuo was not a parishioner of the Vigilance Church, he had been influenced by Redstone Collection for many years and instinctively asked, "Why are you asking this?"

Furthermore, it was a habit of experienced Ruin Hunters not to reveal their locations easily.

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, "We want to observe you."

“Huh?” Han Wanghuo was a little confused.

Shang Jianyao further explained, “As a friend, isn’t it normal to observe your life and care about your condition?”

“Friend...” Han Wanghuo repeated the word in a low voice, seemingly surprised.

After a few seconds, he laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’ll likely go to First City. There are more opportunities there, and it’s a more complicated environment. It’s more suited for people like me.”

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “I heard that the Senate specially raises a Subhuman army.”

This army was hated, discriminated against, and ostracized by First City’s citizens. They could only firmly rely on those in power in the Senate. Otherwise, they would either be unable to leave First City alive or collectively be ‘moved’ to the mines once they were abandoned.

As a result, those in power in the Senate obtained an army that was sufficiently loyal, obedient, and capable of combat.

“This has nothing to do with me,” Han Wanghuo replied simply. He then said, “I should go.”

“We’ll go to First City to find you later!” Shang Jianyao waved his right hand, looking all reluctant.

Han Wanghuo took a few steps and thought for a moment. He paused, turned around, and indiscernibly nodded. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen replied.

Han Wanghuo slowly exhaled, opened the SUV’s door, and entered the driver’s seat. He then drove west through the city ruin and arrived at an empty area by the lake.

There were many target boards erected here. The town guards took turns firing at them.

During this process, they alternated between being in prone positions, kneeling positions, and standing positions. They constantly raised their marksmanship standards in different positions.

Upon seeing Han Wanghuo alight, the town guards in the resting area shouted in unison, “Captain Han.”

Some of the members used the Red River language.

Han Wanghuo was stunned for a moment before smiling. “How’s it going? How was your training?”

He repeated his question in Red River language to show fairness.

The expressionless Tan Jie took two steps forward and said, “Everyone’s skills have significantly improved over this period of time. It’s better to train together and communicate with each other. It’s more effective.”

In the past three years, due to the conflicts between the Ashlanders and the Red River people—as well as everyone’s belief in vigilance and hiding—Han Wanghuo had failed to organize a uniform training session despite exhausting every means possible. He could only assign separate time periods for the town guards to take turns practicing.

After the attack by the merfolk and mountain monsters, the residents of Redstone Town seemed stimulated. They were no longer as extreme and could now barely gather together to train and communicate. After all, many of their relatives and friends had fallen in front of them. Their corpses were incomplete, and blood flowed everywhere. This tragedy was worse than any other time.

Thanks to Han Wanghuo’s philosophy of combining Ashlanders and Red River people, they relied on each other and helped each other in times of danger during the war. This finally sparked a little trust between the two races.

Han Wanghuo smiled again. “Not bad.”

At this moment, a brownish-blond-haired Red River person stepped forward and said, “Captain Han, we’re relatively tight on ammunition now.”

It wasn't that the town guards lacked ammunition, but they had to reserve a portion to guard against sudden attacks from the Subhuman coalition forces and bandits. Allocations for live ammunition practice weren't enough.

Han Wanghuo nodded slightly. "Send someone to find Anhebus. He said that he wanted to contribute to the town."

Be it the Red River people or the Ashlanders, the town guards present laughed upon hearing this.

Although Han Wanghuo had only used the Red River language this time, the Ashlanders here more or less understood a little.

"Yes, Captain Han!" several town guards replied firmly after laughing.

After discussing this matter, Han Wanghuo walked toward the shooting range while Tan Jie followed beside him.

"After the war, they started to truly acknowledge you as their captain. Your defense line was the most tragic," Tan Jie said expressionlessly.

Han Wanghuo fell silent and didn't respond.

As he walked, the team members—who had completed their shooting practice—turned around and greeted him.

"Captain Han."

"Captain Han."

"Captain Han."

...

Han Wanghuo walked to the end and closed his eyes. He turned around and looked up; he saw the Red River people with different hair colors and the black-haired, brown-eyed Ashlanders gathered together. Although their attitudes toward each other were very distant, and they were very vigilant, they would exchange a few words from time to time.

Han Wanghuo retracted his gaze and said to Tan Jie, "Watch them."

"Alright." Tan Jie watched Han Wanghuo circle around the shooting range and walk toward his black SUV.

After getting into the car, Han Wanghuo quietly sat for dozens of seconds before starting the car and driving toward Redstone Collection.

After going underground and parking the car, he looked ahead and silently took a deep breath before slowly exhaling. He then opened the door and alighted.

He entered Redstone Collection and walked down the escalator.

As he passed by an advertising panel left behind by the Old World, he bent his finger and rapped on the surface.

Amidst the echoes, Han Wanghuo asked, "Anything wrong?"

"No, everything's a-okay." A voice sounded from the metal advertisement panel.

Han Wanghuo tersely acknowledged it. "Remember to rest and take turns." With that said, he walked toward the escalator that led to the lowest floor.

At this moment, the public security officer in the metal advertisement panel added, "Good morning, Captain Han!"

Han Wanghuo paused and slowly turned around. He smiled and said, "Good morning."

The escalator began to descend, and Han Wanghuo arrived at the Public Security Department.

Weiler was not around, and there were only two officers hiding in the building.

Han Wanghuo walked to his desk and stared at it for a moment before slowly taking out a letter from his pocket.

He solemnly placed the letter on the table and pressed the waterless cup over it.

His gaze then swept across the familiar tables, chairs, chandelier, stationery, and walls. It was very slow and careful.

Phew. He exhaled, turned around, and walked out the door.

As he went up the escalator, Han Wanghuo looked up and surveyed the empty and bleak town.

After leaving town, he drove the derelict SUV all the way to the northwest of the city ruin.

After an unknown period of time, the hills at the ruin's edge reflected in his eyes.

Han Wanghuo reflexively stepped on the brakes and stopped the SUV. He sat in the driver's seat and cast his gaze at the rearview mirror.

In the rearview mirror, the edge of the dilapidated city ruin was bathed in the winter sun—which was approaching noon—as if it were draped in a faint golden coat.

After taking in the view for a while, Han Wanghuo retracted his gaze, touched the rifle beside him, and raised his right foot that was stepping on the brakes.

As the car drove off again, he saw the hills and barren fields in front of him.

The SUV sped through the deserted Ashlands.

...

After receiving the information regarding Mechanical Paradise, the Old Task Force came to the Vigilance Cathedral and bade Song He farewell.

They had participated in the Requiem Ceremony last night and prayed for the people who had died in the war.

The Vigilance Church's Requiem Ceremony had no hiding segment, but everyone wore masks. It was like a sad masquerade party.

Shang Jianyao wasn't disappointed because of this and participated very seriously.

After leaving the cathedral and getting into the jeep, Long Yuehong was just about to speak when he suddenly saw a few older children playing in the nearby collapsed building.

Among them was Viel, who had soft blond hair.

"Heh heh, I almost thought he was an adult." If not for this scene, Long Yuehong would've forgotten Viel's age.

This older boy's mysterious whereabouts and strange words always made people forget his age. Furthermore, Viel—who liked to see reality from the ducts—had indeed shown maturity that exceeded his peers.

"There's probably something wrong with this fellow, but we aren't local public security officers who have to investigate anything that seems wrong." Jiang Baimian laughed.

At this moment, Bai Chen started the jeep.

Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at the Vigilance Cathedral as if he were unwilling to leave.

"Why are you still reluctant to leave?" Jiang Baimian asked casually.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "I haven't made the merfolk, mountain monsters, Ashlanders, and Red River people live in harmony here."

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before saying, “This requires time. Besides, Harbinger Song also has such intentions. Also, it’s not like we won’t come again. When we return from Mechanical Paradise, we still have to pass by here. When the time comes, you can do what you want according to the situation.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and suddenly became excited. “Then, I want to tell everyone in Redstone Collection: ‘We’re back again!’”

They might not welcome us... Long Yuehong criticized inwardly.

As they had already packed their things, they didn’t return to the hotel camp. They drove the jeep south.

Destination: Mechanical Paradise.

...

Outside the Vigilance Cathedral, a boy about the same age as Viel sat at the edge of the collapsed building and grumbled, “Why didn’t you come when my father was buried? Are we still friends?”

This boy had a pair of dark-green eyes.

Viel—who was also sitting on the edge of the collapsed building—curled his lips and said, “You know that I don’t like him. He always laughed at my height.”

Chapter 238: “Surrounded”

The Old Task Force’s jeep traversed the lofty mountains and mountains, driving south along the barely preserved and poorly maintained road.

Their destination was a place called Tarnan. This was the only foreign trade point established by Mechanical Paradise. Only factions that obtained their trust or could provide important strategic resources knew of its existence.

Redstone Collection and Weed City were one of them.

The Rootless caravan—which mainly focused on logistical transportation—didn't have this qualification because Mechanical Paradise was a large faction that had the lowest chances of lacking logistical abilities.

Jiang Baimian and the others were currently Weed City's trade representatives. They had obtained this through Shang Jianyao Brotherhood's Weed City branch president, Xu Liyan. They were genuine and bona fide.

Before leaving Redstone Collection, they also asked Song He for permission to be Redstone Collection's trade representative as a backup in the event that Xu Liyan suddenly disowned Shang Jianyao as a brother.

Although Xu Liyan wouldn't do anything to Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao with Pangu Biology looming over him, he could secretly send a telegram to Mechanical Paradise and say that the four of them were cheats to vent his displeasure.

"I'm so hungry, so hungry, so hungry. I'm really hungry[1]..."

The song played by Shang Jianyao's small speaker echoed in the jeep, almost making Long Yuehong suffer auditory hallucinations.

"I'm so thirsty, so thirsty, so thirsty. I'm really thirsty..."

They were currently in a mountainous area, one that had a severe shortage of water. It was even more so during a winter with little rain.

A day ago, the Old Task Force had finished their water reserves. They had failed to find a water source after that.

They followed the traces of possible water sources and arrived at two places before finally confirming that the corresponding area was seriously polluted. Some indices had exceeded the mark by countless times.

By digging up the roots of certain trees, Shang Jianyao and the others didn't feel like they were in a pressing situation. However, this was limited to the reason that they weren't immediately dying of thirst.

Jiang Baimian observed the terrain outside the window and said in a relatively confident tone, “There should be a water source if we continue forward.”

“Yes.” Bai Chen agreed.

Phew... Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief. He only now realized that the lack of water was more uncomfortable than facing the merfolk and mountain monsters’ charge. The latter only took a few minutes; things were over once it was done. Even if he didn’t survive, there was nothing to worry about thereafter.

Instead, this current state was chronic torture.

In order to reduce his saliva secretion, he didn’t even want to speak.

Shang Jianyao—who was part of the driving shift—was still in high spirits. Apart from his slightly chapped lips, there was no sign of him being affected.

“Sigh, I forgot to exchange for the Dragon King’s mask. Otherwise, I could still ask for rain.”
Shang Jianyao expressed his regret.

Ever since they left Redstone Collection, the Old Task Force members no longer habitually wore masks. Only Shang Jianyao would occasionally scare Long Yuehong with his smug monkey face.

He even called him ‘idiot,’ something Pigsy was often called in Journey to the West.

“The Dragon King makes it rain on his own; there’s no need to pray for rain.” Jiang Baimian corrected Shang Jianyao’s mistake.

As they spoke, they circled around the tall cliff and entered a valley with slightly moist brown soil.

“Slow down,” Jiang Baimian reminded him. “The visibility here isn’t good; I wonder what will happen after we make a turn.”

Shang Jianyao and her senses were limited by distance. They were not omnipotent.

Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian in the passenger seat, raised his foot from the accelerator, and slowed the car down.

He always followed good advice.

Slowly, the military-green jeep circled around the rock wall as it leveled the mud path.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian immediately felt everything brighten before them.

The first thing they saw was a meandering stream. There were gravel and pebbles in the stream, accentuating the abnormally clear water.

On both sides of the stream were large rocks. Silt stuffed up the crevices, outlining the main colors of the surrounding area.

Beyond them were towering trees. Some of them had withered, and some still had some greenery. They lined a dirt-covered path.

Jiang Baimian then turned her gaze and saw dozens of people nearly 100 meters upstream.

They were mainly men; they wore all kinds of clothes and carried all kinds of weapons.

Jiang Baimian's gaze moved from the old cotton jackets, dirty down jackets, and greasy leather coats to the side of the road. She discovered many cars and many tents.

The armed people slowly drew water, busied themselves by preparing lunch, sat on the ground, laughed loudly, or teased the women whose hands were tied behind them. Occasionally, they would slap the male captives that were glaring at them.

“A band of bandits.” Bai Chen—who was in the jeep's backseat—looked out the windshield and voiced her judgment.

They were a large band of bandits that had just robbed a caravan or a wilderness nomad settlement.

When the Old Task Force saw the bandits, the bandits' guards also discovered them.

“Boss, there's new prey!” The black-haired, blue-eyed bandit excitedly reported to his leader.

After winter, there were fewer caravans, and all the settlements were tightly guarded. Their harvests had been lacking, so they could only barely survive.

Today, perhaps due to a Kalendaria's blessing, they had just tracked down a caravan in the morning and robbed many supplies and people. Now, they had encountered a lone jeep entering the valley.

Their leader was a muscular man in his thirties. He was nearly 1.75 meters tall, and his golden hair was disheveled. His body was rather muscular.

The blue color of his eyes was very faint, and his face was abnormally rugged. He wore a helmet with horns on his head, and it was unknown which city ruin he had dug that out from.

Upon hearing his subordinate's report, the leader looked over and laughed. “They are like a weak and helpless lamb that entered a lion's territory. Go, bring them back. Let me see what kind of travelers dare to traverse Mount Chilar in the winter.”

This was a stretch of the Old Mountain Range.

After a pause, the leader added, “Send four cars. They might just be scouts for a caravan.”

There might be many vehicles, personnel, and weapons behind them.

“Yes, Boss!” the black-haired, blue-eyed bandit replied loudly before beginning to call for his companions.

At this moment, they saw the military-green jeep retreat out of the valley by reversing.

The other party seemed to have forgotten that the car could turn and do a U-turn.

“Haha!” The bandits let out all kinds of strange cries as they brandished their weapons and rushed into their designated vehicles.

They love timid prey like this the most! This often saved them a lot of bullets.

When the cars started and chased after the target, the captured men and women retracted their disappointed and despairing gazes.

They thought they could be saved. Unexpectedly, only a jeep came.

This looked like a Ruin Hunter team that had happened to pass by and come to get water.

With excited shouts, two SUVs and two pickup trucks carrying more than ten bandits crazily drove to the corner, not wanting their prey to escape their line of sight.

Just as the first car drove around the bend, the driver’s gaze suddenly froze.

The military-green jeep was quietly parked dozens of meters away. Its body was tilted like a short wall.

Behind the jeep, a man—who was not short—was wearing a black, metallic skeletal structure with the help of his companions. On the side of the jeep, a slightly petite woman had mounted a rifle to the hood.

On the other side of the jeep, a woman in a gray camouflage uniform with a ponytail was half-kneeling. She carried a heavy single-shot rocket launcher on her shoulder.

Rocket launcher!

The pupils of the bandit driver and his ‘passengers’ in the first car suddenly dilated.

The next second, Death spewed out flames.

Boom!

The bandit leader—who was waiting by the stream for his subordinates to bring back their prey—heard a deafening sound as soon as he lit a charred-yellow, homemade cigarette he had seized.

Bam!

The homemade cigarette fell to the ground before it reached his mouth.

In his eyes was a rapidly expanding fireball.

This crimson fireball instantly swallowed the pickup that had rushed ahead and was about to make a turn toward the pickup truck.

This scene was imprinted in everyone's hearts like an oil painting.

Bang!

The SUV—which was in the second spot—failed to brake in time and slammed into the burning pickup.

Piang!

The glass on its side shattered as a bullet drilled into the driver's seat.

As the driver's blood splattered, a few ridiculous thoughts uncontrollably flashed across the bandit leader's mind. A trap! It's a trap! We're surrounded!

Chapter 239: 'Deity Descends into the World'

The SUV and pickup—which were behind the two vehicles in front—stopped in time. It was unknown how much dirt the wheels had sent flying into the sky.

At this moment, the few surviving bandits in the second vehicle also pushed open the doors and rolled to the ground, searching for cover.

Although they were unlikely to be hit by the hostile gunmen if they remained in the car and bent their backs, they had just witnessed the explosion of the vehicle in front. They knew that in such a situation, the vehicle was no longer protecting them but acted as a coffin for the living.

Upstream of the stream, at the area where bandits gathered, everyone—excluding the captives—stood up. They each found the most suitable spot and hurriedly aimed around the valley's bend.

They were all experienced bandits. Even in the face of an accident, they acted in an organized manner.

At this moment, loud music sounded from the corner of the valley that they couldn't see. Following this melody was an intense drumbeat that made one's blood boil.

Amidst the drumming, a figure appeared in the bandits' eyes.

He was 1.75 meters tall. His neck, chest, and abdomen were covered in iron-black armor. His limbs were supported by the metallic skeletal structure, and a large energy pack could be vaguely seen on his back. His head goggles shimmered with a red glow.

Military exoskeleton! This thought flashed across the bandit leader and more than ten of the most knowledgeable bandits' minds at the same time.

This made the fear in their hearts rise uncontrollably.

The next second, a rough male voice sounded in the smoke-filled valley. "As the smoke of war rises, looking north[1]..."

Long Yuehong suddenly jumped up into the air alongside the musical accompaniment. This caused all the bullets that shot at his original spot to miss.

As the song echoed, Long Yuehong—who was in midair—raised one arm and lowered the other. The raised arm was his left hand, which was holding a light machine gun. The lowered arm was equipped with a grenade launcher.

Amidst the gunfire, the vehicles were riddled with bullet holes as the glass shattered. This forced the bandits' main force in the distance to not dare show themselves.

As the machine gun swept the area, a grenade was fired, flying straight between the second and third vehicles.

Boom!

A smaller fireball exploded from below and swallowed several bandits.

Boom!

Another grenade flew out and landed on the fourth vehicle's windshield. It exploded into pieces, and some screams came to an abrupt stop.

“Dragon banners, horse neighs, sword flashes like frost...” Just as the explosion subsided, the boorish male voice ruled the area again.

Amidst the singing, Long Yuehong acted according to the plan. He borrowed some strength from the rock wall and jumped upstream.

The bandits tried to stop him and even used grenade launchers, but he dodged them with the comprehensive warning system. This allowed Long Yuehong to relax his slightly tense nerves significantly.

The strength of the military exoskeleton was vividly displayed on such a battlefield.

After making a few jumps, he shortened the distance between him and the bandits' main force and fired the light machine gun in his left hand again.

Upon seeing that the enemy in the military exoskeleton was like a deity, the bandit leader was momentarily terrified.

He crouched behind the SUV that was reinforced with metal plates and shouted, “Retreat!”

There was naturally a plan for retreats. This bandit group was relatively famous in the surrounding area, and they weren't pure mishmash mobs. Many members with grenade launchers and

submachine guns immediately stretched out their bodies from their hiding spots and crazily fired at the enemy wearing the military exoskeleton.

Amidst the firing and explosions, many bandits either spewed blood or fell to the ground with incomplete bodies.

With the comprehensive warning system's help, Long Yuehong relied on his jumping, speed, and reaction speed that exceeded that of humans to remain unscathed.

He occasionally failed to dodge a few bullets in time, but he could also fend off the danger by crouching, turning, and raising his hand.

But the sacrifice of seven to eight bandits also created an opportunity for the other bandits. They held their weapons and rushed into their respective vehicles, heading upstream where the other valley exit was.

Cars started moving, leaving behind the supplies and captives that couldn't be taken away in time.

At the corner of the rock wall, Jiang Baimian—who was wearing a grayish-green camouflage uniform—smiled and asked Bai Chen, who was in a sniping position beside her, “How is it? Are you envious? I'll get you one later.”

She seemed to be lazily carrying a single-use rocket launcher.

Bai Chen didn't say anything as a form of tacit agreement. She was targeting enemies that could threaten Long Yuehong.

With a military exoskeleton in front to attract fire, they appeared rather relaxed at the back.

Shang Jianyao held his assault rifle and made the few surviving bandits hold their heads and squat down.

He had placed the small black speaker with a blue bottom on the other side of the rock wall to avoid it from suffering any damage during the battle.

Shang Jianyao attached great importance to this companion.

Jiang Baimian turned her head slightly to glance at Bai Chen before leisurely using the rocket launcher.

Boom!

A car in the middle of the bandits' convoy exploded into a crimson fireball.

Death had chosen it.

The car behind it quickly swerved. Without taking a second look, it circled around the exploded vehicle and drove toward the valley exit.

At this moment, the firepower suppressing Long Yuehong had basically disappeared. He raised his right arm—which was equipped with a grenade launcher—to fire a few rounds at the bandits.

With the help of the precision aiming system, he zoomed in and saw panicked faces.

Long Yuehong hesitated for a moment but didn't fire the grenade.

The bandit convoy quickly escaped the valley.

“Don't chase a cornered enemy!” Jiang Baimian shouted. She didn't raise the matter of Long Yuehong's final mercy because she felt that it wasn't a bad thing to be soft-hearted after the enemy had almost given up resisting.

Han Wanghuo was working hard to be 'human.' As humans—who were richly endowed by nature—they couldn't be cold-hearted and arrogant. Of course, the necessary caution and carefulness could not be lacking.

...

After crazily driving the vehicles for a distance, the bandits slowed down a little and calmed down when they saw that the terrifying enemy didn't chase after them.

"Where did they come from?" The bandit leader panted and muttered to himself.

A weak and helpless lamb had suddenly turned into a flaming devil with goat horns!

If he knew that they had a military exoskeleton, he definitely wouldn't hesitate to smile and think of a way to curry favor.

When they discovered each other, the bandits—who were recuperating—couldn't escape in time unless they left many corpses behind as the price.

At this moment, a bandit in the passenger seat spoke with lingering fear and confusion. "Boss, there seemed to be only four of them."

He had made a rough observation of the situation during the intense battle.

"Four?" The bandit leader was shocked at first, but he then cursed himself. "A person wearing a military exoskeleton reduced us to such a sorry state. If the other three had rushed forward, we would only be able to crouch down, hug our heads, and choose to surrender!"

Such a team was terrifying! Of course, if they had disregarded life and death, it was possible to kill two or three of the other party's members. But how could a band of bandits have such spirit?

After a few seconds of silence, the bandit leader added, "I heard that there are some relatively small Ruin Hunter teams in the Ashlands. Each of them has extremely high strength or the latest equipment.

"Such teams can resist a certain number of troops from large factions head-on. Survival and enjoyment are no longer a problem for them. They travel the Ashlands and explore city ruins to find the door to the New World. That team from before might be like this."

If that were the case, they wouldn't have gained anything by resisting. It would only result in a wipeout.

At this moment, the bandit leader wasn't saying these words to boost the enemy's morale while diminishing his own. Instead, by claiming how strong the enemy was, the easier it was for everyone to regain their composure after suffering a crushing defeat that forced them to flee.

Furthermore, this also meant that he—as leader—wasn't in the wrong in his judgment. It had nothing to do with his mistakes in commanding or his lack of bravery in battle. It was simply because the enemy was too strong.

Facing such a powerful enemy, they naturally had to flee as far as they could.

...

The male and female captives left behind by the bandits looked at Long Yuehong in confusion and shock as if they had seen a deity descend to the mortal world.

They just thought that the other party only had a vehicle and a few people—something that couldn't save them. Unexpectedly, the Mountain Fox bandits—who had the numbers and plenty of weapons—were sent fleeing in panic in the blink of an eye by one member of the team, leaving behind many corpses and a few companions.

A military exoskeleton was really a war machine!

When such thoughts surfaced in everyone's minds, additional thoughts surfaced.

Will they continue to treat us as captives and sell us elsewhere?

Among them, an elder—who was in his fifties and had grizzled hair—slowly stood up with difficulty. His hands were tied behind his back, and he wore a linen shirt and black pants. He trembled slightly under the winter wind that blew through the valley.

Amidst his trembling, his blue eyes looked at Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen—who were holding down a few bandits. He took the initiative to introduce himself. "I'm Miens, a steward from the Omnidirectional Commerce of the Linhai Alliance."

He spoke fluent Ashlandic.

“Linhai Alliance?” Upon hearing this term, Jiang Baimian didn’t have any questions about Miens’s fluent Ashlandic.

The Linhai Alliance was located south of United Industries. Half of it was in the Golden River Zone, and the other half was on the southern coast.

It was made up of city states built by Ashlandics. The official language was Ashlandic. Of course, their accents were different from that of Pangu Biology employees.

In the Linhai Alliance, there were also Red River people and Coastals. This was a large faction that had everything ordinary. It could replicate low-level and ancient products, while high-level products had to be imported.

The resources they lacked were coal and iron.

Coastals were a sub-branch of Ashlandics. Their skin was darker, and their language was a little more awkward and difficult to understand.

“Yes,” Miens replied to Jiang Baimian’s question. With the help of a companion, he broke free from the rope that bound his hands. His body then twitched as if he were scalded by boiling water, but he also seemed to be dancing a strange dance.

After a few brief actions, the man in his fifties—who had more than half of his hair gray—said, “May the divine aura bathe you.”

Shang Jianyao—who had just retrieved his small speaker and driven over in the jeep—saw this scene, and his eyes lit up.

Chapter 240: Furnace Church

Upon seeing Miens’s actions and hearing his blessings, Jiang Baimian’s first reaction was to turn around and look at the corner of the rock wall.

As expected, the jeep rushed over and stopped a few meters away.

Shang Jianyao then opened the driver's seat door and jumped down.

With a bang, he—who was also wearing a gray camouflage uniform—quickly walked in front of Miens and anxiously asked, “Which religion are you from? Which Kalendaria do you believe in?”

This reaction and attitude are akin to meeting a brother of different parents... Although Jiang Baimian was already mentally prepared, she still felt that Shang Jianyao's performance made her have the urge to raise her hand to cover her face.

At this moment, she missed Redstone Collection's mask life.

Miens was shocked. After seeing Shang Jianyao's appearance, he politely replied, “We are from the Furnace Church. We believe in the Door of Scorching that represents August's Kalendaria.”

Door of Scorching... This Kalendaria seems to be relatively low-profile and doesn't have a huge reputation in the north... Jiang Baimian recalled the situation she knew, the information provided by the company, and Bai Chen's recount. She then nodded indiscernibly.

Shang Jianyao asked, “Were you dancing when you bowed?”

Miens didn't understand why the rather good-looking young man was harping on the matter, but he still answered honestly, “Dancing is our way of pleasing the deity. The way the Church bows is a special dance; it symbolizes everyone's instinctive reaction before the Kalendaria.”

The pain from being scalded by the Door of Scorching? Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong couldn't help but criticize inwardly.

Of course, Jiang Baimian definitely wouldn't be so rude on the surface. She smiled and echoed, “I've read some books from the Old World. It says that in ancient times, humans also used all kinds of dances to please and communicate with deities. This is the source of many sacrificial rituals.”

Upon seeing that the team which easily defeated the Mountain Fox bandits was rather friendly, Miens relaxed a little and looked at his companions. “We aren't sure about these things. We chose to dance because dancing and fire are best at pleasing the Kalendaria. Our greatest respect and best wishes for a person are to bow and say, ‘May the divine aura bathe you’ or ‘I dedicate this dance to you.’”

“If one were to say the latter sentence, they would often perform a short dance that they choreographed themselves.”

It’s pretty interesting, but isn’t it strange for an old man with plenty of white hair like you to dance so intensely? Jiang Baimian had a deep impression of the previous scene.

“Oh, oh.” Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up as he replied.

The next second, he also twitched his body to mimic the actions of being burnt.

After completing a few moves, he seriously said, “I dedicate this dance to you.” With that said, he did another strange dance that he had learned from somewhere.

Miens and the others were a little confused at first before they asked in surprise, “Are you also a fellow believer?”

“I think so, but it hasn’t been approved by your bishop,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

Ha, are you not going to ask what Holy Communion they have this time? Is dancing that charming? Long Yuehong—who was wearing the exoskeleton and guarding the surroundings—was surprised and amused.

“You think so?” Miens couldn’t understand what Shang Jianyao meant.

After a few seconds, he smiled in enlightenment. “You want to join our religion? Heh heh, we don’t have a bishop. The person in charge of a parish is a Dedicator. The person who preaches daily is an Extoller. Ordinary believers like us are collectively called The Grateful.”

Jiang Baimian matched the three terms with the other religions’ ranks and asked a question before Shang Jianyao could. “What’s higher? What’s above Dedicator?”

“It’s the Incandescent Man—the Kalendaria’s envoy and spokesperson, Divine Dancer.” Miens didn’t hide it; it was no secret.

“Divine Dancer... Then, is he very good at dancing?” Shang Jianyao changed the topic. He looked like he wanted to have a dance-off with the other party.

“I’ve never seen His Holiness.” At this point in the conversation, Miens consciously took on the responsibility of proselytizing. “The Door of Scorching we believe in is the embodiment of the New World’s door. Only by obtaining ‘His’ recognition and protection can we humans pass through the door, escape the Ashlands, and obtain new life.

“In this regard, we can obtain ‘His’ divine grace by pleasing ‘Him’ and praising ‘Him’ for extended periods of time before being guided into the New World directly. We can also find the New World’s door in reality’s Ashlands city ruins while believing in ‘Him.’ When the time comes, every believer who walks in front of the Door of Scorching will receive redemption.”

At this point, Miens twitched as if he were scalded. He then prayed, “Praise be to New World’s door!”

This can be considered a religion that combines the Kalendaria faith with the New World legend relatively well... Yes, it mainly depends on the term ‘door’ in this Kalendaria title... Jiang Baimian excitedly listened to Miens’s recount and quickly made an evaluation and analysis in her heart.

This was her hobby.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and finally raised the question. “What’s your Holy Communion?”

“Our Holy Communion is related to fire.” Miens did the introductions.

The better this powerful team’s impression of the Furnace Church was, the safer he and his companions would be.

When it came to Holy Communion, Miens—who had interacted with many religions—was rather proud. Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others were a little confused, he quickly explained enthusiastically, “Our Holy Communion is called ‘hotpot’ in the Old World.”

Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up a little.

Miens smiled and continued, “Fire is the beloved of the Kalendaria. Using it is to please the Kalendaria. South of our Linhai Alliance has many spices. Chili is planted, and it can be used to make hotpot bases.

“After we start a fire with coal or charcoal and let the hotpot boil, we can lower meat slices, organs, potato slices, and bamboo shoots that we cut in advance and cook them... The exact type depends on the ingredients around you. There are ways for both the poor and the rich to eat it. Even if you don’t have any soup base and are in the wilderness, you can still enjoy Holy Communion as long as you can boil water.”

Long Yuehong couldn’t help but gulp a mouthful of saliva. Fortunately, his dry mouth prevented him from succeeding.

This Furnace Church has a different style from other religions... This is the Food Fanatics Alliance, right? Even I’m a little tempted... Yes, I can tell that there’s still plenty of food in the Linhai Alliance... Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at Bai Chen and realized that she was still focused on monitoring the few captured bandits.

After hearing Miens’s description, Shang Jianyao directly asked, “Then, how can I join your religion?”

Miens became increasingly happy and smiled. “As long as you can encounter a Dedicator—uh, an Extoller would do as well—then you can become one of The Grateful under his guidance. Yes, the closest Dedicator is in Tarnan.”

Tarnan... Isn’t that our destination, Mechanical Paradise’s foreign trade point? Jiang Baimian asked in surprise, “Do people from Mechanical Paradise also believe in the Door of Scorching?”

Miens shook his head. “The people we encountered in Tarnan are all smart robots. They don’t believe in religion at all. His Excellency Li Zhe is in Tarnan; he serves the merchants and hunters of the Linhai Alliance. Apart from him, there are clergymen from other religions.”

At this point, Miens explained, “Our Linhai Alliance and Mechanical Paradise are close in proximity, and we have a long-term trade relationship. At least half of the humans in Tarnan come from our Linhai Alliance.”

“You guys also came from Tarnan?” Jiang Baimian acutely grasped the main point.

“Yes.” Miens didn’t hide this. He sighed and said, “We’ve been in Tarnan for some time, and the transaction has been completed. Everyone can’t wait to go home. Thinking that there would be few caravans in the winter and that there wouldn’t be many people leaving their nomad settlements, the bandits would definitely reduce their activity frequency and tide through the winter quietly. Therefore, I decided to take advantage of the fact that the weather is still cold to traverse Mount Chilar and return to the Linhai Alliance.

“Who knew that we would encounter the Mountain Fox bandits...” Miens wanted to say that Mountain Fox was a relatively famous and powerful bandit group in the Mount Chilar area, but he shut his mouth when he recalled the one-sided battle.

To the team in front of him, Mountain Fox was nothing worth mentioning.

After hearing Miens’s answer, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Sometimes, reverse thinking is indeed effective. Doing the opposite is also a solution, but the premise is that you have to consider if you have the ability and preparations to withstand any accidents if the development doesn’t go according to your expectations.”

Just as she said that, Bai Chen asked, “Why are you in a rush to return to the Linhai Alliance? Anyone with experience wandering the Ashlands knows that winter is the most difficult season.”

Miens immediately hesitated. He looked at his companions and deliberated for a moment. “I really don’t know what to say. The personnel from Mechanical Paradise in Tarnan are all smart robots. They have no need for food and have never thought of farming. All the food that caravans and hunters eat is either brought over by themselves or obtained by organizing teams to search the surroundings. There are also factions that fancy this business opportunity and specially bring food over to sell, but such things are portable. They are mainly canned food and biscuits.”

Miens paused and said with a bitter expression, “After eating canned food and biscuits for a month or two, everyone misses home food.”

He originally imagined that such ‘sentimental talk’ would be laughed at. Unexpectedly, apart from the person wearing the exoskeleton—whose face couldn’t be seen—the powerful team in front of him revealed a sorrowful expression.

“In that case, Tarnan really isn’t a good place.” Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but sigh with emotion.

Shang Jianyao sighed as well.