

## **Ad Infinitum 271**

Chapter 271: Real and Fake

This howl didn't affect the Superior Heartless. Long Yuehong wasn't aware of anything else, but he knew that his face was blank.

Is this fellow trying to communicate with the target in beast language? But the problem is that you don't know the language either!

On the other side, the corners of Jiang Baimian's mouth stiffened for a few seconds before she recovered.

It had to be said that Shang Jianyao had exceeded her expectations again. Of course, Shang Jianyao's actions were logical in a certain sense.

Being beasts didn't mean that they were completely unintelligent and only had instincts. They could also use roars, actions, and the postures of their tails to communicate with similar creatures to a certain extent.

Cooperation was an objective phenomenon among many beasts.

If even beasts were like this, there was no need to mention humans who had contracted the Heartless disease and suffered a degeneration in their intelligence.

Based on this inference, he could indeed attempt to communicate with Heartless in a way that they could understand to reach the criteria for Inference Clowning to work.

The problem was that no human scholar had studied how Heartless communicated or cooperated in groups to figure out what their different roars and body language meant.

Furthermore, this was a race that had existed for a very short period of time. It was still a question if they had developed their own forms of communication.

In Swamp Ruin 1, Jiang Baimian had noticed a similar situation, but it was far from normal. It was a special case formed under Xiaochong's influence, and it couldn't be spread.

In addition, it was unlikely for the Superior Heartless to spontaneously produce its own beast language and body language if it kept acting alone after contracting the disease.

In other words, regardless of whether Shang Jianyao had grasped the Heartless language, the other party definitely couldn't understand his roar.

It's useless... Jiang Baimian was just about to say that when Shang Jianyao changed his words.

"Anyone who comes clean gets treated with leniency; anyone who holds back the truth gets treated harshly. Abandon your fantasies and accept reality." He held the loudspeaker and shouted in different directions, but no creature came out to 'surrender' themselves.

After thinking about it for a while, or perhaps he had his fair share of fun, Shang Jianyao directed his voice at the mountain path again with the loudspeaker, communicating with the target he had in mind.

"Look, you are a man, and so am I. You have a persistence that you can't let go of, and so do I. So..." As his voice echoed, the mountain range fell silent.

Shang Jianyao constantly changed the areas he could exert his influence on. He repeated it over and over again, but he didn't receive a response.

"It seems like it won't work..." Jiang Baimian exhaled.

"You can't blindly believe that." Shang Jianyao familiarly used the Vigilance Church's mantra before grafting the Clam Dragon Church's philosophy. "This might just be an illusion."

"If it's an illusion, it means that it's useless. Otherwise, we would've already escaped the illusion." In this regard, Jiang Baimian was still meticulous and logical.

"I mean, what I just did and said are just your hallucinations. Actually, I didn't even move." Shang Jianyao was very argumentative.

Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered with him. She discussed the matter with Long Yuehong and Bai Chen and considered the feasibility of other plans.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao sighed regretfully. “Unfortunately, I didn’t try to deceive the fake Bai Xiao when I was chatting with him.”

This... Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment as an idea flashed across her mind.

She asked Shang Jianyao and the others for confirmation, “Who do you think played the fake Bai Xiao we talked to back then?”

“The Superior Heartless, of course.” Long Yuehong found the question baffling. Furthermore, they had long discussed it.

He began to suspect if he was hallucinating again like yesterday.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “We previously said that the fake Bai Xiao, Lin Tong, and company was simulated by the Superior Heartless. However, he can’t predict what we would ask or say, especially with a fellow like Shang Jianyao around—who has a doctor’s certification. In the illusion he created back then, there were questions, answers, reasonable expressions, and normal reactions. Apart from not knowing the relatively private matters, it was extremely real. Does this look like something a person without intelligence and only has animal instincts can do?”

Creating illusions was a skill.

“Team Leader, your judgment back then was that the Superior Heartless’s subconscious was close to an artificial intelligence state. Through gathering signals from the outside world, he can obtain the necessary reactions from his massive memory bank.” Long Yuehong reminded Jiang Baimian that this was a question they had discussed.

Bai Chen thought for a moment and replied, “Therefore, he acted more like a human in an illusion.”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “That’s not the point now. What’s important is that if we talk to a fake in an illusion, won’t it be equivalent to communicating with the Superior Heartless?”

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and said, “In theory.”

“Similarly, the fake person in the illusion is equivalent to a part of his consciousness, and it’s the kind that can ‘communicate.’” Jiang Baimian continued, “This is communication stemming from a large database. But no matter what, it’s better than having communication impossible where you don’t understand me, and I don’t understand you.”

Bai Chen revealed a thoughtful expression. “Team Leader, are you saying that Shang Jianyao can directly use Inference Clowning to influence the Superior Heartless through his conversation with the fake person?”

“But isn’t this equivalent to using Inference Clowning on Artificial Intelligence?” Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao. “I remember Shang Jianyao saying that he can’t sense consciousness from Geneva and the others and can’t exert any influence with his abilities.”

Jiang Baimian laughed. “Didn’t you say so yourself? Geneva and the others don’t have consciousnesses, but the Superior Heartless does! Since most of the prerequisites are in place, the only thing missing is whether comprehension is possible. I think the chances of success are quite high, and it’s worth trying.”

“That’s my intention.” Shang Jianyao—who had been listening—nodded in satisfaction.

“Heh, you can be the team leader then!” Jiang Baimian laughed from anger.

This fellow looked like a leader.

Shang Jianyao immediately turned his head and looked at Long Yuehong. “Have you not changed your pants?”

“...” Long Yuehong almost vomited blood.

Jiang Baimian provided a suggestion. “At a time like this, you should say: ‘Everything is but a dream; why so serious? Maybe it’s just your illusion that I didn’t change my pants.’”

But it’s really uncomfortable wearing it... Long Yuehong quickly took out another pair of pants from his tactical backpack and entered the jeep to change.

After coming out, he couldn't help but complain. "Why is that Superior Heartless constantly targeting us? He kept creating illusions and didn't go to Abbess Zhou and the others."

Jiang Baimian revealed a thoughtful expression. "That's a good question."

From her accustomed point of view, Bai Chen deliberated and said, "Maybe it's because he thinks we're the weakest and the most suitable for a breakthrough."

"That's a sad answer." Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. "That's true. Everywhere else has a combination of a religion and a robot team. Perhaps the Kalendarium—Shattered Mirror, Door of Scorching, and Golden Scale—provide a form of deterrence."

"Is that so?" Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm.

He quickly found a large piece of paper and a fountain pen. He then drew something on the jeep's window.

Long Yuehong stole a few curious glances, but he failed because Shang Jianyao's body blocked it.

After a while, Shang Jianyao put away his pen and clipped the piece of paper to the door facing Mount Chilar.

Compared to before, there were many more patterns on the white paper. They were: a simple baby picture, a featureless face, an iron tower, a pair of eyes like the sun, a furnace with a door, a woman hiding in the shadows behind a door, a dragon symbol, and a scale.

"We're safe now." Shang Jianyao nodded in satisfaction.

One, two, three... Long Yuehong silently counted eight Sacred Emblems.

Jiang Baimian naturally didn't believe in such a method, but she had to admit that it amused her and made her feel a little better.

“I remember that there are some Kalendarium and some religions that seem incompatible like they are fire and water. There’s a great deal of conflict.” From a reasonable perspective, Bai Chen evaluated Shang Jianyao’s Blessings from all Kalendarium pictures.

“They won’t fuss over such matters at a time like this,” Shang Jianyao replied on behalf of the Kalendarium with an abnormally sincere expression.

It was unknown if this really worked or if the Superior Heartless had already changed targets, but the Old Task Force didn’t encounter any hallucinatory effects until the next morning.

Long Yuehong was very happy about this. He didn’t think he could defeat the ‘death experience’ brought about by the hallucinations.

After the sun leaped out of the horizon, a robot guard came from Tarnan with many auxiliary combat robots, prepared to take over the Old Task Force’s duties and stand guard for the new day.

After the handover, Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief and got into the car first, turning the jeep around.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao said to the robot guard, “Look, you are a man, and so am I. You have a persistence that you can’t let go of, and so do I. So...”

Ha, why are you using Inference Clowning on a robot? Just as this thought flashed through Long Yuehong’s mind, he saw the robot guard and the auxiliary robots disappear instantly!

“This...” Long Yuehong’s pupils suddenly dilated.

The next second, he realized that the jeep wasn’t facing Tarnan but the intersection with the most land mines!

He looked around in confusion and saw that the sky was still dark. Only the light bulbs that provided illumination for the wooden tablets and mirrors were still lit.

An illusion... I wonder when we started hallucinating... Fortunately, Shang Jianyao is a persistent person and doesn’t forget what needs to be done... Long Yuehong quickly woke up and exhaled like he had just survived a disaster.

Bai Chen had a similar reaction.

Jiang Baimian looked around and nodded slightly. “This illusion is a little impressive. It can actually affect how we sense the passage of time...”

Before she could finish speaking, she realized that Shang Jianyao had fallen into deep thought.

“What’s on your mind?” Jiang Baimian asked curiously.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “I’m wondering if I made friends with him.”

Chapter 272: Strange Illusion

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao’s question, Jiang Baimian tersely replied, “I don’t know about that. He’s still different from the people you’ve previously used Inference Clowning on. I found it surprising that it could produce an effect and break the illusion.”

The interaction of illusions was more like a conscious artificial intelligence mechanism. Shang Jianyao had no experience with the effects to expect, and Jiang Baimian couldn’t figure it out either.

Long Yuehong couldn’t help but say, “There’s no need to make friends with him. It’s enough that he doesn’t target us.”

If Shang Jianyao became friends with such a powerful Superior Heartless, what would happen? Wouldn’t he be able to walk around in Tarnan, bully whoever he wanted, and prank whoever he wanted? Long Yuehong had wet his pants in front of the other members of the team, leaving him with a certain psychological trauma.

“Let’s hope so.” Jiang Baimian looked around the pitch-black night and the lights that dotted it. “Continue to be on duty.”

Shang Jianyao leaned against the jeep in disappointment.

As time passed, Bai Chen suddenly said, “Look over there.”

Jiang Baimian and the others followed the preset plan and looked at the area Bai Chen was monitoring in a 'think twice before acting' manner.

At some point in time, buildings that weren't too tall had appeared.

These buildings formed the Old World's so-called 'estate,' 'community,' or 'block.' They were hidden amidst the greenery.

At this moment, the night made everything there appear blurry. Only the light coming from the glass windows gave off a sense of security and warmth.

"This... should be an illusion, right?" Long Yuehong muttered to himself hesitantly.

"Apart from illusions, nobody can build such an estate in just a few seconds," Jiang Baimian replied firmly.

"It's still a dream." Shang Jianyao 'helped' Jiang Baimian complete her explanation.

They were all very sure that the estate ahead didn't belong to Tarnan. It had appeared out of thin air.

Jiang Baimian looked at the quiet residential estate and voiced her doubts. "Why did the Superior Heartless create an illusion that we can see through at a glance?"

Shang Jianyao nodded thoughtfully. "He wants to greet us? He thinks I'm already a friend?"

Jiang Baimian wanted to retort, but she swallowed her words.

"That's possible." Bai Chen actually supported Shang Jianyao's theory. After all, she had seen the magical aspects of Inference Clowning.

"Then, how should I respond?" Shang Jianyao was in a dilemma.

"Let's wait and see first." Jiang Baimian decided to adopt a safe strategy.



Just as she said that, all the lights in the neighborhood went out at the same time.

No, there was one light that remained—like a lone boat in the vast lake. It quietly emitted a yellowish glow, becoming the most eye-catching thing in the night.

“That Superior Heartless wants us to enter that room?” Jiang Baimian guessed the meaning of this change.

She was referring to the room with the only remaining lamp.

“Oh...” Shang Jianyao came to a realization. “He wants to invite us to his house as guests.”

“Don’t move.” Jiang Baimian stopped Shang Jianyao’s eagerness. “If you were affected by such a simple illusion and stepped on a land mine, I would definitely write ‘this person died of stupidity’ on your epitaph.”

The Old Task Force had set up many land mines and traps around them. With them being in an illusion, who knew if their bearings and distance were wrong.

“I don’t think he has any ill intentions,” Shang Jianyao said sincerely. With that said, he turned to glance at Long Yuehong.

“Go by yourself if you want to be a scout!” Long Yuehong replied warily.

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao seemed to be waiting for this answer before Jiang Baimian grabbed him.

There’s such a trick? Long Yuehong was a little dumbfounded.

At this moment, the dark residential estate in front of them enlarged, and the distance between them instantly shortened.

In just a few seconds, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others were in the estate, just under the building with the lone light.

“How enthusiastic...” Shang Jianyao praised sincerely. As he spoke, he sighed. “Unfortunately, he wants to eat people and has eaten many people. Otherwise, I really can befriend him.”

You still have a bottom line... Jiang Baimian muttered inwardly before warning him, “Don’t move first. He will take the initiative to let us in if we need to. He will take the initiative to let us see what we need to see.”

“Yes.” Long Yuehong felt that this suited his thoughts.

Jiang Baimian’s words were quickly confirmed. The four Old Task Force members were directly ‘transferred’ into the building.

During this process, they felt like they were climbing a building and taking an elevator.

Before long, they arrived at the top floor, which was the 11th floor.

There was only one unit here. The door was wide and long, vermilion red in color.

The windows high up in the corridor shone with weak light, making figures appear. They were all humans—men and women, young and old. They wore different clothes, but they also embodied the Old World’s style.

At this moment, they were squeezing at the door, prying into the room from every crack like lunatics.

“W-what are they doing?” Long Yuehong was confused.

“Is this a manifestation of the Superior Heartless’s subconscious madness?” Jiang Baimian tried to explain it from a psychological perspective.

Shang Jianyao shook his head and said seriously, “This means that something is happening inside...”

Before he could finish speaking, the four Old Task Force members ‘tore’ through the vermilion door that didn’t appear corporeal and entered.

Long Yuehong subconsciously looked back.

Pairs of eyes seemed to be watching from the cracks in the door.

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

At this moment, Jiang Baimian and the others looked past the astonishingly spacious living room to a floor-to-ceiling window.

The floor-to-ceiling window was immersed in darkness, and human faces were tightly glued to them.

Their expressions were warped, and their eyes flickered with an unknown glow.

It was as if there were a platform outside the window. These people had squeezed there and were peeping into the room through the window.

On the other side, a figure sat on a railing by an open glass window.

She was a slender woman. Her long black hair was disheveled, and her face was covered by the darkness, making it difficult to see her clearly.

At this moment, the woman was sobbing as she kept repeating, “Are you bent on wanting me dead... Are you bent on wanting me dead...?”

“No,” Shang Jianyao answered.

However, the woman ignored him. She suddenly propped herself up and jumped out of the window.

Shang Jianyao stretched out his hand, but he couldn't reach her because of the distance.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian—who knew that this was an illusion—was looking around.

She saw a tablet computer on the ground not far away.

The computer was on, blinking. There were photos and words on it.

The photo seemed to show a woman in a hat getting into a car. The words were: “Popular idol, Jiang[1] Xiaoyue, on a trip with a middle-aged tycoon.”

Thud!

The woman—who had jumped out of the window—had fallen heavily to the ground.

The entire illusion instantly warped. Long Yuehong, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and the others felt their thoughts being sucked away by a vortex. It felt as if their souls were about to leave their bodies.

They felt uncontrollable horror as if they were facing a darkness that could devour their lives.

Gradually, their consciousness began to fade.

Phew... Jiang Baimian struggled to ‘wake up’ and realized that she was still beside the jeep. Her surroundings were pitch black, and only the light bulb that illuminated the mirrors and wooden sign was lit.

She subconsciously glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that this fellow seemed to be prepared to nudge her.

“Have you escaped the illusion?” Jiang Baimian asked as she took two steps forward and tried to wake Bai Chen up.

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao turned his body and shook Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong quickly snapped to his senses and felt very dizzy.

After a few seconds, he came to a realization. “Stop! Stop shaking!”

“You’re awake?” Shang Jianyao asked regretfully as if he had many unused plans.

Long Yuehong quickly replied in a daze, “Yes.”

Upon seeing that the team members were fine, Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and muttered to herself, “What did that illusion represent?”

“That should be a scene from the Old World,” Bai Chen said after some thought. “Is the Superior Heartless related to that popular idol, Jiang Xiaoyue?”

“You saw the news on the computer as well?” Jiang Baimian asked in confirmation. “But that Superior Heartless is in his eighties or nineties? It doesn’t seem like it... Yes, there’s no precedent that states that Superior Heartless can live longer. At most, they can live a little longer than ordinary Heartless. Uh, except for Xiaochong.”

After humans became Heartless, their life expectancy undoubtedly decreased greatly due to changes in their living environment, physical conditions, and other aspects.

After Jiang Baimian described what she had seen, Shang Jianyao nodded. “He might be Jiang Xiaoyue’s son.”

“...” Jiang Baimian asked, “Then, why is he obsessed with entering Tarnan?”

“This is Jiang Xiaoyue’s hometown, where he grew up.” Shang Jianyao suddenly sighed.

“...I almost believed you,” Jiang Baimian said in amusement. “Did you get this inspiration from the merfolks, mountain monsters, and the Heartless in Swamp Ruin 1?”

“It’s not impossible.” Long Yuehong supported Shang Jianyao this time.

Jiang Baimian shook her head. “But it’s too much of a coincidence. It’s impossible that most of the things we encounter are based on the same reason, right?”

Without sufficient clues, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen couldn't answer this question.

After an intense discussion, the Old Task Force finally decided to report this matter and see what the various religions and Mechanical Paradise thought.

Perhaps Nanke Convent's Abbess Zhou could figure out something.

After a long time, the sky gradually lit up, and morning arrived.

After more than ten minutes, a robot guard member and two humans came from Tarnan with many auxiliary robots, prepared to take over.

When they approached, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. "Go."

Chapter 273: Old World's Big Data

Shang Jianyao strode forward and said to the robot guard, "Look, you are human, and so am I."

Before he could finish speaking, the smart robot's blue eyes lit up.

This left Shang Jianyao's subsequent 'inference' stuck in his throat as if he was prepared to consider his words again.

At this moment, the smart bot sighed with emotion. "You are the first carbon-based human I've encountered who is willing to admit that we smart bots are humans." As he spoke, he stretched out his right hand.

As Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others were a little stunned, Shang Jianyao 'habitually' stretched out his right hand and gripped the cold, silver-black metallic palm.

"Look for me if you need anything in the future." The smart bot shook Shang Jianyao's hand heavily. "My name is Alpha Stuart."

"Alright!" Shang Jianyao agreed without hesitation. "From now on, we are friends."

"Yes, yes, yes—friends!" Alpha was very happy about this.

You made friends without Inference Clowning? Jiang Baimian suddenly had the thought that this might be an illusion.

Shang Jianyao turned around and concluded in all seriousness, “I can confirm that there are no problems.”

For the sake of caution, Jiang Baimian chatted with the two humans—who were following Alpha—and confirmed their identities.

After doing this, they handed the layout of the fortifications to Alpha and the others. They then drove themselves and slowly moved to Tarnan as they constantly confirmed the road conditions.

...

:30 a.m. in a large conference room at Town Hall.

Zhou Yue, Li Zhe, Mike, the other locals in charge of the various religions, the Hunter’s Guild President Gu Bo, Bai Xiao’s team, the Qian Bai Team, and Genava—the robot guard captain—were gathered here, prepared to discuss their encounters.

This was to share the experiences they had with the Superior Heartless and seek inspiration.

Bai Xiao—who had half of his cranium shimmering with a metallic glow—spoke on behalf of his team about their experiences and discoveries after entering the mountain.

Genava—who had already received the news—sighed heavily again.

“May they rest in peace.” Tarnan’s mayor sighed and turned to look at Jiang Baimian and the others. “You seem to have been affected by illusions several times?”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

To be honest, she didn't understand Genova's grief and heaviness. From what she knew, smart bots wouldn't 'die' so easily. They should have backup copies of their main program or core modules. When the time came, they could find the components and reassemble them.

They would be good as new without needing to wait long.

This wasn't a good time to study this problem. Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "Let me make it simple."

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao had already opened his tactical backpack. Then, he took out a blue and white speaker and handed it to her.

"..." Jiang Baimian was momentarily at a loss for words.

"The audio here is very good. There's no need for this." Genova stopped this behavior.

Most importantly, there were microphones on the conference table, but they were relatively far from Jiang Baimian.

After Shang Jianyao put away the loudspeaker, Jiang Baimian adjusted her mood and described the fake Bai Xiao's team, the 'death experience,' and the hallucination of Jiang Xiaoyue jumping off a building.

Jiang Baimian didn't mention the matter regarding Long Yuehong's hallucination. She only used a similar case that she had fabricated to explain the corresponding situation. After all, the goal of this meeting was to share their encounters, let others understand the situation, and come up with a plan. There was no need to tell them all the details.

As long as they could achieve this goal, it didn't matter if the case was fabricated.

"Jiang Xiaoyue..." Bai Xiao, Lin Tong, Lei, and Zhang Shaopeng looked at each other and shook their heads at the same time, indicating that they had never heard of this name before.

Jiang Baimian focused on Zhou Yue, but the abbess of Nanke Convent wore a blank expression.



Clearly, she didn't know why the Superior Heartless had created the illusion of Jiang Xiaoyue jumping off a building.

The fiery-red robed Li Zhe, Mike—who was no longer wearing an apron—and the others were the same.

Genava suddenly spoke in a tone as though he was reading a script. “Jiang Xiaoyue, a popular idol in the Old World. Her career suffered a blow when she dated a middle-aged, married tycoon, Cai Mingde. She committed suicide by jumping off a building in her own home...”

This... Long Yuehong and the others were stunned.

After Genava finished explaining what an idol was, Shang Jianyao was the first to react, not Jiang Baimian. He clasped his hands, gave up clapping, and sighed. “It's indeed a tragedy.”

At this moment, Jiang Baimian finally came to a realization.

Mechanical Paradise contains plenty of electronic data from the Old World. Genava found information regarding Jiang Xiaoyue through the built-in or wireless database after a brief search. From the looks of it, they really know a lot... Jiang Baimian was filled with anticipation for the ‘exchange’ with the Source Brain.

“This actually happened in real life...” Zhou Yue couldn't help but sigh with emotion. “I thought this was the content of one of the Old World's drama serials—something the Superior Heartless watched before contracting the disease.”

Drama serial... Abbess Zhou, you and the lady boss should have something in common. Maybe you can become good friends... The only problem is that you won't recognize this friend by simply turning your head...

As Jiang Baimian muttered silently, Lin Tong from Bai Xiao's team frowned and asked, “What has this got to do with the Superior Heartless?”

“I don't know. There are too many possibilities,” Genava replied honestly.

Jiang Baimian immediately added, “Officer Genova, please print a copy of all the information regarding Jiang Xiaoyue later. We want to see if we can extract any useful information from it. If we can resolve the Superior Heartless’s obsession, he might give up on Tarnan.”

“No problem.” Genova moved his metal neck. “We will also do the corresponding data analysis.”

“Give us a copy too,” said Bai Xiao.

Zhou Yue and the others also expressed their desire to have a copy.

After their exchange, they confirmed that the Superior Heartless had an abnormal obsession with Tarnan. They hoped to find clues from the various situations presented by the illusions.

Genava agreed to all their requests.

After Zhou Yue, Li Zhe, and the others finished sharing their encounters, Genova concluded, “Our current strategy is still mainly defense. We shall prevent the target from entering Tarnan while we await the Clam Dragon Church’s specialist or our Mechanical Paradise’s reinforcements to deal with him.”

“Dream Protector...” Zhou Yue corrected him softly.

This wasn’t some specialist.

Genava nodded. “Yes, a specialist dealing in illusions and dreams.”

Zhou Yue didn’t retort and tersely acknowledged it. “He’ll take at most three days to arrive.”

Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?

...

Serene Dream Hotel.

The Old Task Force slept until noon. After a simple meal, they saw a few auxiliary robots arrive.

They turned their feet into wheels and transported a large pile of information into Room 221.

“That much?” Jiang Baimian was a little surprised.

“Yes,” said the lead auxiliary robot in an obviously electronic synthetic voice. “Officer Genava has already removed the repeated data.”

It feels like the living room is about to be filled... Long Yuehong’s first thought wasn’t about the copious amount of information regarding an idol in the Old World but that it was a waste of paper.

In the Ashlands, apart from a few places like Tarnan, paper was also a valuable resource. After all, it wasn’t an important item for production.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “We forgot to tell Genava that we have a computer.”

The lead auxiliary robot was stunned. “You should’ve said so earlier...”

“But even if we didn’t say anything, it shouldn’t be too difficult for you to provide a few temporary computers, right?” Jiang Baimian asked in exasperation and amusement.

The lead auxiliary robot immediately replied, “You had requested printed copies. We were following your request.”

“That’s just my habitual choice of words. You should’ve confirmed it with us...” Jiang Baimian stopped before she could finish.

This was because she had figured something out. Why are you arguing with a few robots? Why are you trying to reason with them?

“We don’t have this program,” said the lead auxiliary robot. “If you need the electronic data now, we can provide it.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian felt that it was more convenient to read it on the computer. She could search, compare, and label it.

In the subsequent period, the Old Task Force would occasionally flip through the paper material or search the electronic data, hoping to discover valuable information from the various useless information about an Old World idol.

As she read, Bai Chen suddenly said, “Jiang Xiaoyue didn’t die.”

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong cast their gazes over at the same time. They were still studying Jiang Xiaoyue’s early experiences.

“After she jumped off the building, she didn’t die on the spot. She was sent to the hospital for emergency treatment and became a vegetable.” Bai Chen briefly described the news she had read.

Jiang Baimian typed a few words and searched for the corresponding electronic data.

She soon saw a series of information: “Jiang Xiaoyue remains in critical condition. Might end up as a vegetable.”

“The attending doctor privately disclosed that the chances of Jiang Xiaoyue regaining consciousness are very low...”

“Jiang Xiaoyue’s parents are seeking help from foreign medical institutions...”

“Will the nation’s most eligible bachelorette wake up after her three-year coma?”

“...”

As she browsed, Jiang Baimian heard Long Yuehong sigh.

“Such a beautiful lady actually became a vegetable.”

Vegetable... Jiang Baimian frowned slightly, inexplicably finding this matter familiar.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao asked, “What happened next?”

“Can’t you check it out yourself...” Jiang Baimian subconsciously replied. As she spoke, she began searching for Jiang Xiaoyue’s final outcome to see if she had successfully woken up or eventually died.

As she searched, Jiang Baimian discovered a thread that seemed to be an informal forum exchange.

The content of this thread was: “Reliable news, reliable news. Jiang Xiaoyue’s parents signed a volunteer agreement and have transferred her to a certain hospital in the north to receive experimental treatment. They hope to wake her up...”

Volunteer agreement... A certain hospital... Vegetable... Experimental treatment... Jiang Baimian read these keywords repeatedly.

Suddenly, she stood up and said to Shang Jianyao and the others, “D-do you still remember that medical record? The one you found in the steelworks factory ruins!”

The medical record belonged to a woman named Fan Wensi. She had ‘recently’ seen her son constantly. Her son had long been in a car accident and had become a vegetable. He was sent north as a volunteer for experimental treatment.

This was very similar to Jiang Xiaoyue’s situation!

The possible connection between the two made Jiang Baimian’s body tremble slightly and her scalp tingle.

Chapter 274: Another Possibility

The steelworks factory’s medical record was something Long Yuehong had found during his first search of ruins. Furthermore, it had a certain research value. Therefore, he had a deep impression of it and recalled all the relevant details.

“Yes, they really are alike!” he replied to Jiang Baimian excitedly. “They became vegetables because of something. They signed a volunteer agreement and were then sent somewhere in the north to receive experimental treatment.”

The biggest difference between these two matters was that there were differences in certain descriptions, but this didn't affect the essence of the problem.

Just as Long Yuehong said that, Bai Chen blurted out, "That hospital—no, that place has secrets?"

She began to suspect that it might not be a hospital. The hospital might very well be a cover!

Jiang Baimian controlled the excitement in her heart and looked at Shang Jianyao. "What do you think?"

After spending so much time together, she increasingly felt that Shang Jianyao's novel ideas or unconventional ideas always gave her a different kind of inspiration. Although more than 90% of them were worthless and only made people exasperated and amused, the remaining 10% often penetrated the fog and pointed at the problem's core in a strange way.

Shang Jianyao acted like the most professional detective. He looked around and said, "I thought of something else."

Man, can he deduce more truths if we give him a pipe at a time like this? Long Yuehong—who had heard the same radio programs as Shang Jianyao—suddenly had such a baffling thought.

"What is it?" Just as Jiang Baimian said that, she felt inspired.

She and Shang Jianyao then said in unison, "Research institute!"

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly and said to Bai Chen and Long Yuehong, "Didn't the lady boss say that before the Old World was destroyed, the largest Ashlandic country and the strongest Red River country jointly established nine future-facing research institutes."

Long Yuehong understood what his friend meant and asked, "You suspect that Jiang Xiaoyue and the others actually became participants in an experiment at the research institute?"

Frankly speaking, he was a little unaccustomed to the solemn, serious, straight-faced, and non-mentally-ill Shang Jianyao.

Of course, being completely different was also a manifestation of his mental illness.

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao nodded, bent down, picked up the phone, and dialed the front desk. He quickly asked, “Hello, is this the lady boss?”

“Call me Madam Aynor! How rude!” Aynor grumbled on the other end of the line.

Shang Jianyao laughed, and his serious expression vanished. “I don’t think there’s a need to be so polite given our relationship, right?”

“What relationship can we have?” Aynor scoffed.

An invitatory relationship... Long Yuehong guessed Shang Jianyao’s answer. Although the lady boss had been joking back then, he felt that Shang Jianyao might remember it.

“A relationship of watching a horror film together.” Shang Jianyao’s answer was even more unconstrained.

Without giving Aynor a chance to retort, he directly asked, “Which of the nine research institutes are in the north?”

“How would I know? I only know that the Third Research Institute is in the south and that the Second Research Institute is in the west,” Aynor replied angrily. “The next time you disturb my drama watching, you have to pay!”

She hung up with a smack.

“There are no further clues.” Shang Jianyao shrugged at Jiang Baimian and the others.

Jiang Baimian nodded and muttered to herself in puzzlement, “But what has this got to do with the Superior Heartless?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “He might be Jiang Xiaoyue’s son.”

This time, nobody ignored this answer.

Bai Chen deliberated and said, “Are you saying that the experiment was very successful? Jiang Xiaoyue woke up and joined someone in a union after the Old World was destroyed and gave birth to a child?”

Union... Wouldn't it be more elegant to use the word 'marriage?' Long Yuehong criticized inwardly. However, he also knew that in many places in the Ashlands, the state of most men and women couldn't be described as marriage.

Thus, the word 'union' was more accurate.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded. “But that doesn't explain why he's so obsessed with Tarnan. We saw the information just now. Jiang Xiaoyue's hometown and the place where she later committed suicide were north of the Lake of Wrath. We're south of Mount Chilar, south of the Lake of Wrath.”

Long Yuehong voiced his guess. “Could it be that the Superior Heartless isn't related to Jiang Xiaoyue but comes from that mysterious research institute? He came into contact with the vegetative Jiang Xiaoyue and the related project information there, which left a deep impression on him?”

“We can't rule out that possibility.” Jiang Baimian sat cross-legged in the chair as her thoughts raced. “But I think there's a deeper connection; otherwise, he wouldn't have shown us the scene of Jiang Xiaoyue jumping off a building for no reason. Even if he only has the intelligence of a beast, he wouldn't do something meaningless.”

To be precise, the closer one was to a beast, the less likely they were to do something without reason.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian really wanted to put her finger on her head and 'rack her brains.' But in order to maintain her image as a team leader, she gave up on the idea.

“Let's review the scene again in our minds.” Shang Jianyao became serious again as if he was acting as a detective again.

“Good idea.” Jiang Baimian praised him and closed her eyes. Then, she replayed the scene of Jiang Xiaoyue jumping off the building in her mind.



After an unknown period of time, Long Yuehong said, “There aren’t any other clues...”

Jiang Baimian opened her eyes and smiled. “No, I found a very valuable clue.”

“What is it?” Bai Chen didn’t hide her curiosity.

“The illusion’s perspective or the source of the corresponding feelings,” Jiang Baimian said with a smile. “The windows, the pairs of eyes, and the faces at the door represent the paparazzi’s prying, the public’s curiosity, and the fans’ disdain.”

They had just learned the term ‘paparazzi’ from searching and flipping through the information.

“Th-this is...” Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little terrified. “This was what Jiang Xiaoyue felt!”

That illusion seemed to be Jiang Xiaoyue’s mental process before she jumped off the building!

“How did the Superior Heartless know about Jiang Xiaoyue’s feelings and corresponding performance back then?” Jiang Baimian asked further.

Pa!

Shang Jianyao clapped his hands and said, “The answer is very simple.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong and Bai Chen look over, he said in all seriousness, “The Superior Heartless is Jiang Xiaoyue.”

“...” Long Yuehong said helplessly, “One is a man, and the other is a woman.”

“Transgender surgery, such as organ transplant, neural reconstruction, and so on,” Shang Jianyao replied smoothly.

“B-but there’s no need, right?” Long Yuehong weakly argued.

“That’s a possibility.” Jiang Baimian didn’t blindly deny it. “For example, the transferring and uploading of human consciousness, which would definitely involve Eternal technology.”

She deliberated for a moment and said, “Yes, there’s another possibility. Jiang Xiaoyue and the child of the steelworks factory’s patient are both in a vegetative state. They receive new experimental treatments or undergo experiments that can wake them up.

“During this experiment, could there be an instrument that can project the memories stored in the recipient’s brain as a step in the awakening, just like how Awakened in Last Man’s domain can read memories?”

This was an inference based on the status of the person involved and the experiment’s possible developments.

Bai Chen followed this train of thought and made a guess. “That Superior Heartless is one of the researchers? He experienced Jiang Xiaoyue’s feelings before she jumped off the building?”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “This is a very reasonable idea, but the question is once again: Why is the Superior Heartless so obsessed with Tarnan? What’s the goal of showing us this illusion?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “Maybe he fell in love with the unconscious Jiang Xiaoyue and kept trying to wake her up; this became his obsession. In the end, he contracted the Heartless disease and will never be able to fulfill this wish. He can only use an illusion to get us to help him complete it.”

Q-quite a touching love story... Jiang Baimian evaluated inwardly and asked, “What has this got to do with Tarnan?”

This was a place to study robots!

“I get it.” Shang Jianyao acted as if he had come to a realization. “He wants to insert the memories extracted from Jiang Xiaoyue into a certain smart bot’s main module and let it live as Jiang Xiaoyue.”

“It’s too complicated.” Jiang Baimian shook her head without hesitation. “It doesn’t seem like a plan that a Superior Heartless can come up with.”

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen raised some guesses, but they couldn’t explain the entire matter. There were too many problems.

The Old Task Force’s brainstorm lasted until evening, but they still couldn’t find any clues that could penetrate everything.

“Phew, we’ll discuss for another half-hour before we get something to eat.” Jiang Baimian pointed at the open computer and said, “Let’s summarize all the key information and put them together to see if we can get any inspiration. I’ll write first; you guys can add.”

She typed rapidly and wrote short sentences and terms in the document.

“Jiang Xiaoyue jumped off a building; the Fan family’s child was in a car accident; vegetables; somewhere in the north; experimental treatment; research institute; Superior Heartless; good at hallucinations; powerful; suspected to have contracted the disease after awakening at the Sea of Origins’ end or entering the Mind Corridor; illusions created contain dragons; obsessed with Tarnan...”

As she wrote, Jiang Baimian heard Shang Jianyao’s voice. “I thought of a possibility.”

This time, his voice was a little deep and sounded very serious.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen looked over and saw Shang Jianyao standing beside the computer, bathed in the setting sun’s glow. His expression was rather solemn.

Jiang Baimian asked solemnly, “What?”

Shang Jianyao rarely appeared like this.

Shang Jianyao looked around and said, “Do you still remember Harbinger Song’s description of the Mind Corridor’s essence?”

“The Mind Corridor connects all Awakened’s minds. Every door there corresponds to a mind world...” Long Yuehong replied like he was reciting a book.

Without waiting for him to finish, Jiang Baimian already understood what Shang Jianyao wanted to say and blurted out, “You mean that the Superior Heartless entered the Mind Corridor before he fell ill? He opened a door in that corridor one day, and Jiang Xiaoyue’s mind world was behind the door?”

Chapter 275: Third Visit to Nanke Convent

Behind the door is Jiang Xiaoyue’s mind world... After hearing Jiang Baimian’s words, Long Yuehong realized that this very unscientific guess was the most reasonable one. After all, this explanation regarding how a vegetable in the north established a connection with a Superior Heartless that appeared south of the Ashlands was more possible than any other.

Of course, be it the Superior Heartless coming from a mysterious research institute or Jiang Xiaoyue—who had long woken up and formed a union with someone during her wanderings in the Ashlands to give birth to this child—there was still a high chance of it happening. It was impossible to eliminate the possibility.

At this moment, Bai Chen thought for a moment and added, “Song He said that the doors which can be opened in the Mind Corridor are either the Kalendarium’s dream or powerful Awakened who have explored the Mind Corridor’s depths. It’s normally impossible for an ordinary Awakened’s corresponding door to be opened in the opposite direction...”

“Not only has Jiang Xiaoyue woken up, but she has also become a powerful Awakened and explored the Mind Corridor’s depths? That research institute is studying the awakening of humans? They are looking for vegetable volunteers because these patients’ conditions are more suitable for such experiments?”

Long Yuehong’s head nearly exploded when he heard this series of questions. He kept having the feeling that the secret was too big for his ordinary shoulders to handle.

If this discussion continued, he suspected that something extremely terrifying would erupt before him soon.

“Maybe this can eliminate the interference brought about by human thought...” Jiang Baimian agreed with Bai Chen’s guess and then said excitedly, “Do you still remember the contents of the

medical record? Fan Wensi always saw her child appear around her, and her child had long become a vegetable and was sent to the north for experimental treatment. It would be interesting if we eliminated the possibility that this mother had a mental illness and everything she saw was real.

“Her child might’ve indeed woken up, but he’s trapped in the Mind Corridor. He can only show concern for his mother by projecting himself into reality in the reverse direction...”

This matched her initial guess regarding Jiang Xiaoyue and the Superior Heartless’s relationship.

Although Long Yuehong felt that his team leader and Bai Chen’s guess was reasonable, he still raised a question. “Why is the Superior Heartless obsessed with Tarnan?”

Jiang Baimian thought for a while before suddenly saying a word. “Dragon!”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s confusion, she exhaled and explained with a smile, “The dragon Ninth Zhang saw in the illusion! If that Superior Heartless really contracted the disease after entering the Mind Corridor, which faction did he belong to prior to that?”

There were many possibilities, but when combined with the ‘dragon’ in the illusion, there seemed to be only one answer.

Shang Jianyao replied, “He’s a high-ranking member of the Clam Dragon Church.”

An expert who was either a Dream Protector or someone close to this rank.

Long Yuehong came to a realization. “It’s no wonder Abbess Zhou keeps emphasizing that the Superior Heartless is very dangerous. It’s best to wait for their Church’s Dream Protector to deal with him.”

“B-but...” Long Yuehong had new doubts. “He’s obsessed with Tarnan because there’s a Clam Dragon Church convent here? Why is he obsessed with this?”

Jiang Baimian fell silent and thought about the corresponding possibilities.

At this moment, Long Yuehong saw Shang Jianyao touch his lips with his right hand and smile.

“We still took something for granted on one point.”

“Which one?” Jiang Baimian asked in confusion.

Shang Jianyao looked around and smiled. “The door corresponding to Jiang Xiaoyue’s mind world might not necessarily belong to an expert who has explored the Mind Corridor’s depths. It might also come from...”

He paused and gave his answer. “The Kalendaria’s dream.”

Just as Long Yuehong’s scalp tingled, Shang Jianyao laughed. “I’m joking. It might also belong to an ordinary Awakened or even ordinary people.”

Long Yuehong objected. “But didn’t Harbinger Song say that it’s impossible to open the door in reverse under normal circumstances? Unless one reaches the level of Yama Tiger...”

“He also said that it’s only under normal circumstances that they can’t be opened,” Shang Jianyao explained with a smile. “Before the Superior Heartless contracted the disease, he opened the door that represented Jiang Xiaoyue. He originally thought that it was left behind by an expert who had explored the Mind Corridor’s depths and wondered if he could find some mystical items that could be used.

“To his surprise, the more he explored the mind world, the more puzzled he felt. It clearly belonged to an ordinary Awakened—or even an ordinary person—but he could actually open the door and enter. After that, a series of terrifying things happened. For example...”

Just as Shang Jianyao deliberately paused to make Long Yuehong nervous and curious, Jiang Baimian said in a deep voice, “For example, he contracted the Heartless disease.”

“...” Long Yuehong felt inexplicably terrified. He knew that his team leader would always associate some strange matters with the source of the Heartless disease’s breakout and attempt to analyze it. This had already become her professional habit.

But at this moment, this guess was very reasonable!

He was indeed a Superior Heartless!

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

This time, Jiang Baimian didn't glare at him and continued, "Therefore, the Superior Heartless's obsession is to inform the Clam Dragon Church of this strange and fatal encounter and remind later generations to pay attention? His goal in entering Tarnan is Nanke Convent. Hunting and eating humans is only a Heartless's instinct..."

Room 221 suddenly became quiet. After a while, Bai Chen said, "This can indeed string all the details together, even though it sounds unbelievable..."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "We have to visit Abbess Zhou again. This time, I hope she doesn't hide anything. If it really doesn't work out..."

At this point, Jiang Baimian smiled and looked at Shang Jianyao.

"I think I can get her to speak the truth without Inference Clowning," Shang Jianyao replied thoughtfully.

Abbess Zhou, you're being looked down on by a mental patient... Long Yuehong didn't know if he should sympathize with Zhou Yue. However, he also felt that Abbess Zhou was rather muddle-headed. There might be no problem with her intelligence, but she really was easier to deceive.

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked Shang Jianyao, "Aren't you worried about Shattered Mirror's attention?"

Shang Jianyao silently took out a piece of paper.

The piece of paper depicted a simple baby picture, a featureless face, a woman hiding behind a door, and other symbols.

...

Nanke Convent.

Prayer mats were placed in the hall. A few Dream Guides and Dream Bewilders were focused on praying.

Zhou Yue was still wearing the white robe and a belt made of hemp rope. She stood in front of the shrine and stared at Jiang Baimian and the others. “Are you here to join our Clam Dragon Church, or are you here for an investigation, Team October Xue?”

This time, she was very careful and hadn’t blindly recognized them.

She had a deeper impression of October Xue than Qian Bai. After all, they had spoken on the phone.

“Abbess Zhou, you finally managed to recognize me this time.” The person who spoke wasn’t Jiang Baimian but Shang Jianyao.

Zhou Yue sized him up a few times. “You’re not a woman.”

Jiang Baimian raised her hand to stop Shang Jianyao from speaking. “Yes, I’m October Xue. I have a question for you this time, Abbess Zhou.”

“Please speak.” Zhou Yue smiled until her eyes narrowed.

Jiang Baimian directly asked, “Was that Superior Heartless from the Clam Dragon Church before he fell ill?”

“Ahem...” Zhou Yue—who was feeling pleased with herself—suddenly broke into a fit of coughs.

After a while, she calmed down and sighed. “Since you’ve discovered it, I’ll be honest. I’m also unable to determine if the Superior Heartless is one of our Dream Protectors. He lost his way more than half a year ago, and we couldn’t find him after searching for a long time. We found it very strange back then. After all, the price he paid wasn’t becoming directionally challenged... Uh...”



Zhou Yue suddenly realized that she had let something slip and quickly laughed dryly. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

As expected... This phrase flashed across the Old Task Force members’ minds.

Shang Jianyao excitedly asked, “You knew long ago that he was afraid of looking in the mirror?”

“Sort of, but I wasn’t sure if it was him, so I prepared everything...” Zhou Yue stopped abruptly. I’ve let it slip again!

She quickly half-raised her body, slightly spread her arms, and prayed. “Clam Dragon, thou art supreme!”

Without giving Qian Bai’s team a chance to ask again, Zhou Yue ‘took the initiative’ to say, “What’s the point of you figuring this out? In any case, we don’t have to deal with him ourselves. We just need to focus on defense and wait for the people above to arrive.”

Upon hearing Abbess Zhou’s ‘frankness’—revealing all kinds of things she shouldn’t have said—Jiang Baimian replied according to the results of her discussion with Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong before they set off.

“Here’s the thing. When we were investigating Jiang Xiaoyue’s matter, we found some clues and connected them to a medical record we previously found...” Jiang Baimian explained everything she could, only concealing the analysis process regarding Pangu Biology and the Old Task Force.

“Do you mean that the Superior Heartless might’ve become like this because of the hidden problem in Jiang Xiaoyue? He has always wanted to enter Tarnan in hopes of finding Nanke Convent and ‘reporting’ the matter to us?” Zhou Yue clearly had a certain level of understanding of the Mind Corridor. Under the Old Task Force’s guidance, she came to a conclusion without Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s detailed descriptions.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly applauded. “That’s right.”

Zhou Yue felt a little smug. “You want to verify this guess?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. "It's not us but you. Don't you want to verify this question as soon as possible and see if there's truly any important information?"

Zhou Yue fell into deep thought. After a while, she hesitantly said, "But won't it be verified when our Church's Dream Protector comes?"

But we won't know the answer if you do that... Jiang Baimian realized that she had failed to deceive this Abbess Zhou.

Chapter 276: Staying Behind

After some thought, Jiang Baimian said seriously, "There are two problems with that. First, your Church's Dream Protector might take two to three days to arrive. An accident might happen at any moment during this wait, causing our defense to fail.

"Second, we don't know what other changes the Superior Heartless has undergone. Maybe he only has a few days left to live. Maybe that's why he stubbornly wants to enter Tarnan and find Nanke Convent to inform his fellow parishioners of the critical information."

Zhou Yue nodded slightly, but she still didn't make her position clear.

Jiang Baimian continued, "Besides, we don't have to take too many risks. We just have to shrink the defense perimeter. Even if our guess is wrong, it won't affect our subsequent actions."

Zhou Yue finally spoke. "What do you want to do?"

Long Yuehong couldn't help but look at Shang Jianyao when he heard that. He suspected that his team leader had learned Shang Jianyao's Inference Clowning!

She actually convinced Abbess Zhou so quickly!

Shang Jianyao had a solemn expression and nodded at Long Yuehong as if he were saying, "Yes, that's right."

Jiang Baimian seized the opportunity and struck while the iron was hot to reveal the Old Task Force's plan. "After dawn, evacuate everyone in Tarnan to River West and set up defenses there. It's

winter now. As long as everyone brings along important supplies, there's no need to worry about any losses. The Superior Heartless won't destroy houses, trample on farmlands, or damage equipment. There are plenty of empty houses in River West that are well maintained.

"On River East, we'll leave two to three observers behind. Under the mirrors' protection, we can confirm if the Superior Heartless's target is a place in Tarnan or someone in Tarnan. In short, even if the verification fails, it won't affect Tarnan's safety. We can still wait for your Church's Dream Protector to arrive."

She couldn't be sure that the Superior Heartless was here for Nanke Convent. What if Jiang Xiaoyue was still alive and hiding in Tarnan?

After so many years, her face had definitely changed greatly. It was understandable that it would be difficult to recognize her.

Zhou Yue quietly listened and nodded. "We have to obtain Officer Geneva's permission."

"We will try to persuade it," Jiang Baimian replied without hesitation.

"It's our friend," Shang Jianyao added.

"Friend?" Zhou Yue repeated the term in confusion. She didn't ask any further and said, "I have to report this to headquarters and see what the higher-ups say."

"Please, go ahead," Jiang Baimian said sincerely.

"Be careful not to have the telegram's content distorted," Shang Jianyao deliberately reminded her.

As for how the telegram could be distorted, it was definitely when the Clam Dragon Church didn't support the Old Task Force's plan.

Zhou Yue smiled when she heard that. "Don't worry. Our Church has a way to verify its authenticity."

With that said, she turned around and walked into a door at the side of the hall.

The four people from the Old Task Force patiently waited.

“Seriously, how impolite.” After a few minutes, Shang Jianyao grumbled, “Shouldn’t they offer a cup of honey water and a few biscuits at a time like this?”

Long Yuehong subconsciously gulped and had an idea. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

Whoa, Little Red has learned how to counterattack... Jiang Baimian found it funny. From the corner of her eye, she saw Bai Chen nod indiscernibly as if she were a little relieved.

Shang Jianyao nodded in agreement. “That’s true.”

He then said, “I previously used the name ‘Gu Zhiyong’ to eat Glorious Scale’s fried chicken wing on your behalf. Remember to join them later and fulfill your obligations.”

“Wait, why me?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise. You were clearly the one eating the fried chicken wing!

Shang Jianyao smiled and glanced at him. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

How vengeful. This fellow... Long Yuehong shut his mouth and stopped provoking Shang Jianyao.

After waiting for a few minutes, Zhou Yue returned to the hall and said to the four Old Task Force members, “The higher-ups say that we can give it a try.”

From the looks of it, the Clam Dragon Church’s Dream Protectors also want to know what information the Superior Heartless will deliver... Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. “Shall we go to Officer Genova together?”

Jiang Baimian was rather proactive in this matter because it very likely involved one of the Old Task Force’s main missions. This was also one of her ideals; she wanted to figure out the cause and transmission mechanism of the Heartless disease and remove the sword of destruction that hung high above humans.

Furthermore, she might even be able to take the opportunity to resolve the latent dangers brought about by the Superior Heartless and complete Genava's commission to obtain the qualifications to speak to the Source Brain.

When the time came, the Old Task Force might be able to take a step further in investigating the cause of the Old World's destruction.

Zhou Yue thought for a moment and said, "No rush. Who will stay in River East and take on the role of an observer?"

Just as she said that, the tall young man opposite her replied with a smile, "Me."

You look very confident... Zhou Yue subconsciously asked, "Aren't you afraid?"

Shang Jianyao nodded seriously. "He's my friend."

"Huh?" Zhou Yue was confused. "You guys knew each other in the past?"

"We just became friends," Shang Jianyao explained.

The more Zhou Yue listened, the more confused she became. In the end, she gave up on asking. In any case, everything was but a dream; why so serious?

She deliberated for a moment and said, "I'll stay too. In Nanke Convent, I have the Kalendaria's blessing and the mirrors' protection. I don't have to worry about the 'death experience.'"

Jiang Baimian looked at her left arm. "Me too."

She then said to Long Yuehong and Bai Chen, "As a backup team, you are to be prepared to provide support at all times."

This was a way to comfort Long Yuehong. In the massive illusion created by the Superior Heartless, her philosophy was 'don't move if possible.'

This was equivalent to Zhou Yue's 'the more you do, the more mistakes you make; the less you do, the fewer mistakes you make.'

...

River West, Geneva's house.

Jiang Baimian and Zhou Yue cooperatively described the 'observation plan' with the same reasons as what was previously mentioned.

Geneva—who was still in its military uniform—stood up and paced back and forth. "Indeed. The longer this drags on, the more likely an accident will happen. However, it won't be a simple matter to initiate a mass evacuation to River West. Something might happen in the middle..."

The silver-black smart bot walked in silence for a while before saying, "I'll report this to the Source Brain."

With that said, it stood there motionless.

In just a minute or two, Geneva opened its mouth and spoke in a mellow, masculine voice. "The Source Brain has agreed to the attempt, but I have to bear all the consequences."

Jiang Baimian opened her mouth in a bid to persuade it, but she didn't make a sound in the end.

She looked at Shang Jianyao and realized that her companion had a similar performance.

It was better for Geneva to make a decision on this matter.

Geneva looked around and glanced out the window at the lawn that was bathed in the night. It then said in a deep voice, "Give it a try."

At this moment, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others actually felt a sense of trust from this smart bot.

Shang Jianyao stood up without hesitation and replied, “Don’t worry.”

...

After a night of rest, Tarnan’s local residents, foreign hunters, and caravan members retreated to River West with the corresponding supplies under the organization of a large number of robots the next morning and moved into the temporary housing assigned to them.

This matter didn’t end until noon.

After that, the teams in charge of the various defense zones retreated and spent a certain amount of time reconstructing the defense line.

At Nanke Convent, Zhou Yue looked at the empty street and sighed with emotion. “Compared to the past, it’s like an illusion now.”

Although many areas on Tarnan River were previously uninhabited and quiet, it was still very lively here. People came and went endlessly.

Now, the fallen leaves fluttered in the wind, becoming the only protagonist.

“How do you know that it wasn’t an illusion in the past? Maybe what’s happening now is real?” Shang Jianyao asked.

Zhou Yue frowned. “That’s true.”

She then corrected Shang Jianyao. “It’s all an illusion and a dream.”

Jiang Baimian stretched her left arm and said, “Let’s go in and wait.”

At this moment, the sky was a little dark. The Superior Heartless was about to arrive.

Under the sunlight during the day, there were too many buildings in Tarnan that had mirror-like effects. Therefore, Zhou Yue believed that the other party would wait for a better opportunity unless there was no other choice.

After entering Nanke Convent, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao each found a futon and sat cross-legged because the rows of black recliners were gone.

Jiang Baimian smiled at Zhou Yue and casually chatted with her. “Abbess Zhou, actually, this is pretty good. Why did you create an illusion previously and set up something that doesn’t match the style here?”

Currently, there were only pillars, shrines, mats, and three people in Nanke Convent. The extreme emptiness gave off an austere sense of holiness.

Zhou Yue sighed and said, “On the one hand, it’s to practice my abilities and discover the tricks involved. On the other hand, many believers aren’t that pious nowadays. I have to put on a show to show that there are many Clam Dragon Church parishioners and that we are worth joining.”

She looked as if she had deep thoughts about this.

Shang Jianyao suggested, “I think the Holy Communion needs to be reformed. Honey water and small biscuits are good, but they’re only suitable as desserts...”

Zhou Yue didn’t find it odd and smiled. “Every time Glorious Scale makes fried chicken wings on the street, even I want to line up. However, I’m afraid of being recognized.”

“You can wear a mask,” Jiang Baimian said before Shang Jianyao could.

“No, that’s just burying one’s head in the sand.” Zhou Yue shook her head.

As the three of them chatted, the sky gradually darkened, and the wind slowly turned cold.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Zhou Yue simultaneously stopped talking and focused.



After a while, the sky turned darker, and the wind became stronger. Even with Jiang Baimian's courage, she became much more tense.

Zhou Yue raised her body and slightly spread her arms. She looked into the void and muttered to herself, "Clam Dragon, thou art supreme!"

After praying, she saw Shang Jianyao look over and heard him ask with a smile, "Can I sing?"

"Sure, but..." Before Zhou Yue could finish speaking, Shang Jianyao—who was sitting cross-legged—tapped his thigh and hummed a song.

The strong winds howled, and night was about to descend. A clear melody sounded in Jiang Baimian's ears.

"One roar of laughter over the sea, both shores' tides washed and cleaned..."

Chapter 277: Consciousness Infection

In the pitch-black night, a loud and clear song echoed from the uninhabited River East. It was as if all danger and difficulties would flow along with the current and disappear into the wind.

Jiang Baimian gently hummed a melody and psyched herself to optimal condition. After singing a stanza, she turned to look at Shang Jianyao and asked with a smile, "Why didn't you use the small speaker?"

"In such an environment, you have to sing this song yourself to have the feeling." The person who replied was the Shang Jianyao who strove for perfection.

He even provided an improved opinion. "It feels better when you're singing and slapping yourself on the leg."

Jiang Baimian imagined it and said, "I'll give it a try later."

In front of the shrine, Zhou Yue—who had mirrors all over her head, waist, and hands—looked at them. She felt like she didn't fit in.

"Is it really suitable to sing at a time like this?"

“Forget it, forget it. Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

These thoughts flashed across Zhou Yue’s mind before finally settling on the way she was most accustomed to handling things.

Just as Shang Jianyao gently patted his thigh again and was about to hum a melody, the entire Nanke Convent suddenly turned pitch black. All the light bulbs seemed to have instantly lost their power.

Soon, Jiang Baimian and the others found themselves in a small area covered by green trees under the illumination of some light.

The buildings here weren’t too tall. Warm light reflected from the glass windows, making the night less quiet and desolate.

Zhou Yue looked around and asked, “The estate where Jiang Xiaoyue jumped off the building?”

“Probably.” Jiang Baimian gave an affirmative answer.

The three of them seemed to have been teleported. Everything around them felt so real.

“The information that the Superior Heartless wants to provide is hidden in this illusion?” This was the question Zhou Yue was most concerned about.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “Maybe. We probably might have to explore it ourselves.”

“The more you do, the more mistakes you make...” Zhou Yue still insisted on her philosophy.

Although they looked like they were standing in the middle of the estate, they were actually sitting cross-legged on mats.

Just as she said that, the environment changed. Just like Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others’ previous experience, the three of them didn’t have to do anything before entering the corresponding building and arriving outside Jiang Xiaoyue’s residence.

It was the same crowded door, with people scrambling to peek through the cracks.

Terror, despair, and breakdown echoed in Zhou Yue's ears.

“Are you bent on wanting me dead... Are you bent on wanting me dead...?”

She then saw the house's interior, the distorted faces stuck to the floor-to-ceiling windows, and Jiang Xiaoyue sitting on the railing.

The next second, Jiang Xiaoyue jumped out of the window.

Amidst the sound of something heavy falling to the ground, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Zhou Yue felt their thoughts being swallowed by a vortex. Their rationality was drowned by darkness, and their consciousness swayed like a falling willow.

After they broke free from this feeling, they realized that they were still in the estate covered by green trees. It was no different from the beginning.

They were already familiar with the subsequent developments. They entered the room again and again, passed through the prying crowd, and entered Jiang Xiaoyue's home. They watched Jiang Xiaoyue mutter to herself as she committed suicide by jumping off the building. They then experienced the pain of her consciousness turning into a candle in the wind and her thoughts being torn to pieces.

They seemed to be trapped in this period of time, unable to escape or leave.

As she repeatedly experienced this over and over again, Jiang Baimian's consciousness gradually turned blurry. Her entire body became more and more muddle-headed.

Suddenly, the chip on her left arm gave her a preset signal. This was to remind her that something about her wasn't right!

What's wrong... Jiang Baimian's thoughts partially returned to normal in an instant, and she realized that she was repeating something.

The sentence was: “Are you bent on wanting me dead... Are you bent on wanting me dead...?”

This... Jiang Baimian instantly sobered up and realized that she was standing on a railing. In front of her was an open glass window, and below her was the ground that had shrunk significantly.

She was just about to jump off a building!

The corresponding spot didn't have a mangled human body.

I became Jiang Xiaoyue? I really entered this illusion? What will happen if I actually jump down? A series of questions flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind as fear rose in her heart.

She quickly turned her head and looked at where Shang Jianyao was. She then realized that Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a short, dark-blue down jacket—was also standing on the railing, one hand reaching for her head.

During this process, Shang Jianyao endured the night breeze and kept his gaze on the ground as if he were considering jumping down.

“I'm already awake,” Jiang Baimian said when she saw this.

“That's good.” Shang Jianyao retracted his right hand.

Jiang Baimian asked curiously, “You weren't affected? You didn't become Jiang Xiaoyue?”

“The infected me has already been dragged away. I'm the calm and rational me now,” Shang Jianyao replied calmly.

You can do this? There are benefits to being mentally ill? That's true. This is different from Qiao Chu's Forced Bewitchment. He doesn't succumb to the spell immediately; it requires repeated attempts to be infected. Switching personalities can indeed allow him to effectively escape the effects... Jiang Baimian nodded in enlightenment.

She then thought of another person. Zhou Yue!

Shang Jianyao pointed ahead and said, "We might have to give Abbess Zhou a little stimulation."

Jiang Baimian looked over and realized that Zhou Yue was in another similar room. She was also standing on the railing and leaning against the window, prepared to jump down.

Her black hair was disheveled as she muttered to herself with listless eyes, "Are you bent on wanting me dead... Everything is but a dream; why so serious...? Are you bent on wanting me dead... Everything is but a dream; why so serious...?"

She seemed to be struggling and couldn't make up her mind on whether to jump off the building.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian didn't care if the other party's actual spot had been warped by the illusion. She directly stretched out her left hand and spread her fingers in Zhou Yue's direction.

A silver-white electric arc jumped out and illuminated the surroundings with crackling sounds.

In the blink of an eye, the electric arc landed on Zhou Yue, making her body tremble.

The open window, the faces against the glass, the room with the lights on, and the residential estate covered by green trees became extremely illusory and quickly disappeared.

Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and Zhou Yue remained sitting on mats. Around them were shrines and pillars.

"The hallucination just now was a little strange..." Zhou Yue shook her numb hand. "I actually still feel like I was electrocuted."

"Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?" Shang Jianyao replied.

Jiang Baimian realized a problem from Zhou Yue's sigh. "It's indeed a little strange. Why was our consciousness affected to make us feel like we had become Jiang Xiaoyue?" Shouldn't the Superior Heartless's illusions focus on distorting environmental information and replicating the target's condition? When could he directly affect the target's consciousness?

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian's question, Zhou Yue widened her eyes. "That's right! Our domain's Illusion can't do this, at least not at the Mind Corridor level..."

As she spoke, she stopped and revealed an awkward smile. I've let it slip again!

Jiang Baimian politely ignored this and thought for a moment before saying, "He obtained mystical items from other domains inside the Mind Corridor?"

"That's possible," Zhou Yue agreed.

"There's another possibility," Jiang Baimian continued. Her expression became rather serious. "The one affecting our consciousness isn't the Superior Heartless but the illusion itself."

"The illusion itself?" Zhou Yue was a little confused.

Jiang Baimian explained, "He should've replicated his encounter and created this illusion. Since it's a replica, he might've copied some of the strange aspects of Jiang Xiaoyue's mind world, and that could've produced an effect."

"In other words," Shang Jianyao summarized Jiang Baimian's words, "the one affecting our consciousness isn't the Superior Heartless but Jiang Xiaoyue's mind world."

Zhou Yue shrank back. "That sounds a little terrifying..."

She then nodded and said, "In theory, there's such a possibility."

"Jiang Xiaoyue's mind world is truly a strange place..." Shang Jianyao helped voice out the feelings of the two ladies present. "It's no wonder that the Superior Heartless developed an obsession."

As Zhou Yue secretly agreed, she asked, "Didn't you say that he wanted to enter Nanke Convent and inform us of important information? Why didn't he come in and only create an illusion instead?"

"T-this is only a guess." Jiang Baimian was a little speechless.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao shook his head and said, “Because you guys are rude.”

“Huh?” Zhou Yue looked at the tall young man in confusion. “Should I stand up to welcome him?”

Shang Jianyao pointed at the mirror in front of him. “There are too many mirrors here. How do you expect him to come in?”

“That’s right!” Zhou Yue came to a realization.

Jiang Baimian immediately understood the crux of the matter.

She and Zhou Yue looked at each other and took a deep breath. Jiang Baimian then flipped the mirrors around her and turned her body to face outward.

Amidst the howling winds, the tree branches in the convent’s impluvium rustled in the night.

After two to three minutes, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Zhou Yue cast their gazes at the hall’s entrance at the same time.

A figure stumbled out of the darkness; he was an old man past his prime. He had messy grayish-white hair and wore all kinds of clothes. His eyes were turbid and bloodshot.

As he walked, he looked back.

In the void, faces appeared. Their expressions were warped, and their eyes were red.

The Superior Heartless walked faster and faster. In the end, he actually ran, but he couldn’t escape the countless faces that appeared in the darkness around him.

Gradually, a half-high railing and an open glass window appeared in front of him.

The Superior Heartless mounted the railing and muttered to himself with a dazed expression, “Are you bent on wanting me dead... Are you bent on wanting me dead...?”

This voice was feminine and ethereal. It didn't sound like it came from a man at all but a woman from somewhere distant.

At this moment, the Superior Heartless's pupils reflected Nanke Convent's shrine, reflecting the dragon symbol made of mirror shards.

He suddenly stretched out his hand, and a hoarse sound came from his throat like a dying beast struggling with all its might.

Shang Jianyao, Zhou Yue, and Jiang Baimian each took a few steps toward the illusion before finally hearing the words that seemed to be squeezed out of the Superior Heartless's chest.

“Five, zero, three.”

Chapter 278: Everything is But a Dream, Why So Serious?

“Five, zero, three.”

Jiang Baimian had expected the Superior Heartless to give all kinds of ‘hints,’ but she never expected it to be three numbers.

What does this mean? What does this represent? A secret code used by the Clam Dragon Church? A series of questions flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind.

At this moment, the Superior Heartless—who had said these three numbers—seemed to have finally released the heavy boulder weighing down on his heart. Clear, deep-brown colors surfaced in his turbid eyes.

The dark-brown color was instantly swallowed by the turbidness like a drowning person who had finally given up on struggling.

“Gasp...” The Superior Heartless let out a sound that resembled a beast's threat toward humans from his throat.

This made it difficult to believe that he could speak human words a few seconds ago.

Once he was relieved of his obsession, he was no different from a normal Superior Heartless.



Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian raised her right hand, flipped the mirror over, and aimed it at her target. She wouldn't allow such a dangerous existence to unleash its abilities unrestrainedly.

Similarly, Abbess Zhou Yue had a similar reaction.

At this moment, a figure appeared in front of them—Shang Jianyao's tall figure.

He walked in front of the Superior Heartless and calmly looked him in the eye.

The gasping in the Superior Heartless's throat gradually reduced, and his highly tense body relaxed a lot.

“Do you still treat yourself as a human?” Shang Jianyao asked.

His back was facing Zhou Yue, and his side was facing Jiang Baimian. The expression on his face was shrouded in the shadows brought about by the Superior Heartless. It was indistinct, but the two ladies present could tell that his voice was deep.

The Superior Heartless hunched his body slightly, and his turbid eyes were bloodshot. He didn't respond to Shang Jianyao, nor did he leave. He stood rooted to the ground, and the illusion he had created had already vanished without a trace.

Zhou Yue's heart palpitated. She took two steps forward and stood beside Shang Jianyao. Then, she looked at the Superior Heartless and gently asked, “Are you Protector Fan?”

The grizzled elder looked at her with a beast-like gaze. His expression didn't change, nor did he speak.

“I'll take it as a yes.” Zhou Yue sighed. “After you disappeared, your wife couldn't find you. She was overly worried and fell seriously ill. She couldn't be treated... Your child and granddaughter never gave up. They wandered the Ashlands, searching every place you might've gone... The Church ordered every convent to pay attention to your tracks...”

The Superior Heartless quietly listened, but it was unknown if he understood. However, the gasping in his throat had completely vanished.

After Zhou Yue finished speaking, he suddenly whimpered, turned around, and ran out of Nanke Convent like a wild ape.

Jiang Baimian didn't stop him because of the danger he posed.

Jiang Baimian paid attention to the door and didn't randomly move to prevent herself from being affected by the illusion. She muttered to herself, "Phew, the information he wants to transmit is actually the numbers: five, zero, and three..."

As she hesitated, she had an idea. "Is this the door number representing Jiang Xiaoyue's mind world in the Mind Corridor?"

"Maybe." Zhou Yue nodded slightly. "Every door in the Mind Corridor has a different number. I wonder how it came about."

"Electronic—Identification number?" Shang Jianyao almost said 'electronic card number,' but he forcefully changed it to something found in the Old World.

"It's not that long." Zhou Yue denied this guess.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. "So, the Superior Heartless is reminding your Church's other Dream Protectors to avoid Room 503 in the Mind Corridor?"

Or they could gather their manpower and conduct a thorough cleanup under the Kalendaria's protection.

"Maybe." Zhou Yue didn't know much about such matters, so she could only answer ambiguously.

As they discussed the numbers 'five,' 'zero,' and 'three,' a beast's roar suddenly sounded from outside Nanke Convent.

"Woo!" This voice was shrill and hoarse.

The three of them looked at each other, each holding a mirror. As they swept the mirrors around, they walked to the door.

Just as they passed the impluvium and came to the streets, they saw the Superior Heartless standing on the rooftop opposite them.

As countless stars shimmered, he jumped forward with all his might.

His figure rapidly plummeted as his grayish-white hair danced in the wind.

Clap!

The Superior Heartless landed on the street and splattered into pieces. Bright-red and dazzling blood quickly flowed out from under him as if it were creating a puddle.

This scene froze in Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and Zhou Yue's eyes.

When they arrived, the target was no longer breathing. He had no signs of life.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian recalled the scene of Jiang Xiaoyue committing suicide by jumping off a building in horror, and she couldn't help but sigh.

Zhou Yue stared at the scene for a while and sighed silently. She raised her body and slightly spread her arms. Then, she said in an ethereal and solemn tone, "The New World is beyond the dream. May you please the deity."

After a brief prayer and blessing, Zhou Yue saw the tall young man from the Qian Bai Team walk to the corpse and quietly watch it for a few seconds.

He then took off his short, dark-blue down jacket and squatted down gently. He covered the deceased's face with his clothes, covering his skyward, turbid eyes that had lost their focus.

Phew... Jiang Baimian sighed again.

...

In Nanke Convent.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao worked together to move the Superior Heartless's corpse in. According to the Clam Dragon Church's teachings, they replaced the short down jacket with a white towel and covered the deceased's face.

This meant that he would never fall into a dream again.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Zhou Yue sat down cross-legged one after another. They guarded the corpse and waited for dawn.

The speechless silence lasted for a while before Jiang Baimian broke the still atmosphere casually. "Abbess Zhou, do you think he jumped off the building with his last bit of rationality to end his life as a Heartless, or did he repeat Jiang Xiaoyue's actions because of the effects of her mind world?"

Zhou Yue stared at the corpse covered by a white towel and smiled. "I hope it's because of the former reason. This way, he can escape the illusion as a human."

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a while before asking, "Abbess Zhou, how did you join the Clam Dragon Church?"

Zhou Yue retracted her gaze and smiled. "I'm an orphan adopted by the Clam Dragon Church. I grew up in the Church, and there's no such thing as joining or not joining."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly when she heard that. "No wonder you follow the Clam Dragon Church's teachings so well. You have integrated it into your daily actions and words."

Shang Jianyao—who was sitting cross-legged beside her—was still staring at the corpse. His eyes were calm, and it was unknown what he was thinking.

Zhou Yue laughed self-deprecatingly and shook her head. "No, I wasn't like this in the past."

“Oh?” Jiang Baimian sounded with a questioning tone.

Zhou Yue looked up slightly. It was unknown if she was looking at Nanke Convent’s roof beam or the Kalendaria in the void. “I once had a very good friend. She was also an orphan adopted by the Church, and we lived in the same room for many years. We agreed that whoever became a Dream Guide or even a Dreamland Priestess would apply to have them sent to their convent and be good friends for life.

“Later, one day...” At this point, Zhou Yue paused, and her gaze seemed to be a little empty. “She contracted the Heartless disease.”

Jiang Baimian opened her mouth, but she couldn’t find the right words.

Zhou Yue then said, “After I became an adult, I fell in love with a fellow disciple. He was a very good person. He was tall and shy. He always stammered when he saw us girls and couldn’t say much.

“He was also very kind. Once, he followed the other Church members to a nomad settlement in the wilderness that had suffered a flood to save the refugees there and search for children suitable to be brought back for nurturing.” As she spoke, Zhou Yue wore a faint smile as if she had returned to the past.

“Later, later...” Her expression gradually turned blank. “They told me that a plague broke out in the settlement, and he didn’t return.”

After a few seconds of silence, Zhou Yue looked at Jiang Baimian and revealed her usual smile. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

Chapter 279: Celebrities

Jiang Baimian looked at Zhou Yue’s smiling face and fell silent for a while. Underneath the light bulb’s yellowish light, she gave up on any additional thoughts and muttered to herself, “I’ve read a lot in the past. They come from wilderness nomad settlements, private diaries, production records, and allocation lists.

“Through them, I felt like I saw groups of humans struggling to survive in that era of chaos and harsh environments, relying on relatively unclean water sources, low-production farms, and abandoned towns and villages.

“I could sense the sincere joy they felt when they finally found a clean water source or a water cleansing chip. I could sense the pride they felt when they painstakingly cleared the trenches and laid the foundation for the next year’s planting. I could sense their happiness when they obtained a harvest or hunted enough beasts. I could sense their appreciation for every sacrifice and their relief at successfully protecting their settlements.

“Looking at this information makes me feel like I’ve joined them and experienced a sense of satisfaction from nothing.”

Zhou Yue was a little entranced. “What happened next?”

Jiang Baimian looked down at the corpse and smiled. “Later, a Heartless outbreak erupted. Many people lost their minds overnight and became beasts. They attacked their former companions who had fought alongside them. The settlement that many people built bit by bit was destroyed in the blink of an eye. Only some information remained as a testament to their hard work and struggles.

“If we had discovered it a little later, the information might’ve scattered in the wind. Yes, there were also plagues, weather changes, and famine. Some were invaded by bandits and large factions after they resisted with all their might. However, these had better outcomes than the sudden Heartless outbreaks or insurmountable circumstances.”

Zhou Yue opened her mouth, but it was unknown if she wanted to sigh or say, “Everything is but a dream; why so serious?”

At this moment, she heard Jiang Baimian’s tone drift a little.

“Therefore, I’ve always wanted to figure out the theory behind the Heartless disease’s outbreak and the transmission mechanism and figure out the reason for the Old World’s destruction. Otherwise, all efforts would ultimately be for naught. Even if this is just a dream, I have to work hard to change it before I wake up.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. “Rebuilding order, restoring production, and changing the environment are also important components to saving the world. However, those large factions will do it; it’s not our place to worry. We can only set ourselves a goal that sounds unrealistic.”

At this moment, Shang Jianyao looked up at Zhou Yue and asked with a smile, “So, are you going to save all of humanity with us?”

If it were anyone else, they would definitely scoff inwardly at this moment. However, Zhou Yue adhered to the philosophy of ‘everything is but a dream; why so serious’ and replied with a smile, “We are also saving all of humanity. Our goal is to make everyone believe in Shattered Mirror and serve and please ‘Her.’ Finally, with ‘Her’ help, we will escape from the dream and enter the New World without the Heartless disease, war, plague, or famine.”

Since Zhou Yue didn’t mock her ideals, Jiang Baimian didn’t say things like ‘self-reliance’ or ‘don’t place your hopes on the elusive Kalendarium.’ She smiled and said, “Then, let’s see which side will succeed earlier.”

“Want to compete?” Shang Jianyao asked.

Zhou Yue shook her head and smiled. “Regardless of which side succeeds, it’s a good thing. There’s no need for a competition.”

As she spoke, she sighed with emotion. “With the strength your team has shown, you definitely won’t have to worry about food sources in the Ashlands. You can find a large faction to settle down in and lead a better and more stable life. For example, Tarnan.”

“But perhaps they will contract the Heartless disease one day.” Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. “And I don’t know if it will be my turn next. There’s no way to prevent or treat it, much less figure out who will ‘hit the jackpot.’”

Perhaps it was because of this unknown fear that the people who had first resolved their hunger in the various large factions would also be developed into believers by the various public or secret religions.

In the Ashlands, almost no group had a sense of security.

If one really had to name one, Pangu Biology’s employees could barely be counted.

Zhou Yue was momentarily speechless. After a while, she said, “I just want to express my admiration for your strength.”

“You can tell?” Shang Jianyao was ‘surprised.’

Jiang Baimian smiled and added, "I don't think we did anything?"

Apart from knocking out a bunch of people at Wild Pigeon Bar and preventing them from being affected by illusions to the point of killing each other and guarding their own defense area for one day and one night without letting the Superior Heartless break through, the Old Task Force had never showcased their strength.

Zhou Yue casually replied, "The fact that you were able to survive his repeated illusions, make him take the initiative to create an illusion that originated from Jiang Xiaoyue's mind world, infer the hidden information behind this, and choose to stay behind without fear of danger means that you have brains and are very confident in your strength."

She was referring to the Superior Heartless on the ground.

"It might also be a wild guess. People are also rash." Shang Jianyao gave another possibility.

"A rash and brainless team won't live to see this day." Zhou Yue smiled and glanced at the fellow. As Nanke Convent's abbess and a Dreamland Priestess of the Clam Dragon Church, she still had this bit of insight, other than not being capable of remembering faces.

"That's because our names are good." Shang Jianyao had a logical and self-consistent theory.

Jiang Baimian held in her laughter and prepared to see how Zhou Yue would answer.

The corners of Zhou Yue's mouth twitched. After some thought, she decided not to continue arguing with him.

There was no need to be so serious.

The three of them alternated between staying silent and chatting. They guarded the Superior Heartless corpse until the sky lit up.

As the silhouette of the convent's impluvium gradually appeared, Jiang Baimian took out her phone and dialed a number.



“Hello?” Geneva’s slightly synthetic male voice sounded from the other end.

“Officer Geneva, the problem has been resolved. You can send someone over to deal with the aftermath.” After Jiang Baimian said that, she added, “Yes, it’s also possible that what we experienced was only an illusion. Be careful on the way; don’t give up on using mirrors for protection.”

Geneva fell silent for two seconds before saying, “Alright.”

...

At 9 a.m., after confirming that the Superior Heartless was truly dead and that Tarnan was no longer affected by an illusion, the local residents, foreign hunters, and caravan members—who had previously retreated to River West—returned to River East one after another with the corresponding supplies.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian—who had come out of Nanke Convent—they nodded in greeting to express their respect.

They had all heard that the two Ruin Hunters and Abbess Zhou Yue had stayed behind last night to resolve the Superior Heartless threat. Earlier, they had also saved a bar full of people.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had just pulled open the jeep door and sat in the backseat when Long Yuehong turned his head and smiled. “You guys are now celebrities in Tarnan.”

He sat in the passenger seat.

Shang Jianyao emphasized, “All of us.”

“That’s right. Our Qian Bai team has become famous in Tarnan.” Jiang Baimian understood what Shang Jianyao was getting at.

Bai Chen—who was driving—couldn’t help but whisper, “Why is it still the Qian Bai Team?” She had always been the most low-key member of the team.

“Because you’re the only Intermediate Hunter,” Jiang Baimian replied with a smile. She then recounted the previous night’s experience with Shang Jianyao.

She focused on the three matters—consciousness infection, 503, and the Superior Heartless’s suicide by jumping off a building.

Toward the end, Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but sigh. “Even I feel like joining a religion and giving their Mass a try to see if I can awaken. The secret hidden in Room 503 of the Mind Corridor is definitely not something to overlook...”

Now, it seemed like only Shang Jianyao could explore that place in the future.

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao seriously suggested, “Shall our team collectively join the Furnace Church and be baptized?”

A sauna should be quite enjoyable... Jiang Baimian was a little tempted.

In any case, she wasn’t truly pious. It was also mainly for the sake of an Awakening; she had no devotion to the Door of Scorching.

“It’s an idea...” Bai Chen muttered as she drove.

Long Yuehong—who was in the passenger seat—was a little scared when he heard that. He weakly asked, “Should we report to the company first?”

“Ha, just joking, just joking.” Jiang Baimian laughed dryly.

Bai Chen then asked, “Have you told Genava all the details?”

“No.” Jiang Baimian shook her head. “We discussed it with Abbess Zhou and only mentioned the general development. We didn’t specify what the consciousness infection brought about by Jiang Xiaoyue’s mind world and the information that the Superior Heartless desperately tried to transmit.”

“I see.” Long Yuehong had expected this. After all, this was also considered a secret of the Clam Dragon Church.

At this moment, he heard Shang Jianyao lower his voice. “Will we be silenced?”

Long Yuehong was shocked and felt that it wasn’t impossible.

“If it were any other religion, I don’t think we can be careless,” Jiang Baimian said with a smile. “But the Clam Dragon Church... Uh, everything is but a dream; why so serious?”

“That’s true.” Long Yuehong thought of Abbess Zhou’s appearance and performance and felt that she couldn’t or wouldn’t do deeds like silencing them.

As he spoke, the jeep drove back to Serene Dream Hotel.

As soon as the four of them entered the lobby, Aynor—who was huddled at the front desk—stood up and asked curiously, “Did you finish off the Superior Heartless yesterday? He’s so strong...”

Before the lady boss could finish speaking, Shang Jianyao asked in confusion, “How do you know he’s very strong?”

“I-I heard about it! Everyone is saying that this Superior Heartless is very strong and different from the previous ones.” Aynor stammered and organized her words.

Why are you stuttering... Jiang Baimian’s thoughts raced as she smiled and replied, “It can’t be considered resolved by us. This matter has a deep relationship with the Clam Dragon Church. Oh right, did you encounter other Superior Heartless in the past?”

Chapter 280: Room

Aynor was stunned for a moment. “Ha, how is that possible? They’re the Superior Heartless I’ve met in Tarnan over the years.”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others to ask again, she curiously asked, “What exactly happened?”

Lady Boss, you look to be in your thirties and about to turn 40. There's no need to mention the exact age, but why are you acting so gossipy? Jiang Baimian had learned many old-era terms from Jiang Xiaoyue's information. However, she could also understand that gossip had nothing to do with age. The freer a person was, the more they loved gossip.

"Actually, it's a series of matters that happened when a Dream Protector from the Clam Dragon Church contracted the Heartless disease..." Jiang Baimian recounted everything she could, only hiding a few key points.

In any case, the lady boss would definitely be able to find out about Jiang Xiaoyue if she was willing to spend the effort.

"Is that so..." Aynor—who was wearing a gorgeous dress—nodded. "It sounds like a ghost story, especially the last jump."

"Yes." Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong agreed.

If the Superior Heartless had chosen another method of suicide, they might not have felt this way. However, it was inevitable that they would make some connections when he jumped down from the building like Jiang Xiaoyue.

Aynor sat down again and smiled as she looked at the computer screen. "No matter what, you should be given half the credit for resolving this matter. I'll tell Old Man Gu later and see how I can get you some substantial repayment."

Long Yuehong had always been a little curious about the lady boss's relationship with President Gu and couldn't help but ask, "Madam Aynor, are you familiar with President Gu?"

"Of course, I'm familiar. How can I not be? We've been neighbors for so many years. Would you believe me if I said I'm not familiar with him?" Aynor chuckled and said, "That old man is smart. He doesn't lose out on anything other than being a little timid. He'd rather let something pass than take the risk."

After chatting for a while, the Old Task Force took the elevator and returned to the second floor.

Aynor held her chin and watched their backs disappear behind the elevator door before slowly retracting her gaze.

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

...

In a pink room filled with toy bears, lace dresses, and various electronic products.

Aynor sat cross-legged on a bed and stared at the vermilion door in confusion.

Behind her, which was also the bedhead, hung a large decorative painting. On it was a shimmering dark sea and a few indistinct islands.

Aynor jumped off the bed and walked to the door step by step, holding the brass handle.

She gently twisted and pulled, and the vermilion door opened.

Outside the door was a corridor covered in a thick, dark-yellow carpet. On both sides of the corridor were rooms.

No matter which end of the corridor one looked at, they couldn't see the end.

The countless rooms had vermilion wooden doors and brass locks. Apart from the golden door numbers, everything else was identical.

Aynor stepped into the corridor and looked around. Her gaze swept past the irregular door numbers.

Her body trembled at some point in time.

At this moment, the corridor was extremely quiet. Nothing happened.

A few seconds later, Aynor suddenly turned around, walked back to the room, and slammed the wooden door.

On her vermilion door, golden numbers identified it: “506.”

...

In Room 221, Long Yuehong saw Jiang Baimian bring out the radio transceiver. “Team Leader, aren’t we going to report to the company after we finish the call with the Source Brain?” He didn’t hide his confusion.

Previously, Genava had already clearly indicated that he could arrange for the Old Task force to communicate with the source brain after dealing with the matter regarding the Superior Heartless and retrieving the smart bots and auxiliary robots that had fallen off the cliff.

It would only take two to three days.

As Jiang Baimian wrote the telegram, she chuckled and replied, “Although I don’t think the Clam Dragon Church is an organization that will silence people, we can’t be completely unguarded.”

“Yes, we can’t have blind trust.” Shang Jianyao regained his identity as an honorary member of the Vigilance Church.

“This...” Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little nervous.

As Jiang Baimian quickly wrote, she smiled and said, “For such matters, one can never be too careful. Therefore, we still have to report what we’ve experienced. After that, the company will at least know where to look if we do lose contact suddenly, right?”

After casually saying that, she was suddenly stunned. She subconsciously glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that his expression was normal.

“Ahem...” Jiang Baimian cleared her throat. “Do you think there’s a problem with me writing this?”

She quickly read out the original telegram draft she had written up.

Bai Chen quietly listened and frowned. “Isn’t it too short?”

Jiang Baimian's telegram only mentioned the Superior Heartless's origins, encounters, and ending, as well as the illusion where Jiang Xiaoyue committed suicide by jumping off a building. It didn't mention the Old Task Force's inference, judgment, verification, and role.

Of course, the telegram included the numbers 'five,' 'zero,' and 'three.' However, there was no corresponding interpretation.

At the end of the telegram, Jiang Baimian also mentioned that she would be able to speak to the Source Brain in two to three days.

"How much content can a telegram contain? I'll add it to the report when we return to the company based on the prevailing circumstances." Jiang Baimian was already experienced in this regard.

The batch of computers they obtained from rescuing people hadn't been mentioned when they sent a telegram to the company saying that they had already arrived in Tarnan.

"It can be made into a serialized form," Shang Jianyao suggested.

"They don't want that," Jiang Baimian replied briskly.

'They' referred to the employees of the Security Department's communications department.

Jiang Baimian quickly translated the original telegram and sent it out.

After the Old Task Force had breakfast and was about to catch up on sleep, Pangu Biology replied with a telegram: "...Well done... After speaking to the Source Brain, you can return to the company to rest."

Long Yuehong actually felt a little happy to hear Jiang Baimian recite the last half of the sentence.

They had been on the surface for months, from late autumn to late winter. Coupled with the time needed for their return journey, they would definitely miss the most lively and joyous festival of Pangu Biology every year—New Year.

This made Long Yuehong miss home more than usual.

Just as Long Yuehong was about to say ‘finally,’ Shang Jianyao voiced his opinion. “That’s a little inauspicious.”

That’s true... Jiang Baimian suddenly felt that something unexpected might happen.

Bai Chen glanced at Long Yuehong without leaving a trace. She quickly retracted her gaze and gently slapped her face.

“What’s wrong?” Jiang Baimian asked curiously.

“It’s a habit of wilderness nomads in our area,” Bai Chen explained simply. “If you say or listen to something inauspicious, you can slap yourself and pretend that it never happened.”

“Is that so?” Long Yuehong tried to imitate Bai Chen’s actions.

Jiang Baimian asked in confusion, “Why didn’t you do this before?”

This wasn’t the first time that ominous words had been said amongst the Old Task Force.

Bai Chen fell silent for two seconds. “I didn’t believe in auspiciousness in the past.”

“...” Long Yuehong was at a loss for words.

...

After sleeping until the evening, the Old Task Force got up and went out to search for food.

After walking through a quiet alley, they arrived at Riverfront Avenue.

The street lamps here weren’t spaced very far apart. They were all lit up, illuminating the street as if it were daytime.



Under the light, stalls were set up one after another. On them were many items that had been obtained from the Old World's city ruins.

The people preaching, singing, dancing, and performing balancing acts gathered in one place, making Riverfront Avenue appear very lively.

This was just like what Shang Jianyao and the others had seen during the first night they arrived in Tarnan.

Recalling the empty silence of the past two days, Long Yuehong suddenly sighed with emotion. "I kind of understand the meaning of our previous work..."

"Not bad." Jiang Baimian smiled and nodded.

Bai Chen's eyes flickered as she thought of something.

Shang Jianyao turned his head to look at Long Yuehong and smiled. "So, should we save all of humanity together?"

Long Yuehong didn't ignore it like he had the past few times. He hesitated for a moment.

He opened his mouth, but he was surprised to see Shang Jianyao walk to the other side and join the Glorious Scale group to watch the performance excitedly.

The Glorious Scale's parishioners were walking around on stilts to showcase their balance.

In addition to this, they also did a human pyramid and made bicycles stand on a single wheel. In short, they depicted the teachings in various ways.

"Why does this look like an acrobatic team..." Jiang Baimian muttered softly.

Shang Jianyao didn't watch for long because his stomach didn't allow it.

The Old Task Force was out foraging for food. They walked all the way to Wild Pigeon Bar and pushed open the door.

As many of the regular customers were still in the hospital, the bar appeared very quiet. Only a few people were playing cards in a group.

Upon seeing the Qian Bai Team enter, the boss—Cai Yi—stood up and welcomed them at the door. His enthusiastic attitude and humble tone left Long Yuehong a little unaccustomed.

“Boss, there’s no need for that.” Jiang Baimian also shared the same feelings.

Cai Yi rubbed his palms and said, “It’s needed! It’s needed! If not for you, forget about whether this bar can continue. Who knows if I’d be standing here. What do you want to eat today? It’s on the house!”

“As long as it’s not canned food, biscuits, or energy bars,” Shang Jianyao requested.

Cai Yi laughed. “No problem. I’ll bring down the frozen meat at home and show you my skills. Oh right, President Gu said that everyone should gather some supplies and exchange for a pig in the next two days. We’ll set up a few tables at Nanke Convent later and slaughter the pig to make some dishes as a way to thank you.”

Long Yuehong and the others immediately salivated.

“Sounds great.” Jiang Baimian didn’t refuse and only said awkwardly, “Wouldn’t it be inappropriate to host it at Nanke Convent?”

Isn’t it inappropriate to hold a banquet, slaughter a pig, and cook in such a sacred and solemn religious place?

Cai Yi smiled. “Abbess Zhou agreed. She said: the sooner, the better.”

At this moment, the same sentence flashed across Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others’ minds: “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”