

## **Ad Infinitum 321**

### Chapter 321: Strange Room

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong were amused when they heard Shang Jianyao's answer. Even Bai Chen couldn't help but purse her lips.

This fellow also works hard when it comes to smearing himself!

"The name 'Zhang Qubing' is great," Jiang Baimian joked and said, "I'll call them and ask them what they saw on the surveillance cameras."

Just as she said that, she picked up the phone on the table and dialed a number.

After the line connected, she briefly explained Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's encounter last night and raised her questions.

She then listened to the person on the other end of the line as she tersely responded from time to time with a focused expression.

"It's as I expected." Finally, she hung up and said to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "There was nobody running naked in the surveillance cameras. Shang Jianyao did stand in front of Room 23 for a period of time as if he was talking to someone, but nobody lives there. The Order Supervisory Department opened the room this morning; there were no traces of human activity inside."

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly, raised his body halfway, raised his arms, and sang beautifully, "Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?"

"Do you think you suffered an illusion?" Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Your mental problems are in other areas. In theory, there shouldn't be any visual or auditory hallucinations. Besides, Little Red was beside you back then. He's a normal person, so it's even more unlikely for him to fall ill suddenly."

Long Yuehong was deeply gratified by his team leader's evaluation. "Yeah, yeah, but the Naturalism Church's philosophy doesn't sound like it believes in Shattered Mirror."

Bai Chen pointed out the problem with Long Yuehong's words. "The information from before mentioned that there's no definite connection between the belief in a Kalendaria and awakening abilities."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. "You can't say that. To be more precise, there's no absolute connection. The information also states that among the Kalendaria's believers, an Awakened's abilities are highly likely to belong to the corresponding domain."

But no matter what description he used, Long Yuehong's judgment couldn't be valid.

Jiang Baimian left her seat, paced a few steps back and forth, and deliberated before saying, "There are two possibilities. The first is that you encountered an illusion and that there was nobody running around naked. The second possibility is that the surveillance cameras were tampered with and that they recorded an illusion."

With their experience in Tarnan, they were extremely confident that the Shattered Mirror domain's abilities could affect electronic products. However, they weren't sure what level an Awakened needed to be to achieve this.

"Maybe all of them." Shang Jianyao suddenly became excited as he spoke. "I want to prepare the Eight Trigrams Mirror, the Confining Ghost Pouch, the Qian Yang Golden Lamp, and the Pure Yang Talisman Water!"

In human terms, they were makeup mirrors, linen pockets, flashlights, and bottled water with floating ashes.

It was obvious that Shang Jianyao had a deep impression of Abbess Zhou Yue's performance back then. Furthermore, he had grasped a series of phrases after studying the Old World's entertainment.

Jiang Baimian secretly curled the corners of her mouth and said, "There's no need; we'll just report our guesses. The company is large. I don't believe there aren't many powerful Awakened. It's better and safer to leave any problems to them. After all, someone can grab the wheel from us in the worst-case scenario."

Shang Jianyao had a look of disappointment.

Jiang Baimian had originally written a mission report for this trip. At this moment, she specially selected one of their encounters in Tarnan. Coupled with Shang Jianyao and the others' encounters, she gave simple feedback on what happened last night and raised the Old Task Force's guess.

As for doing a mental evaluation, she was still prepared to delay it until the review was over.

...

In the evening, Long Yuehong—who didn't have dinner at the Security Department's cafeteria—returned home. He rolled up his sleeves and showed his parents and siblings how to cook hotpot.

The bone soup stock had long been boiled, and the subsequent process was relatively simple. The family quickly surrounded the dining table and enjoyed a brand-new experience.

Long Dayong took out a piece of tender pork and dipped it in the sesame oil that had been mixed with salt, Tabasco peppers, garlic paste, and onions. He rolled it around before stuffing it into his mouth.

This was all that could be obtained from the Supplies Allocation Market on the 495th floor.

“Not bad...” Long Dayong praised in a muffled voice. “I only remember when I actually ate it. Your grandfather had mentioned something similar, but I couldn't get it before. After he died, nobody knew what to do. Sigh, it's just too wasteful of energy quotas...”

“Eat! Swallow your food before talking!” Gu Hong felt that Long Dayong was teaching the children a bad lesson.

Fortunately, Long Zhigu and Long Aihong were focused on picking up the scalded meat slices and didn't spare their father any attention.

Long Yuehong didn't snatch any from them. As he smiled and watched, he casually asked, “Mom, I heard that the Order Supervisory Department sent people to check Rooms 20 to 30?”

Gu Hong immediately nodded. “Yes, they came in the morning. There were still people who weren't at work back then, so they happened to see them.”

“Are they going to assign people to those empty rooms?” Long Yuehong asked despite knowing better.

Gu Hong wore an ‘are you stupid?’ expression. “Why would the Order Supervisory Department come to reassign the rooms? I guess someone used the empty rooms to do something bad.”

This wasn’t too rare in Pangu Biology. For example, although gambling was prohibited in the company, and whoever lost the game usually lost their seats and could only squat, it was inevitable that some people would bet their contribution points during a card game. The company definitely couldn’t manage family entertainment during festive seasons, nor was there a need to. However, real gambling couldn’t be done publicly. It could only be secretly carried out with the help of an unallocated room or someone’s home.

“Is that so...” Long Yuehong didn’t ask any further and immersed himself in eating hotpot.

...

Shortly after lights out, Long Yuehong appeared outside Room 23 in Zone C with a flashlight.

As expected, Shang Jianyao arrived after some time.

Long Yuehong was happy that his judgment was correct and asked, “Do you want to go in and conduct a search?”

This was also his goal.

He really couldn’t feel at ease with things happening in a room that wasn’t too far from his.

Although the company definitely had high-level personnel handling this matter and might’ve secretly resolved everything, he had to personally confirm it before he could truly feel at ease.

In any case, the Order Supervisory Department’s people had already gone in to search. There were no problems, nor did they issue any warnings to the surrounding residents about prying into the situation inside out of curiosity.

This made Long Yuehong feel that there were no latent dangers. Of course, he didn't say this out loud because he was afraid that whatever he said would turn out true.

Shang Jianyao sized up Long Yuehong and smiled brightly. "You really need to do a mental evaluation."

"Huh?" Long Yuehong was first stunned before he came to a realization. If it were in the past, he would definitely pretend that nothing had happened.

He lived each day as they came. After all, there was someone to grab the wheel if things turned bad; there was no need for him to worry.

How could he be as proactive as he was now?

As his expression changed slightly, Shang Jianyao walked to Room 23. He held the door handle with one hand and took out his electronic card with the other. Then, he inserted it into the crack and gently pried open the lock.

He gently turned the doorknob with his left hand and prepared to push open the door.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao stopped.

The curtains by the window beside the door were still tightly shut without any gaps.

Shang Jianyao seemed to have turned into a statue and stiffened for a few seconds.

"What's wrong?" Long Yuehong asked warily.

Finally, Shang Jianyao retracted his hand and electronic card and allowed the door to be locked again.

His face flickered under the flashlight's illumination.

Long Yuehong took a step back and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Shang Jianyao cast his gaze at him. “The moment I opened the door, I felt like my consciousness would leave my body. It was like there was a vortex inside.”

Long Yuehong’s pupils dilated as he glanced at Room 23. “How did you discover it?”

Shang Jianyao pointed at his head and smiled. “You’ll have to thank Mr. DiMarco.”

Sharp acumen brought about by the green night pearl? A sharp sense for such matters? Long Yuehong said in enlightenment, “Weren’t the people from the Order Supervisory Department fine during the day?”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Maybe it’s targeting us.”

Long Yuehong shuddered in fear.

“It’s also possible that something abnormal happens only after lights out.” Shang Jianyao raised the flashlight and shone it at his face. “It’s also possible that something has happened to those people, but it just hasn’t been discovered...”

His voice became ethereal and slow.

Gasp... Long Yuehong finally couldn’t help but gasp. “What should we do now?”

Shang Jianyao replied matter-of-factly, “Go back and sleep!”

With that said, he walked to Zone B.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and felt that it was indeed the best solution. He completely gave up on the idea of entering the room to search.

After taking a few steps, he suddenly heard Shang Jianyao say, “Don’t wake your parents up when you open the door yourself later.”

Afraid that I'll encounter a similar problem? Long Yuehong quickly nodded. "Alright."

Shang Jianyao fell silent again. He held the flashlight and slowly wandered back to Room 196 in Zone B.

He took out the brass key, inserted it into the keyhole, and gently twisted it.

When Shang Jianyao pushed open the door, his actions were so slow that they felt exaggerated. It was as if he was performing a silent play alone.

This slow process only lasted for two seconds before it returned to normal. Shang Jianyao easily opened the door and walked into his house.

Nothing happened.

...

The next morning, Room 14 on the 647th floor.

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but frown when she heard Shang Jianyao recount his feelings from yesterday. "It seems like there's really a problem with that room..."

"I suggest cannon bombardment." Shang Jianyao suggested a plan.

Jiang Baimian knew that he had made the connection with 'execution by cannon fire.' She smiled and said, "Let's not bother about this matter and let the higher-ups handle it."

"I'll warn them. Yes, say that you heard a slight commotion in that room again when you passed by last night. I'll suggest closely monitoring all the Order Supervisory Department employees who entered that room."

She didn't want to expose DiMarco's residual aura.

“That’s good.” Long Yuehong felt that this was the best solution. Not only would they warn the company’s higher-ups, but they also didn’t need to take the risk.

Jiang Baimian then smiled. “Let’s not talk about this. Our review is over, and the rewards have been distributed.”

Chapter 322: Promotion and Raise

Upon hearing that the rewards had been disbursed, not only did Long Yuehong instantly become excited, but even Bai Chen unconsciously changed her sitting posture and faced Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian clicked open a document and cleared her throat. “Our rewards are mainly derived from two aspects. The first is that we obtained a major breakthrough in our mission, learned of the nine research institutes’ existence, and grasped the secret of one of First City’s founders, Oray. This established a solid foundation for any subsequent investigations.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped as expected.

This, combined with Jiang Baimian’s official-sounding delivery, made Long Yuehong feel like he was participating in the school assembly during his schooling days.

They had yet to experience the influence of Pangu Biology’s All-Hands Meeting. They had only seen the end-of-year report performance at one of the secondary venues.

Although Jiang Baimian was mentally prepared for Shang Jianyao’s applause, she still gritted her teeth.

She maintained her serious expression and continued, “The second is that we rescued Lei Yunsong’s team and facilitated the company’s partnership with Weed City.”

As for contributing to the quelling of Weed City’s unrest, helping Redstone Collection defend against the Subhuman Alliance’s invasion, helping the Tarnan citizens escape the trauma brought about by the Superior Heartless, accepting the Vigilance Church’s employment to save all the humans in the Underground Ark, it was either unrelated to the company or an interlude in their main mission. There was no way to request a reward.



“So...” Jiang Baimian finished her previous sentence and gave the results.” I’ll be promoted one rank again and reach D8. Haha, I’m now at the officer commanding level, but I can only command the three of you. Yes... It will become more and more difficult to promote further. Even if I have a considerable harvest every time I’m outfield, I won’t reach D9 without four to five trips.”

Not to mention M1 management.

In the Security Department, a D8 could be in charge of a company with about 100 people.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped enthusiastically.

Jiang Baimian stopped him from saying anything else. “Continue calling me Team Leader. There’s some level of intimacy.”

“Shouldn’t that be Big White or Mianmian?” Shang Jianyao asked questions for anything he didn’t know.

Jiang Baimian’s eyebrows twitched as she raised her left hand and spread her fingers.

Shang Jianyao immediately shut his mouth.

“What about us?” Long Yuehong asked in anticipation.

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and smiled. “You and Hey have gotten a double promotion again. In other words, both of you are now D5s. Bai Chen is a D4. Uh, the promotions probably won’t be that fast in the future as well. You might just be promoted a rank at a time, or nothing at all.”

Long Yuehong didn’t hear what his team leader said next; his mind was filled with the term ‘D5.’ This not only meant that his monthly basic salary would increase by another 1,000 for a total of 3,800 contribution points, but it also meant that he had officially surpassed most of his employees and neighbors.

In Pangu Biology, D4 was a threshold. It meant that one had gone from an ordinary employee to a senior employee or high-ranking employee. Many people might not be able to reach this rank in Pangu Biology their entire lives. They would only receive the corresponding treatment close to retirement.

If they were in any other combat platoon from the Security Department, Long Yuehong, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen would be assistant platoon commanders.

Furthermore, apart from the basic salary, D4 employees also had an additional year-end allowance. It was roughly at 500 contribution points per month, depending on the actual position.

In the Security Department, this allowance was fixed at 500 because there were additional subsidies for fieldwork. Every promotion in rank gave an additional 200 points.

To put it simply, Jiang Baimian's basic salary was 5,300 contribution points per month based on her current D8 rank. At the same time, she could receive a total of 15,600 contribution points as an allowance at the end of the year (1,300 contribution points per month). This did not include her other allowances from her other positions.

Similarly, Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao now had a basic salary of 3,800 points per month. They could also receive 8,400 contribution points (700 points per month) at the end of the year.

This was worlds apart from the monthly 1,800 points that people got when they first started working, not to mention the lack of a year-end bonus. A single one of them was almost comparable to another family.

Long Yuehong calmed down and sighed sincerely. "I always knew that the Security Department's field agents got promoted quickly, but I never expected it to happen so quickly."

It had been less than a year since he graduated!

Jiang Baimian said with a slightly complicated expression, "It's really not that fast under normal circumstances. It took me almost two years to reach D6 back then."

"This is called seeking wealth amidst danger," Shang Jianyao added.

Just as Deputy Minister Xenny had said, the number of things the Old Task Force had encountered during the past two missions could be counted as more than ten to twenty for others.

Long Yuehong stammered, "It's better to be normal."

In another year or two, he would steadily promote to D6. When he transferred to another job, he would directly be promoted to the platoon commander rank of D7 and could become a leader of sorts—for example, the team leader of the Order Supervisory Team in Zone C on the 495th floor. When the time came, all his relatives would feel honored by his achievements. The Security Department's employees would be directly promoted when they transferred jobs.

"That's not up to us." Jiang Baimian smiled and looked down at the computer file. "The compensation for the portable computers when converted, together with the various intelligence rewards, food allowance for the return journey, and the field allowance for this period of time amount to a total of 30,000 contribution points per person."

This couldn't be compared to the last time because they had pulled back two full cars of supplies and an armored vehicle back then.

The fact that it could be converted to 30,000 in the end meant that the company was satisfied with this batch of new portable computers and was lacking in them.

"Not bad." Bai Chen expressed her understanding.

Long Yuehong nodded and asked in anticipation, "Can we each keep a few?"

"A few?" Jiang Baimian laughed. "The higher-ups only gave us one each. We can also choose to exchange it for contribution points."

"That's enough." Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief. As the elder brother and the pillar of the Long family, he definitely had to work hard to achieve what he had bragged about.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao. "Some of the songs in your small speaker have been deleted, likewise for the Old World entertainment. Sigh, with the matter regarding the Naturalism Church, the investigations are even stricter."

According to the new rules, Old World items that could store electronic data were considered new items every time they returned. They needed to be audited for their content.

Shang Jianyao smiled casually. “They can delete the songs in the speaker, but they can’t erase my memories. I can sing it myself and record it.”

Be careful that the Awakened who can erase memories from before will come looking for you... Jiang Baimian muttered silently and tersely acknowledged his words. “The items will be distributed with the portable computers tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. When the time comes, there will also be an evaluation of our mental status. This is a confidentiality list; take a look at it yourselves. Remember what you can and cannot say.”

As she distributed the printed documents to her team members, she looked at Bai Chen and said, “Your current employee rank and contribution points are enough to apply for biomechanical limb transplantation and genetic modification. However, I don’t recommend the latter. It’s still too dangerous with the current level of technology.

“If it’s a biological prosthetic limb, I’ll help you request a list later. You can choose it yourself. Yes, you can also consider waiting a little longer. When you’re a D7 or D8, you can exchange for better and stronger ones.”

Bai Chen nodded solemnly. “I’ll consider it seriously.”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Also, remember to go to this floor’s Supplies Allocation Market to receive genetic enhancement drugs. This is one of your employee perks. Although you are already an adult and the effects won’t be that good, it’s better than nothing.”

Bai Chen indicated that she wouldn’t forget.

That morning, the Old Task Force spent their time memorizing the confidential information and confirming their electronic card data.

...

After having dinner in the Security Department’s cafeteria and returning to the 495th floor, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong realized that a circle of people had surrounded Room 23 in Zone C.

They were pointing and whispering, and it was unknown what they were discussing. Among them was Long Yuehong's mother, Gu Hong.

"What's wrong?" Long Yuehong approached and looked at the tightly shut door through the crowd.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao beside her, Gu Hong smiled and greeted him. "Jianyao, you're getting more and more spirited."

"I still need to learn more from you," Shang Jianyao replied in an incongruous manner. It was unknown what was wrong with him.

Fortunately, Gu Hong's focus wasn't on him. She then told Long Yuehong the reason for the spectacle. "The people from the Order Supervisory Department came over and moved away the tattered furniture in the room."

As she spoke, she lowered her voice. "Something bad must've happened inside. It needs to be thoroughly cleaned."

"Is that so..." Long Yuehong suspected that the Order Supervisory Department had yet to discover any problems, so they could only empty the room and air it out.

At this thought, he subconsciously glanced at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao nodded.

A nod... What does he mean... Long Yuehong couldn't understand.

It took him a long time to come to a realization. He retreated from the crowd and suppressed his voice. "After lights out?"

Do another reconnaissance after lights out?

In any case, nothing happened to the Order Supervisory Department.

Shang Jianyao nodded again. He then returned to Zone B, Room 196.

As there was still some time before Newspoint, Shang Jianyao lay on the bed and massaged his temples.

...

In the shimmering Sea of Origins, Shang Jianyao leisurely but persistently swam forward.

As he swam, he saw a thin, yellowish-green fog spread out at the intersection of the dark sky and the Sea of Origins.

Shang Jianyao's expression became excited. His hands quickly alternated, and his feet constantly kicked the 'water' as he rapidly swam in that direction.

As the distance shortened, he saw a large city appear in the faint, yellowish-green fog.

The city was filled with tall buildings, and the lights were like reflected stars—magnificent and spectacular.

Shang Jianyao continued swimming in that direction, but he couldn't really approach it no matter what. It was as if there was an invisible, impenetrable barrier.

After a while, the thin, yellowish-green fog gradually thinned. The city that appeared to be from the Old World also disappeared.

Shang Jianyao stopped. As he treaded 'water,' he looked at the horizon and muttered to himself, "A mirage? A new island?"

He fell silent for a while before whispering again, "Yellow-green..."

Chapter 323: Exploring Again

After lights out, outside Room 23 in Zone C.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong—who were wrapped in thick, military-green cotton coats—met up and shone their flashlights at the brownish-red wooden door with white numbers.

“Are we really going to give it a try?” Long Yuehong was still a little timid now that they were going ahead with the plan.

Shang Jianyao took out an electronic card with his other hand and calmly said, “Pay attention to my condition. If anything goes wrong, shout immediately.”

“Shout?” Long Yuehong subconsciously asked. Wake him up?

Shang Jianyao held the door handle with the flashlight and replied seriously, “Shout for help.”

Long Yuehong was speechless. He then took a deep breath and got his lungs ready, prepared to shout at any moment.

Shang Jianyao gently pried open the lock and slowly turned the doorknob. He pushed the door forward bit by bit as if it weighed more than 500 kilograms.

Finally, the door to Room 23 opened a huge gap. The scene inside was vaguely visible under the flashlight’s illumination.

“There’s nothing abnormal this time,” Shang Jianyao said as he pushed open the door completely.

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief and reminded, “You have to be careful when entering.”

Shang Jianyao half-turned his body and glanced at him strangely. “Shouldn’t you be the one going in first?”

Long Yuehong felt suffocated instantaneously. The next second, he saw Shang Jianyao light up Room 23 with his flashlight.

This place wasn’t large, similar to Long Yuehong’s original home. The walls were painted mottled white, and the ground was paved with standard stone bricks. Apart from that, it was empty.

After the flashlight illuminated every corner, Shang Jianyao took a step forward. He walked very slowly as if he had become a robot with rusty joints. He passed through the open door almost by shuffling his feet.

Long Yuehong forgot about the joke from before and tensed up again. He was ready to shout for help at any moment.

After more than ten seconds, Shang Jianyao completely entered Room 23. Then, he turned around and placed the flashlight under his chin, allowing the light to illuminate his face.

“Long Yuehong...” Shang Jianyao slowly shouted with an ethereal voice.

“What?” Long Yuehong’s body tensed up.

Shang Jianyao’s voice remained creepy. “Do I look like a ghost...”

“...” Long Yuehong wanted to curse. He exhaled and said tactfully, “Fortunately, the small speaker hasn’t been returned to you. Otherwise, playing a song that can create a terrifying atmosphere this very moment would create a stronger feeling.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at him disdainfully. “That will be a nuisance to people sleeping.”

Long Yuehong found himself unable to retort.

Shang Jianyao then retracted his gaze and used the flashlight’s light to examine Room 23 inch by inch.

Upon seeing that he was fine, Long Yuehong mustered his courage and slowly moved past the door.

“No...” Long Yuehong swallowed the words he had just said. He wanted to say, “Nothing seems wrong.”

Shang Jianyao looked at him regretfully. “Why didn’t you finish your sentence?”



I'm not stupid... Although I still don't think there's anything wrong with my luck, I'd rather believe it than not at a time like this... Long Yuehong muttered silently before using the flashlight's beam to search for any possible abnormalities.

The tattered furniture in Room 23 had been removed, so Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong quickly ended their work.

"There's nothing at all..." Long Yuehong retracted the flashlight's beam from the vent above.

Shang Jianyao looked at him and asked with a smile, "What's your overall evaluation of this place?"

"What do you mean by overall evaluation?" Long Yuehong was a little confused and replied according to his understanding. "This place is relatively old, and it seems a little colder than the outside..."

At this point, he suddenly paused.

After a few seconds, Long Yuehong asked in horror, "Don't you think it's a little like the atmosphere in DiMarco's room back then, but less severe?"

He still had a fresh memory of the gloomy, dark environment created by DiMarco's consciousness lifeform.

"Congratulations, you got it right." Shang Jianyao patted the side of the flashlight with his palm.

Long Yuehong looked around and probed, "The abnormalities have been removed. These are only traces."

Shang Jianyao didn't answer him. He held the flashlight and strode out of the room.

"Where are we going?" Long Yuehong quickly followed. He didn't dare to stay in Room 23 alone.

Shang Jianyao looked ahead and calmly replied, "Back to sleep."

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and realized that there was nothing else they could do.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was in front of him—casually said, “Remember to close the door.”

...

The next day was Pangu Biology’s weekend break. Shang Jianyao bought a pile of things like cloth, canned food, and bagged rice at the Supplies Allocation Market with his electronic card.

In order to transport them, he borrowed a cart from the Supplies Allocation Market.

“Yo, Jianyao, you earned so much from a trip?”

“You hit it rich?”

“Is it really that good to be in the field?”

Along the way, the neighbors who knew Shang Jianyao greeted him.

Shang Jianyao wasn’t modest and directly replied, “Yes, I’m already a D5; Long Yuehong as well.”

He acted frankly, just short of shouting along the street with a loudspeaker.

“D5?”

“It’s not like I don’t know other Security Department employees. How can you be promoted so quickly?”

“W-what unit are you in at the Security Department?”

The neighbors were either shocked, envious, or felt tempted to introduce a girl to Shang Jianyao. In their impression, Shang Jianyao was an honest child.

He probably wouldn't lie about such matters. Furthermore, such lies were very easy to expose.

As they chatted, Shang Jianyao came to an open room.

This was Shen Du's home.

Shen Du's child was sitting at the dining table, reading the numbers in his simplified textbooks.

He looked up at the door and didn't greet or shy away. He lowered his head and continued reading the basic numbers.

Compared to Shang Jianyao's memories of him, he didn't grow up much, but he had clearly become a quiet child.

Shen Du's wife, Tian Jing, was taking advantage of the break from work to clean the room. She only turned around when she sensed someone at the door.

Tian Jing grabbed the dirty rag and nervously said, "Jianyao, why are you..."

Shang Jianyao smiled. "I've been promoted to D5."

"Huh?" Tian Jing's first reaction was: Why are you telling me this?

She was a little surprised and envious next.

Her employee rank was only D3 now. With just a little calculation, she knew how many contribution points a D5 employee's average monthly income was.

She then understood Shang Jianyao's hidden meaning: "I'm already a D5. Giving you this won't affect my quality of life."

Tian Jing replied bitterly, "You've already given me a lot of things back then. There's really no need..."

She wanted to say that they were unrelated, but she instantly recalled Shang Jianyao's words—"You can choose to be my mother."

Shang Jianyao glanced at Shen Du's child and looked back at Tian Jing. He then said in an incongruous manner, "Don't tire yourself out. You will collapse if you do that."

Tian Jing opened her mouth and closed it again when she thought of Shang Jianyao's family matters.

She didn't stop him and watched Shang Jianyao move the items on the cart into her room.

After doing so, Shang Jianyao waved his hand. "I'm leaving."

Tian Jing nodded and took a deep breath. "The two of us will always remember you."

Shang Jianyao didn't look back and pushed the cart away like he was on a tour.

After returning the cart, he entered the elevator and pressed the button '490.'

The Eleventh Orphanage was there.

...

At noon, Long Yuehong was just about to use all kinds of leftover ingredients to try cooking the Rootless's specialty, Hodgepodge, when he saw his mother rush in.

"Y-you've been promoted to D5?" Gu Hong was surprised and astonished.

Long Yuehong was stunned. "How did you know?"

He planned on telling his parents that he had been promoted and given a raise when he brought the portable computer back home.

“Really?” Gu Hong blurted out.

Long Yuehong nodded honestly. “I was preparing to tell you in two days.”

He was still confused as to how his mother knew so quickly. An instant later, a name surfaced in his mind.

Long Yuehong probed, “You bumped into Shang Jianyao?”

Gu Hong grumbled with a joyful look, “How can I not know when Jianyao was telling everyone he met on the street? Gosh, how did you reach D5 all of a sudden? There’s no need to worry about nobody introducing their daughters to you...”

As she spoke, the smile on Gu Hong’s face vanished. She looked at Long Yuehong and fell silent for a moment. “Are your missions very dangerous?”

Long Yuehong subconsciously forced a smile. “It’s fine. Besides, it won’t take long before I transfer out.”

“That’s good, that’s good...” Gu Hong heaved a sigh of relief.

...

The next morning, Room 14 on the 647th floor.

After hearing Shang Jianyao’s recount, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, “You saw yellowish-green fog in the Sea of Origins, and there seems to be a city from the Old World in the fog?”

“Yes,” Shang Jianyao replied firmly.

Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “You suspect that this is the aftereffect of letting the Coward aura into your mind world?”

When dealing with DiMarco, Shang Jianyao had brought the yellowish-green aura in the night pearl into his Sea of Origins.

“That should be the case.” Shang Jianyao appeared very calm, perhaps even a little excited.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Long Yuehong. “After you entered Room 23 in Zone C the night before, you felt that it was colder than the corridor. It was a little like the environment DiMarco created after he transformed into a consciousness lifeform?”

“Yes.” Long Yuehong nodded heavily.

Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen again and paced around before facing Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “I have an idea. It might not be a coincidence that you saw a Naturalism Church member running naked. Even if it’s an illusion, it’s not a coincidence.”

She paused and said seriously, “Could this be related to the yellowish-green fog in Shang Jianyao’s mind world?”

Chapter 324: Communal Joy

Long Yuehong was confused. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Jiang Baimian explained in detail, “DiMarco said that you shouldn’t casually bring the aura of an Awakened at the Mind Corridor level into your consciousness. This can easily alarm the original owner and allow him to locate your mind, thereby entering without needing to open the door.

“Although Shang Jianyao has already used most of Coward’s aura on DiMarco, it still seems to have some influence. Will this attract the original owner’s attention and bring about an anomaly to the surroundings, one that ordinary people can’t detect?”

“Did such an anomaly attract the attention of the hidden powerhouses in the company or trigger some inconspicuous problems that originally existed, causing Room 23 to change and trap you in an illusion? The reason you saw the Naturalism Church parishioner running naked was that you had just talked about this matter, so it was reflected in the illusion.”

After finishing her guess, Jiang Baimian added, “I still don’t know enough about Awakened at the Mind Corridor level. I can only make a guess that has many unverifiable details.”

Long Yuehong felt a little happy for some reason when he heard that. “That’s right. How can there be so many coincidences? There are sufficient reasons behind many coincidences.”

The ‘reason’ this time was Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “This still doesn’t explain why it didn’t happen sooner or later but happened after Little Red and I coincidentally met, and he told me about the Naturalism Church.”

Long Yuehong was speechless and couldn’t answer.

Jiang Baimian made a strained guess. “Maybe the news regarding the Naturalism Church is a trigger? Maybe if you didn’t encounter Little Red by chance, you wouldn’t have approached Zone C after lights out. The premise of the anomaly is a room that’s empty at night and one that has been empty for a long time?”

“I think it’s the latter.” Bai Chen found the second explanation most logical and reasonable. Of course, the premise for all of this was that ‘Long Yuehong being unlucky’ was false.

Shang Jianyao commented, “It’s too shy.”

Jiang Baimian exhaled silently and said, “The matter regarding Room 23 has probably been secretly resolved by the company. We don’t have to worry about it. We just have to pay attention to any abnormalities over there.”

She then looked at Shang Jianyao and said, “As for you, you have to think of a way to resolve the yellowish-green fog left in the Sea of Origins as soon as possible. We are still fine while in the company. There’s always someone to grab the wheel when in trouble, but it will probably bring considerable trouble if we are in First City.

“Besides, even without external influences, you have to worry that Coward’s original owner is doing something to your mind world. Sigh, I only hope this isn’t arranged by Eidolon Nun...”

At the mention of Eidolon Nun, Bai Chen suddenly said, “Didn’t Shang Jianyao previously say that he felt his consciousness leave his body when he opened the door, like there was a vortex behind it? Do you still remember what Eidolon Nun’s symbol is like?”

“A female figure spying from behind a door...” Long Yuehong suddenly fell silent as he spoke. This was because he understood what Bai Chen wanted to say.

Door!

“In terms of imagery, it feels related,” Jiang Baimian said after some deliberation. “But this doesn’t seem to match Eidolon Nun’s observation.”

Shang Jianyao then shook his head. “That pressure didn’t exist.”

“Besides, Eidolon Nun definitely knows that Shang Jianyao has DiMarco’s residual aura on him.” Jiang Baimian provided the strongest evidence.

It was impossible for the Kalendaria—who liked to watch ‘Her’ cathedral and believers—not to watch the Underground Ark battle back then.

The Old Task Force fell silent, unable to find any other direction to analyze the situation.

Finally, Jiang Baimian said to Shang Jianyao, “In short, try to resolve the yellowish-green fog’s problem first. Remember to report the situation at any time. We can draw on our collective wisdom.”

“We’ve already held a meeting and formulated several plans.” Shang Jianyao gave an answer that didn’t make anyone feel at ease or worried.

Jiang Baimian then pointed at the sofa. “The things have been distributed; take your own stuff. Each person will get one portable computer.”

As she spoke, she picked up a stack of information and handed it to Bai Chen. “This is the available biological prosthetic limbs that you can exchange for at your current rank. Take a look and consider it.”

Bai Chen tersely acknowledged her words and walked to Jiang Baimian’s side to take the stack of paper.



Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were also curious. They didn't immediately take the items that had been reviewed; instead, they approached Bai Chen at the same time and looked at her hand.

"Feline biomechanical prosthetic limb... Has rather high explosive force and can retract and flick out fortified nails..."

"Python-type biological limb... It has relatively high flexibility and powerful strangulation abilities. It can also effectively reduce many types of damage..."

"..."

At this moment, Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong and smiled. "Do you want one too?"

Long Yuehong shook his head without hesitation. "There's no need for that for the time being."

With the exclusive military exoskeleton, he was even more unwilling to harm his original body.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words, retracted her smile, and solemnly asked, "Do you still want to transfer out of the Old Task Force? If you want, I'll help you write another report."

What followed was the dangerous trip to First City.

Long Yuehong fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "Alright, but there's no need to force it."

"It's useless for me to force it." Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly and cast her gaze at Bai Chen. "What about you? Do you want to be transferred out of the team after you have the right to undergo modification?"

Bai Chen's gaze left the information in her hand, and she said in a deep voice, "I want to have a modification so that I can go to First City again."

Jiang Baimian immediately exclaimed, "I thought you couldn't bear to part with us."

As she said this, her eyebrows relaxed, and she smiled.

Bai Chen ignored her and continued reading the stack of information. A few seconds later, she said, "I'll give you an answer in a few days."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian sat back down, switched on her computer, and helped Long Yuehong write his application.

After printing it out, she—who was planning to visit the deputy minister's office—directly brought the report with her.

...

On the 646th floor, in the deputy minister's office.

Xenny picked up the report in front of her and briefly glanced at it before smiling. "How can anyone transfer shifts in less than a year? It's not like he's missing a limb or two. What will others think of the way I run things if this gets out?"

Jiang Baimian was not disappointed. She took advantage of the deputy minister's words and smiled. "You mean he can be transferred out after a year?"

Xenny smiled at her and didn't answer.

Jiang Baimian said with a joking tone again, "If he were to swap to having a biological prosthetic limb, would it be considered missing an arm or leg?"

"You're becoming more and more slippery as a team leader," said Xenny with a laugh. Then, she fell silent for a moment before saying, "The Security Department's standard transfer window for high-risk jobs is three years. Your situation is even more special, so you just need two years. Keep hold of your progress. After two years, you and your team members can transfer out."

"Alright, Minister." Jiang Baimian happily agreed. She deliberated for a moment and probed, "Minister, is there any way to make me an Awakened?"

Xenny smiled in surprise. “Why do you suddenly have such an idea?”

Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “After encountering so many dangers outside, it’s natural to have the desire to improve myself.”

Xenny nodded and said, “The company has done some research and experiments in this regard, but they haven’t achieved any breakthroughs. It can only be said that there’s a certain probability. If you want to give it a try, you need to be injected with anesthetic and enter a coma. The entire process is confidential, and the chances of success aren’t high.

“After you wake up, there might be some repercussions even if you don’t Awaken. There’s no need to say anything now. Give me an answer after you consider it carefully.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and unconsciously raised her right hand to touch her metal cochlear.

...

495th floor, Zone C, Room 11.

Long Yuehong stood in the living room that also served as the master bedroom and looked at the neighbors—who had surrounded him and the portable computer—with a blank expression.

According to his original plan, he would mainly teach his younger siblings the basics after bringing back the computer. He would then secretly enjoy the Old World entertainment when there was nobody around so as to avoid affecting Long Zhigu and Long Aihong’s studies.

But why did it develop into this situation?

Long Yuehong only remembered a group of uncles and aunties suddenly rushing in and asking him about the portable computer and Old World entertainment. Then, his younger brother and sister returned with their friends and excitedly talked about broadening their horizons.

Under his parents’ expectant gazes, Long Yuehong turned on the computer in confusion and numbness and played a reviewed TV drama.

Why is this happening? How do they know about the Old World's entertainment? They can even name the show? Long Yuehong looked around and felt like the world had become extremely unfamiliar.

During this process, he saw his father, Long Dayong, pat a middle-aged man's shoulder and laugh. "Old Feng, you're late. I'll reserve a seat for you tomorrow!"

His mother, Gu Hong, was surrounded by a group of aunties as if they were holding her up on a pedestal. Her face was filled with joy.

She constantly said to the people around her, "See if there's anything you like. I'll get Yuehong to continue playing them tomorrow!"

Long Zhigu and a few friends squeezed into two seats and excitedly discussed the drama's contents. Their peers outside the door also looked inside enviously.

Long Aihong pulled out her good friend from the crowd and passed through the crowd in a reserved manner under everyone's envious gazes before sitting in her exclusive seat.

Long Yuehong unconsciously smiled, finding this pretty good.

He bent down and pressed a few buttons.

Immediately, a large virtual screen appeared in the air, allowing the drama's content to be showcased better.

This made the people sitting far away see things more clearly.

Amidst cries of surprise, Long Yuehong came to Long Aihong's side and asked curiously, "Aihong, how did you know I had these?"

Long Aihong said matter-of-factly, "Brother Yao just demonstrated it at the Rec Center. He also said that you have it all here and that it was in some drive and then some folder."

The corners of Long Yuehong's mouth twitched twice, but he wasn't surprised at all.

## Chapter 325: That City

495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

After hearing the news, Shang Jianyao leaned back on the pillow and massaged his temples.

His consciousness quickly entered the shimmering Sea of Origins and randomly chose a direction to swim in.

As he swam, a faint, yellowish-green fog spread out from the intersection of the sea and sky. Amidst the fog, a magnificent Old World city was vaguely visible.

Shang Jianyao immediately adjusted his direction and swam toward his target with all his might. But no matter how hard he tried, he only shortened the distance between him and the yellowish-green fog by a little. Furthermore, it kept changing positions, making it seem as though he would never reach it.

Shang Jianyao stopped and split his body into nine according to the plan.

The nine Shang Jianyaos set off in different directions as if they wanted to weave an inescapable net that prevented the thin, yellowish-green fog from escaping.

In the vast Sea of Origins, the Shang Jianyaos could occasionally see the target appear in front of them, but this would quickly change.

After an unknown period of time, the nine Shang Jianyaos had no choice but to stop when they reached the maximum distance that could be maintained among them.

The yellowish-green fog remained at the intersection of the sea and sky as if it had never left.

The nine Shang Jianyaos took a deep breath at the same time as their figures fused together.

He sat cross-legged in the shimmering Sea of Origins and fell into deep thought.

In just a minute or two, Shang Jianyao created a black cloth and completely covered his eyes. He then took out two cotton balls and stuffed them into his ears.

Therefore, Shang Jianyao entered a state where he couldn't see or hear anything. After that, he casually swam forward without knowing what was ahead or where it led.

When he was almost exhausted from swimming, Shang Jianyao stopped, took out the cotton balls in his ears, and removed the black cloth from his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the faint and thin yellowish-green fog.

It was already within reach!

Shang Jianyao smiled. He hugged his right fist with his left hand and bowed at the yellowish-green fog. "The Perfected Man has no self; the New World is before us."

After completing this ritual, Shang Jianyao cast his gaze at the Old World city that resembled a mirage in the yellowish-green fog.

Over there, buildings—dozens to a hundred meters tall—stood, forming a magnificent concrete jungle. Their surfaces were bathed in red sunlight, and it was utterly silent.

Shang Jianyao was in no rush to pass through the fog and enter. Instead, he circled the periphery and swam quickly.

The illusory city revealed itself from different angles.

After a while, Shang Jianyao suddenly saw an arched tunnel exit. He saw thousands of glass walls that reflected the sunlight and a dilapidated street with signs on both sides.

Shang Jianyao stopped and let his gaze penetrate the thin yellowish-green fog and land on the street ahead. The words 'clothing,' 'barbeque,' 'police,' 'hotpot,' 'foot bath,' and 'supermarket' entered his vision.

The shops corresponding to these signs were either dilapidated or covered in dust. The thing they had in common was that they were devoid of humans.

Shang Jianyao sized them up a few times before a smile gradually appeared on his face. He then shouted, “Xiaochong! Xiaochong!”

He was all too familiar with the scene in the fog; it was Swamp Ruin 1, the place Qiao Chu had brought them to back then. It was the mysterious city where they had encountered Nightmare Horse and Xiaochong!

The only difference was that it wasn’t as rundown as what Shang Jianyao remembered.

The illusory city echoed with his voice, but there was no additional response.

Shang Jianyao swam forward a few meters and passed through the faint, yellowish-green fog. During this process, he didn’t find anything abnormal.

The city ahead no longer felt like a mirage; it was as real as the mind islands.

Shang Jianyao casually found an unlocked bicycle by the street, mounted it, and headed deep into the city.

Under the setting sun, it didn’t take him long to reach a high-rise building that had its own courtyard. He didn’t encounter anyone on the way, nor did he encounter any Heartless. There was nothing but silence in the entire city.

Shang Jianyao got off the bicycle and cast his gaze at the black marble signboard in front of the courtyard.

On the signboard, golden words formed a name: “City Intelligence Network Control Center.”

This was identical to what Shang Jianyao and the others had seen in Swamp Ruin 1.

Shang Jianyao ran, passing through the courtyard as if he were racing someone until he entered the building where the City Intelligence Network Control Center was located.

He walked down the emergency access one level at a time as though it was the back of his hand and arrived at the underground engine room. He then ran down the dark corridor with the flashlight and found the room where he had met Xiaochong.

As he pushed open the door, Shang Jianyao shone the flashlight beam in and shouted, “Xiaochong! Xiaochong!”

The tables and chairs in the room were still the same. There was nobody there, and it was extremely quiet.

Shang Jianyao revealed a disappointed expression.

At this moment, everything around him slowly faded and gradually became transparent. In less than ten seconds, the city vanished like a dream. The faint, yellowish-green fog around it also disappeared, similar to the last time it ended.

Shang Jianyao returned to the Sea of Origins again. He then felt intense fatigue and had no choice but to leave the mind world.

...

The next day, Room 14 on the 647th floor.

When Shang Jianyao arrived, Jiang Baimian was alone.

Jiang Baimian looked up and asked with a smile, “Little Red didn’t come with you?”

Shang Jianyao sighed and said sincerely, “The Old World entertainment is harmful.”

“Was he obsessed with it last night?” Jiang Baimian found it funny. Although she also felt that Long Yuehong didn’t have much self-control, she also believed that he wouldn’t be like this on the first day.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “His parents, siblings, and neighbors are obsessed.”



Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but raise her hand, press it to her mouth, and laugh.

Shang Jianyao continued, "I don't think it will happen again in the future."

"Why?" Jiang Baimian asked curiously.

Shang Jianyao explained, "When I passed by their house this morning, I heard his father wailing: 'Why does it use so much electricity? Our energy quota for this month is almost gone!' His mother also lost her composure. She seemed to be saying to Little Red, 'Son, what exactly did you bring back? It's a scourge!'"

"Little Red then appeased them. 'I'm a D5. My energy quota is about the same as the two of you combined. It won't be a problem for us to last until the end of the month.'"

Shang Jianyao vividly imitated the Long family trio's tones, amusing Jiang Baimian greatly.

Jiang Baimian calmed down and asked in a guessing tone, "So, you didn't wait for him?"

Shang Jianyao nodded. "I don't think they can finish their conversation in a short period of time. I also have something to tell you."

"What is it?" Jiang Baimian sat up straight. "Is it about the yellowish-green fog?"

At this moment, Bai Chen also entered the office and happened to hear the latter half of the sentence.

She looked at Shang Jianyao in surprise. "You resolved it so quickly?"

Shang Jianyao shook his head. "I found it, but it wasn't resolved."

"Tell me the details." Jiang Baimian broke away from the gossip and jokes and became very focused.

Shang Jianyao described how he found the yellowish-green fog, how he entered, and what he discovered.

The more Jiang Baimian listened, the bigger her eyes became. “Are you sure it’s the city ruin where we encountered Xiaochong?”

“Unless there’s an identical layout elsewhere,” Shang Jianyao replied calmly.

Jiang Baimian frowned. “This terrifies me, but it’s also very complex and mysterious...” She gradually sounded a little excited.

“What are you guys discussing?” Long Yuehong walked into the office and looked around in confusion.

After Jiang Baimian simply repeated the matter, Long Yuehong blurted out, “How can that be?”

The tiny bit of influence left behind by Coward is actually connected to Swamp Ruin 1, which we’ve been to?

He then voiced out a possible explanation as he looked at Shang Jianyao. “Could it be that some of your memories have combined with the yellowish-green fog?”

“Why not other memories?” Shang Jianyao asked in response.

A coincidence, I guess... Long Yuehong was too embarrassed to say that.

Shang Jianyao continued, “I have Destiny Connection, so I can be sure that it’s not my memories.”

Why didn’t you say so earlier... Long Yuehong muttered inwardly.

Jiang Baimian sat in her seat as thoughts raced through her mind. She thoughtfully said, “The yellowish-green fog comes from an Awakened who has explored the depths of the Mind Corridor. It’s an aura left behind by him...”

“It’s highly probable that it was obtained when Yama Tiger explored a room in the Mind Corridor...”

“Harbinger Song said that every room corresponds to a mind world. Only Awakened at the Mind Corridor level can open them normally...”

“What appears in those rooms might be the original owner’s dream, or it might be part of the islands of fear they cleared. Yes, according to this logic, it’s also possible that the scenes that appear are interwoven with some of his memories...”

At this point, Jiang Baimian naturally gave a guess. “The image of the city ruin came from a certain memory or dream contained in the yellowish-green fog?”

Bai Chen’s eyes narrowed. “The original owner of Coward has been to Swamp Ruin 1?”

“It’s also possible that he embarked on his journey from there.” Jiang Baimian gave another possibility.

It was a possibility that gave Long Yuehong the creeps.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and said, “If that’s the case, I should be able to completely eliminate the remnant effects by finding ‘him’ in the dream city...”

“That’s right. Dream owners are the most special in such situations.” Long Yuehong thought for a few seconds and agreed. He then raised a question. “But where can you find him? Where will he be in that dream city?”

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian replied in unison, “That laboratory!”

The mysterious laboratory that Qiao Chu destroyed!

Jiang Baimian then smiled at Shang Jianyao, indicating that everyone had a tacit understanding.

The next second, she saw Shang Jianyao extend his right hand to her.

Jiang Baimian's smile froze for a second. She puffed up her cheeks slightly and also stretched out her right palm to slap Shang Jianyao's palm.

After retracting her hand, she quickly asked another question. "Why did you think of covering your eyes to find the yellowish-green fog?"

Shang Jianyao explained seriously, "Since I'm an Awakened in the Master Zhuang domain, I should adopt an approach of adapting myself to the circumstances."

Chapter 326: The Method of Opening

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao's answer, Jiang Baimian felt mixed feelings. She couldn't describe it in words and actually had the urge to raise her hands and clap.

Fortunately, she controlled herself in time and didn't do anything that was too in line with Shang Jianyao's style.

Long Yuehong weakly said, "Awakened in the Master Zhuang domain aren't equivalent to believers of Master Zhuang."

Shang Jianyao looked at him and hugged his right fist with his left palm. "The Perfected Man has no self; the New World is before us."

Not only was Jiang Baimian laughing this time, but Bai Chen was laughing as well.

I'm really stupid. Why can't I stop arguing with this fellow... Long Yuehong felt vexed and did a deep self-reflection.

After discussing the yellowish-green fog, Bai Chen's lips quivered a few times. "After transplanting a biological prosthetic limb, can we swap it to another type in the future?"

Jiang Baimian was considered half an expert in this regard. She organized her words and said, "In theory, it's feasible. In practice, because biological transplants of different types involve different neural modifications and limb rejection, forcefully changing to another type will cause greater harm to the body.

"It's not that there's no solution, but it's not recommended to do so. Yes, if your biological prosthetic limb is damaged, it will be relatively simpler and safer to change to a similar type."

Bai Chen fell silent for a moment before saying, “Then, I’ll wait a little longer. I’ll apply after I can exchange for a better biological prosthetic limb.”

“Smart!” Jiang Baimian agreed. “Those crap aren’t worth exchanging unless you’ve already lost your arm. In any case, you still have a military exoskeleton. There’s no rush in this regard.”

At this point, she looked at Long Yuehong and took the opportunity to tell him about the situation where he could only be transferred two years later.

Long Yuehong wasn’t too disappointed and even heaved a sigh of relief. He smiled and said, “I can only hope that there won’t be too many field operations in the next year.”

As he spoke, he subconsciously looked out the window, wanting to use the clear sky to soothe his emotions. But in Pangu Biology’s underground building, there was only the corridor that acted as a street outside the window and the sunlight lamps that scattered a gentle glow.

On the other side of the corridor were also walls, windows, and wooden doors. Above them were pieced together boards that made the ceiling.

Long Yuehong was stunned for a moment before looking away.

Jiang Baimian then looked around. “My plan as of now is that we can set off after Little White has completely recovered around April or May. Geneva will have stabilized the Underground Ark and gone to Weed City by then.

“We can’t be completely idle during this period of time. We’ll go to the surface for short-term training every two to three weeks to prevent our wilderness survival skills from becoming rusty.”

“Yes, Team Leader!” Shang Jianyao replied very loudly.

“Stop, stop, stop. I’m just hard of hearing, not deaf!” Jiang Baimian snapped.

After Bai Chen and Long Yuehong expressed their attitudes, she smiled at the latter. “There’s plenty of time now. You can let your mother continue introducing you to others. Heh heh, we might even be able to attend your wedding before we set off.”

“Team Leader, our Pangu Biology doesn’t do wedding banquets...” Long Yuehong retorted softly.

Most people were collectively assigned partners and had mass weddings. Everything was simplified. At most, they would have a good meal at home.

Not wasting food was a habit that every employee of Pangu Biology internalized.

Long Yuehong didn’t know if the management was like that.

“Ah, what did you say?” Jiang Baimian really didn’t hear him clearly this time.

Long Yuehong skipped over his words and sighed. “My mother said that many ladies have such thoughts, but their families don’t support their wishes. They wish to wait and see.”

Jiang Baimian understood why they took a wait-and-see approach. An ordinary employee—who had been working for less than a year—had been promoted to D5 like a rocket. He had also changed his home to a large room and obtained a lot of contribution points and a portable computer. Anyone would’ve suspected that something was wrong.

In addition, Long Yuehong worked in the Security Department, which was considered relatively dangerous. Parents who didn’t want their daughter to suffer the pain of losing her husband not long after her marriage naturally didn’t support them having blind dates now.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded. “In another half a year, they will be doing the central assignment again. You might get a wife then.”

It was a partially mandated marriage, and very few people resisted the outcome.

Just as Shang Jianyao was about to say something, Jiang Baimian suddenly chuckled. “When the time comes, as an official employee, Little White will also join the marriage list. It will be fun if you guys are paired up.”

Long Yuehong was stunned for a second and imagined the outcome. He suddenly felt a little shy and embarrassed.

“It wouldn’t be so coincidental, right...” he whispered.

Bai Chen didn’t have any special reaction to this and only reminded Jiang Baimian, “You and Shang Jianyao should also be on the list.”

Jiang Baimian snorted. “There’s no final conclusion regarding my genetic modification.”

She then clapped her hands. “Alright, let’s go to the training room to prepare for our first trip to First City in April!”

...

After Newspoint, 495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

Shang Jianyao leaned against the pillow filled with grains and massaged his temples.

After entering the Sea of Origins, he patiently waited for a while like last time until the thin, yellowish-green fog appeared along the sea’s horizon. He then blindfolded himself, stuffed his ears, and swam forward while adapting to the circumstances.

When fatigue struck, he took out the cotton and took off his blindfold. After doing so, he saw a faint, yellowish-green fog floating in his reach, and the mirage-like city was just inches away.

Shang Jianyao quickly passed through the fog and entered. He realized that the bicycle he previously rode had returned to its original spot. It was not where he had deliberately stopped.

He mounted it again and rode toward the street where the mysterious laboratory might be. On the way, Shang Jianyao calmly observed his surroundings.

Cars were parked haphazardly on the streets. In many places, only simple vehicles like bicycles could pass through. It seemed like it was before the Heartless cleaned up the place when the lights were switched on.

Fallen leaves piled up alongside the road, showing signs of decay. Large patches of blood remained in certain areas, but no humans or Heartless appeared.

Time seemed to be frozen at some time during dusk. The afterglow of the setting sun made the buildings' glass walls feel like they were on fire...

As Shang Jianyao searched, a desolate, hoarse roar suddenly sounded from somewhere in the city. "Howl!"

Intense fear gripped Shang Jianyao's heart, making his mind blank.

As there were no 'responders,' the roar quickly subsided, leaving only a lingering echo for two seconds.

Shang Jianyao sat on the bicycle, propped himself up with one foot, and muttered to himself regretfully, "Much weaker than normal."

He lowered his back and quickly pedaled toward the source of the roar.

Before long, Shang Jianyao stopped in front of a building.

Compared to its surroundings, it was very short—only three stories tall. In front of it was a courtyard that also served as a parking lot. It was silver-gray in color, with smooth lines that reflected the setting sun's glow.

This building looked very sturdy as if it was made of pure alloy. It didn't use a signboard to identify itself like other places.

Its gates that swung open on both sides were rather heavy, and beside it was a keypad that allowed a password to be entered.



Another roar sounded from the building's underground.

Shang Jianyao rode the bicycle to the gates and fiddled with it for a while before realizing that he couldn't open the gates.

He took a few steps back, raised his right hand, and waved it gently.

Nothing happened.

Shang Jianyao didn't show any disappointment. He split out another self and got him to ride the bicycle to the edge of the city. He then passed through the faint, yellowish-green fog and returned to the Sea of Origins.

The next second, Shang Jianyao used the specialness of the mind world to transform into a vehicle that dragged over cannons.

The vehicle drove into the yellowish-green fog with oppressive vibes and into the 'dream' city.

It arrived in front of the nameless building. Under Shang Jianyao's 'command,' the cannons lined up and aimed at the heavy gates.

"Ready, fire!" Shang Jianyao retreated to the side and waved his right hand.

Boom! Boom!

The salvo was almost one as flames drowned the building's entrance.

After a round of bombardment, the gates cracked, and the surrounding walls had collapsed.

Shang Jianyao was just about to fire another round when he suddenly felt the ground tremble violently.

The ground quickly cracked, and the buildings collapsed. The dream city instantly shattered and became illusory.

The yellowish-green fog that enveloped it quickly melted.

Shang Jianyao stretched out his hand, but he only grabbed air. His surroundings had already returned to the shimmering Sea of Origins.

“It’s too weak...” Shang Jianyao looked ahead and criticized.

After that, the yellowish-green fog didn’t appear again.

...

When it was time for work again, Shang Jianyao recounted last night’s encounter in detail.

“Could it be that the mysterious laboratory isn’t the core of the dream city?” Long Yuehong guessed.

Jiang Baimian shook her head in denial. “Perhaps it’s because of this that Shang Jianyao’s bombardment brought about such a huge change. I even suspect that the remnant effects of Coward have been eliminated because of this. The yellowish-green fog won’t appear again.”

Bai Chen also voiced her opinion. “This itself is a remnant of a dream, and it has experienced an all-out eruption of DiMarco. It won’t be too stable.”

“What a pity.” Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “I wanted to see what’s in the laboratory.”

He seemed to think that he should change his method.

“Maybe there’s still some remnants? Besides, it’s not like there won’t be a chance in the future.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “As long as we can find the original owner’s corresponding Mind Corridor room and enter his dream or memory world, we can unveil the mysterious laboratory’s secrets. Yes, I plan on applying to the higher-ups to see if we can obtain the company’s harvests from exploring Swamp Ruin 1 in the past few months.”

Long Yuehong subconsciously asked, “But how do we find the correct Mind Corridor room?”

Just as he said that, he saw Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen look at him at the same time.

The next second, he came to a realization: The correct room was most likely among the pile of numbers left behind by Yama Tiger!

Each of those numbers was a room that Yama Tiger had successfully explored and returned from. The gains often came from such a place.

The rooms were: “1210, 757, 935, 314, 329.”

Chapter 327: April

“From the looks of it, we can only know the answer after Shang Jianyao enters the Mind Corridor,” Long Yuehong said in disappointment.

In reality, the mysterious laboratory in Swamp Ruin 1 had already been destroyed. Therefore, they could only think of ways to dig out the hidden secrets from certain people’s dreams or memories.

Jiang Baimian nodded and raised another possibility. “The Mind Corridor rooms that Yama Tiger recorded might not necessarily correspond to the original owner of Coward. The original owner could’ve left behind a certain amount of aura when exploring other rooms due to a particular motive or accident.

“Also, it might be Room 102. Yama Tiger didn’t tick it, but that doesn’t mean that Yama Tiger only entered it once. Maybe he didn’t finish exploring the first time and only obtained the Coward aura. Therefore, he conducted a second or third exploration and never returned.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao’s applause was never absent.

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance. “The next step is to observe and see if there are any other changes. In addition, we’ll see if the company will give us records about Swamp Ruin 1’s excavation.”

With that said, she walked back to her seat and read the pile of information.

...

For a long period of time in the subsequent days, the Old Task Force prepared for their First City trip in a relatively peaceful and stable state. They spent most of their time training themselves and grasping First City's various situations.

At the same time, they went to the surface three times. Sometimes they went for field training, and at other times, they did so to hone their ability to use the military exoskeletons.

Shang Jianyao didn't discover any remnants of the yellowish-green fog in the Sea of Origins again. But to Jiang Baimian's surprise, he failed to encounter the fourth island of fear after all this time.

As for Room 23 on the 495th floor, Zone C, it had already been assigned to a couple who had freely dated and gotten married.

Nothing abnormal had happened. Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao's encounter was akin to a dream.

Similarly, the Naturalism Church faction in Pangu Biology seemed to have been completely eradicated. There was no follow-up.

In the blink of an eye, April arrived.

Jiang Baimian stood in Room 14 on the 647th floor and spoke to Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen with a serious expression. "Tomorrow is the scheduled departure date. Do you have any other thoughts?"

Shang Jianyao and the others shook their heads at the same time. They had discussed the date of departure last month and had decided on it, so they were all mentally prepared.

The corners of Jiang Baimian's mouth curled up as she smiled brightly. "Then, I hereby announce that you can leave early. You can go back now."

“Yes, Team Leader!” Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao replied in unison.

...

622nd floor, Zone B, Room 59.

Bai Chen took out her key, opened the door, and entered.

The room was very simple. There was a bed against the wall, a table by the window, a chair by the table, and a cabinet by the bed.

Although it was simple, it was tidy. There was no excess junk, nor was there any obvious dust. It was clean and refreshing.

Bai Chen didn't turn on the lights and sat in the chair. She looked at the street lamps that scattered light from outside the window. Half of her body was in the light, and the other half was in the darkness.

After a while, she stretched out her hand and pulled open the desk drawer. Inside lay a heavy mechanical component.

The surface of the component had some cracks, and its luster was rather desaturated.

Bai Chen picked up the component, held it, and looked at it for a long time, motionless.

...

349th floor, Zone C, Room 12.

Jiang Baimian didn't return home until almost 8 p.m. Of course, she had called in advance and said that she was having dinner in the Security Department's cafeteria so that her parents didn't have to prepare her share.

The moment she opened the door, Jiang Baimian saw that the room was dark. Jiang Wenfeng was sitting in a chair by the window, reading a book under the street lamps' light.

“Take care of your eyes!” Jiang Baimian switched the living room's sun lamp on.

It looked as if it was daytime here.

As Jiang Baimian walked toward Jiang Wenfeng—who was rubbing the corners of his eyes—she grumbled, “How much energy can this save? You don't even use up your energy quota every month!”

Without giving Jiang Wenfeng a chance to speak, Jiang Baimian looked around. “Where's Mom?”

Jiang Wenfeng heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. “Out visiting.”

Good opportunity... Jiang Baimian thought to herself and sat beside Jiang Wenfeng.

She took a deep breath and made herself appear calm and composed. “Dad, I'm going out on another mission tomorrow.”

Jiang Wenfeng took off his reading glasses and turned to look at his daughter. He then asked calmly, “Where are you going this time?”

Jiang Baimian replied obediently, “First City.”

“Ah, that's a good place and a bad place.” Jiang Wenfeng stood up, walked to the small table beside him, picked up the telephone receiver, and dialed a number.

He spoke to the other party and made a few terse replies. He then put down the phone and turned to Jiang Baimian. “Elder Huang has a deep friendship with an elder named Meyers from First City's Senate. If you encounter any difficulties and can't resolve them yourself, and the company's help can't keep up for the time being, go find this elder and give him Elder Huang's name.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian quickly nodded.

After Jiang Wenfeng sat down again, she fell silent for a few seconds. She hugged her father's arm and leaned her head over.

She looked forward and muttered to herself, "Dad, am I being very willful and selfish doing this...?"

Jiang Wenfeng patted her arm with his other hand and smiled. "When your grandfather was young, everyone worked hard day and night for the sake of perfecting the company's internal processes, allowing everyone to survive the apocalypse. Some people sacrificed themselves for this, others ended up ridden with sickness, and some lost their family and friends. However, no one regretted it.

"He often told me that staying underground isn't a long-term solution. Our future will always be under the sun." At this point, Jiang Wenfeng paused. "I can understand your ideal."

Jiang Baimian coughed twice. "Can you bear to?"

Jiang Wenfeng heaved a long sigh. "Even if I can't bear to, I still have to. It's not up to the parents when a child is old."

Jiang Baimian leaned her head closer and laughed. "Then, help comfort my mother later."

"Are you plotting against me?" Jiang Wenfeng laughed.

Jiang Baimian laughed as well. "When Madam Xue is angry, Baimian can only run away like a rat and rely on you."

Jiang Wenfeng looked ahead and exhaled. "Your mother is a softie at heart. She can't sleep well at night every time you go on missions. Often, she secretly wipes her tears."

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but close her eyes and say sullenly, "I'll remember to bring a gift for Madam Xue..."

...

495th floor, Zone C, Room 11.

The five members of the Long family gathered around the dining table and ate dinner.

“The dishes are so sumptuous today.” Long Aihong sighed sincerely after finishing a mouthful of braised pork.

Long Yuehong smiled and said, “I got off work early today, so I got some extra food.”

“Brother, if only you left work early every day.” Long Aihong fantasized about that beautiful scene.

“What are you saying?” Gu Hong cursed. “Those who leave work early every day are either leaders or idlers. Do you want your brother to reach a standstill in the future?”

“I was just saying,” Long Aihong replied softly.

At this moment, she realized that Long Zhigu had secretly eaten a few more pieces of meat while she was talking. She quickly shut her mouth and focused on the food.

After his parents, brother, and sister were almost done eating, Long Yuehong looked around and acted casual before saying, “I have another mission tomorrow. If it’s fast, I’ll be back in a month. If it’s slow, it might take months.”

This was completely different from the time spent on field training.

Pa!

Gu Hong’s chopsticks fell on the table.

She quickly picked it up and forced a smile. “Do you know where you’re going for the mission?”

“First City.” Long Yuehong didn’t elaborate and only briefly mentioned it.

Gu Hong held her chopsticks and shut her mouth, not saying a word for a long time.



Upon seeing this, Long Dayong straightened his body and said in a deep voice, “You have to be careful in everything. Your mother and I can’t help you much. We can only say that you don’t have to worry about family matters.

“When you’re outside, listen to your superior; she’s definitely more experienced than you. What she says definitely makes sense. If you encounter a situation, don’t be a hero. More observation, wait a little more...” At this point, Long Dayong paused as if he was a little stuck.

At this moment, Gu Hong sniffed and said, “Remember to bring that thin sweater. The temperature on the surface often drops in April...”

As she spoke, she couldn’t continue. Her eyes reddened slightly.

“Alright.” Long Yuehong suddenly felt that the dishes in front of him had become blurry.

Long Aihong and Long Zhigu—who were beside him—cheered him on with a fist pump.

...

495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

Shang Jianyao remained lying in bed, hiding in the darkness as he waited for the radio broadcast to begin.

Before long, a familiar voice echoed. “Good evening, everyone. I’m Newspoint broadcaster, Hou Yi. It’s 8 p.m. now...”

“At 9 a.m. today, the board of directors convened the third management meeting this year to revisit the Big Boss’s end-of-year speech. At the meeting, the board of directors and Vice President Ji Ze announced the production, research, and trade numbers for the first quarter.

“The first quarter’s production, research, and trade have been stable and optimistic...”

“At the management meeting, the board of directors decided to increase the meat, eggs, and milk supply in the next week...”

“According to the Security Department’s latest report, the frequency of bandit encounters in the wilderness has returned to the same level as last year...”

“The spring table tennis tournament has ended, and the 580th floor’s team representative clinched the final victory...”

“The first baby boom this year has arrived...”

“Radio program reforms are steadily being pushed forward...”

“The temperature in the wilderness plummeted today...”

...

The next morning, the well-dressed Shang Jianyao walked into Zone C.

Long Yuehong was already waiting at his door.

The two of them didn’t speak as they walked side by side and entered the elevator to the 647th floor.

After changing into their grayish-blue camouflage uniforms and stuffing all kinds of things into their tactical backpacks, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong headed to Room 14.

On the way, they encountered Bai Chen—who had come out of the female changing room.

The three of them entered the Old Task Force’s office one after another. Jiang Baimian—who was long prepared—was already waiting there.

She looked at them and smiled. “Let’s set off!”

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao added, “To save all of humanity!”

## Chapter 328: Perilous Meeting

In Weed City, a car with dark bulletproof glass slowly drove into the street.

Zhao Yide sat on the left in the back row. He looked back at the grain shop behind him and nodded in satisfaction.

Ever since the nomad riot before the new year, he felt that his luck had turned for the better. As the number one successor of North Street's Zhao Manor, he was bound to be glorious in the eyes of others. However, he knew very well that he was trembling with fear every day as if he were treading on thin ice.

He had his family, who wielded authority, backing him. As a member of Weed City's Aristocratic Council, his father—Zhao Zhengqi—could handle anything. His ambitious younger brother, Zhao Yixue, was constantly watching him. Not only could he not make the decision on most matters, but he could only obtain a small portion of the resources available. Furthermore, he couldn't make any mistakes.

After the riot, his ambitious younger brother, Zhao Yixue, was expelled to First City and completely left the center of the family's power. His father, Zhao Zhengqi, suffered from poor health due to shock and gradually handed over a portion of his power and properties to him.

After living for more than 30 years, Zhao Yide finally understood how noble aristocrats were. For example, the lucrative grain shop he had just inspected was completely under his name from today onward. For example, the steward—who only listened to his father, Zhao Zhengqi, and treated him coldly—was now so eager to suck up to him that he yearned to grow a dog tail and wag it around him.

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Zhao Yide pressed the button to roll down the window, wanting to breathe in the sweet and intoxicating air outside.

At this moment, he saw a clearly modified, military-green jeep drive over.

This was not a rare situation in Weed City, so Zhao Yide didn't think much of it.

Suddenly, the jeep slowed down. The driver rolled down the window, removed his sunglasses, and waved his left hand at Zhao Yide.

He looked excited and happy.

Zhao Yide's eyes immediately reflected a handsome face with a healthy complexion. He was ever so familiar with this face.

He had such a deep impression of it that his mind went blank, and he felt like his heart and lungs had come to an abrupt halt.

It's him! It's the lunatic who held the explosives and threatened the entire Aristocratic Council! He's the terrifying Hunter who wields the strange ability to make anyone unknowingly become friends with him and dance with him! Zhao Yide held his breath. His instinct was to roll up the window and pretend not to see anything.

The dark glass window slowly closed. From the corner of his eye, Zhao Yide saw the man—who called himself Zhang Qubing—retract his hand in disappointment.

He numbly turned his gaze forward and didn't urge the driver to speed up lest he expose the fact that he had already seen the other party.

The two vehicles passed each other, and nothing happened.

Zhao Yide remained sitting upright, his body extremely stiff.

Only when the car circled around the municipal building, and he had the bridge that led to North Street in sight did he heave a sigh of relief.

In the jeep, Shang Jianyao turned the steering wheel and said with a regretful expression, "From the looks of it, Inference Clowning's effects have already disappeared. Sigh, I haven't had the time to attend his ball."

Back then, Zhao Yide had issued an invitation to Shang Jianyao.

"It's been so long. You aren't a Kalendaria, so the effects will definitely be gone." Jiang Baimian—who was sitting on the left in the backseat—wasn't surprised at all.

In the passenger seat, Long Yuehong said worriedly, “He should’ve recognized us. Will he get someone to take revenge?”

Back in Weed City, the Old Task Force had made the Aristocratic Council’s councilors suffer heavy losses to appease the nomads. Furthermore, Shang Jianyao had also used Inference Clowning on them to form a Brotherhood and dance with them.

After the nobles came to their senses, this was undoubtedly an embarrassing, shameful memory that made them grit their teeth.

With the resources they had, Long Yuehong felt that it was illogical for them not to take revenge on the Old Task Force.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “Weed City and the company are now in a friendly partnership. As long as Castellan Xu doesn’t want to attack us, the few nobles won’t cause any trouble. They also won’t be able to find many Awakened and experienced Hunters just by hiring outsiders. Our current strength is more than double that of when we left Weed City. As long as we aren’t careless, would we need to be afraid of them?”

Without Xu Liyan’s permission, the aristocrats’ private armed forces couldn’t act too presumptuously in the city and act without any scruples.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and actually felt that his team leader made sense.

Our team has really grown to a rather terrifying level... As he sighed inwardly, he tersely acknowledged it.

“We won’t be staying in Weed City for long anyway. We’ll leave as soon as Geneva arrives.”

As the Underground Ark’s situation was relatively delicate and it had a competitive relationship with the other factions in Redstone Collection, Geneva spent more time than expected to establish order. He would take another two days to reach Weed City.

Jiang Baimian propped her elbow on the door and held her cheek with one hand. She smiled and said, “Besides, they should be able to guess that we have a considerable faction backing us. As long as we don’t go to North Street to agitate them, they will at most monitor us.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian swept her gaze and realized that Bai Chen's gaze had passed her and was looking out the window.

"What are you looking at?" She curiously turned her head and looked down the street.

The original Time-Honored Noodle Restaurant had become Wang's Noodle Restaurant.

Jiang Baimian fell silent.

Shang Jianyao also didn't say a word. He drove the jeep around until he was sure that nobody was following them before driving into the alley where Ah Fu's Gun Shop was.

After the car stopped in a courtyard surrounded by buildings, Long Yuehong pushed open the door and walked out. He sized up this familiar yet unfamiliar place.

The familiarity came from the fact that he had lived and fought here. The unfamiliarity came from the fact that this place had been modified to a certain extent. The clothes that were hung out to dry had also become thin.

"You guys are here again?"

"You even changed cars? I really didn't dare to believe my eyes!"

"Wanna have a seat inside?"

The residents coming and going recognized the Old Task Force that had fought alongside them and greeted them politely and enthusiastically.

There were also many strangers here; they were likely Ruin Hunters that had just arrived after the New Year. They sized up the Old Task Force with curious and scrutinizing gazes.

After a simple response, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong followed Bai Chen and entered Ah Fu's Gun Shop's back door.

Auntie Nan—who was wearing an old dress and a thin scarf and had her hair tied into a high bun—was already waiting at the stairwell. As she threw out the two keys in her hand, she smiled and said, “The same two rooms as before.”

Bai Chen originally wanted to reach out and catch the two keys, but Shang Jianyao had already finished the job happily before her.

She could only nod and make a simple acknowledgment.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “You’ve been doing well recently.”

“Same old,” Auntie Nan replied with a smile.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, “Does Teacher An still teach?”

“Yes, the usual time,” Auntie Nan said as she turned her body and made way.

The four people from the Old Task Force carried their tactical backpacks. They followed the same staircase that didn’t change much except for the many bullet holes until they entered a cold aisle.

...

North Street, Zhao Manor.

Zhao Yide rushed into the study.

The fat, chubby, and grizzled Zhao Zhengqi held a teacup and glanced at his eldest son. He said in dissatisfaction, “Why are you panicking? You’re already in your thirties! You must stay calm in every major event!”

Zhao Yide panted and hurriedly said, “Dad, those people are back! The ones who threatened us with bombs!”

With a crash, the teacup in Zhao Zhengqi's hand fell to the ground and shattered into pieces.

"Where are they?" Zhao Zhengqi jumped up, displaying agility that didn't match his figure.

"S-south Street!" Zhao Yide replied truthfully.

Zhao Zhengqi calmed down a little. "What are they doing?"

"We met on the way. That lunatic even happily greeted me, but I pretended not to see him." Zhao Yide didn't hide any details.

Zhao Zhengqi asked, "And you came back just like that?"

"Yes!" Zhao Yide nodded heavily. "Dad, what should we do now?"

Zhao Zhengqi regained his composure and paced around. "Let's report this matter to the Castellan and the others first and raise everyone's guard. After that, don't do anything. Just pay close attention to those people's actions."

"Nothing?" Zhao Yide was rather surprised.

Zhao Zhengqi sneered. "You still want revenge? If that lunatic doesn't die on the spot, you and I won't be able to sleep well for the rest of our lives. Which normal person isn't afraid of a proactive and capable lunatic?"

At this point, Zhao Zhengqi paused. "It's not like they have no background either. Our losses last time weren't great either."

Zhao Yide exhaled and said, "Guess that's the only way..."

Just as he said that, he suddenly recalled something and blurted out, "Dad, haven't we failed to find a suitable person to do that matter? Should we hire them?"



“Are you nuts?” Zhao Zhengqi cursed reflexively. He then fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “It’s not impossible...”

Chapter 329: ‘Brotherly Love Runs Deep’

The sky had turned dark by the time the Old Task Force settled down. The setting sun’s rays draped an orange-yellow veil over the entire city.

Jiang Baimian and the others changed their clothes, hid their Ice Mosses and United 202s, slowly left Ah Fu’s Gun Shop, and entered South Street.

Being in such a large settlement, they didn’t want to eat canned food, biscuits, or energy bars.

Long Yuehong looked around as he walked. “It’s much more lively than before.”

At this moment, people were coming and going on South Street. They were dressed in all kinds of clothes. Some seemed to come from the mountains and forests, and some effused the charm of the Old World.

Among them, the cars drove slowly as if they were breaking through the waves.

The noodle shops, food outlets, and restaurants on both sides were almost filled with people, be it good or bad.

Upon hearing Long Yuehong’s sigh, Bai Chen simply said, “Very few Ruin Hunters come during winter to begin with.”

After spring, a large number of Ruin Hunters would come from various settlements and different factions from the surroundings. They either sought opportunities or traded their harvests, restoring Weed City—which had been in turmoil—to its former state.

“How fragrant...” Shang Jianyao didn’t mind such matters. He sniffed the various fragrances of food drifting in the air and actively searched for a restaurant with empty seats.

As Jiang Baimian swept her gaze across the area, she realized that many people were gathered in corners and alleys near Central Square. It was unknown what they were doing, but they always acted as if nothing had happened whenever a patrol passed by.

Sensing that Jiang Baimian was watching those people, Bai Chen casually said, “Small-scale black markets.”

Upon seeing that Long Yuehong was a little confused, she further explained, “West Street’s underground market mainly deals with large goods, all kinds of contraband items, and currency exchanges. As for the items excavated by Ruin Hunters from the city ruins, many of them can’t be categorized. It’s difficult to directly trade with the corresponding major buyers, and it also costs a sum of supplies to enter the official market. Not everyone is willing to bear the cost.

“Some of them chose to walk the streets to peddle their wares, and some spontaneously form such small-scale black markets. There are many strange Old World items sold among them.”

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong roughly understood and asked curiously, “Could there be anything valuable sold in such places? For example, an item that has solidified the aura of an Awakened at the Mind Corridor level?”

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao laughed. “You’ve watched too much of the Old World’s entertainment.”

That’s true. Such items are closer to a curse or a disaster when they land in the hands of an ordinary person. There will definitely be problems once someone comes into contact with them for extended periods, allowing others to distinguish their abnormalities easily... Long Yuehong was too embarrassed to admit that he had been overthinking.

“Very few.” Bai Chen answered his previous question. “If you have the time and knowledge, you can also select some good stuff from these small-scale black markets. The price is often lower than their actual values.”

After taking a few more steps, Long Yuehong suddenly suppressed his voice and said, “There’s someone watching us over there. He looks elsewhere whenever I look over. There’s another one over there...”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Not bad; you can graduate now. Those few should be the monitors that North Street hired. Ignore them.”

She, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen discovered this earlier than Long Yuehong. Peeping at handsome men and beautiful women was clearly different from paying close attention to their actions.

As they spoke, Shang Jianyao realized that two tables were empty in a shop called Delicious Food.

“Over there!” He touched his stomach and pointed in that direction.

Jiang Baimian had no objections. She led the Old Task Force and walked over, occupying a four-person table.

There were very few dishes in this fast-food restaurant. There were only seven to eight pots lined up, and different foods were stewed in each pot.

Under them was a platform with many simple stoves. The charcoal, coal, and other small fires kept the dishes in the pot at a minimum temperature.

Shang Jianyao looked over and recognized most of the food in the pot.

Tomato scrambled eggs, stewed pork belly with potatoes, small pieces of braised pork, and a few kinds of stewed vegetables...

Almost at the same time, Jiang Baimian figured out what this shop sold—Meat Vegetable Rice!

“I want potatoes stewed with meat.” Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong and the others.

The Old Task Force still had some of their Oray, Drace, and Cass from before. There was no rush to exchange for currency.

“Me too.” Shang Jianyao wiped the corners of his mouth.

“I want braised pork.”

“I want tomato scrambled eggs.”

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen ordered separately.

After settling on dinner, they patiently waited.

The Ruin Hunters around the team sized them up from time to time. On the one hand, they were eye candy. On the other hand, they were confusing.

After all, it was relatively rare to see a team with such outstanding looks in Weed City.

Even the restaurant owner sneaked a few peeks.

He held a plate, scooped a spoonful of rice, and covered it with a layer of ingredients. In less than a minute, he had prepared four servings of the dish.

It could be described in one word—fast!

Shang Jianyao seriously mixed the gravy from the stewed potato pork belly into the rice and counted the pieces of meat.

“Three small pieces.” He sighed.

Fortunately, you didn’t say it out loud... As Jiang Baimian mixed the rice, she smiled and said, “How much meat can such a small shop get? Besides, if there’s more meat, it’ll become more expensive. Many Ruin Hunters won’t be able to afford it.”

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it and focused on eating the rice that had been infused with gravy.

At this moment, a car stopped outside the door. It was a sedan with dark bulletproof glass and thick armor.

Zhao Yide pushed open the door and alighted. He pretended to be surprised and shouted, “Qubing? You guys are back?”

His voice echoed in Delicious Food Shop, attracting the attention of Ruin Hunters.

After recognizing him, the Ruin Hunters' pupils dilated.

This gentleman clearly had a high status! The vehicle behind him was something most Ruin Hunters couldn't afford to modify, and several suspected bodyguards were around him in scattered positions. His black, tight pants and the same-colored top with golden buttons were neat, clean, and very new. He was slightly obese, and his face was ruddy. He looked different from the generally malnourished people of the Ashlands...

The Ruin Hunters at the door had sharp eyes and saw the pass under the sedan's windshield—it was a permit to enter and leave North Street!

This is probably an aristocrat... Ruin Hunters—who knew Weed City well—lowered their heads.

Upon hearing Zhao Yide's greeting, Shang Jianyao stood up and shouted in surprise, "So you didn't recognize us previously. I thought you are no longer acknowledging me as your brother!"

Brother... Ruin Hunters—who were engrossed in eating—simultaneously chewed on this Ashlandic term.

This team is indeed not simple! They sighed inwardly.

Zhao Yide's expression stiffened for a few seconds as he tried his best to appear surprised. "Did we bump into each other this afternoon?"

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to answer, he forcefully changed the topic. "Come, let's go to my house! I won't allow you to eat such things in Weed City."

Shang Jianyao's expression suddenly turned serious, making Zhao Yide's heart skip a beat.

"No, we've already begun eating. We can't waste food," Shang Jianyao explained seriously.

"Yes, yes, yes." Zhao Yide didn't dare retort.

Shang Jianyao then pointed to the side and said to the fast-food restaurant owner, “My friend is here. Add a stool.”

Normally speaking, such matters were usually handled by customers themselves. But after looking at the gentleman suspected to be an aristocrat at the door, the boss still walked out from behind the stove, took a square stool, and placed it by the side of Shang Jianyao’s table.

Zhao Yide sized up the greasy shop and forced a smile. “It’s not too safe here, right?”

“I’m here!” Shang Jianyao had an expression that said, “Do you not believe me?”

Long Yuehong, Jiang Baimian, and Bai Chen—who were beside him—lowered their heads and tried their best to hold in their laughter.

Zhao Yide silently took a deep breath, took out a white handkerchief, and wiped his forehead.

“We’re brothers. How can I not trust you?” He replied to Shang Jianyao first before saying to the bodyguards beside him, “Wait at the door.”

Shang Jianyao added, “Drive the car further away; don’t block the door to the shop. It’ll affect their business.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Zhao Yide readily agreed.

After the driver drove away, Zhao Yide slowly walked to Shang Jianyao and the others. Looking at the slightly greasy square stool’s surface, he mustered his courage for a few seconds before finally sitting down.

Shang Jianyao happily patted his shoulder and asked in a friendly manner, “Have you had dinner?”

“Not yet,” Zhao Yide replied reflexively.

The next second, he regretted it because Shang Jianyao turned around and said to the boss, “Another serving of potato stew meat. My treat!”

Whoa, how generous... That's coming from the team's common funds... Jiang Baimian didn't object.

When the Meat Vegetable Rice that was dotted with a few pieces of pork belly was served to Zhao Yide, he almost frowned. Just the sight of the fat made him feel nauseous.

He remembered that his father, Zhao Zhengqi, had a penchant for these. It seemed to be a habit his father had developed when he was young, but he didn't share the same habits. He had only tried it during his childhood out of curiosity and never wanted to come into contact with it again.

Besides, this restaurant was dirty and messy. How could the food it made be edible?

Upon seeing him stunned, Shang Jianyao said with bright eyes, "Make sure not to waste food."

"..." Zhao Yide picked up the cutlery, picked out the parts that weren't contaminated by the fat, and scooped a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

He soon choked to the point of having tears flow out.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but wonder if Shang Jianyao's 'brotherly love ran deep' or if he was doing this on purpose.

After finishing the spoonful of rice, Zhao Yide couldn't help but retch twice.

"You're pregnant?" Shang Jianyao was surprised.

Zhao Yide didn't know how to respond—both verbally and expression-wise.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat. "He's joking."

"Oh, I just ate too quickly," Zhao Yide quickly explained.

Jiang Baimian revealed a friendly smile. "Eat slowly then."

Zhao Yide nodded with a complicated expression. "Alright."

After forcing himself to eat a small spoonful, he finally couldn't help but say, "My father wants to see you."

Chapter 330: Warped Flattery

Shang Jianyao gave a terse acknowledgment. "Your father dances well. You can't judge a book by its cover."

He didn't seem to hear what Zhao Yide was saying.

Upon seeing that October Xue and the others didn't comment, Zhao Yide could only repeat, "My father has something he wants your help with. I wonder if you are willing to meet him."

Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced as she said mischievously, "As the saying goes, a gentleman doesn't stand under a dangerous wall. It's fine if we meet, but we can't do it at Zhao Manor. We have to find a place where everyone feels at ease."

Zhao Yide found this reasonable and nodded in agreement. "Alright."

He was just about to suggest a meeting place when Shang Jianyao suddenly patted his shoulder. "Let's eat first; we'll talk later. It won't taste good when it's cold."

Zhao Yide slowly turned his head and looked at Shang Jianyao, only to see his sincere and serious expression.

Retracting his gaze, Zhao Yide picked up a small spoon and arduously finished the rice with potato stew meat.

He almost cried from eating.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him and suggested, "If you don't like meat, I can help you."

Zhao Yide quickly replied, "Alright!"



Jiang Baimian pursed her lips slightly.

...

After the sun set, in Weed City's Central Square.

Zhao Zhengqi—who was wearing a beanie and a loose robe—sat on a bench, enjoying the night breeze. He looked a little wooden as he watched the bodyguards around him try their best to stop the city's citizens and Ruin Hunters from approaching.

This was the meeting place Jiang Baimian had chosen.

As she and Shang Jianyao walked toward Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen consciously spread out and monitored their surroundings. Their focus was on the surrounding high-rise buildings, mainly to prevent them from being sniped.

As for the square, most of it was within the range of Shang Jianyao's Awakened ability—Hands Immobility. There was no need to pay too much attention.

“Long time no see.” Zhao Zhengqi stood up with a smile when he saw October Xue and Zhang Qubing approach.

Shang Jianyao spread his arms and made a gesture of him offering a hug.

The fat Zhao Zhengqi stroked his white beard, smiled, and accepted the enthusiastic hug.

“Your dance left a deep impression on me.” While hugging, Shang Jianyao patted Zhao Zhengqi's back.

Zhao Zhengqi quickly retracted his hand, stood up, and sighed with a smile. “When I was young, everyone lived a very difficult life. We often relied on singing and dancing to lift the mood.”

As he spoke, he stretched out his hand and gently shook Jiang Baimian's hand.

After the four of them sat down, Jiang Baimian went straight to the point. “Senator Zhao, why did you want to meet us?”

Zhao Zhengqi glanced at his eldest son, Zhao Yide, and deliberated over his words. “Pardon me for asking, but where do you plan on going next? What are your plans? I can’t let my request delay your business.”

He was very, very humble.

Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “We plan on going to a few large factions to try our luck and hope for a better development.”

Zhao Zhengqi revealed an understanding expression. “Then, I would like to invite the few of you to make a trip to First City—uh—the real city.”

“You encountered some problem?” Shang Jianyao asked in concern.

Zhao Zhengqi took the opportunity and said, “Our Zhao family has a few manors on the south bank of the Red River around First City’s suburbs.”

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian’s faint smile, he quickly explained, “As the saying goes, we can’t put all our eggs in one basket.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, and Zhao Zhengqi continued, “Something happened to those manors some time ago. They weren’t able to turn in last year’s earnings as scheduled. They said that it was due to the weather that their production was severely reduced.

“I sent a steward, and he reported that it was indeed the case. I also sent Yide’s younger brother, and he also sent a telegram back saying that there was nothing abnormal. I originally believed it until a friend of mine happened to pass by those manors in First City and discovered unknown people entering and leaving.

“I secretly sent a Ruin Hunter team from First City to monitor the manors for a week and confirmed that unknown people often appeared there. I got another Ruin Hunter team to enter the manor to investigate. In the end, they reported that there were no strangers.”

“It sounds very bizarre.” Shang Jianyao stroked his chin thoughtfully.

Zhao Zhengqi looked like he had found a savior. “Yes, I’m very worried about my child and my few trusted aides. I was just considering if I should hire the guild’s Advanced Hunter to help when Yide told me that you were back. In my heart, you are stronger than Advanced Hunters.”

He remembered that Oudick had also become Zhang Qubing’s ‘friend.’

Shang Jianyao fell into deep thought. Jiang Baimian smiled at Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide but didn’t say a word.

Zhao Zhengqi gritted his teeth and said, “I know that I’m not trustworthy in your hearts. I’m willing to be affected by that ability again and ‘become’ your friend. That way, you’ll know if I’m lying.”

There’s really nothing wrong with this attitude... Jiang Baimian was just about to reply when Shang Jianyao’s eyes suddenly lit up.

“Can a brother inherit the Zhao family’s assets?”

“...” Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide were first stunned before they felt regret.

Since that Awakened ability allowed them to ‘make friends,’ it would definitely allow them to become akin to blood-related brothers despite sharing zero biological traits. In their imaginations, the ‘father’ was naturally Zhang Qubing, and they could only be the ‘children.’

“He’s joking.” Jiang Baimian mediated the situation. “There’s no need to do so. We just need to have the promise that we can give up on the mission at any time without paying any price.”

“Are you willing to take on the mission?” Zhao Yide asked in pleasant surprise.

Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “That depends on what price you can offer.”

Zhao Zhengqi thought for a moment and said, “I’m not sure what you’re interested in. Why don’t you make a bid? It won’t be a problem as long as the Zhao family can afford it.”

This attitude... Jiang Baimian couldn't help but praise him inwardly. She still remembered how arrogant and cold Zhao Zhengqi had acted in the Aristocratic Council Chamber. Now, he had completely lowered himself in a rather refreshing take.

A person could have two completely different facades.

Anyone who can obtain a certain status in the early stages of the New Calendar and become a noble isn't simple... Jiang Baimian didn't know Zhao Zhengqi's age and had no idea if he had experienced the Chaotic Era. She could only sigh casually.

After pondering for seven to eight seconds, Jiang Baimian gave an answer that she had long considered. "A sum of money and the use of the Zhao family's power network in First City to help us."

It was precisely because she eyed the Weed City nobles' intricate network in First City that she was willing to meet Zhao Zhengqi.

"How much Oray? What help do you need?" asked Zhao Zhengqi.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "I can't tell you the exact amount of Oray. After all, we haven't figured out how dangerous this matter is. Don't worry, it won't be too much. You will definitely be able to accept it because we will give up once the danger exceeds our expectations. The same goes for that help. In short, it won't put the Zhao family in danger."

You make it sound nice now, but we can only listen to you when the time comes... Zhao Yide muttered inwardly. He really felt like he was asking a tiger for its skin.

Zhao Zhengqi recalled what the Qian Bai Team had done in Weed City and what he knew. He deliberated and said, "No problem."

"Congratulations." Shang Jianyao stretched out his hand.

What do you mean by congratulations? Zhao Zhengqi shook his hand hesitantly.

"If you can frequently help refugees, we can be true friends," Shang Jianyao said truthfully.

Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide could only respond with smiles, not daring to say anything.

“Remember to inform us of the Zhao family’s contact in First City later.” Jiang Baimian looked up at the moon hanging in the sky and slowly stood up.

Zhao Zhengqi stood up and stretched out his right hand. “I can give it to you now. Happy cooperation.”

Shang Jianyao shook his hand in Jiang Baimian’s stead and smiled. “Since we have a pleasant cooperation, why don’t we dance and celebrate?”

Zhao Zhengqi’s expression stiffened before he smiled. “Sure, let’s dance at my place.”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “That will have to wait. Let’s do it here.”

He smiled brightly and pointed at the busy Central Square. At the same time, he took off his tactical backpack and prepared to take out his small speaker.

Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide imagined themselves dancing in the square, and their expressions turned a little ugly.

Jiang Baimian slapped Shang Jianyao’s hand away. “Don’t disturb the residents!”

She then smiled at Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide. “There’s no need to listen to him.”

Zhao Zhengqi heaved a sigh of relief and quickly told Jiang Baimian about the Zhao family’s liaison in First City.

Then, under Shang Jianyao’s disappointed gaze, he pulled Zhao Yide and hurriedly left Central Square while surrounded by bodyguards.

The four people from the Old Task Force then strolled back to South Street.

At this moment, the lamps had already been switched on. The streets were alternating between light and dark—some a dim yellow and some black.

Some people were huddled in a corner of the street, wrapped in tattered and dirty blankets, as they prepared to sleep. Some were gathered by the streets as they sized up the passersby, stretching out their hands in a bid to receive help.

Long Yuehong looked around and sighed. “There are more beggars in the city than there were before...”

Bai Chen looked ahead and calmly said, “Most of those who slept outside in the winter are dead.”

Long Yuehong fell silent when he thought of the wilderness nomads outside the city. Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao also didn't say a word and quietly walked forward.

After returning to the second floor of Ah Fu's Gun Shop, Jiang Baimian switched on the radio transceiver to see if Geneva or the company would send a new telegram.

Just after 8 p.m., they suddenly received an electric signal.

After accepting the telegram and translating the contents, Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows and said to Shang Jianyao and the others, “It's not from Geneva or the company.”