

## Ad Infinitum 251

Chapter 251: Li Zhe

Has he gone completely crazy from an extreme mental breakdown? Jiang Baimian was just about to squeeze in closer when she realized that the crowd had dispersed.

Two robot guards in dark-green uniforms appeared. They were about the same height as Genava, and their eyes emitted a blue glow. This made Jiang Baimian—who believed she could recognize any face—unable to tell who they were. After all, the most likely different additional modules were covered by clothes.

The two robot guards quickly picked up a man in the middle of the road and walked to the other end of the street.

The man wore a relatively loose blue-white cotton shirt. His black hair hung messily, and there was green stubble by his mouth. His eyes revealed a hysterical look.

As he was dragged forward, he constantly shouted, “Dead! They’re all dead!”

The originally lively street fell silent. It was only when the man was taken elsewhere by the robot guards and disappeared in front of everyone that everyone recovered and discussed the matter regarding the Superior Heartless in the southwest mountains.

Although it was called the southwest mountains, it was actually northeast to Tarnan. However, people here were accustomed to using the Mount Chilar range’s main peak as a standard.

Jiang Baimian swept her gaze over and realized that the pedestrians on the street didn’t have any fear or worry. They seemed to think that this was a trivial matter that the robot guards could easily resolve.

Mechanical Paradise gives them a very strong sense of security... Jiang Baimian sighed silently and continued tailing Shang Jianyao in secret.

...

At 10 p.m., in Serene Dream Hotel's Room 221, the four Old Task Force members—who had been out on missions—gathered together again.

Jiang Baimian scanned the area and smiled. "Not bad; all of you are back in one piece."

The main point of her sentence was to praise Long Yuehong.

Without giving Long Yuehong a chance to make a humble comment, she directly added, "Let's share what we learned. Let's start with—uh, Little White."

Although Bai Chen had been watching Long Yuehong, this didn't stop her from using her observation skills and the time Long Yuehong took when questioning others to gather some information.

"There are two bars in Tarnan, but they only sell fruit wine and are limited in quantity. The situation inside is similar to the company's Rec Center. It's mainly filled with local residents during their downtime, Ruin Hunters who don't dare to take risks in winter, and personnel from the various caravans taking breaks to play cards, chat, sing, and dance..."

It was obvious that Tarnan's food production couldn't support the brewery industry. Even if it had any excess, it definitely had no lack of demand. Foreign caravans would choose to make more valuable transactions. Nobody would cross mountains just to transport ten to twenty barrels of alcohol over. In the Ashlands, there were very few places that had alcohol-based beverages like Weed City. Most of them had insufficient food.

Therefore, to Tarnan's residents, only seasonal wild fruits—which weren't too delicious and had short preservation periods—could be used to make wine.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao's eyes light up, Jiang Baimian laughed. "There's quite a variety of entertainment here. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any radio programs."

In Pangu Biology, the Rec Center organized special activities every rest day, including but not limited to social dances, basketball games, and tug-of-war competitions to enrich the employees mentally.

Long Yuehong added, “But there’s the Old World entertainment material. I realized that many townsfolk here have portable computers. There’s more or less Old World entertainment material stored inside.”

Even Pangu Biology couldn’t compare to such a situation. Which ordinary employee had a computer at home?

“Electronic products are indeed not worth much here. In Weed City, some nobles might not even have portable computers,” Jiang Baimian commented.

Of course, considering Weed City’s relationship with Mechanical Paradise, the nobles didn’t have computers mainly because they felt that computers were useless.

Could those help with farming?

After Bai Chen finished recounting the information she had gathered, Jiang Baimian asked Shang Jianyao, “What did you gather?”

Don’t tell me you had a happy time dancing, were satisfied from singing, and that the fried chicken wing was delicious... Just as she finished her sentence, Jiang Baimian added inwardly.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “The religion that organizes people to sing along the street is the Clam Dragon Church. They worship November’s Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror. They believe that the current world is only a large illusion and that the Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror, is using it to test humans. This God of Illusions’ true body is an ancient mythical clam dragon. Only by pleasing ‘Him’ in various ways can one escape the painful illusion and wake up from the dream to see the real, beautiful world—which is also the New World... They call the believers who obtained Shattered Mirror’s favor ‘Dragonkin...’”

Whoa, not bad. You didn’t forget your mission when you were singing, dancing, and eating the fried chicken wing... Jiang Baimian suddenly felt that something was amiss and quickly asked, “Don’t you care what the Clam Dragon Church’s Holy Communion is?”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “I’m afraid I’ll hesitate.”

Jiang Baimian clicked her tongue. “Actually, there might not be a need to worry. Think about it. They all believe that the current world is a huge illusion, so why do they need Holy Communion? It’s all fake and illusory anyway.”

“That’s true...” Shang Jianyao seemed to be convinced. However, he then asked, “Doesn’t that mean they don’t even have to eat? Wouldn’t it be better to wake up from their hunger early?”

Jiang Baimian almost couldn’t answer this question. Fortunately, she reacted quickly and had a good imagination. “Didn’t we encounter the Nightmare Horse before? Starving to death in our dreams will have it reflected in real life.”

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

He then talked about the Glorious Scale.

As for the Furnace Church, everyone had heard Miens mention it before, so he didn’t repeat it.

After Shang Jianyao was Long Yuehong. He recounted the information he had obtained from a few local elderly men and women.

“Maximian? Mechanical Paradise actually placed a bounty on a human for so many years... What did he do? Or is it related to an important research project in the Old World?” Jiang Baimian made a guess based on the fact that Maximian was suspected to be a scientist.

“Possibly,” Long Yuehong suggested. “Team Leader, I want to visit the local president of the Hunter’s Guild, Gu Bo, tomorrow. He should know a lot.”

He didn’t figure out where Gu Bo’s home was.

“Good.” Jiang Baimian praised him in relief. “Not bad; you’re becoming more and more proactive. This means that your confidence has increased. Yes, form a team with Little White tomorrow and visit President Gu Bo. Shang Jianyao and I will go to the Furnace Church and meet the Dedicator, Li Zhe.”

Since they had Miens’s letter, it would be a waste not to take the opportunity to build a relationship and obtain some information!

Finally, Jiang Baimian told him about the crazy survivor and other things she had seen.

...

The next morning, the Old Task Force split into two groups after a simple breakfast and headed for their respective destinations.

The Furnace Church's cathedral was at the southernmost end of the street from last night. It seemed to have been modified from a small Old World factory.

It stood independently; its outer walls were iron-black, and the door was painted a fiery red. At a glance, it really looked like a strange 'furnace.'

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao only saw the road sign when they arrived. They learned the current street's name from its mottled surface: "Riverfront Avenue."

The door to the Furnace Cathedral was tightly shut as if nobody was allowed in. However, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had heard Miens mention that this was mainly to simulate the sense of a furnace and not to stop anyone from entering.

Jiang Baimian stretched out her left hand and pushed open the door. She felt a heatwave gush toward her.

This formed a sharp contrast with the chilly wind outside.

Jiang Baimian looked up and realized that the dome was very high. Grayish-white or iron-black pipes extended along the pillars and walls in different places.

"It's producing heat." Shang Jianyao placed his palm on an iron-black pipe by the door.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and made a judgment. "Hot water should be flowing inside. How extravagant!"

She believed that this was an imitation of the Old World's heating system. According to this inference, there was likely a large boiler behind the cathedral and a pile of coal.

Although it felt strange to associate the cathedral with these things due to its magical industrial vibe, Jiang Baimian found it understandable when she thought of the Church's name—Furnace.

“Please close the door behind you.” A voice sounded from the prayer hall.

Yes, we can't let too much of the heat dissipate. That would be a waste of energy... Jiang Baimian gained a new understanding of why the Furnace Church kept its doors closed.

As Shang Jianyao closed the door, he curiously asked, “If it were summer, would there still be heating here?”

Jiang Baimian imagined the scene and suddenly felt burning hot.

The person in front of the prayer hall explained, “We don't provide heat. The architectural design here can ensure that the summer heat stays inside and directly creates the feeling of a furnace.”

He was in his forties, and he wore a fiery-red robe. He was a typical Ashlandic; his skin was slightly tanned, and his cheekbones were relatively high. His hair was wet, and his forehead was covered in sweat.

Jiang Baimian approached and asked politely, “May I ask if His Excellency Li Zhe is around?”

The red-robed man exhaled and said, “I'm Li Zhe, the cathedral's Dedicator.”

“Are you very hot?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

Li Zhe nodded. “It's very hot, but it's also very comfortable and relaxing. I feel like the impurities in my body have been calcined by the furnace.”

Upon seeing that Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao were a little confused, Li Zhe pointed at a door to the side. “I just hosted Mass. That's our Mass Room.”

“You hold Mass in a special room?” Jiang Baimian didn’t hide her confusion and curiosity.

Li Zhe smiled and said, “Yes, our Mass ritual has relatively high requirements. We need to water the red-hot stone in a relatively well-sealed room and watch the steam spread. Ah, this is the aura of a deity. ‘He’ is bathing us. It will seep into our clothes, drill into our skin, and expel the uncleanness and fatigue in our bodies...

“After every Mass, everyone will feel very relaxed and energized after changing their clothes. This is a gift from God, just like how we feel after enjoying Holy Communion during the summer.”

“...” Jiang Baimian’s expression became stranger the more she listened. She wanted to ask if their religion had a sanctuary in the Old World. If it did, was it called a ‘sauna?’

Chapter 252: Heresy

After Li Zhe—who was wearing a fiery-red robe—described the feeling of bathing in the divine aura, he looked at the two visitors in front of him and asked, “Is there something you need?”

Behind him, on the altar representing the deity, was an iron-black furnace with a glowing-red door. This was their Church’s Sacred Emblem, the symbol of the Kalendaria—Door of Scorching.

Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes and got him to take out the letter Miens had written. She then introduced herself. “We are foreign Ruin Hunters. On the way, we encountered Miens and the others from Omnidirectional Commerce. They were attacked by the Mountain Fox bandits, and we helped them escape their predicament. This is a letter he wrote to you.”

As Li Zhe came to a realization, his body twitched as if he had been scalded. He danced a short segment of a dance.

“May the divine aura bathe them.” At the end of the dance, he gave them his blessings.

He then danced an improvised tap dance to express his gratitude to Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao. “I dedicate this dance to you.”

Shang Jianyao mimicked his actions and replied, “May the divine aura bathe you as well.”

Li Zhe was stunned for a moment. “Are you also a parishioner of the Church?”

“I think so, but I haven’t obtained your permission,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

“Huh?” Li Zhe didn’t understand what he meant.

Jiang Baimian was already accustomed to this and informed him, “Read the letter first.”

“Alright.” Li Zhe unfolded the letter and read the content written in familiar handwriting.

After reading it, he smiled and said to Shang Jianyao, “So you also worship the Kalendaria and wish to join our Church.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation.

Li Zhe restrained his expression and asked seriously, “Let me officially ask you: Are you sure you want to join our Furnace Church? Although we don’t have many rules, this also means that you will have to abide by certain rules. You can’t be as unrestrained as before.”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before asking, “Will this affect me from saving all of humanity?”

“Huh?” Li Zhe couldn’t keep up with Shang Jianyao’s train of thought again, and Jiang Baimian didn’t help explain.

The Dedicator hesitated for a moment and said, “I don’t think so...”

After all, there was no rule in the Church’s Holy Bible that forbade believers from saving the world. In the Holy Bible, this portion of the content was reserved for the Kalendarium, especially the Door of Scorching.

Shang Jianyao asked, “Will that affect my investigation of the reason for the Old World’s destruction?”



More sweat broke out on Li Zhe's forehead. "In theory, no. We don't interfere with our parishioners' work. Even if you are a bandit, you can still believe in the Door of Scorching as long as you don't kill the innocent."

As he spoke, Li Zhe had a thought: What kind of person is he?

After joining the Church and becoming a clergyman for so many years, this was the first time he encountered such indescribably strange questions.

Previously, he felt most exasperated when he was asked: 'Dedicator, does joining the Church ensure I have food to eat?' 'Does the Church give out wives (husbands)?' 'Dedicator, do the dead have to be cremated to conform to the teachings?' 'Dedicator, do we receive the blessings of the Kalendaria if we dance well enough?'

After hearing his answer, Shang Jianyao nodded. "I have no further questions; I confirm my admission."

Li Zhe heaved a sigh of relief inexplicably.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian asked curiously, "I heard that faith in the same Kalendaria often develops into several denominations because of the differences in the proselytizing area, the lack of connections between them, the differences in the mainstream culture characteristics of the corresponding places, and the different interpretations of the oracle's canonical texts. Are there such situations among the worshipers of the Door of Scorching?"

Li Zhe slowly sighed and said, "Yes, and we were originally one family."

"Then, why did it fracture?" Jiang Baimian asked. On the one hand, she was interested. On the other hand, she wanted to show Shang Jianyao the problems of joining a religion.

Li Zhe said with a solemn expression, "Their understanding of the Kalendaria's teachings has deviated. We believe that the focus is on Scorching and Fire. This forms the concept of a smelting furnace, and it then extends to dancing and hotpot. In our Church, August is a holy period, and August's heat is another aura of the deity.

"They find dancing more important than flames, something that can please the Kalendaria more. Furthermore, they accused us of deviating from the orthodox path."

Shang Jianyao curiously asked, "Deviation in what way?"

"They believe that only by using flames to directly process food can one show their sincerity. A hotpot with a container in the way is an inferior choice. It can't be used as Holy Communion. It's a false belief!" As Li Zhe spoke, he became a little agitated. He looked like he wanted to blow up the heretic's head to maintain the orthodox path of hotpot.

Jiang Baimian's expression became a little strange. "So, what's their Holy Communion?"

"It's barbecue," Li Zhe controlled his emotions and replied.

Although Jiang Baimian had already expected this, she couldn't help but twitch her facial muscles.

This disagreement was unimaginable to her. In Pangu Biology, employees of the Security Department would occasionally retrieve a few Old World computers. Some of the data on them could be restored, and some couldn't.

Jiang Baimian had previously read some of the recovered information and found the things recorded in it ridiculous. She expressed her confusion.

This included disputes between the groups that liked sweet tofu, salted tofu, and spicy tofu, respectively.

She originally imagined that this might be a joke on the Old World's Internet. Who knew that she would encounter a living example in the real world today!?

After hesitating, she asked with interest, "Then, can your religion eat barbecue?"

"We can, but we try our best not to." Li Zhe tactfully expressed his attitude. "I know that in the wilderness, barbecue might be the most convenient way to process the ingredients. Therefore, I don't insist on parishioners doing so when out on expeditions."

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at Shang Jianyao and realized that he seemed to be a little hesitant.

Jiang Baimian chuckled and asked, “What’s that Church’s name? Can their believers eat hotpot?”

“They are called the Dance of Frenzy. In the teachings, they aren’t to eat hotpot unless there’s no other choice.” Li Zhe was unwilling to elaborate on the heretics’ situation. He looked at Shang Jianyao and asked, “Will you be leaving Tarnan any time soon?”

“Not for a week at least,” Jiang Baimian answered on Shang Jianyao’s behalf.

Li Zhe tersely acknowledged it. “In three days, we have a baptism ceremony at 2 p.m. If you participate, you will officially be a member of the Church. Heh heh, remember, 2 p.m. is the Church’s Holy hour. Try your best to arrange your daily prayers at this time. There’s no time limit for our ordinary Mass. The Grand Mass and Baptism can only be held between 2 p.m. and 3 p.m.”

“What’s the baptism ritual like?” Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

Li Zhe pointed at the Mass chapel’s door. “It’s about the same as an ordinary Mass, but the baptized can’t wear the clothes they prepared. They have to strip naked and wrap themselves in the cathedral’s red bath towels. The longer someone can stay in the Mass chapel, the more they will receive the Kalendaria’s favor.”

Jiang Baimian listened with relish and interrupted. “What’s different about the Grand Mass?”

“It’s only once a month. Outside ordinary Mass, there’s an additional hot water bath and a mass dance that praises the deity,” explained Li Zhe simply.

After chatting about joining the parish, Jiang Baimian talked about the Old Task Force’s goal in coming to Tarnan. “We want to meet the Source Brain for some matters and directly ask it some questions. Dedicator, I wonder if you have a way to move Mechanical Paradise into giving us permission?”

Li Zhe quietly listened and sighed. “I’ve been in Tarnan for so many years...”

At this point, he pointed outside the cathedral. “The people in town have stayed here longer. The caravans that come and go also represent a certain faction, but nobody has seen the Source Brain. Most of them don’t even know of its existence.”

Li Zhe meant: It's beyond me as well.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao couldn't force the matter. After exchanging a few pleasantries, they bade farewell and left.

As a quasi-member of the Furnace Church, Shang Jianyao offered a dance to the Holy Emblem representing the Door of Scorching before turning around.

Li Zhe was rather satisfied with this.

...

The Tarnan Hunter's Guild was also in the middle of the most lively Riverfront Avenue.

The layout inside was very similar to that of Weed City's Hunter's Guild. There were also many tables with corresponding electronic products, hunters that assisted in accepting missions and handing in missions.

The only difference was that the Hunter's Guild here wasn't too large. There weren't many employees, and there were only three of them. Furthermore, they appeared rather relaxed because of the machines. They could even zone out and be in a daze.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen walked to a round-faced female employee and looked inside through the empty glass panel below.

"Hello," Long Yuehong said.

The staff member raised her head, her eyes filled with confusion. "What's the matter?" she asked in Ashlandic after a while.

She didn't use a dialect, but a language similar to Redstone Collection's.

Long Yuehong had already discussed it with Bai Chen and bluntly said, "We want to meet President Gu Bo."

“Ah, I’ll help you ask.” The staff member picked up the black phone in a panic and dialed a number.

After the call connected, she said a few words and made a few terse acknowledgments. She then looked up and said to Long Yuehong and Bai Chen, “President Gu has agreed to your request. Room 201 on the second floor.”

Uh... That’s it? That simple? Long Yuehong was a little surprised. He still remembered that a reason was needed if they wanted to meet the few high-ranking members of the Hunter’s Guild in Weed City.

Maybe the guild here isn’t large, so it doesn’t have so many rules and interests? Long Yuehong was more and more accustomed to thinking about the information contained in these differences, although he often couldn’t figure out the answer.

After exchanging looks with Bai Chen, they walked to the stairwell.

#### Chapter 253: A Scientist That Doesn’t Resemble One

Gu Bo was a thin and small old man. His white hair was a little sparse, but his dark-brown eyes were still spirited.

He wore a black tweed top and held a silver metal thermos in his hand. He pointed across the desk and said, “Have a seat, please.”

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen nodded politely, pulled out a chair each, and sat down.

“How may I help you?” Gu Bo’s Ashlandic accent was slightly different from the local dialect.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen determined that this local president of the Hunter’s Guild was a first-generation or second-generation Tarnan resident from another area.

“President Gu, we have something to consult you on,” Long Yuehong replied politely.

Gu Bo laughed. “Shouldn’t you issue a mission first and let me decide if I want to accept it based on the payment? News or information is valuable.”

“...” Long Yuehong was momentarily speechless. He could only sigh with emotion at how senior hunters and local presidents were indeed professionals.

Bai Chen calmly replied, “You can first listen to our questions before deciding how much payment you want. This doesn’t need to be done through the guild.”

Gu Bo twisted open the thermos and drank from it. “These old bones of mine are afraid that you’ll go back on your word and not pay me. Not only will I not be in the green when the time comes, but I might even find myself in trouble. I might end up getting beaten up instead of getting paid.”

Upon seeing that Gu Bo was becoming more and more ridiculous, Long Yuehong suddenly missed Shang Jianyao.

At such a time, he could definitely lead the conversation astray.

Bai Chen looked at Gu Bo and asked, “Would a local Chief Hunter be afraid of this?”

Long Yuehong had inquired about Gu Bo last night and learned that he was originally a Senior Hunter. After becoming president, he was even given the honorary title of Chief Hunter.

“A good man doesn’t mention his past achievements.” Gu Bo mocked himself. “As for humans, their bodies aren’t much to speak of once they get older.”

After joking, he restrained his expression. “Speak. I’ll decide how to deal with it when I know the question.”

Long Yuehong took out a fountain pen and a palm-sized notebook. As he recorded the contents, he asked, “President Gu, do you still remember Maximian?”

“Huh?” Gu Bo wore a blank look.

Long Yuehong quickly highlighted the key points. “Early in the New Calendar, the person that Mechanical Paradise placed a bounty on.”

Gu Bo sank into his memories and said after a while, “Him? It’s been decades. Why are you asking about him? Could it be that you have clues about him and are his descendants?”

You sure have an imagination... Long Yuehong criticized inwardly and simply explained, “We want to seek an audience with the Source Brain and are hoping to offer something that Mechanical Paradise would be interested in.”

“Then, you might as well save up metal ores and make a large transaction with Mechanical Paradise. That might still give you a chance.” Gu Bo felt that the young man’s sudden idea was completely unrealistic. “It’s been decades since the search for Maximian. Maybe he’s already dead.”

“We’re only in charge of this direction.” Bai Chen’s words stopped Gu Bo’s persuasion.

Gu Bo unscrewed the thermos cap again, took a sip of water, and moistened his throat. “Then, I’ll be frank—I don’t need your payment. I didn’t find any clues back then, so this person definitely isn’t in Mount Chilar. Even if he is, he’s most likely in the stomach of some beast or Heartless.”

Long Yuehong recorded Gu Bo’s answer and asked, “What kind of person is he? What was written on Mechanical Paradise’s bounty announcement back then?”

“What kind of person is he?” Gu Bo recalled and said, “There was a photo back then, and there were some descriptions... This person was more than 1.80 meters tall, and his body was very muscular. His hair was golden, and his eyes were light blue. His nose was slightly large, and he looked alright. It’s said that he had undergone genetic optimization...”

In certain places, genetic enhancement was also known as genetic optimization. This was a technology that had made breakthrough progress before the Old World was destroyed. However, it had later been lost to most human factions. Only Pangu Biology and the White Knights continued on this path, improving it and making it sufficiently mature.

As Long Yuehong quickly recorded the information, Gu Bo continued, “I think he looks more like a warrior than a scientist, but Mechanical Paradise’s bounty notice specially emphasized his identity.

“Apart from this, the notice had nothing of value. It only said that Mechanical Paradise would satisfy any one request of yours if you found this person as long as it didn’t involve the survivability of Mechanical Paradise and it has the ability to complete it.”

Give me a robot army. I want to save the world... Upon hearing 'any request,' Long Yuehong couldn't help but simulate Shang Jianyao's train of thought. However, he felt that this idea was too ordinary after some thought.

It didn't evoke enough of Shang Jianyao's vibes.

At this moment, Bai Chen asked, "It only said to find the person and didn't mention why?"

"No." Gu Bo shook his head.

"Then, did they emphasize protecting certain things or tracking down certain information?" Bai Chen asked.

"None as well. It just said to try our best to ensure the target's survival." Gu Bo still had some impression of this. If there were such requests, he would've changed the direction of the investigation back then and wouldn't have walked into a dead end.

"Jot this down," Bai Chen instructed Long Yuehong.

Based on her experience, she could make a preliminary judgment. Mechanical Paradise's bounty for Maximian was mainly directed at him or what he had done in the past, not the information or items he might've had on him.

She and Long Yuehong asked a few more questions, but Gu Bo couldn't remember much after so many years. Hence, he couldn't provide more information.

After politely bidding farewell and leaving the Hunter's Guild, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen walked in the direction of the Furnace Church. They were prepared to rendezvous with Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao and discuss what to do next.

As they walked, Long Yuehong was a little surprised to discover that there were still many stalls by the side of the road. The lower shutters of the outlets on both sides of the street were tightly shut with nobody running them apart from those with the signboards like 'XXX Chamber of Commerce' or 'XXX Provision Store.'



He curiously walked to a stall and asked the stall owner, “Why don’t you use a street stall and stay here under the sun and rain?”

As he had been to Weed City, he knew the concept of a street stall. He remembered that Redstone Collection had provided one piece of information: In Tarnan, ownerless outlets could be occupied by others, and they couldn’t apply for property rights from the smart robots without long-term use.

The stall owner was a woman in her thirties with rough skin. Her face was a little tanned from the sun.

She spoke in a rather clumsy Ashlandic accent that resembled Redstone Collection’s. “I still have to repair and clean it myself. How can I have so many supplies to invest in it? In any case, the robots don’t care if we set up stalls by the road. I’ll hold a large umbrella when it rains. Besides, I can also use the electric lights for free.”

As she spoke, she pointed at the street lamp above her.

Uh, does one have to pay a fee once they occupy a shop and apply for power? Long Yuehong nodded in understanding.

As he had asked the other party a question, he was embarrassed to turn around and leave. He squatted down and looked at the stall owner’s goods.

There were books left behind from the Old World. The paper had turned yellow, and there were also jade, diamond jewelry, and miscellaneous items from the Old World.

After some thought, Long Yuehong asked Bai Chen—who had squatted down with him, “If I wish to gift something to a female elder, which do you think is better?”

“Your mom?” Bai Chen easily interpreted Long Yuehong’s true meaning.

“Yes.” This wasn’t anything shameful, so Long Yuehong frankly admitted it.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao—who had left Furnace Cathedral—saw their teammates. They quickly approached and squatted down.

After hearing Long Yuehong's request, Jiang Baimian laughed. "I can give you special permission to exchange some supplies for jewelry. You can deduct them from your contribution points when you return."

Bai Chen pointed at a green jadeite bracelet and said, "At your mother's age, she might prefer such things. Although it doesn't look that good now, it will look more lustrous after prolonged wearing. The few female Ruin Hunters I knew in the past wore them because they couldn't sell them. Later, I realized that they looked pretty good."

"Yes, yes, yes." The stall owner quickly echoed Bai Chen's words.

Jiang Baimian didn't have much knowledge in this regard. Furthermore, she preferred shiny diamonds. Therefore, she didn't raise any objections and cast her gaze at the books.

She realized that Shang Jianyao had already picked up a book and was reading it attentively.

What are you reading? Jiang Baimian curiously lowered her head and glanced at the cover of the book in Shang Jianyao's hand.

The title soon appeared in her eyes: "An Actor Prepares."

"..." Jiang Baimian wanted to say something, but she didn't know what to say.

After a round of bargaining, they exchanged one can for the jadeite bracelet, one can for four books, and the remaining three books were chosen by Jiang Baimian.

After a simple and insipid lunch, the Old Task Force didn't go out because they had nothing else to do. They took a nap and occupied a chair (sofa) each to read the books they had just bought.

Time always flew by when one was having fun. Just as evening was about to arrive, a commotion suddenly sounded in the distance.

Long Yuehong looked in the direction of the sound and muttered to himself in confusion, "What happened?"

“Let’s go take a look.” Jiang Baimian felt that it was time to stretch her body.

The four of them then left the Serene Dream Hotel and walked to Riverfront Avenue.

Before long, they discovered the source of the commotion—the Hunter’s Guild.

The commotion had subsided by this point, but many people were still gathered there. Their expressions were a little solemn.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others walked into the guild and immediately saw the mission fixed on the large screen: “...Investigate the matter regarding the Superior Heartless in the southwestern mountains...”

Didn’t Genava send the robot guards to resolve it? Jiang Baimian looked around in confusion and quickly found a line of description.

“...communication with ten robot guards has been lost...”

Chapter 254: Research Institute

At this moment, similar thoughts flashed across Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen’s minds. How can that be?

From what they knew, robot warriors were the best choice to deal with Superior Heartless. Logically speaking, there shouldn’t be any problems.

Of course, this was only common knowledge to them. Most people in Tarnan didn’t know the exact situation of Awakened and Superior Heartless. They had only seen how powerful robot warriors were and felt that a total of ten robot guards were enough to deal with the trouble in the southwestern mountains.

This was a force that could deal with an ordinary army!

Unexpectedly, communications with them were lost.

This made the Tarnan residents—who still felt a sense of security last night—panic.

In all of Tarnan, there were only 24 robot guards. Nearly half of them were gone!

The robot guards were all smart robots. They were different from the ones in charge of surveillance, repair, and cleaning.

“The situation in the mountains might be more complicated than we imagined.” Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and deliberated before saying, “Maybe the problem isn’t solely limited to a Superior Heartless.”

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao thoughtfully said, “I thought of someone.”

Jiang Baimian had a faint premonition, but she still asked, “Who is it?”

Shang Jianyao sighed and revealed a yearning expression. “Xiaochong.”

“You mean...” Jiang Baimian forcefully lowered her voice. “That Superior Heartless isn’t an ordinary Superior Heartless—he has reached Xiaochong’s level?”

Although the Old Task Force members had never truly seen Xiaochong’s abilities, one could imagine his powers from how numerous Superior Heartless had spontaneously protected him and listened to his orders.

If an ordinary Superior Heartless corresponded to an Awakened in Star Cluster Hall or Sea of Origins, Xiaochong would at least have entered the Mind Corridor. He might not even be inferior to Yama Tiger; he might even be stronger.

“Maybe,” Shang Jianyao said frankly. “I’m just wondering what will happen if Xiaochong encounters the Superior Heartless in the mountains? Will he make the other party obedient?”

At this point, his eyes lit up. He clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “If I impersonate Xiaochong, will it have a similar effect?”

“You’re too tall.” Jiang Baimian gave up on using reason and went straight to the heart of the problem.

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao sighed again. “Even if I walk on my knees, I’m still taller than him.”

Man, you’re really too concerned about your friend’s height... Long Yuehong cursed inwardly as he felt lucky that he wasn’t the one being mocked.

With Shang Jianyao’s interruption, Jiang Baimian and the others quickly composed themselves and read the mission’s exact description.

Toward the end, Long Yuehong couldn’t help but say, “This mission only gives 500 credit points?”

The mission rating was only B, only one rank higher than Weed City’s investigation of Liu Dazhuang’s murder.

Although the latter involved Castellan Manor and was highly regarded by the higher-ups, it was ultimately just a relatively ordinary case on the surface. Now, this mission had already included ten robot guards. Together, they could compete with Weed City’s city defense forces.

Of course, the premise was that the latter didn’t set up a camp in advance and had all kinds of heavy weapons in position.

Jiang Baimian also found it strange, but she understood the reason after some thought. “This is just an investigation. It’s not to deal with the Superior Heartless directly.”

This was a reconnaissance mission, not a monster clearing mission. It was indeed dangerous, but it was definitely much better than facing a terrifying target.

Bai Chen nodded. “If we’re lucky, we might not encounter any danger.”

For example, the Superior Heartless had already moved elsewhere, leaving behind the battlefield and the corresponding traces of the robot guards.

When the time came, even if the robot guards were already destroyed, they could still search for useful information by retrieving the black boxes on them.

“The payment is also very generous,” Jiang Baimian added.

The commissioner was Tarnan’s mayor, Genava. He would prepare ten non-smart combat robots to distribute to the Ruin Hunters who had obtained important information.

If one didn’t want the robots, they could choose other supplies of equivalent value.

“Do we take it?” Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance. “This is a little dangerous. We aren’t real Ruin Hunters who need to complete missions to survive.”

Shang Jianyao explained, “I want to change the robot payment for a car.”

“Uh...” Jiang Baimian hesitated.

This sounded good, but it wasn’t enough to make the Old Task Force take such a huge risk...

If the Superior Heartless really reached Xiaochong’s level, they couldn’t expect a big shot like Du Heng to pass by.

At this moment, Bai Chen calmly added, “You can also exchange it for a request to meet the Source Brain.”

“That’s true...” Jiang Baimian frowned and fell silent for a while.

Just as Shang Jianyao tried to say something, she exhaled and smiled. “We shouldn’t make such a hasty decision. First, we have to determine if we can exchange the payment for a meeting with the Source Brain. Second, we have to gather all the information we can gather in Tarnan and analyze the risks...”

With that said, she turned around and walked to the Hunter’s Guild’s door.

At this moment, Long Yuehong weakly said, “Didn’t Geneva still not reject our request to meet the Source Brain?”

“That’s true... Then, let’s wait a little longer.” Jiang Baimian realized that the option wasn’t out of the picture yet. There was no need to be in such a rush to try something else.

In any case, the matter in the southwest mountains didn’t look like it could be resolved in a short period of time.

...

The next morning, just as the Old Task Force finished their morning training, a robot guard wearing a dark-green military uniform and carrying a rocket launcher came to Serene Dream.

Jiang Baimian and the others went downstairs and asked, “What’s the matter?”

The robot guard with shimmering blue eyes replied in a magnetic but emotionless voice. “Officer Geneva instructed me to inform you that the Source Brain will not meet anyone.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian knew that the robot in front of her had no say, so she didn’t say anything else.

After the robot guard left the hotel, Aynor—who was sitting at the front desk—curiously asked, “You want to meet the Source Brain?”

“Why? Do you have a solution?” Jiang Baimian asked in surprise.

Shang Jianyao had already rushed in front of Aynor.

Aynor—who had changed into a cashmere dress today and was still gorgeously dressed—glanced at Shang Jianyao and smiled. “I’ve never seen the Source Brain. How can I have a solution?”

At this point, she changed the topic. “Mechanical Paradise is rather concerned about the Old World. They’ve been searching for relevant people.”

“For example, Maximian?” Jiang Baimian instantly made the connection.

Aynor laughed like a blooming flower. “Young lady, you are pretty smart. I once heard my elder mention this person, saying that he’s the Chief Scientist of the Third Research Institute.”

“The Third Research Institute?” Jiang Baimian naturally thought of Qiao Chu and the Eighth Research Institute that he came from.

“Yes.” Aynor nodded. “I’m not sure about the exact details either. I only know that there are nine similar research institutes. They were a research institute jointly established by the most powerful Ashlandic country and the most powerful Red River country before the Old World was destroyed. The main purpose seemed to be about facing the future.”

This hotel lady boss sure has a past. She actually knows so much... Jiang Baimian sighed silently after hearing this.

“Thank you.” Jiang Baimian sincerely expressed her gratitude.

“Is thanks sufficient?” Aynor smiled. “I have to get these two handsome guys to spend the night with me.”

“Cough, cough...” Long Yuehong almost choked to death on his saliva.

“Sure, sure,” Shang Jianyao said excitedly. “We can dance, sing, play cards, compete, etc.”

“Alright, I’m joking.” Aynor smiled and shook her head. “These old bones of mine can’t handle young people.”

Why are those words so familiar? Ah yes, President Gu Bo also said something similar... Long Yuehong was first stunned before he came to a realization.

After bidding Aynor farewell, Jiang Baimian got Bai Chen to drive to River West and went to the town hall to seek an audience with Genava—Tarnan’s mayor and robot guard captain.



The town hall was located in a ten-story building on River East. The glass walls had been wiped clean, reflecting a golden glow under the sun.

As soon as they walked in, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others saw the so-called cleaning robot. It looked like a mop and had many mechanical tentacles that could wrap around objects with suction cups.

This allowed it to clean everything—from the ground to the ceiling.

In addition to the cleaning robot, there were also combat robots with many weapon modules, trash can-shaped robots that were in charge of broadcasting elevator music, and pet robots that looked like cats and dogs. There were all kinds of them.

Among them, there were only a few smart robots wearing clothes—a small minority.

After passing the message, the Old Task Force met the robot mayor, Geneva, in an office on the top floor.

It was still wearing a military uniform. It stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows and looked northeast.

After the four people from the Old Task Force approached, it turned around and said in its mellow male voice, “Is there anything else? If you seek an audience with the Source Brain, there’s no room for negotiation.”

Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “If we investigate the matter regarding the Superior Heartless in the southwest mountains and retrieve the missing guards, will we be able to meet the Source Brain?”

Geneva fell silent for a moment before saying, “I can help you make the request again, but I can’t make any guarantees. If it really doesn’t work, you can choose another payment.”

This was an expected answer. Jiang Baimian then said, “Actually, it’s very simple for you to resolve the matter in the southwest mountains. After figuring out the general range, bombard the area with missiles. Plow the area through various means.”

This was the most effective way for human armies to deal with Superior Heartless. Though it would consume too much ammunition, Mechanical Paradise was likely able to afford it.

Genava took a few steps and said, “First, it’s a matter of efficiency. Second, the mountainous terrain is complicated, and there are too many places to hide. Third...”

It paused and said, “The ten guards are my companions. I don’t want to take the risk before we determine their situation.”

Chapter 255: Interrogation

Although it felt strange to hear the word ‘companions’ from the smart robot, Jiang Baimian could still understand it. After all, she could easily come to a conclusion from what she had seen and heard: In Mechanical Paradise, smart robots had a higher status than other robots, and there weren’t many of them.

In such a situation, it was very normal for the robot guards to have a higher status, and their survival had greater importance in Genava’s core program.

“I understand.” It wasn’t Jiang Baimian who said this, but Shang Jianyao. He had a look of sympathy as if he had lost a stepbrother.

Jiang Baimian didn’t continue the topic and asked, “We also need you to provide more information and the corresponding permission so that we can evaluate the danger level of the mission and ultimately decide if we want to take it.”

Genava walked back to the chair. After some thought, he said in a mellow, masculine voice, “Alright, what do you want to know?”

At this moment, Long Yuehong finally understood his team leader’s words. He suddenly felt that something was amiss.

Even if Genava provided more information and gave the corresponding permission, the Old Task Force seemed capable of giving up on this matter on the grounds that it was too dangerous.

Isn’t... isn’t this equivalent to gaining something without risking anything?

They were only making a verbal claim to obtain a lot of intelligence without paying anything! Of course, this made sense in turn. Most Ruin Hunters would choose to keep a respectful distance from missions with insufficient information. Therefore, when commissioners issued missions in the guild, they were often asked to provide details that met the requirements for review.

“Is there only one survivor? Did he say anything?” Jiang Baimian had long thought of what to ask and how to ask.

The blue light in Genava’s eyes flickered twice. “Yes, there’s only one survivor. His name is Zhang Jin, and his nickname is Ninth Zhang. He’s a member of a Ruin Hunter team. They originally wanted to go to the southwest mountains to hunt beasts that appear during the winter due to hunger. However, he was the only one who drove back.

“When he returned, his body was covered in blood. He only said to the guards at the mouth of the River East Road: ‘There’s a Superior Heartless.’ Then, he fainted. When he woke up, we realized that he had mental problems. He only knew how to crazily shout, ‘dead,’ ‘they’re all dead,’ ‘I killed them,’ and ‘I killed them.’ We couldn’t get any details.”

“Is there no other information?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“That’s all.” Genava shook its silver-black mechanical head.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but ask, “You only know this bit of information, yet you sent out the guards?”

They didn’t even know the number of Superior Heartless, much less details such as whether the other party had human companions, what their abilities were, or whether they had weapons.

Genava fell silent for a moment before saying, “We have experience dealing with Superior Heartless. In the past, there were many Heartless in Mount Chilar...”

These were all wiped out by the robot guards.

Amazingly, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others actually heard a little guilt in Genava’s words.

A smart robot actually simulated guilt...

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else.

This wasn’t her subordinate or her superior; they weren’t close enough to have a hearty talk.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, “Why is his nickname Ninth Zhang? Because his mother gave birth to nine, and he’s the last child?”

Genava’s mouth opened and closed as it said, “No, it’s because their Ruin Hunter team has a total of ten people. They followed an ancient book and became sworn siblings. He’s the second youngest among them.”

That sounds a little tragic. I would’ve broken down if I were in his shoes... Long Yuehong secretly hissed.

If none of his nine sworn siblings were left, he too would’ve gone crazy.

Jiang Baimian sighed and said, “We would like your permission to meet Ninth Zhang and see if we can get more information.”

“Sure.” Genava expressed its understanding. “But the chances aren’t high. We’ve used all kinds of methods and even employed some very advanced machines, but we couldn’t get anything else from him.”

“How do you know that it won’t work if you don’t give it a try?” Jiang Baimian controlled herself and didn’t look at Shang Jianyao.

The Old Task Force had an interrogation expert—no, a negotiation expert—no, a social expert!

Genava didn’t say anything else. It bent down and wrote a permit with its hand. It also drew a complicated pattern that was made up of information like a signature, content, and key.

Jiang Baimian felt that she couldn't match such anti-forgery standards. However, she was still a little confused. "There should be a wireless network connection between all of you. Why don't you directly send an electronic permit to the guards guarding Ninth Zhang and attach our photos?"

"This is standard procedure. We can't use any tricks; otherwise, it will be very easy for others to exploit flaws," Geneva explained.

Your smart robot's creed is Program Justice? Jiang Baimian took the permit, and Shang Jianyao and the others bade farewell before returning to the jeep.

As Bai Chen started the car, she asked, "What can you infer from the current information?"

Shang Jianyao immediately said, "Ninth Zhang probably didn't lie."

"Why do you say that?" Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "A lunatic can't lie."

What kind of theory is that? Jiang Baimian spat in exasperation and amusement.

Shang Jianyao added, "Father can get Ninth Zhang to kill his companion. That Superior Heartless might have a similar ability."

"Ninth Zhang couldn't accept the truth after he came to his senses and had a mental breakdown?" Long Yuehong said, finding this the most reasonable explanation.

"That's very possible." Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

The Old Task Force returned to River East during the discussion, but they were in no rush to go to Tarnan General Hospital. Instead, they headed to the Hunter's Guild first to see if anyone else had more information.

After entering the hall, they swept their gazes around and realized that a Ruin Hunter team had already accepted the investigation mission.

Jiang Baimian stopped a Hunter and asked, “Who took it on?”

How confident!

The Hunter glanced at her and unconsciously smiled. “It’s a foreign team. The leader has half a head that’s metal.”

“Handsome’s companion!” Shang Jianyao said happily.

Jiang Baimian nodded and also figured out who it was. This was likely the Ruin Hunter team at the watering spot, who had warned them of the Superior Heartless at Mount Chilar.

Yes, the survivors can not only choose Tarnan, but they can also escape to places different from Mount Chilar... Back then, that person said that several Ruin Hunter teams had suffered tragic casualties... From the looks of it, Ninth Zhang and the others aren’t the only ones who encountered the Superior Heartless. There are other Ruin Hunters as well.

These people might have more critical information... The team that warned us clearly encountered other survivors and got some details. That’s why they dared to take on this mission... Of course, we can’t rule out the possibility that they are extremely strong and confident... As Jiang Baimian’s thoughts raced, she came up with a plan.

She asked the confused passerby, “Where’s the foreign team?”

“They’ve already set off and entered the mountain,” the passerby replied truthfully.

After asking around, the Old Task Force couldn’t get any more information. They could only drive north of Riverfront Avenue and turn toward Tarnan General Hospital.

Outside Ninth Zhang’s ward was a robot guard in a dark-green uniform. It stood very straight.

Jiang Baimian explained her intentions and handed Genava’s handwritten permission slip to it.

The robot guard’s eyes lit up with a blue glow as it scanned the complicated symbols on the paper.

With a beep, it nodded and said, “Verified. No problem; you may enter.”

How convenient... Long Yuehong praised inwardly.

...

In the ward, Ninth Zhang—who was actually not that old—was curled up on the bed. He was wrapped in a thick white blanket and trembling non-stop. His eyes darted around randomly as if they were unfocused.

Although it was still winter, his performance was really too exaggerated.

Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes before she stopped at the door and closed it.

Shang Jianyao walked over and sat by the bed. Ninth Zhang—whose stubble was becoming increasingly obvious—quickly shrank into a corner, showing a clear stress response.

“There’s no need to be nervous. Look...” Shang Jianyao laughed. “You’re a human, and so am I. You’re a Ruin Hunter, and so am I. So...”

Since Ninth Zhang could still understand human language and knew how to answer questions, Jiang Baimian determined that Inference Clowning would have a certain effect.

As for what they could get from a crazy person after it worked, that was another matter.

After hearing Shang Jianyao’s words in a daze, Ninth Zhang gradually relaxed and stopped trembling so much.

He hesitated and asked excitedly, “Y-you’re Eldest Wang?”

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were first stunned before they realized who Eldest Wang was.

After figuring it out, they felt a sense of sorrow assault their hearts.

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao nodded slightly and asked bluntly, “Why did you kill them?”

“I...” Ninth Zhang paused, and his voice rose a little. “I didn’t, I didn’t! Eldest Wang, listen to my explanation. I-I was only killing monsters!”

As he spoke, he fell silent. Then, he laughed until tears flowed down his face. “Haha, I-I killed them! It’s me, it’s me!”

Shang Jianyao raised his right hand and pressed it down. “Apart from monsters, what else did you see?”

Ninth Zhang calmed down a little, and his eyes slowly glazed over as if he had fallen into a slow-motion replay of his memory.

Suddenly, he shook his messy black hair and blurted out, “Th-there’s a dragon!”

This voice echoed in the room as if it resonated with something.

Chapter 256: Clam Dragon Church

In the modified military-green jeep outside Tarnan General Hospital.

Jiang Baimian sat in the passenger seat and turned her body to ask Shang Jianyao and the others, “Any thoughts?”

Long Yuehong voiced his guess before Shang Jianyao could. “That Superior Heartless’s ability should be the creation of illusions. Therefore, Ninth Zhang treated his companions as monsters, treated them as dragons, and made a huge mistake. This resulted in a complete mental breakdown in the aftermath.”

After saying that, he realized that nobody added to this or refuted him. He felt a little nervous and took the initiative to ask, “What do you think?”

“From the information we have gathered so far, this is the most likely possibility.” Jiang Baimian gave an affirmative answer. She then smiled and praised, “Your analysis and judgment of matters are improving.”



Amidst Long Yuehong's joy and embarrassment, Shang Jianyao said, "Can smart robots also be affected by illusions?"

"Yes, the biggest problem now is why communication with the ten robot guards was lost," echoed Bai Chen.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "This depends on what the Superior Heartless's ability is. If it creates illusions by disturbing the senses, the smart robots will definitely not be deceived. Their sensory systems are completely different from humans. However, if the Superior Heartless directly distorts the environmental information and tampers with the corresponding signals to create illusions, the smart robots might not be spared."

She paused and muttered to herself, "But why did Ninth Zhang see a dragon? Under normal circumstances, people who have never come into contact with such information can't imagine a dragon of their own accord... Could it be that the Superior Heartless created a dragon? Why did it create a dragon?"

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up. "I know where there are dragons!"

"Where?" Jiang Baimian vaguely guessed the answer.

"In the Clam Dragon Church's cathedral," Shang Jianyao replied firmly.

"Have you been inside?" The person asking the question wasn't Jiang Baimian but Long Yuehong.

"No." Shang Jianyao shook his head and said boldly, "I guessed it."

As Long Yuehong's lips twitched, Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. "It's very normal to have a dragon image in places that worship the Clam Dragon. If Ninth Zhang is a believer of the Clam Dragon Church, the problem will be explained..."

At this point, Jiang Baimian suddenly exclaimed, "Which Kalendaria does the Clam Dragon Church worship?"

“November’s Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror,” answered Bai Chen—who was driving.

“What’s ‘His’ other title?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Bai Chen fell silent for a second before replying in unison with Long Yuehong. “Goddess of Illusions!”

Shang Jianyao nodded, indicating that it was so.

“That’s interesting,” Jiang Baimian said excitedly and solemnly. “That Superior Heartless’s ability is suspected to be illusion creation. Ninth Zhang also saw a dragon...”

Clap!

She clapped her hands and said to Bai Chen, “Let’s go to the Clam Dragon Church’s cathedral.”

Long Yuehong was a little nervous. “Isn’t it bad to go over directly?”

“Then, how do you want to go over?” Shang Jianyao asked very cooperatively.

“Find Mayor Geneva and bring a few robot guards with us.” Long Yuehong felt that this was the safest plan.

“Not bad. You know how to sing the opposite tune now that your wings have hardened!” The person who said this wasn’t Jiang Baimian but Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a second before she reprimanded angrily, “Where did you learn these lines? From a radio program?”

“No.” Shang Jianyao categorically denied it.

Jiang Baimian—who knew that he wouldn’t lie about such matters—was immediately a little curious. “Where did you learn that?”

Long Yuehong vaguely felt that something was amiss, but he didn't know what.

The next second, he saw Shang Jianyao laugh. "I learned it while watching Little Red's mother beat him up."

"F\*ck..." Long Yuehong cursed. This was the downside of having bad company grow up together with him. He had been wondering why those words sounded so familiar!

Jiang Baimian held in her laughter and didn't continue the topic. She simply explained, "It's easier to create a tense atmosphere by bringing the robot guards along; it will promote conflict. Our goal in going over is only to ask if Ninth Zhang is a believer of the Clam Dragon Church.

"Uh, we should be asking the Clam Dragon Church's bishop, I guess? What he thinks of the Superior Heartless in the southwest mountains, and what suggestions he has on how to see through the illusion? These aren't sensitive questions; there's no need to make a fuss."

"That's true." Long Yuehong was convinced.

Furthermore, there were surveillance cameras that could speak everywhere in broad daylight.

...

The Clam Dragon Church's Sanctuary was located at the northernmost end of Riverfront Avenue. It wasn't a cathedral but a pavilion with ancient Ashlandic vibes. It had white walls and black tiles.

The horizontal signboard above was: "Nanke Convent."

Behind the open, brown wooden door was an impluvium. On the other end of the impluvium was a hall pavilion with many cloud-like patterns.

In the hall pavilion, there were wooden beams above. Below them were rows of black recliners. Deep inside was a shrine, and inside the shrine were dragon symbols embedded with shattered mirrors.

At this moment, a few believers were sitting in chairs with their eyes closed and praying.

Before Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others could approach the female clergyman in front of the shrine, she rushed over.

This clergyman wasn't too old and looked to be in her late twenties. She wore a white robe with the Old World's classical style and had a hemp rope tied around her waist.

Her hair was black and bright, which draped down over her shoulders. Her facial features weren't considered beautiful, but she had an indescribable bearing.

The clergyman swept her gaze across Shang Jianyao and the others before smiling. "You guys are finally here."

"Huh?" Long Yuehong asked in confusion. He didn't remember when the Old Task Force had made an appointment with the Clam Dragon Church's clergymen for a visit.

Could it be... While he was confused, Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao. Could it be that this fellow made an appointment with someone after tasting the Clam Dragon Church's Holy Communion when he was out on his solo mission?

The female clergyman smiled reassuringly when she saw that Jiang Baimian and the others were a little stunned. "There's no need to be nervous; it's normal to be late. Our Church's Fantasy Era has many important and serious matters to attend to. There are also a few Dream Protectors who are late, and some have even missed the entire process. Alright, let's hold the induction ritual..."

"Wait a moment." Shang Jianyao interrupted her. "What's your Holy Communion?"

"Didn't I tell you?" the female clergyman asked in confusion. "Our Holy Communion is very simple; it's just small biscuits made by the Church with honey water."

"Honey water..." Shang Jianyao hesitated.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian finally couldn't help but ask, "Did you recognize the wrong people?"

The female clergyman was first stunned before she revealed an embarrassed expression. “This might be the case.”

She laughed dryly and took out a photo from the hidden pocket of her white robe. “Is this really not you? There’s exactly four!”

Jiang Baimian looked over and almost laughed in exasperation.

Apart from the quartet in the photo being Ashlandic and consisting of two men and two women, they didn’t resemble the Old Task Force at all.

In particular, the tallest man looked like a gorilla. How blind could she be to mistake Shang Jianyao for him?

Shang Jianyao actually discussed the matter of entering the Church with the other party without skipping a beat!

The female clergyman looked at the photo and then at the Old Task Force. After repeating it a few times, she finally confirmed that she had recognized the wrong people.

She revealed an embarrassed smile and bowed deeply. “Sorry, I’m bad with faces.”

With that said, she half-raised her body and slightly raised her hands as if she were saluting an existence in the void. “May you please the deity.”

What’s wrong with your religion? There are high-ranking members who love to be late, and there are preachers who are bad with faces... Isn’t this a little too ad-hoc? Long Yuehong had so many things that he was too embarrassed to say when he heard this.

As he scanned the area, he realized that not only did his team leader not mock him, but she also revealed a thoughtful expression.

Th-this is the price an Awakened has to pay? Long Yuehong came to a realization.

Jiang Baimian restrained her emotions and asked seriously, “How should I address you?”

“I’m Nanke Convent’s abbess, Zhou Yue. You can just call me Priestess Zhou.” The female clergyman introduced herself.

Perhaps recalling how unreliable her performance was, she laughed dryly. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious? Be more casual. Be casual.”

Before Jiang Baimian could respond, Shang Jianyao asked, “I have a question: Why are those Dream Protectors late?”

Abbess Zhou Yue seemed happy that she finally wasn’t the embarrassment. She quickly replied, “Some are lost!”

Upon seeing that the conversation had finally returned to ‘normal,’ Zhou Yue assumed a calm and gentle posture of a charlatan. “How may I help you?”

Jiang Baimian organized her words and inquired, “Abbess Zhou, have you heard about the Superior Heartless in the southwest mountains?”

“I heard. Why? Is there anything I can help you with?” Zhou Yue looked carefree.

Jiang Baimian asked, “Then, do you know the survivor, Zhang Jin? His nickname is Ninth Zhang.”

Zhou Yue thought for a moment. “No. Although I’m bad with faces, I remember names very clearly. He shouldn’t be a member of our Church unless he joined using a fake name.”

“That’s very unlikely,” Shang Jianyao commented in a detective’s tone.

Who ate a fried chicken wing under the name ‘Gu Zhiyong?’ Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted up as she cursed inwardly.

Although there weren’t many such people, there were definitely some!

Jiang Baimian then said to Abbess Zhou Yue, “So here’s the matter. When we asked Ninth Zhang, he said that he treated his companions as monsters after encountering the Superior Heartless and even saw a dragon.”

“Dragon...” Zhou Yue’s expression gradually turned serious.

Chapter 257: Illusion

After muttering to herself, Zhou Yue looked at Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others. As she pondered, she said, “If it’s simply a Superior Heartless having the ability to create illusions or Zhang Jin seeing a dragon during his mental breakdown, it wouldn’t be too surprising. However, it’s indeed a little coincidental when the two are combined.”

“There are other explanations. This isn’t conclusive evidence.” Shang Jianyao was just short of having a pipe in his mouth.

Zhou Yue wrote it off as him being usually like that, so she didn’t mind. She nodded slightly and said, “Indeed. It’s possible that Zhang Jin has heard our preaching; it’s also possible that the Superior Heartless had a certain level of interest in the Old World’s dragon culture before it contracted the Heartless disease. But no matter what, I have to report this matter and see what the Dream Protectors think.”

Jiang Baimian deliberated over her words and asked, “We don’t wish to come across as doubting your Church; we just find it a little coincidental.”

“No.” Abbess Zhou Yue flicked her sleeve and said rather coolly, “Even I have some doubts after hearing your description.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words and didn’t continue the topic. She then said, “Abbess Zhou, our main purpose in coming here is to seek consultation. If we enter the mountains to investigate the Superior Heartless, how should we deal with the illusions?”

Zhou Yue’s gaze swept across the four Old Task Force members’ faces, and she nodded slightly. “Illusions come under a large domain. I only have a relatively superficial understanding of it. If you don’t mind, I can give a simple explanation.”

As the Clam Dragon Church's highest-ranking clergyman in Tarnan and Nanke Convent's abbess, Zhou Yue couldn't claim that she didn't understand illusions.

This word permeated every angle of their teachings.

"We don't mind," Shang Jianyao immediately replied.

At a time like this, saying that you don't mind will give people the impression that you've considered whether you should mind. You—who value manners—should've just said 'please go ahead...' Jiang Baimian criticized silently, but she didn't say anything else.

Zhou Yue looked around and lowered her voice. "This world itself is an illusion; it's a dream dreamed up by the Kalendaria. Our Clam Dragon Church's main goal is to please the Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror, and make 'Her' retract this painful illusion and present the real and beautiful new world in front of us."

Whoa, as expected of the abbess. She's taking the opportunity to preach... Jiang Baimian found it funny, but she pretended to listen attentively.

At this point, Zhou Yue raised her body again and lifted her hands slightly to salute a certain existence in the void. "Clam Dragon, thou art supreme."

After bowing, she continued speaking. "Our daily routine is to deal with illusions. If I say that I don't know what an illusion is or how to deal with it, I will definitely be lying to you. However, you can also see that I'm still lingering and suffering in the dream."

Zhou Yue exhaled. "The most intrinsic problem with illusions is that they are ultimately illusions. Even if they are real in all aspects, there are definitely fake aspects. As for how many of them there are, you can crack the illusion once you figure it out. Of course, at the Kalendarium level, the dream 'He' created is indistinguishable from reality. It's not something humans can see through by themselves."

"Then, how do we find what's fake?" Jiang Baimian asked.

The more she listened, the more she felt that the Clam Dragon Church's philosophy was a little similar to that of the Eternal Time Sect. Zhou Yue and Daoist Galoran also had a certain level of commonality in terms of bearing and handling matters. However, one relied more on a deity, while



the other cared more about their own experience and insights into the Dao. This resulted in many differences.

The most typical point was that Zhou Yue's performance always gave off the feeling that it was all a dream, so there was no need to be so serious. Galoran favored 'following one's fate' and 'going with the natural flow.'

Zhou Yue smiled. "I need a volunteer."

Just as she said that, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen looked at Long Yuehong at the same time.

"..." Long Yuehong's expression stiffened for two seconds.

Since the group had already decided, he could only choose to accept it. He took a step forward and said, "I'll do it."

Regardless of what it was, he had to pretend that he had volunteered.

Zhou Yue nodded and pointed at one of the black armchairs in the corner at the back. "Touch it."

That simple? Long Yuehong suspiciously approached, bent down, and carefully stretched out his palm.

After coming into contact with the chair, he felt the texture of the wood, the solidity, and the unevenness of the surface.

"How was it?" Zhou Yue asked with a smile. When she smiled, her eyes narrowed into lines.

"There's nothing wrong." Long Yuehong truthfully expressed his feelings.

"Have a seat then." Zhou Yue made another request.

Long Yuehong wondered how 'simple' it was again. He then turned around and slowly sat down.

Just as he was about to touch the chair, there was nothing below.

Although he was mentally prepared, he still couldn't control the momentum that came from sitting down, and he fell to the ground with a thud.

During this process, he saw himself sink into the black chair, but he didn't feel anything else. When he hurriedly stood up and looked back, the black chair was intact.

"Th-this is an illusion?" he exclaimed.

Before sitting down, he felt that it was real from every angle.

Zhou Yue smiled and nodded. "Yes. Therefore, as you can see, no matter how real it looks, it can't replace real things. The real can't be fake, and the fake can't be real."

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully replied, "To determine if it's an illusion, we have to start with the actual effects and not the feedback from our senses?"

"This is an effective method, but it's not a panacea to the question," Zhou Yue said very cautiously.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao raised an idea. "If the four of us enter the mountain hand in hand, we won't have to worry about being affected by hallucinations and treating our companions as monsters?"

Jiang Baimian understood what he meant: The ones holding hands were their companions.

This should be effective, but it feels strange imagining that scene... Jiang Baimian imagined Shang Jianyao's description of the situation and felt like it was a game that children played.

Zhou Yue tersely acknowledged his words. "In theory, yes. However, won't the two in the middle lose their combat strength?"

Both hands were held.

“I can fire with my foot.” Shang Jianyao gave a solution.

Zhou Yue was momentarily at a loss for a response. After some thought, she said, “This isn’t completely safe.”

Upon seeing that Long Yuehong and the others were confused, she further explained, “This doesn’t guarantee that the person you’re holding won’t suddenly ‘disappear.’”

The meaning of ‘disappearing’ in her words was to disappear from one’s senses, not to disappear from reality. When one couldn’t see a person, hear their voice, or obtain a sense of touch from their hand, it was equivalent to them ‘disappearing.’

Shang Jianyao had already expected this. He looked at Long Yuehong and confidently said, “I’ll pinch him the moment he disappears.”

“...” There was only one thought echoing in Long Yuehong’s mind. Why pinch me?

He then came to a realization and found a flaw. “Even if the person being pinched screams in pain, you shouldn’t be able to hear them. You won’t feel anything when you pinch them either. No...”

As he spoke, Long Yuehong suddenly understood Shang Jianyao’s true meaning.

Even though his companion might appear to have disappeared, Shang Jianyao’s hand couldn’t sink too deep when pinching down because something real was in the way.

“That’s a solution.” Abbess Zhou Yue agreed. She then added, “This depends on which domain the Superior Heartless is good at. He might be able to make you make mistakes in your judgment of distance.”

“I see...” Jiang Baimian realized that she had too little understanding of hallucinations.

After conversing for a while, she politely bade farewell on behalf of the Old Task Force.

After Zhou Yue—who was wearing a white robe with a hemp rope tied around her waist—watched them leave, she turned around, faced the shrine with the dragon symbol, and muttered to herself, “What a strange matter...”

Whoosh!

A gust of wind blew across the impluvium and entered the hall.

The rows of black chairs and a few praying believers beside Zhou Yue instantly vanished.

This place became empty. Apart from the shrines, wooden beams, pillars, and abbess, there were only a few dark-blue mats.

...

The moment Shang Jianyao sat down in the jeep outside, he said, “Those people are fake.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong look over in surprise, he added, “There was no human consciousness.”

“There’s no corresponding electric signal either.” Jiang Baimian nodded and smiled. “Abbess Zhou’s hallucination abilities are still relatively crude.”

She then said, “From this, we can infer that her hallucinations were created with her own cognition, not by triggering our memories and making us hallucinate.”

If the source of the hallucination was themselves, Jiang Baimian would definitely ‘sense’ an electric signal. Shang Jianyao would also ‘discover’ human consciousness.

Long Yuehong quickly recalled what had happened and couldn’t believe that the believers with closed eyes were hallucinations.

But since his team leader and Shang Jianyao were so certain, he didn’t doubt them. He couldn’t help but sigh. “As expected of the Clam Dragon Church...”

Most of the people and objects in the convent were fake and illusory.

Upon seeing Bai Chen start the jeep, Long Yuehong casually asked, “Where are we going next? Do we enter the mountains?”

Long Yuehong believed that he now had a certain level of understanding regarding illusions.

Jiang Baimian immediately laughed. “What for? Play a monster-killing game with the Ruin Hunter team from before?”

Upon seeing that Long Yuehong was a little dazed, Shang Jianyao helped ‘explain.’ “You can pew pew at them, and they can also pew pew at you.”

“That’s true...” Long Yuehong came to a realization.

When the two teams met in the mountains and were affected by the hallucinations, they would definitely treat the people opposite them as monsters.

In such a situation, it was impossible not to respond. What if it were a real monster?

Jiang Baimian then exhaled. “Let’s talk about it when they return. Even if we want to enter the mountains, we have to ensure that we’re the only team entering.”

Chapter 258: Bar

In the evening, the idle Old Task Force decided to visit Tarnan’s bar.

On the one hand, they wanted to see if they could obtain any information. On the other hand, they didn’t want to eat the canned food, biscuits, and energy bars that they had with them.

As long as there was normal food in the bar, they were willing to pay a premium. After all, the many latest portable computers in the car were practically free. It was equivalent to exchanging for them using a small amount of ammunition.

If they couldn’t even get any food from the bar, they could still choose canned food, biscuits, and energy bars of other flavors. In short, they were tired of eating them.

There were two bars in Tarnan. Their entrances were diagonally opposite each other and were very close to each other.

Shang Jianyao stood between them and looked around before asking Long Yuehong, “Which one?”

Although Long Yuehong had passed by this area a few times, he had never observed it carefully. Upon hearing this, he swept his gaze between the two signboards—Wild Pigeon and Green Grapes. “Let’s go to Green Grapes. It feels pretty fresh.”

“Alright, let’s go to Wild Pigeon then!” said Shang Jianyao as if a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

“You’re bullying Little Red again!” Jiang Baimian scolded jokingly. Just as Long Yuehong was feeling consoled, she tersely grunted. “I choose Wild Pigeon. This name stirs up my gastric juices.”

The first time they went out for training, apart from catching rabbits, the Old Task Force had also caught birds and roasted them for food.

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian’s words, Long Yuehong immediately recalled his previous experience and salivated. “Alright.”

Just as he said that, he heard Shang Jianyao mutter, “There’s a way when it comes to bullying...”

Before Shang Jianyao could finish speaking, Jiang Baimian placed her left hand on his shoulder and smiled. “Go on in.”

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao readily agreed.

Long Yuehong speechlessly followed behind the team.

Wild Pigeon’s door had two levels. One was open, and the other only existed in the midsection level. It was brownish-yellow and made of pure wood.

After passing through the half-open door, the scene inside reflected in Jiang Baimian’s eyes.

In the middle was the dance floor. Around it were round tables and chairs. At this moment, there was no music playing. Many people were sitting together, playing cards, dice, and mahjong.

After crossing the dance floor and walking to the bar counter, they saw billiards tables, ping pong tables, and other entertainment facilities on both sides.

As a bar, apart from not having much alcohol, Wild Pigeon was pretty well equipped with everything else.

Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. "It's really like what Little White said. This is more like the Rec Center."

Shang Jianyao then hummed a song. "You're my..."

"Stop!" Jiang Baimian stopped him. "Let's first ask if the Ruin Hunter team has returned."

She was referring to the team that had entered the mountains to investigate the Superior Heartless.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian's instructions, Shang Jianyao walked straight to a table of people playing cards. He then patted a young man—who had shaved both his sideburns—and inquired like he were a good old pal. "How's it going? Did you win?"

The young man turned his head and realized that it was an unfamiliar face. However, the other party appeared very enthusiastic as if they were very familiar with each other. He couldn't figure out if he had met him before.

As the question wasn't sensitive, he casually replied, "Don't mention it. I've almost lost everything from my previous discovery."

"All the best." Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and twitched his body, performing a scolding dance. "May the divine aura bathe you."

Tarnan had many Furnace Church believers, so the card players weren't surprised.

Shang Jianyao casually asked, "Have the hunters who entered the mountain returned?"

“Nope.” The young man shook his head. “I guess something bad happened to them.”

Shang Jianyao—who had obtained an answer—nodded. He watched the card game for another minute or two before slowly walking back to Jiang Baimian and the others.

At this moment, one of the gamblers at the table asked the young man—who had been patted on the shoulder by Shang Jianyao, “Shava, who is he? Why don’t I know him?”

The young man named Shava thought for a few seconds and said, “I don’t know him either...”

“Aren’t you very familiar with him?” The other gamblers were surprised.

The two of them were like sworn brothers that had already made the oath of brotherhood.

Shava was confused and suspected his memory again. However, they quickly threw this matter to the back of their minds in the face of their card game.

As they crossed the dance floor and walked to the bar counter, Jiang Baimian swept her gaze around and suddenly asked Long Yuehong, “Do those people know you? Why do they look like they want to flay you?”

Long Yuehong looked over according to Jiang Baimian’s indications and realized that three men at a table were staring at him with resentment and hatred.

“Uh, didn’t I mention it? I beat up a few locals who tried to scam me.” This was the result of Long Yuehong’s first solo operation, so it was still fresh in his mind.

“They look quite pissed.” Shang Jianyao made a sarcastic remark; he looked like he was egging Long Yuehong on to fight again.

“It’s normal for them to be pissed. After all, they aren’t coming over to provoke me.” Long Yuehong had always been a nice guy.

Shang Jianyao immediately found a reason. “They looked at you and glared at you!”



As the two of them chatted, the three people—who had been beaten—originally thought that there were many neighbors here and many mahjong friends. They wondered if they should take the opportunity to get back at Long Yuehong. But after seeing Shang Jianyao's height, looks, and his female companion, they gave up on the idea.

It was obvious that they weren't people to be trifled with.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian and the others had already walked to the bar counter and saw the bartender in a daze.

There was no alcohol, nor was there anyone drinking. This meant that he didn't have to do much.

"Where's your boss?" Jiang Baimian knocked on the bar counter.

The bartender looked up at her, and his expression instantly changed. "I am. Think about it; who would hire an assistant who has nothing to do?"

The bartender was in his thirties and wore a thick, navy-blue cotton coat. His hair was combed in a 7-3 split, and there were signs of the elements on his face.

"How should I address you?" Shang Jianyao asked politely on Jiang Baimian's behalf.

"Just call me Ah Yi, Cai Yi," said the bar owner with a smile. "How may I help you?"

"Is there any normal food?" Jiang Baimian didn't hide her needs.

Cai Yi shook his head. "I hired two helpers to farm—one to raise chickens and one to raise pigs. It barely suffices for a large family. How can there be excess?"

At this point, he smiled. "Are you Ruin Hunters? I have regular combat competitions here. Whoever wins the championship will receive an additional sumptuous dinner apart from the reward they deserve. It's a normal meal."

Shang Jianyao shook his head before Jiang Baimian could. “This is too troublesome. I have a simpler solution.”

“What solution?” Cai Yi was a little curious.

Shang Jianyao smiled brightly and said, “Kidnap you and get your family to redeem you with a bag of flour, a bag of rice, a pig, four chickens, and a basket of cabbage.”

Cai Yi instinctively touched his waist and smiled. “There are two problems with this idea. First, can you defeat the robot guards? Second, can you capture me?”

He took the opportunity to brag. “Back in my day, I was also an Intermediate Hunter. If not for the fact that I married a local lady and used my savings to open this bar—where I gathered all the means of entertainment in the Ashlands—I might’ve already become a Senior Hunter. Which level are you at?”

“Official.” Jiang Baimian wasn’t embarrassed at all.

Cai Yi didn’t continue the topic and asked, “What do you want to eat or play?”

Shang Jianyao took out a portable computer from his tactical backpack and said with a pained expression, “You can decide for us.”

Jiang Baimian quickly added, “It’s best if it’s a relatively rare flavor. We’ll pack the excess to go. We’ll play billiards.”

Cai Yi took the portable computer and smiled. “You guys sure have your means. No problem; I don’t have much here except for a variety of canned food.”

After completing the transaction, Long Yuehong asked curiously, “Where do you raise livestock? I didn’t see any.”

Cai Yi smiled. “In the houses in no man’s land, everyone occupies their own buildings. After all, the most worthless thing in Tarnan is houses.”

No man's land referred to the uninhabited area.

Long Yuehong sighed when he thought about how he had to rack his brains and pay an additional price to ensure that his family lived better in Pangu Biology.

Just as the Old Task Force walked to the billiard tables, Cai Yi suddenly stood up and looked at the bar entrance solemnly.

A group of people had entered. There were a total of 14 of them, and the leader had blond hair and wore a bull-horned helmet.

They were the Mountain Fox bandits.

Cai Yi went forward and smiled. "Yo, you haven't left yet?"

Although he was in Tarnan and wasn't worried that he would be robbed by the Mountain Fox bandits, such a large group of people was enough to mess up the bar without running afoul of the regulations. Therefore, he had to be careful.

Having the numbers was always terrifying.

The Mountain Fox bandit leader, Panania, smiled and said, "You have to let our brothers vent their pent-up feelings first."

He then cast his gaze at the stairwell of the bar. There were a few old sofas nearby, and many women of different races sat there.

A place like a bar was often associated with such businesses.

"No problem. Payment makes you a customer," said Cai Yi with a smile.

Panania was just about to take the lead in choosing when his sleeve was suddenly tugged by a subordinate.

“Boss, over there...” The subordinate’s tone was abnormally solemn.

Panania looked over and saw the beautiful woman, the tall young man, the powerhouse who had almost destroyed his band of bandits, and their inconspicuous companion.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others were smiling as they looked over.

The corners of Panania’s mouth twitched as he turned his head to Cai Yi and said, “My stomach suddenly doesn’t feel well. Let’s talk another time.”

With that said, he immediately turned around and prepared to lead the bandits to the opposite bar.

At this moment, he saw Shang Jianyao still staring at them from the corner of his eye.

Phew. Panania exhaled and waved his right hand. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” Shang Jianyao replied in satisfaction.

Their interaction stunned the bar owner, Cai Yi.

Just as the Mountain Fox bandits were about to reach the door, a strong wind suddenly blew outside. The wind produced howling sounds that made one feel a little uneasy.

Is there such a strong wind on this side of the mountain? Jiang Baimian frowned in confusion.

Amidst the strong winds, a loud knocking sound suddenly came from the door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Chapter 259: Night

Amidst the gale, the sudden knocking echoed in Wild Pigeon. It made the people playing cards, playing mahjong, bargaining, and dancing fall silent.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao smiled and commented, “How polite.”

Long Yuehong was first stunned before he realized what Shang Jianyao meant.

The door to Wild Pigeon wasn't closed at all. Two wooden panels that allowed free movement blocked the entrance. They could be opened with a push, so there was no need to knock.

“It's a little strange...” Jiang Baimian echoed.

At the door, the Mountain Fox bandit leader—Panania—was also a little nervous. However, there was an even more ferocious and terrifying existence in the bar. Therefore, he finally signaled one of his subordinates to push open the wooden partition that only existed in the middle of the doorframe.

On the street outside, the light from the street lamps illuminated a portion of the area. A black figure flashed from within and entered the area ruled by night.

Panania heaved a sigh of relief and laughed. “Who's the brat causing trouble?”

Amidst his laughter, he led his 13 subordinates out of Wild Pigeon. The two wooden panes bounced back and swayed a few times before gradually coming to a stop.

Upon seeing that there was nothing else, the card players began to push out the chips in front of them. The mahjong players touched the tiles in their hands, and the bargainers gradually reached a consensus. The dancers asked the bar owner, Cai Yi, if the dance floor would be open tonight because of the strong wind and sleet.

Jiang Baimian also retracted her gaze and cast it at the billiard table beside her.

Shang Jianyao had already set up the billiards and pulled out a wooden pole. He chalked the cue, leaned down, and assumed an abnormally professional posture.

Handsome!

“Yo, you're pretty good at it,” Jiang Baimian commented with a smile.

The next second, Shang Jianyao swung his cue and struck the white ball.

With a bang, the white ball flew up and smashed into the pile of red balls.

The red balls scattered, some jumping and some rolling. One of them slipped into the hole.

Jiang Baimian watched with a slightly dazed expression and couldn't help but ask, "You've never played before?"

"I've only seen them play," Shang Jianyao replied truthfully.

In Pangu Biology, not every Rec Center had a billiard table. The Rec Center on the 350th floor—where the university was located—had one, but people were often queuing for it. It was impossible to get a table without some ability.

"What about you?" Jiang Baimian turned to look at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong shook his head. "I've only seen others play."

"Ha, I'll teach you. With your eyesight, wrist strength, and physical control, it's very easy to master." Jiang Baimian immediately felt pumped.

She then looked at Bai Chen. "Little White, do you know how to play?" Jiang Baimian remembered that Bai Chen was no stranger to bars, dance halls, and nightclubs in Weed City. Bai Chen clearly roamed these places from time to time in search of opportunities.

In such places, there were special billiard rooms.

"Yes," Bai Chen replied concisely.

"Then, let's play a round and give them a demonstration." Jiang Baimian took out a cue stick and threw it to Bai Chen.

As the two ladies played billiards, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong watched as they listened to their explanations of the techniques and rules.

In this round, Jiang Baimian won against Bai Chen by relying on her wide-open attacks and precise grasp of her trajectories and strength.

“You’re quite an Attrition Queen,” Jiang Baimian praised with a smile. She meant that Bai Chen was very good at defense and always placed the ball in a very uncomfortable and awkward position.

This also meant that this round had entered a long period of attrition. The bar owner, Cai Yi, had already finished his work and had prepared the first serving of food—spam.

Cai Yi took out the spam inside and fried it in an air fryer for eight minutes, making both sides a little crispy. The grease also seeped out.

This made the spam’s fragrance become increasingly obvious. Even the four Old Task Force members—who were sick of eating canned food—had their appetites whet when they took a sniff of the fragrance.

They held their chopsticks, and each took a piece. After taking a bite, they found it much more delicious than normal.

It had the fragrance of fried food, but it was also devoid of the cloyed taste of meat.

“Not bad,” Jiang Baimian praised sincerely after finishing a piece.

Shang Jianyao—who was eating the second piece—nodded in agreement and echoed, “Our culinary methods... are... lacking... in development...”

Just like that, they ate the food delivered from time to time and played billiards happily.

After finishing dinner, Jiang Baimian decided not to give Shang Jianyao a chance to dance because the wind outside was still strong. She led the three Old Task Force members away from Wild Pigeon with the canned food that had been exchanged for the portable computer’s remaining value.

Shang Jianyao looked back with every step and reluctantly stepped out the door. He then walked to the street and commented, “The wind isn’t that strong either...”

“Ah, what did you say?” Jiang Baimian touched her ear.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen also didn’t hear Shang Jianyao’s words because the wind was too strong.

The wind could send a person flying, much less his voice.

They put their hands in their pockets and slightly shrunk their bodies as they walked toward Serene Dream.

The light from the street lamps and the darkness of the night alternated. The stall owners on both sides had already returned home, and the streets were silent.

It was so quiet that Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine.

After walking for a while, Jiang Baimian—who had been observing the surroundings—suddenly had her gaze freeze.

She saw a sign diagonally ahead. On the sign were many small, glowing light bulbs that formed five words: “Wild Pigeon Bar.”

“This...” Jiang Baimian stopped.

“These are the machinations of fate.” Shang Jianyao used a magnetic male voice to deliver a ‘voice-over’ while the wind was less intense.

“Fate my ass!” Jiang Baimian replied and said with a serious expression, “It seems like there’s big trouble.”

Jiang Baimian had never been lost ever since she underwent an arm transplant and obtained an auxiliary chip! Most importantly, they didn’t sense anything abnormal prior to this.



Long Yuehong was already tense, and he was highly vigilant.

Shang Jianyao seriously explained to Jiang Baimian, “This academic term for this phenomena is Ghosts Pounding the Wall.”

Hiss... Long Yuehong immediately felt a chill run down his spine.

“Maybe we haven’t left and were just circling the area outside.” Bai Chen voiced her guess. Her expression was a little solemn.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “There’s no need to be nervous. We’ll deal with whatever comes our way. Let’s go in and see if there are any changes. We’ll see if the problem lies inside, outside, or with ourselves.”

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao had already walked to Wild Pigeon’s entrance and slammed the two wooden partitions.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

At this moment, Jiang Baimian’s first reaction wasn’t that this fellow was bold, but that she came up with an idea that scared herself. Could the knocking we heard in the bar be created by the current Shang Jianyao?

This idea was too ridiculous and involved time, which humans had yet to understand. Jiang Baimian quickly rejected it. She didn’t voice out such a guess because she knew that it would definitely scare Little Red and make him overly tense.

This wasn’t a good state.

The wooden partition quickly opened, and the bar owner, Cai Yi, appeared in front of the Old Task Force.

Phew... Jiang Baimian secretly heaved a sigh of relief and was penitent over her thoughts.

She remembered that the person who had opened the door after the knocking was a member of the Mountain Fox bandits.

From the looks of it, it's just a simple case of Ghosts Pounding the Wall. Pui! Why did I say that? Ghosts Pounding the Wall... An illusion in the area of distance? Jiang Baimian had a vague guess.

"Why are you guys back? Did you leave something behind?" Cai Yi asked in confusion.

The wind outside became stronger again, making it difficult to hear what he said.

"Let's go in first." Jiang Baimian pointed inside.

Without waiting for Cai Yi's response, Shang Jianyao had already turned his body and 'slipped' into the bar from the other party's side.

There's a huge gap... Long Yuehong couldn't help but criticize inwardly. He also didn't feel so tense anymore; he passed by Cai Yi normally and walked into Wild Pigeon.

The third was Bai Chen. Jiang Baimian was in charge of the rear.

After everyone was in place, Jiang Baimian looked at the wooden partition that gradually stopped moving and asked Cai Yi, "How long were we gone?"

She had a rough estimate of the time and wanted to match it with Cai Yi. This was both a test and a verification.

"Just three to four minutes." Cai Yi looked back at the clock near the bar counter.

"Then, there's no problem." Jiang Baimian confirmed that her judgment of time hadn't been messed up.

Just as she said that, a black figure suddenly flew in from above the wooden partitions and slammed to the ground.

Bang!

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and the others looked over at the same time and realized that it was a mangled corpse.

His eyes were wide open, frozen with extreme horror. His clothes were tattered, and one of his arms was missing. There were obvious bite marks on his neck.

This was like a person who had encountered a starving man-eating beast.

...

Nanke Convent.

Zhou Yue—who was draped in black hair and a white robe with a hemp rope—was sitting cross-legged on a mat. She faced the dragon symbols in the shrine and read the Old World sutras that the Church had organized for reading. These were all related to hallucinations.

Around her, a few Dream Guides and many Dream Bewilders were either reading the sutras or praying attentively. No one made a sound.

After a while, a Dream Guide stood up and walked in front of Zhou Yue to consult her on some classic interpretations.

Zhou Yue calmly replied.

Suddenly, a blurry light flashed across the surface of the shattered mirrors that formed the dragon symbol in the shrine.

Zhou Yue's heart palpitated as she subconsciously looked up.

Her gaze froze.

Around her, most of the figures—including the Dream Guide—gradually disappeared. Only five people really existed.

...

In Serene Dream, the lady boss—Aynor—was huddled at the front desk in a gorgeous dress. She was using three electronic devices simultaneously.

In front of her was the computer she originally had—it was playing a drama serial from the Old World. She held a palm-sized machine with lines of words on it. On her right was the latest portable computer that Shang Jianyao and the others had used for payment. At this moment, some patterns, words, and data were running.

While engrossed, Aynor suddenly looked up, straightened her body, and looked at the door.

An eerie gust of wind blew in.

The electric lights in the hotel whirred and dimmed strangely, and black figures vaguely appeared outside the window.

Chapter 260: Anomaly

Aynor's body immediately stiffened. She then retracted her head like an ostrich. "It's fake. It's definitely fake..." she muttered as she moved the mouse and repeatedly clicked on her latest portable computer to change the game's default settings.

A cold, eerie wind tore through the hotel lobby, and the electric lights above became increasingly dim. It felt like they would go out at any moment.

"It's fake. How can there really be ghosts..." Aynor constantly consoled herself, but she refused to make a response. She continued to focus on the three electronic devices.

Aynor acted as if nothing had happened if she could indulge in one thing and forget the changes around her.

Amidst the dim and flickering light, black shadows appeared on the hotel lobby's walls.

They contorted and moved, but they didn't have a corresponding corporeal entity as if they had been created out of thin air.

Aynor shrank even more. She forced herself to focus on the drama serial, novel, and game.

Suddenly, she felt a cool breeze blow at the back of her neck, making her hair stand on end.

Aynor was just short of standing up and running out of the hotel with a scream. However, she eventually 'controlled' herself and made a choice that normal people wouldn't have.

She remained huddled there, 'focused' on watching the episode, playing the game, and reading the novel, even though she could already sense someone loitering behind her and the cold air that kept blowing at her neck.

"Hallucination... It's all an illusion..." Aynor cheered herself on as she forced herself to forget the changes in reality.

...

Inside the Wild Pigeon bar, the mangled corpse brought about quite a commotion.

Although most of the customers here were Ruin Hunters and the city ruins in the surrounding area had been explored over the years because Tarnan was too well protected by Machine Paradise, there weren't too many latent dangers. Many of them had never seen real killings or such terrifying corpses.

Regarding this point, they were worlds apart from Redstone Collection's townsfolk.

For a moment, chaos spread like a plague. The people playing cards, the people playing mahjong, the people bargaining, and the people waiting to dance stood up. Then, they either huddled in a corner or gathered together. They anxiously discussed what had happened, or they mustered their courage. Many people walked to the door in groups and sized up the incomplete corpse.

The bar owner—Cai Yi's identity as an Intermediate Hunter didn't slowly build up from various small missions and accumulations of time. After a brief panic, he calmed down and carefully examined the corpse in front of him.

A few seconds later, he said in a deep voice, "It's a Mountain Fox bandit."

He recognized the deceased.

At the same time, Jiang Baimian confirmed his judgment.

"The Mountain Fox bandits were attacked after they left?" she asked herself. "That's true; they only left after the wind started and a series of thuds sounded."

From the looks of it, the problem had started since then.

Cai Yi retracted his gaze from the corpse and looked at the Ruin Hunter team in front of him. "Why are you back? Did you sense danger?"

He felt that the hunter team had discovered something abnormal and made a prompt decision to return the way they came. Therefore, they successfully avoided the fate of repeating the Mountain Fox bandits' mistakes.

"We found ourselves back here as we walked," Shang Jianyao replied quickly. He then mimicked Aynor's creepy tone. "I suspect that we encountered Ghosts Pounding the Wall."

The people in the bar stiffened when they heard that. Some people couldn't help but approach the door, wanting to escape and find the robot guards.

Jiang Baimian glanced at them and reminded them, "If you blindly go out now, you might very well end up like him."

She pointed at the corpse on the ground; then, she voiced her judgment. "I suspect that the Superior Heartless from the southwest mountains has come to Tarnan. The wind outside, the knocking just now, and our experience of getting lost are all illusions."

Not only did this guess not calm the people in the bar, but it also made them nervous.

Previously, a total of ten robot guards had disappeared in a bid to eliminate the Superior Heartless! This meant that the robot guards weren't insurance when facing such a terrifying enemy!

In contrast, nobody had encountered a ghost before. Who knew if the robot guards would be affected by a ghost? In any case, they habitually believed that robots weren't afraid of ghosts.

Cai Yi looked up at the ceiling and tried his best to calm down. "Is this corpse also an illusion?"

His wife and children were upstairs. He had to determine the situation as soon as possible and respond.

"Let me confirm it." Just as Jiang Baimian said that, Shang Jianyao had already taken her place. He walked to the corpse and squatted down.

He took out rubber gloves and wore them before pressing his hands on the corpse. He then used this as a pivot and did an inverted stand.

Inverted stand... The bar owner, Cai Yi, was a little dumbfounded.

The nervous customers were the same. What kind of confirmation method is this? Could it be that allowing blood to flow into the brain effectively increases intelligence?

Upon seeing that the corpse's surface had only caved in and that Shang Jianyao didn't sink in, Bai Chen turned her head to Jiang Baimian and said, "It's real."

At some point in time, she had already drawn her guns. She had an Ice Moss in one hand and a United 202 in the other.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. As she watched Shang Jianyao stand up, she looked at the bar owner, Cai Yi. "Do you have a grenade launcher here? I plan on releasing a flare outside to see if the robot guards will react."

In any case, robots were definitely better at seeing through illusions than humans. At the same time, Jiang Baimian also wanted to inform the Clam Dragon Church's Nanke Convent.

In this regard, she felt that the unreliable abbess, Zhou Yue, might be more reliable than Li Zhe of the Furnace Church and Mike of the Glorious Scale.

Professional matters were best left to the professionals.

Cai Yi was stunned for a moment. “Why use a flare? We can just give the robot guards a call. Are you afraid of interference?”

Uh... Jiang Baimian realized that she was used to the ecological environment in Weed City, Redstone Collection, Moat Town, and other parts of the Ashlands. For a moment, she couldn't get used to Tarnan and forgot that not only was there a wireless base station here, but almost everyone who lived here had a telephone line.

In this regard, Tarnan was more technologically advanced than Pangu Biology.

Jiang Baimian quickly came to her senses and asked, “Can you call Nanke Convent's Abbess Zhou?”

Cai Yi nodded. “I have a phone book.”

“Thank you,” Jiang Baimian replied politely before turning to look at Shang Jianyao.

The two of them exchanged looks and shook their heads.

Jiang Baimian wasn't sure if Shang Jianyao had the same thought as her. In any case, she wanted to say: This is the most populated street in Tarnan. There are people everywhere, so I couldn't find the Superior Heartless based on the electric signals.

From this starting point, there should be a similar problem with perceiving human consciousnesses.

“Is anyone still on the street?” Jiang Baimian asked in confirmation.

Shang Jianyao replied truthfully, “Several.”



“Yes.” Jiang Baimian indicated that this was her answer as well.

Cai Yi—who couldn’t understand their conversation—shook his head indiscernibly. “I’ll make the call.”

Just as he said that, a cold wind blew in from above the two wooden panels, bringing a gloomy feeling with it.

The next second, the chandelier and wall lamps in the bar dimmed as if something had happened to the electricity.

Long Yuehong’s heart tightened. He looked up, and his pupils suddenly dilated.

Everyone in the bar—including the three people he had previously beaten—hunched slightly. Their eyes became abnormally turbid and bloodshot.

Heartless! They had all become Heartless!

Long Yuehong suddenly raised his gun-wielding hands.

At the same time, he heard his team leader warn the bar owner, Cai Yi. “Be careful.”

Cai Yi slowly turned around. His eyes protruded, also turbid.

Long Yuehong almost couldn’t control his reflexes and almost pulled the trigger.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao’s voice sounded happy. “If we turn off the lights and can’t see them, will everything be fine?”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong glanced over from the corner of his eye and realized that Shang Jianyao was already standing beside the power switch at some point in time.

...

Nanke Convent.

Zhou Yue left the futon with the strength of her feet and waist and stood up. She patted her white robe and said to the Dream Guide beside her, “Phelps, I’m going out for a while. Bring me my Eight Trigrams Mirror.”

The Dream Guide had black hair and blue eyes. He was clearly mixed-blood.

He first replied, “Yes, Abbess.”

He then added, a little aggrieved, “Abbess, I’m Zhen Lian.”

“...Zhen Lian. Yes, Zhen Lian.” Zhou Yue forced a smile. “Apart from the Eight Trigrams Mirror, I also need talisman water and a sack. Oh right, a flashlight as well.”

This strange combination surprised Zhen Lian and the others, but it wasn’t their place to ask. After all, the abbess looked a little anxious.