

## Ad Infinitum 341

### Chapter 341: Strange Sounds

“This comes under direct memory modification, am I right?” Jiang Baimian propped her right elbow over her left hand and placed her right hand’s five fingers between her mouth and nose.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “I’ve never compared the differences between hypnosis and tampered memories, so I can’t be sure.”

Whoa, it’s the strict Shang Jianyao now... Jiang Baimian sat there and thought for a moment before saying, “If someone in the Zhao family is indeed related to the Anti-intellectualism Church’s assassination attempt on Xu Liyan, then the manor’s matter might very well have been done by the real Father. But with his caution, he shouldn’t be in the manor. Instead, he should be hiding somewhere nearby and quietly watching everything.”

Shang Jianyao did the same exact actions as Jiang Baimian. “Then, how do you explain the tampered memories of Zhao Shouren and the others?”

“Maybe he appeared during the initial takeover of the manor. Later, he only left behind a fake Father-like puppet.” Jiang Baimian felt provoked and explained her guess in detail. “It’s likely that the people who entered the manor to investigate probably didn’t suffer from memory modification but hypnosis. Those who hid outside to observe naturally weren’t affected because they weren’t discovered.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to raise any doubts, she realized another problem. “But what is the Anti-intellectualism Church trying to do? If they plan on using the Zhao family manor as a stronghold to draw benefits from it, there’s no need to go that far. It’s crucial not to arouse the Zhao family’s patriarch’s suspicion. If that happens, there will only be subsequent investigations. It’s very unfavorable in their bid to lay low. If it were me, I would definitely hand over a reasonable amount of produce and write it off as reasonable expenditures. Who wouldn’t suspect something when there’s a complete wipe-out all at once?

“If they only want to occupy the manor and strengthen their church, this method isn’t smart. If it were me, I would directly modify the corresponding personnel’s memories and sell a few manors in the shortest time possible. Then, I would leave for good and get someone else to use the money I earned from selling the manors to buy other manors openly...”

At this point, Jiang Baimian realized that Shang Jianyao’s gaze became strange when he looked at her. She immediately and subconsciously made a terse comment to protect her glorious image as

team leader. “I’m only thinking from a different perspective and analyzing the problem from the villain’s perspective. I don’t really have any plans on actually doing it. Pui, what I mean is that I usually don’t even have such thoughts. It’s only when I’m putting myself in their shoes that I strictly follow logic and infer what kind of development there will be.”

Shang Jianyao nodded. “Watch my mouth.”

With that said, he opened and closed his mouth a few times without making a sound.

“I don’t know lip language!” Jiang Baimian snapped. Although she said that, she actually opened her mouth as if she was replicating Shang Jianyao’s performance.

“Anti-intellectualism Church? You want to say ‘Anti-intellectualism Church?’” Jiang Baimian probed.

Shang Jianyao smiled in relief and clapped. “Correct!”

“You mean that it’s not surprising for the Anti-intellectualism Church to do something that’s devoid of intelligence?” Jiang Baimian shook her head in disagreement. “But according to the Anti-intellectualism Church’s teachings, the higher-ups have to maintain their intellect and think on behalf of the parishioners. They should still be relatively smart. Yes, the real Father is an example.”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “Stupidity is contagious.”

“Prove it to me!” Jiang Baimian subconsciously retorted.

Shang Jianyao immediately said, “Look...”

“Stop!” Jiang Baimian stopped him directly. She raised her hand to rub her forehead and voiced her guess. “I think the Anti-intellectualism Church wants to use the Zhao family’s manor as a stronghold to plan something. This should be a short-term operation; therefore, there’s no need to consider the problem of being exposed. They don’t mind doing so for instant benefits.”

“They are printing pamphlets there?” Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up. He seemed to be very interested in the Anti-intellectualism Church’s pamphlets that were filled with mistakes.

Jiang Baimian stood up from the edge of the bed and walked to the door as she replied, "Maybe."

Shang Jianyao stood up with her and walked out step by step.

Jiang Baimian pressed down on the door handle and asked with a smile, "Aren't you going to ask me where I'm going?"

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "I'm not Long Yuehong."

"Then, tell me where I want to go and what I want to do?" Jiang Baimian responded with a smile.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, "It'll cost him!"

Jiang Baimian's eyebrows twitched as she smiled in surprise. "Since it involves the Anti-intellectualism Church, we really need to have a chat with Councilor Zhao. He needs to be mentally prepared for a higher price that might appear in the future. At the same time, let's see what help he can find in First City. It's best if it's someone with real power who hates the Anti-intellectualism Church deeply."

If their final evaluation proved that the danger level was too high, she would consider giving up. After all, the Anti-intellectualism Church was also a major faction. It was not wise to provoke a bunch of brainless lunatics when it had nothing to do with their main mission.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao inexplicably said, "I wonder if the Furnace Church is related to the Anti-intellectualism Church."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. "I won't go directly to Lance. We'll send a telegram to Councilor Zhao when we return."

With that said, she turned the doorknob and opened the door.

The two of them walked down, bade farewell to Lance, and returned to the jeep.

Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at the Harvest Bathhouse and sighed with emotion. “It’s really comfortable to steam and soak in a bath. I felt much more relaxed after it. Yes, I have to bring Little White and the others to give it a try later.”

Shang Jianyao’s expression suddenly changed as though he had been put in a difficult position. He appeared deep in thought.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian to ask, he took the initiative to say, “Can Geneva undergo a steam bath?”

“I’m not sure about that...” Jiang Baimian wasn’t that good at robots.

The jeep slowly started moving and drove down the city’s main road. However, it didn’t return to the Green Olive Zone northwest of First City. Instead, it went straight to the southernmost exit of the Golden Grain Zone.

Jiang Baimian casually explained, “It’s still early, so we can observe the surroundings of the Zhao family manor. We won’t do any investigations other than familiarizing ourselves with the terrain.”

Their jeep had been modified after Weed City’s unrest, so they didn’t have to worry that the Anti-intellectualism Church’s people would recognize it.

Shang Jianyao sighed when he heard that. “Unfortunately, Little Red didn’t come with us.”

You mean that if Little Red were here, the simple act of familiarizing ourselves with the terrain would develop into a direct conflict? You think too highly of Little Red. Weren’t we fine all this while? As Jiang Baimian’s thoughts raced, she gave up on retorting.

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Just past 3 p.m., the jeep returned to Ugo Hotel and stopped at the spot from yesterday.

Jiang Baimian glanced at the additional gray SUV nearby and smiled. “Little White and the others should be back.”

Shang Jianyao carefully examined the SUV. It was unknown if he felt regretful or relieved as he said, "There are no bullet holes."

Jiang Baimian ignored him and walked into the hotel.

In the lobby, nobody was at the front desk. The wooden door to the room behind it was tightly shut.

As Jiang Baimian frowned, Shang Jianyao had already jumped over as if he wanted to enter the front desk and pretend to be a hotel owner.

Hey... Jiang Baimian didn't dare to shout loudly. She quickened her pace, attempting to catch up to Shang Jianyao and not give him a chance to act freely.

The two of them circled to the reception desk one after another. Jiang Baimian stretched out her hand to stop Shang Jianyao's subsequent actions.

At this moment, she heard a gasping sound coming from behind the tightly shut wooden door. This was like a beast howling in grief.

The expression on Jiang Baimian's face vanished instantly. She turned her ear and tried her best to listen to the commotion in the room.

She sensed that there was a large creature's electric signal inside.

The gasping sound sounded twice before completely disappearing.

Behind the wooden door was silence.

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes. She then quietly left the reception area and returned to the lobby.

Shang Jianyao mimicked her and quickly retreated far away from the room.

The two of them had just rendezvoused and were walking toward the stairwell when the wooden door creaked open.

The person who walked out was the hotel owner, Ugo. His blond hair and linen shirt were slightly moist as if he had perspired a lot. His slightly wrinkled and tanned face was slightly pale.

He glanced at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao and slowly asked, "What's the matter?"

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, "You can't leave the front desk empty. It's very inviting for thieves."

Ugo nodded. "Don't worry. I know all the thieves in this area."

"It seems like we were overthinking." Jiang Baimian smiled and pulled Shang Jianyao away.

After returning to the second floor, Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and suppressed her voice to ask, "Did you go over because you sensed something abnormal?"

Shang Jianyao shook his head. "I wanted to help him guard the front desk for a while."

Jiang Baimian was speechless.

The two of them quickly returned to Room 202. After resting for a while, Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava knocked on the door.

After discussing today's experience, Jiang Baimian smiled and heaved a sigh of relief. "At least we don't have to worry about not having money to live on for the time being. Yes, we'll use 100 Oray as a deposit tomorrow to redeem the single-person rocket launcher. Since we're in First City, we have to ensure that we have sufficient firepower."

100 Oray was definitely insufficient to buy a brand-new car, but for an SUV that was over 70 years old and had undergone major repairs? The deposit was enough.

After settling this matter, Long Yuehong said hesitatingly, "Are we really going to deal with the Anti-intellectualism Church?"

“If we ignore it, there might be another upheaval like in Weed City that will eventually involve us,” replied Bai Chen.

Jiang Baimian was slightly surprised by this, but she didn’t tease him.

She thought so too. After all, the Anti-intellectualism Church had the tendency to do nasty things that affected a large number of people.

Of course, whether they wanted to interfere ultimately depended on the level of danger. If it was too dangerous, they could consider reporting it to First City’s relevant departments.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Everyone must take responsibility in fighting cults!”

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Genava clapped.

Shang Jianyao gave him a nod of approval and thanked him for his support.

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen and asked seriously, “What else do you know about this hotel’s boss?”

Chapter 342: Expenses

Bai Chen shook her head. “When we live here, the boss doesn’t ask anything. Same for the reverse.”

Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at the door. “When Shang Jianyao and I returned, we realized that there was no one at the front desk...”

She recounted the process of hearing the beast growl in the boss’s room and emphasized, “According to my senses, there was only a cluster of electric signals that can be considered a large creature inside.”

“There was only one human consciousness,” Shang Jianyao added.

“Mourning, growling, pale, sweating...” Bai Chen ruminated over these words and guessed, “He has some kind of disease? Or is he some kind of Subhuman?”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and the others to respond, she made another guess. “Maybe he believes in a strange religion? In First City, there are many religions of all kinds.”

Jiang Baimian recalled and said, “Forget it. Let’s not discuss the boss. It has nothing to do with us.”

At this point, she clapped her hands. “Rest up. We still have to meet the company’s intelligence agent at night.”

...

It was already dark by 7:40 p.m.

Red Wolf Zone, Bulis Street, Silver Candle Café.

After Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva entered the surveillance cameras’ sights, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao pushed open the slightly heavy, glass-inlaid door and walked in.

The tables here were a little greasy. This place clearly also doubled up as a restaurant.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian each ordered a cup of coffee. Then, they found a seat by the window in the corner before sitting down.

Before long, two cups of coffee—which the locals called Bouchard—were served.

Jiang Baimian sniffed it, picked up the cup, and took a sip.

“It’s not too fragrant, and the taste is very ordinary. It’s rather bland...” she suppressed her voice and commented.



The coffee they had at Genova's place was better. Furthermore, milk and sugar were relatively valuable here. Additional payment was needed if one made a request, and at times, they weren't even available.

Shang Jianyao picked up his cup and gulped it down.

"It's quite quenching." He also voiced his feelings.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. "This place should be prepared for lower and middle-class citizens. All the places in the Ashlands that can grow food are definitely planted with food. How many good coffee beans can there be, and how many instant mixes can there be?"

The two of them drank and chatted like normal customers. At this moment, a person walked over from the table behind them and sat down with his back facing them.

The spot faced a wall along the street, preventing pedestrians from looking in.

After about a minute, the person sitting beside Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao suddenly lowered his voice and whispered, "I'm Garibaldi."

He spoke in Ashlandic.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment. She turned her head and looked at Shang Jianyao. "Ah, what did you say? I'm hard of hearing."

As she spoke, she touched her metal cochlear.

The person who called himself Garibaldi was immediately dumbfounded. He didn't expect the secret meeting he had meticulously prepared to encounter an almost insurmountable difficulty from the beginning.

There was at least one condition when communicating with backs facing each other while pretending not to know each other: the other party had to hear him clearly.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao controlled his voice and simulated his performance. "I'm Garibaldi."

Jiang Baimian nodded and slowly exhaled.

Garibaldi was the company's intelligence agent's code name.

"I'm the company's Old Task Force team leader. Have you gathered any information regarding the target?" With her disability, Jiang Baimian could only suppress her voice to prevent herself from being overheard by the guests at the other tables.

She also spoke in Ashlandic.

This time, Garibaldi couldn't hear her clearly.

Shang Jianyao took on the role of interpreter and seemed to be enjoying it.

After Garibaldi figured out what Jiang Baimian was asking, he quickly replied, "There's some progress on the two targets' general situation. It's written in the information. In addition, the company has also prepared 1,000 Oray for your mission expenses so that it's easier for you to bribe the people around the target."

The company is pretty generous this time... The intelligence network in First City seems to be very rich... Jiang Baimian muttered in surprise after hearing Shang Jianyao's recount.

However, this was still far from the Oray needed to purchase the military exoskeleton and mechanical arm.

Garibaldi continued, "Anything else you need?"

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and fell silent for a few seconds. "I want detailed information on the Anti-intellectualism Church's assassination of Elder Salus. Uh, we had a conflict with the Anti-intellectualism Church in Weed City. We discovered their tracks not long after arriving in First City. We have to take precautions."

She spoke in a dignified manner, and every word was the truth.

“Alright, give us some time.” Garibaldi didn’t shirk his responsibility.

After Shang Jianyao’s interpretation, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, “Is there anything worth paying attention to in First City recently?”

Garibaldi thought for a moment and said, “Nothing special. There are only two things if you insist. The first is that a strange white wolf appeared in the North Shore Mountains. You can go to the Hunter’s Guild to understand the details. The second is that the new member of the Senate, Geus, has expressed his extreme views at the Citizen Conclave many times and has incurred the displeasure of many of the Elders, including Superintendent Alexander.”

Members of the Senate could be called Elders or Senators.

In name, First City had three powerhouses. They were the consul, the inspectorate, and the Chief of Homeland Security. The latter was also known as the commander-in-chief, but it was currently held by Consul Beulis.

The three giants were elected by the Senate every four years.

With his amazing memory, Shang Jianyao repeated Garibaldi’s words word for word.

This made Garibaldi inexplicably have the feeling that the other party was being sarcastic. It’s fine as long as the meaning is clearly expressed during a recount. How can one repeat the entire text without missing a single word while maintaining the same tone?

Jiang Baimian listened seriously and thought for a moment. “I have no other questions. If I need your help in the future, I’ll contact you again.”

“It’s not about who’s helping who. This is our job. It might be better to call it a cooperation,” Garibaldi said politely. As he stood up, he said, “I’ll leave the things on the table. Don’t forget them.”

Just as he said that, he had already left his spot and walked toward the door of Silver Candle Café.

In order to prevent others from discovering the item and raising questions to find the owner, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian only waited for a moment before turning around and looking at the table behind them.

There was a small gray cloth bag there.

Shang Jianyao sat outside, so he could move more freely. He grabbed the cloth bag and hid it in his arms.

During this process, he and Jiang Baimian saw Garibaldi's side profile.

This intelligence agent was less than 1.75 meters tall. He wore a very old black coat and a cap that was pressed very low. As he walked, his left hand kept pressing down on his cap, blocking his face.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao didn't look any further. They retracted their gazes, sat up straight, and continued drinking their coffee.

After waiting for nearly ten minutes, they slowly got up, left the coffee shop, and got into the jeep parked nearby.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva waited for a while until they confirmed that nobody was keeping tabs on them before leaving one after another and returning to the gray SUV.

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Ugo Hotel, Room 202.

Jiang Baimian held some of the information and flipped through it as she said, "Marcus likes to watch gladiator fights..."

In First City, a form of entertainment was popular. It was to choose strong captives and slaves and let them wrestle each other to determine the final winner.

The victor would obtain freedom and become a member of the Senate Guard or a member of a particular noble's private army.

Long Yuehong also shared what he had read. “Avia really likes to bathe. She made half of her home a bathroom.”

This referred to 14 Round Hill Street in the Golden Apple Zone.

“How enviable.” Jiang Baimian stood up with a smile and walked to the bathroom.

As she approached, she felt the light dim a little. At some point in time, the ajar wooden door had been tightly shut.

She then heard a gasping sound coming from inside. This was like a beast panting, wailing, and growling; it made one’s hair stand on end.

Jiang Baimian suddenly looked around and saw that the room was pitch black. An instant later, she opened her eyes and realized that she was lying in bed.

The moonlight shone weakly through the curtain.

It was just a dream.

The dream mixed the Old Task Force’s discussion of the information at night with her afternoon encounter with Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian sensed something and turned her head in confusion. She saw that Shang Jianyao had already sat up and was deep in thought in the darkness.

“You’re awake too?” Shang Jianyao asked.

Jiang Baimian gave a terse acknowledgment and recalled. “I dreamed about what happened in the afternoon. It was when I heard the strange sounds in the boss’s room. I woke up in shock.”

Shang Jianyao looked at her and calmly said, “Me too.”

Chapter 343: Bidding

Jiang Baimian's expression gradually turned solemn. She didn't say, "Isn't this too coincidental?"

Instead, she directly made a judgment: There's something wrong with this!

It was completely understandable for the two of them to have such a dream because of the same encounter. However, it was unbelievable that they woke up at the same time without external interference.

After pondering for a few seconds, Jiang Baimian looked at the door and deliberated before saying, "The boss did it? He's an Awakened in the dream domain and wants to confirm what we discovered this afternoon? Hmm... If he were really an Awakened, our act back then would've been useless. He could clearly sense us approaching the door and returning to the lobby..."

Shang Jianyao nodded before saying in confusion, "He can ask us directly. It's not like I would lie to him."

You make it sound like I'll lie... Jiang Baimian didn't retort Shang Jianyao and only criticized him inwardly.

She thought for a moment and covered her mouth to yawn. "The boss should already believe that we only heard a strange sound but failed to figure out what went wrong. Sleep and pretend nothing happened."

This was Ugo Hotel's 'custom': If you don't ask, so won't I.

Shang Jianyao cast his gaze at the door and said eagerly, "I'm wondering if the boss knows Oudick."

"Awakened in the same dream domain might not necessarily believe in the same Kalendaria. Even if they believe in the same Kalendaria, they might not be in the same Church. It's not rare for Churches that believe in the same Kalendaria to be in conflict because of their different interpretation of the scriptures," Jiang Baimian replied. She lay down again and prepared to sleep.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and sighed. He pulled up the blanket and wrapped himself in it.

Nothing happened again that night. There were no more strange dreams.

The next morning, Jiang Baimian briefly shared last night's encounter with Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Genava after breakfast that mainly consisted of bread. She also mentioned her guess.

Perhaps it was because they had already encountered a large number of Awakened and even experts with strange and terrifying abilities like DiMarco. Thus, Long Yuehong wasn't too shocked or afraid; he only sighed with emotion. "As expected of First City. Even a random hotel owner might be an Awakened."

Jiang Baimian took the opportunity to educate her team members. "Therefore, we can't think too highly of ourselves. We can't let loose just because of our past achievements."

"What do you mean by 'let loose?'" Genava asked, not understanding.

"It's the antonym for 'being down-to-earth and careful.'" Jiang Baimian helped the smart bot add to his vocabulary.

Shang Jianyao looked at Bai Chen and asked curiously, "You said that the boss has a deep friendship with the sheriff here. Do you know how they established a friendship?"

"I didn't ask." Bai Chen's answer was abnormally succinct, just a little short of the words 'none of my business.'

Shang Jianyao didn't expect an answer at all and excitedly voiced his guess. "Could it be that he enters the sheriff's dream every night to create all kinds of scenes to enhance their friendship? After dreaming of him many times, the sheriff feels an affinity with him whenever he sees him; hence, becoming friends with him."

"Why does this sound a little perverse..." Long Yuehong felt that something was amiss the more he thought about it.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "This was probably adapted from an Old World love story in the entertainment catalog."

"Even if it's love, it's perverted." Long Yuehong insisted on his opinion.

“People can’t be generalized.” Shang Jianyao ‘sincerely’ educated him. “Some people like a more perverted way of showing their love for each other.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t give Shang Jianyao a chance to continue his nonsense. She looked at the time, stood up, walked to the table, and operated the team’s radio transceiver.

She wanted to inform Zhao Zhengqi—the Zhao family’s patriarch—of their findings from yesterday’s investigation and see what he wanted to do next and what he could do.

In order to make a distinction, the Old Task Force communicated with Zhao Zhengqi using the frequency range and password that the Zhao family often used for this investigation. The schedule was also between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m.

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In the Zhao family’s study in Weed City.

Zhao Zhengqi—who was drinking tea—saw his eldest son, Zhao Yide, rush in. He wanted to curse, “What’s the rush? You must stay calm in every major event.” However, he instantly recalled a particular incident from before and forcefully shut his mouth.

After carefully putting down the teacup, Zhao Zhengqi asked, “What happened?”

Zhao Yide held a piece of paper and said, “Dad, Zhang Qubing’s team sent a telegram back.”

“That fast?” Zhao Zhengqi took the piece of paper in surprise. He had just received a telegram from Lance last night saying that the investigators had just arrived in First City and had contacted him.

At a glance, Zhao Zhengqi quickly finished reading the already short telegram. “It’s suspected to be related to the Anti-intellectualism Church and Awakened abilities involving Hypnosis.”

Jiang Baimian only said the results and didn’t mention the exact investigation process. At the same time, she hid the matter of ‘memory modification’ to prevent her employer from gaining any direct suspicions.



How did they discover that memories had been modified?

“Anti-intellectualism Church...” The previous assassination made all the nobles in Weed City familiar with this religion. The same went for Zhao Zhengqi.

Just as he muttered this name, Zhao Yide said in horror, “Dad, haven’t we never been able to figure out which entity was cooperating with the Anti-intellectualism Church? We only suspected that First City wanted to wipe us out and directly annex us. Could it be... Could it be Yixue...”

As the second son of the Zhao family’s direct line of descent, Zhao Yixue would inherit everything in the Zhao family as long as Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide died. When the time came, he would have a high chance of uniting Weed City with First City’s support while there was a void in power from the Castellan and other nobles’ demise.

Zhao Zhengqi clearly thought of this as well. His expression turned extremely ugly and gloomy.

After dozens of seconds, he slowly said, “Yixue might’ve been hypnotized.”

This was the most acceptable answer he could think of.

“That’s right.” Zhao Yide didn’t retort. “What should we do next?”

“Get Zhang Qubing’s team to confirm if it’s really the Anti-intellectualism Church. Tell them that we won’t be stingy with our payment. It won’t be a problem even if we have to pay them with one or two manors.” Zhao Zhengqi now felt that the Anti-intellectualism Church was the real threat.

If his second son continued mixing with the Anti-intellectualism Church, the Zhao family would never have a day of peace until everyone died or was converted. There would be no exceptions.

Even if the Anti-intellectualism Church no longer thought much of the countryside nobles in Weed City and focused all their efforts on First City, Zhao Yixue’s participation would implicate the entire Zhao family.

After a pause, Zhao Zhengqi said in a deep voice, “Also, inform the Castellan immediately. We might very well have to use his relationship and strength in First City. I believe he definitely would find pleasure in exterminating the Anti-intellectualism Church. Sigh...”

He weighed the pros and cons and felt that with the Zhao family’s strength and their connections in First City, they wouldn’t be able to deal with a large organization like the Anti-intellectualism Church even with Zhang Qubing and October Xue’s team.

Only by uniting all the factions in First City that hated this Church would they have a sufficient chance of winning.

“Alright.” Zhao Yide quickly agreed.

His brother had colluded with the Anti-intellectualism Church, and the first target was very likely him!

...

Jiang Baimian smiled and teased, “Heh, the Zhao family sure is generous.”

If they could really obtain two manors, it wouldn’t be a problem for the Old Task Force to exchange for the military exoskeleton and mechanical arm by saving up another 2,000 to 3,000 Oray.

Since the Old Task Force felt that there was nothing wrong and that it was fair, Lehman likely wouldn’t find it problematic. After all, this profiteer had played dirty back then. Furthermore, the Old Task Force would give him detailed information regarding Lars when the time came.

“Shall we go to the southern suburbs now?” Bai Chen asked in confirmation.

Shang Jianyao was a man of action and had already walked to the door. Geneva followed closely behind.

Jiang Baimian smiled and shook her head. “There’s no rush; we’ll go in the afternoon. In the morning, we’ll go to the Golden Apple Zone and observe the situation around the main target. If we can discover the hidden protectors because of this, we can then formulate a targeted plan.”

“How many cars are we driving?” asked Long Yuehong.

“One is enough. Two will make us too eye-catching. Also, remember that we will only pass by once. We can’t circle around repeatedly; we will be discovered.” Jiang Baimian hid the radio transceiver as she spoke.

After leaving Ugo Hotel, they chose the military-green jeep. This was because their destination was Golden Apple Zone, where the original city nobles lived. Cars that were in bad shape were very eye-catching.

The problem of it being modified wasn’t a problem in that zone. Countless nobles’ vehicles had additional equipment installed over their original bulletproof systems.

As their car moved, Long Yuehong cast his gaze out the window and looked at the scenery by the road and the pedestrians on the street.

Suddenly, a female figure jumped over. Her back was hunched, and her eyes were turbid and bloodshot.

“The fifth...” Long Yuehong muttered in confusion.

The fifth Heartless patient. This was the fifth Heartless patient along these streets in recent times.

As the public security officers in grayish-blue uniforms chased after her, Jiang Baimian slowed the car and frowned. “Isn’t this happening too frequently?”

Although it was normal for more cases to appear in the surrounding area for a certain period of time after a Heartless disease outbreak, and there was often no connection between patients, the frequency of the initial ‘epidemic’ was surprisingly high.

Even though Jiang Baimian knew that this should be within reasonable limits based on statistics, it gave off a different and more impactful feeling.

“It’s considered normal. The higher frequencies I’ve experienced also happened in First City.” Bai Chen voiced her thoughts.

“Also in First City? Is there something wrong here?” Jiang Baimian looked out the windshield and deliberated before saying, “It seems like we have to gather the medical records of these incidents and see if we can discover anything.”

Investigating the Heartless disease’s source was also the Old Task Force’s primary job because it was very likely related to the cause of the Old World’s destruction.

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao replied eagerly.

Chapter 344: “Encounter” on the Road

The roads in Golden Apple Zone were wide, and the houses that lined them weren’t too tall. However, there was sufficient distance between them, just like the area Genava lived in back at Tarnan.

Electric poles, street lamps, statues, and green trees were scattered around, accentuating the peace and harmony of the district.

Long Yuehong wouldn’t have believed that this place was in the same city as the Green Olive Zone if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes.

In the Red Wolf Zone he had previously been to, apart from the many high-rise buildings left behind by the Old World, it was only slightly cleaner and better planned than the Green Olive Zone.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Bai Chen—who was in charge of driving—and turned to look at Shang Jianyao, who was deep in thought. “What are you thinking about?”

She would rather Shang Jianyao join in the discussion and lead the conversation astray than have him sit there quietly without making a sound. This meant that he might very well throw a big bombshell shortly.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and replied, “I’m wondering which song should be played to represent my current mood and accentuate the atmosphere here.”

“What’s your mood now? I can help you through data screening,” Genava suggested enthusiastically.

Shang Jianyao had backed up a copy of all the entertainment data with him. In any case, he still had enough storage space. If he really didn’t have enough space, Genava still had many slots that allowed him to buy additional storage chips for expansion.

Shang Jianyao was just about to describe his condition when Bai Chen—who was driving—suddenly gave a reminder. “We’re almost at the target’s residence.”

The jeep was driving along Round Hill Street—a street that was famous for being on the top of a small hill.

The Old Task Force’s target this time was Oray’s granddaughter, Avia.

As the car steadily drove forward, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others saw the building corresponding to 14 Round Hill Street.

This building was built with a classical charm. Pillars propped up the roof, and green vines coiled around it in a fixed trajectory, giving it a refreshing feeling that came from nature.

Its overall shape was different from villas in Redstone Collection and Tarnan. It also had the bearing of the Red River Zone’s classical era. It had a total of four floors, and the main door was very exaggerated. Even if one only opened the bottom half, it could allow a two-meter-tall man to pass through without lowering his head.

Clearly, the pair of brown doors usually only had the lower half of the door operational unless they were welcoming guests of sufficient importance or were holding a grand banquet.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and reminded, “Don’t keep staring.”

She had imagined this place to be a tiger’s den. She would rather miss opportunities than take the risk.

Long Yuehong, Shang Jianyao, and Genava turned their gazes back into the car.

During this process, Long Yuehong noticed a woman from the corner of his eye.

She was around 27 years old, and she was almost as tall as Long Yuehong. She wore a white dress and had blond curly hair. Her eyes were light blue, her nose was tall, and her face had well-defined contours. She had a classic beauty that was unforgettable.

The only flaw was that her nose was a little large, but this didn't damage her beauty.

Long Yuehong was stunned for a moment. When he looked forward, a name flashed across his mind: Avia!

Avia Ubis—one of the Old Task Force's two primary targets!

"Team Leader, Avia!" Long Yuehong quickly reported the situation to Jiang Baimian. He had only swept his gaze in passing and didn't notice how many people were beside Avia. He only knew that there were many of them.

Jiang Baimian immediately replied and said in a deep voice, "Don't take a second look."

She only glanced at the rearview mirror and stopped observing Avia.

Avia's appearance meant that her secret protectors were nearby. If the Old Task Force acted abnormally, they would immediately be discovered. Things would only turn troublesome.

Shang Jianyao expressed his opinion regarding Jiang Baimian's instructions. "As a normal man, how can Little Red not take a few more looks when seeing such a beautiful lady pass by?"

"That's true." Jiang Baimian realized that she was too tense and overreacted. "Who doesn't like beautiful ladies? Even I would take a few more looks at them."

As she spoke, she openly looked back at Avia and the others. Long Yuehong did the same.

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen were on the other side. They couldn't see anything and could only give up.

Shang Jianyao originally wanted to move across Genava and Long Yuehong and force his head out the opposite window to size up Avia, but he ultimately didn't do so.

It was normal to take a few more looks at passing beauties, but it was very abnormal to do such a thing just to take a few more looks at a passing beauty.

The Old Task Force knew that Shang Jianyao had a jumpy thought process and that he was different from normal people. However, the powerhouses who secretly protected Avia and monitored her surroundings didn't know.

When the time came, they would discover a problem from a simple investigation.

There are many bodyguards... but I can't tell who's stronger or weaker... Long Yuehong didn't size them up and stopped before looking away.

Jiang Baimian did likewise.

"There's a problem with those people." She simply shared the results of her observation with a heavy expression.

At this moment, the jeep maintained a similar speed and drove forward to a junction.

Bai Chen turned the steering wheel and made the car turn left. This allowed Shang Jianyao to see Avia and the others through his window.

"The problem is that those bodyguards don't look good?" Shang Jianyao asked.

"Uh, what logic is that?" Long Yuehong was a little confused.

Shang Jianyao analyzed it for him seriously. "If I were Avia, apart from not having much choice with the strongest few, I would definitely choose the ones that look better when choosing other bodyguards."

Long Yuehong tried to retort, but he had to admit that it made sense.

“It might’ve been arranged by someone else. She has no right to refuse.” Genava gave another explanation.

“That’s right, that’s right.” Long Yuehong realized that he had been misled by Shang Jianyao.

After the car drove away from Round Hill Street, Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and calmly said, “Those people’s bioelectric signals are highly consistent, and their expressions are very similar. They aren’t attentive enough.”

“Ah, this...” Long Yuehong’s pupils suddenly dilated. His mind was in a mess, and he couldn’t figure out what this meant for a moment. Instead, he thought of a ghost story.

Shang Jianyao spread his arms, raised his body, and looked at the ceiling. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

That’s right... Long Yuehong came to a realization and blurted out, “Illusion! We encountered an illusion just now?”

The red light in Genava’s eyes flickered a few times. “It’s very similar to Tarnan’s Superior Heartless.”

“The level of realism is about the same.” Bai Chen voiced her feelings. When making the turn, she had also seen Avia and the ‘others.’

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Isn’t this what we want? There’s at least one illusion domain expert at the Mind Corridor level secretly protecting Avia. Upon seeing that we were strangers, he casually created an illusion to test us. Fortunately, we acted normal.”

Shang Jianyao excitedly said, “I wonder if he knows Abbess Zhou.”

“I don’t think so.” Jiang Baimian struck down his idea. “The Clam Dragon Church is mainly popular in areas where Ashlandics gather. The company’s information didn’t mention any signs of Clam Dragon Church activity in First City.”



“She still owes us a pork meal.” Shang Jianyao had a look of regret.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s not something she owes.”

She then said, “We can now confirm one thing: First City’s protection of Avia and Marcus is indeed very tight. It involves experts at the Mind Corridor level.”

Armed personnel definitely couldn’t compare to Awakened if they provided protection in the city unless they were mentally prepared to protect their ward regardless of the damage they caused.

Long Yuehong’s heart palpitated as he asked, “Are we still going to Crown Street?”

The Old Task Force’s other target, Marcus, lived at 57 Crown Street.

“No, it’s too much of a coincidence to ‘visit’ Round Hill Street and then ‘visit’ Crown Street. It will easily arouse suspicion.” Jiang Baimian had long made a decision. “Let’s change cars next time. We’ll go as a team of two or three.”

In order not to show any abnormalities, Bai Chen drove the jeep and ‘visited’ the different streets in the Golden Apple Zone and the Red Wolf Zone for a while before returning to Ugo Hotel at noon.

There were few pedestrians on the streets, and many shops had their doors closed.

“Did something happen?” Jiang Baimian pointed at the door and asked the boss, Ugo. “Why is it suddenly so quiet?”

Ugo calmly replied, “The Heartless disease outbreak is too serious. Many people aren’t willing to stay on these streets any longer and choose to stay with their relatives and friends for the time being. As you know, a Heartless outbreak is limited to a certain area most of the time.”

Those who remained basically had nowhere else to go.

Before Jiang Baimian asked further, Shang Jianyao raised a question. “If everyone in these streets runs away, will the Heartless outbreak end?”

In the entire Old Task Force, Jiang Baimian was the one who studied the Heartless disease the most. She opened her mouth but didn't give an answer.

Ugo glanced at Shang Jianyao and revealed a slightly mocking smile. "It will spread to other areas. Therefore, those with slaves left behind the slaves."

Shang Jianyao nodded and asked in concern, "Then, why aren't you leaving? Aren't you afraid of being infected with the Heartless disease?"

The look in Ugo's eyes became rather strange before returning to normal. He replied in a nonchalant tone, "My luck has always been good."

Shang Jianyao glanced at him sympathetically. "That's because you still don't know..."

He then felt Jiang Baimian place her left hand on his arm and tacitly shut his mouth.

Jiang Baimian then said that she had an employer who wanted to obtain information on the current Heartless disease outbreak. She hoped that Ugo could introduce her and the others to the nearby sheriff.

"10 Oray. I'll give you the information tomorrow," replied Ugo in a direct manner.

"Alright." Jiang Baimian took out 10 Oray and handed it over. She then returned to Room 202 with all the Old Task Force members.

Long Yuehong stood by the door and hesitated for a moment before asking worriedly, "Team Leader, are we moving to another area?"

If anyone in the team contracted the Heartless disease, it would be impossible to save them even if they wanted to.

Nobody could guarantee that they wouldn't contract the disease.

Chapter 345: "Suggestion"

Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong and stared into his eyes. She didn't answer immediately.

This made Long Yuehong a little nervous, wondering if he had acted too cowardly.

A few seconds later, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Actually, even without the Heartless disease outbreak, I would’ve considered getting one or two other locations in other zones or the more chaotic streets in the Green Olive Zone for residential purposes. As the saying goes, a wily rabbit has three burrows. Since we are in the business of secrets, we have to make more preparations.”

“That’s right.” Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief.

Jiang Baimian then said to Bai Chen, “We can dig up the backup choices we previously gave up on.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen didn’t think she could escape the Heartless infection.

When they were in the company, everyone had no choice. If a Heartless outbreak really happened, it was meaningless to hide since they would still be in the underground building no matter how much they tried.

In the entire Old Task Force, as a smart bot, Geneva might be the only one who wasn’t worried about contracting the Heartless disease.

Shang Jianyao raised a question. “Will Zen Masters contract the Heartless disease?”

The Zen Masters he was referring to were the mechanical monks.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t answer.

“There are no relevant records. It might be something they keep internally to themselves.” Geneva spoke using data.

Long Yuehong muttered, “Sometimes, they aren’t much different from Heartless.”

He would forever remember Jingfa’s madness from hearing a woman’s voice.

...

Taking advantage of the money they had, the Old Task Force rented a room both in the relatively messy streets of the Green Olive Zone and the Red Wolf Zone.

When they rented the room, they didn't do it themselves. Instead, they randomly found someone on the way and stuffed him with some money to get him to handle the matters.

After busying themselves with this matter, they drove the gray SUV toward First City's south exit.

When Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian observed the Zhao family manor's surroundings yesterday, they had driven their original jeep. They naturally had to change to another jeep today to avoid being suspected.

On the way, Shang Jianyao—who was sitting in the backseat to the right—raised his hand and massaged his temples, allowing his consciousness to enter the Sea of Origins.

Having not discovered the fourth island of fear all this while made it imperative that he didn't waste any free time.

In the shimmering sea, Shang Jianyao continued swimming toward the horizon that seemed like it would never end.

He tried blindfolding himself, stuffing his ears, and letting fate guide his way. He also tried to split into nine and have each of them explore a direction, but he ultimately failed to discover any traces of an island.

Just as he was about to be mentally exhausted, the nine Shang Jianyaos fused into one. They sat cross-legged atop the illusory 'water waves' and entered a contemplative mode.

After a while, he muttered to himself, "Do I no longer have any fears? That's not right. I'm still afraid of losing my companions..."

As his thoughts raced, his voice echoed in the Sea of Origins.

Suddenly, a small island rose not far away, and a golden glow appeared in the middle of the island.

Shang Jianyao was thrilled. He made himself grow an additional eight pairs of hands and sixteen legs before paddling toward the island.

He soon arrived at his destination and jumped up. At the same time, he retracted his additional limbs.

As he scanned the area, he saw a golden elevator that seemed to lead underground situated in the middle of the small island.

The elevator door was tightly shut, and a figure sat cross-legged outside.

This figure wore a gray camouflage uniform. His back was straight, and his eyebrows were like swords. His brown eyes were bright, and his facial features were handsome—he was Shang Jianyao himself!

Shang Jianyao looked at him and politely said, “Good afternoon. You should be the last stage of the Sea of Origins, right?”

The corners of the other Shang Jianyao’s mouth curled up slightly as he spoke with a faint smile. “You still have fear; you’re still afraid of losing your companions. I’ll teach you a solution that can effectively resolve this problem.”

“What is it?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

The other Shang Jianyao smiled and replied, “Kill them all. Let them live in your memories, and let your split personalities become them. This way, you will never lose them again, and you will never feel that intense pain again.”

Shang Jianyao was just about to open his mouth when he suddenly felt the island shake. Waves appeared in the Sea of Origins.

The entire mind world quickly crumbled. Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and realized that Geneva was shaking him.

“We’re at our destination,” said Jiang Baimian as she opened the car door.

Shang Jianyao instantly sobered up and alighted from the car. After stabilizing himself, he casually said, “I found the fourth island.”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian almost didn’t hear him clearly. “The fourth island? What’s on it?”

When Long Yuehong and Bai Chen cast curious gazes at him, Shang Jianyao simply said, “Another me and an elevator.”

“Another you.” Jiang Baimian nodded before coming to a realization. “Doesn’t that mean you have found yourself? As long as you can accommodate him, you can enter the Mind Corridor!”

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “I can’t accommodate him for the time being. I think there’s something wrong with him. Likewise, he also thinks there’s something wrong with me.”

“What’s wrong?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “He has fused with a certain fear.”

“Which fear?” Jiang Baimian asked with great acumen.

Shang Jianyao laughed. “The fear of losing companions. He said that as long as I don’t have companions, I don’t have to be afraid of losing them.”

Shang Jianyao looked at Long Yuehong as he spoke, and his tone became a little sinister. “He said that the problem could be resolved by killing you all and making you into specimens.”

F\*ck... Long Yuehong shivered. “Isn’t this too perverse?”

Shang Jianyao’s smile suddenly turned sunny. “He said that he learned this from you. Back then, you wanted to kill Qiao Chu and turn him into a specimen collection.”

“Uh...” Long Yuehong was momentarily speechless. He then defended himself after sensing Genava’s gaze. “That was because of your Inference Clowning.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian pressed her palm down. “We’ll discuss this at length in the future. There’s no rush.”

She still valued her and her team members’ lives and didn’t have the intention of committing suicide to fulfill the other Shang Jianyao’s wish.

She had yet to figure out the reason for the Old World’s destruction and the Heartless disease’s mechanism. How could she bear to die?

After ending the topic, she couldn’t help but sigh at Shang Jianyao. “You found yourself after only three islands. I wonder how many Awakened would be envious of you. Could this be the benefit of having mental problems and being fearless?”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “Nothing is stopping them from getting a doctor’s certificate?”

Is that the point? Jiang Baimian swallowed the words she was about to blurt out and pointed at the forest beside her. “This is today’s surveillance spot.”

“But we can’t see the Zhao family manor here...” Long Yuehong was a little confused.

He had just heard his team leader give the introductions. The road outside the forest was the main road that led to the Zhao family manor’s main entrance.

Jiang Baimian smiled and explained, “It’s not like we haven’t interacted with Father before. We should know that he likes to hide in the dark and monitor everything. If we go to the few surveillance spots with the best field of view outside the Zhao family manor, it will be very easy for him to discover us. It’s better to observe the passersby here. Once we see the problematic ones according to Zhao Shouren’s memories, we will immediately take action and subdue them to confirm the situation...”

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian suddenly fell silent.

Long Yuehong didn't know what had happened and was a little confused.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, "The Ruin Hunter team that did the prior surveillance was very impressive."

That's right. With Father's intelligence, abilities, and style, he definitely wouldn't ignore the surveillance spots around the Zhao family manor. Those people actually discovered a problem and confirmed that there were strangers... Long Yuehong came to a realization.

Jiang Baimian nodded solemnly. "Do you still remember the real Father's performance during the assassination of Xu Liyan?"

Bai Chen replied in a deep voice, "He released the fake Father as bait and attracted everyone's attention, allowing everyone to step into his trap."

"Will it be the same this time? The Zhao family manor is actually bait—a trap?" Jiang Baimian answered her own question. "This can explain some of the anomalies. For example, they directly confiscated all the harvests that should be handed over and made Zhao Zhengqi discover the anomaly. For example, they didn't deal with the surveillance spots around the manor..."

She previously believed that the Anti-intellectualism Church's control of the Zhao family manor was short-term, so they didn't care if the Zhao family's patriarch sensed that something was amiss. But this explanation was very forced because no matter how short-term their actions were, they would still be worried that an accident would happen midway.

Now, everything made sense when combined with the true Father's style of doing things.

Upon hearing this, Geneva gave the results of his analysis. "Therefore, we should leave immediately?"

Jiang Baimian smiled at him. "No, no, no. As the ones supposed to be deceived, we should continue staying here and gathering clues to see what we can obtain in the end."

"Deceive them in reverse?" Geneva perfected his analysis mechanism.



Jiang Baimian's plan had been one of his candidate plans, but the weightage of the plan couldn't compare to one he eventually mentioned.

Shang Jianyao defended Jiang Baimian. "How can it be called deception? This is strategic deception!"

"What's the difference?" Geneva was rather honest.

Jiang Baimian didn't give Shang Jianyao an opportunity to spout nonsense as she said, "If this really is a trap, who does the Anti-intellectualism Church want to deal with?"

"It's definitely not us." Long Yuehong voiced his thoughts.

It was filled with coincidences regarding when the Old Task Force left Pangu Biology and arrived in First City. The matter regarding the Zhao family manor had clearly been going on for a long time.

Bai Chen looked back in First City's direction. "The Zhao family isn't qualified... The Anti-intellectualism Church wants to use them to wipe out certain factions in the city?"

"Maybe," Jiang Baimian replied simply and said to Shang Jianyao and the others, "Alright, hide the car and enter your designated spots to monitor the pedestrians on the road."

In fact, Shang Jianyao was the only one in charge of recognizing people because he was the only one who had seen a few targets in Zhao Shouren's memories. Long Yuehong and the others couldn't recognize the portraits he had 'drawn.'

The five Old Task Force members quickly hid in the forest, acting as though everything was normal.

#### Chapter 346: The Full Act

Nearly two hours later, a light truck peppered with bullet holes drove over from the Zhao family manor and headed for First City.

Sitting in the driver's seat was a man with fluffy black hair and a scraggly beard. He had a cigarette in his mouth that was nothing but a rolled leaf. His body swayed slightly, and he looked rather relaxed.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and asked him with her eyes if he was a target.

Many people had passed by during the past two hours, but none of them belonged to the ‘suspicious people’ in Zhao Shouren’s memories.

Shang Jianyao nodded in response. He then mouthed a name: “Shen Kui.”

This person was called Shen Kui. He was someone Zhao Shouren knew in some of his memories, but in another portion of his memories, he was mixed with another person’s image. Some details seemed to indicate that he didn’t exist.

Without a doubt, Jiang Baimian didn’t understand Shang Jianyao’s mouthing. However, she only needed his nod.

After receiving a definite answer, she turned to Genava and stretched out three fingers, indicating that they were taking action.

Genava—who was squatting behind a tree—suddenly jumped out. He then exerted strength with the metal joints in his legs and flew up, landing on the light truck’s hood.

Shen Kui—who had a crude cigar in his mouth—saw this scene from the corner of his eye and immediately tensed up. Without bothering to distinguish who the figure that suddenly pounced out was or what characteristics it had, the corners of his mouth curled into a cruel smile. His right foot lowered as he floored the accelerator.

He had undergone training and knew that he absolutely couldn’t brake when encountering such a situation. It was the best and safest choice to slam through the obstacle regardless of the consequences.

With a roar, the light truck suddenly accelerated.

This made Genava—who was supposed to land on the bonnet—slam into the windshield.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but raise her hand to cover her face. She wasn't worried about Genava, but she pitied the driving Shen Kui.

Amidst the mixed sounds, Shen Kui was first blasted by the windshield shards as a small number stabbed into his body. Then, he was struck by heavy and high-speed steel in the guts.

He fainted without a grunt. Several of his ribs fractured.

Normal people would definitely choose to reduce their speed or turn the steering wheel when they saw a 'metal lump' flying toward the windshield to prevent themselves from being injured. However, Shen Kui accelerated as if he wanted to compete with Genava to see who was harder and more able to withstand the impact.

Needless to say, how could an egg deal damage to a rock?

With a creak, the light truck barely stopped after traversing quite a distance. It didn't fall to the side.

This was because Genava tried to control the steering wheel in the driver's seat and kicked the other party's foot that was on the accelerator.

As soon as the light truck stopped, the smart bot opened the door and alighted. As it checked itself, it 'grumbled' at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao—who were quickly approaching. "Doesn't he know that doing so will only lead to a vehicle accident? I need another paint job later."

"All carbon-based people have moments when a screw goes loose in their heads," Shang Jianyao explained sincerely.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shen Kui—who was slumped in the driver's seat—and said worriedly, "I hope he didn't die."

"I controlled my posture and avoided the critical spots." Genava was very confident about this.

In the situation just now, it wasn't strange for the driver's head to be smashed by the 'metal lump.'

At this moment, Jiang Baimian carefully pulled Shen Kui out and placed him on the ground beside the forest.

“Only a few bone fractures...” Geneva took on the role of medical inspection equipment.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and turned to Shang Jianyao. “There are no electric signals of large creatures within 50 meters of us.”

It wasn't that she was afraid of accidentally killing Shen Kui. The reduction of every Anti-intellectualism Church believer would raise the average intelligence of humanity. Furthermore, these weren't ordinary believers who had been bewitched and deceived. They were direct participants in an operation and were the core members with a certain role. She was just afraid that she wouldn't be able to obtain 'information' in time. That would mean she would have to wait a while longer.

“There are no human consciousnesses either.” Shang Jianyao took out the night pearl that emitted a green glow.

Facing an unconscious person, Destiny Connection was better than Inference Clowning.

As the green light suddenly lit up, Long Yuehong saw Shang Jianyao's eyes turn hollow, and his gaze lost focus.

The next second, the unconscious Shen Kui opened his eyes. He raised his hands and touched his body before saying excitedly, “If the target loses consciousness, I can still control them to do things.”

Back then, DiMarco could forcefully control the other party's body regardless of whether the target had lost consciousness or not. They could only interfere and resist to a certain extent.

Upon seeing Shen Kui's bearded face filled with excitement and his hands constantly touching his body, Long Yuehong inexplicably found it ridiculous. He couldn't help but say, “Quick, flip through his memories. You look like a pervert.”

A legendary narcissist.

Bai Chen nodded in agreement.

“He’s not very strong...” Shen Kui’s voice gradually lowered until there was silence.

After a while, he opened his mouth and said, “He’s indeed from the Anti-intellectualism Church. He was arranged to enter the Zhao family manor and control it...”

“He has never seen the real Father or any other higher-ups. There are no such figures in his memories. It’s also possible that his key memories have been modified...”

“He listens to the black-robed man beside Zhao Yixue. That person’s name is Meng Gang, a suspected Awakened who has shown the ability of Hypnosis...” As he spoke, Shen Kui flipped through his pockets and took out a few randomly folded pieces of paper.

After he unfolded them, Jiang Baimian and the others saw the contents clearly.

“Thinking is a wrap, and knowledge is poison...”

“Sublimate your thoughts to distance yourself from the Heartless ciease...”

“Contracting the Heartless ciease is definite from imparting knowledge...”

Jiang Baimian sighed in amusement. “Reading it makes my head spin. It’s like a spell.”

She then said, “With these pamphlets and ‘verbal statement,’ we can report to Councilor Zhao and confirm that it’s an operation of the Anti-intellectualism Church. Old Ge, take a photo of the pamphlet and save a copy.”

“Hey, you can come back now. Conserve Destiny Pearl’s energy.”

Destiny Pearl was the name she had given the night pearl. It couldn’t be charged unless DiMarco was resurrected or if they had the help of a Mind Corridor-level expert with the same abilities as him.

Shen Kui nodded reluctantly.

His eyes quickly closed, and Shang Jianyao's eyes began to move.

The night pearl's brightness also returned to normal.

"Shall we go?" Geneva asked.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian to speak, Long Yuehong hesitantly said, "I think we should put on a full act, right?"

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

"Yes." Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully.

Bai Chen objectively said, "Our current role is an investigation team hired by Councilor Zhao. We definitely don't want to expose ourselves."

"Wake him up then." Jiang Baimian pointed at Shen Kui on the ground.

"Let me do it." Geneva had the intention of testing the new module he obtained from Redstone Collection—the stun gun.

Shen Kui jolted awake a moment later. He saw four human faces in front of him and a silver-black robot standing beside them.

"What's wrong with you? Do you not know how to drive?" Bai Chen criticized on behalf of the entire team. "Don't you know better than to brake when you encounter people on the road and swerve? Are you trying to kill us? Fortunately, the first person you hit was a robot. It's nothing serious; otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to leave alive today!"

Long Yuehong was stunned by the scene because Bai Chen showed no signs of acting. It was as though this was something she was very good at.

Yes, she was a wilderness nomad and mainly did business. She definitely argued with others often... On second thought, Long Yuehong found an explanation.

Shen Kui was at a loss from the scolding. He wanted to retort, but the pain in his chest and the fact that the other party had the advantage in numbers made him lower his head and mutter, "It was its fault. It tried to jump onto my truck."

"It's a frog-type robot. You have a problem with its preference of jumping around?" Jiang Baimian lied through her teeth.

Shen Kui weighed the pros and cons and smiled fawningly. "How do you want to resolve this?"

"We'll need a paint job, right?" Bai Chen raised the request.

Finally, they 'extorted' 50 Oray from Shen Kui—funds the Anti-intellectualism Church had provided him for his expenses.

After watching them disappear into the forest, Shen Kui touched his pocket to confirm that the pieces of paper were still there.

"How unlucky!" He slowly moved back to the light truck and prepared to return to get someone to treat him.

In the forest, Long Yuehong looked back at the highway and said in amusement, "The Anti-intellectualism Church's ordinary believers really aren't that smart..."

Jiang Baimian smiled and sighed. "If I can earn a sum of money from them every time, I really can't bring myself to crush them."

Shang Jianyao agreed deeply.

...

At 7 p.m., the Old Task Force had dinner and moved into the rented apartment on Iron Medallion Street in the Green Olive Zone.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, "We'll sleep here tonight. There are only two beds; we'll have to make do."

She then smiled. "I'm with Little White!"

This rental room was very small. It could only accommodate a bunk bed, a table, and chairs.

"I can rest sitting." Geneva indicated that this wasn't a problem.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong glanced at each other in disdain and didn't say anything.

As they chatted, Jiang Baimian drafted the afternoon's harvest into a telegram and prepared to send it to Zhao Zhengqi tomorrow morning.

Suddenly, a wolf howl sounded from the harbor. It dragged on long like a beast's whimper; it was sad and strange.

"What happened?" Jiang Baimian turned to look at Bai Chen.

Bai Chen simply repeated what she had previously told Long Yuehong. "Ashlandic prostitutes that are illiterate can only rely on simulating wolf calls to attract customers. This should be a symbol of sex in First City."

As an outsider, she wasn't sure about the latter half of the sentence. She only heard someone mention it and remembered it.

Before Jiang Baimian could say anything, Shang Jianyao stood up and said with a normal expression, "I'll go take a look."

Chapter 347: Amidst Chatter

Although Long Yuehong was a little mentally prepared for Shang Jianyao's reaction, he couldn't help but feel a little flustered.



This is First City... Our mission has just begun... Isn't it inappropriate to cause trouble? He wanted to say this, but he ultimately kept his mouth shut.

He looked around and realized that his team leader and Bai Chen didn't stop Shang Jianyao. They stood up silently, and Genava showed a hesitant reaction. However, Long Yuehong wasn't sure if he deliberately simulated the corresponding actions to make himself more like a person because he felt compelled to do something after analyzing the situation.

Team Leader and Little White seem to be more inclined to do something, but they will consider the consequences and analyze the pros and cons. Therefore, they are very hesitant... When it comes to actions that require risk, Shang Jianyao is the entire team's person who's 'responsible' for steeling the team's resolve... Long Yuehong muttered to himself, checked the weapons he carried, and walked to the door.

The target location wasn't difficult to find. Relying on the intermittent cries of 'She-Wolves,' the Old Task Force only took about ten minutes to reach an eight-story building.

At a glance, they saw a large sign hanging on the roof. On it were words written in Red River language: "Ashland Wolf's Den."

"The seventh and eighth floors are all..." Long Yuehong tried to raise a conversation topic and broke the silence that the team had been in along the way.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words as she watched Shang Jianyao enter the building and press a button.

One of the three elevators quickly came down. The five Old Task Force members walked in one after another.

Genava was the last. As he stepped in, the elevator sank heavily and shook a few times.

Long Yuehong looked around the elevator and realized that the walls were old and mottled. There were also some pieces of paper stuck to its surface. Some were drawings, and others were photos. The contents were virtually identical—different women in various flirtatious poses or having certain parts of themselves playing peek-a-boo. All of them clearly had Ashlandic characteristics.

Long Yuehong retracted his gaze and exhaled silently.

Before long, the elevator arrived at the seventh floor. The elevator's two doors opened one after another.

Long Yuehong had just walked out when he saw four men with pistols. They were Red River people with different hair colors, and they wore the same black, short-sleeved T-shirt that revealed their bulging arms.

On the walls beside them and along the aisle were colorful murals displaying different poses of men and women in sexual intercourse.

Jiang Baimian also saw the murals and didn't mind Long Yuehong's flushed face. She gave a brief evaluation. "There's obvious worship of male genitals."

At this moment, a guard took a few steps forward and said in Red River language, "Sorry, we don't receive female guests here."

"You have no say. I want to speak to your boss." Shang Jianyao raised his chin slightly and put on an arrogant look.

After sizing up the robot behind them, the guard who had previously spoken retreated into the corridor and entered the Wolf's Den.

In just a minute or two, a slightly obese man walked to the elevator with the guard from before. He held a United 202 in his right hand, and he was only about 1.7 meters tall. His chestnut hair was slightly curled, and there was inconspicuous swelling beside his eyes. He also had a thick beard around his mouth.

"What's the matter, ladies and gentlemen?" asked the man in the untidy black shirt in a deep voice.

"Are you the boss here?" Shang Jianyao asked politely.

The man nodded. "Sort of. There are other partners."

“How should I address you?” Shang Jianyao asked with a smile.

The man frowned and said, “Ogre, what do you want?”

Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “Mr. Ogre, I’m here to give you suggestions. This business of yours isn’t too good. Why don’t you spend some time teaching them to cut vegetables and make condiments and convert it to a hotpot restaurant?”

Ogre raised his gunless left hand and dug his corresponding ear. He deeply suspected that he had misheard.

Are you kidding me? He couldn’t help but curse inwardly. He originally imagined that this group of people were here to cause trouble, and he was prepared to use money to send them off if he could. If it really didn’t work out, he would find an opportunity to escape. He would then gather more men later and hire a team that could deal with the robot to take revenge.

To his surprise, they appeared to be drunk.

After some thought, Ogre scoffed. “It’s none of your business how I use the female slaves that I bought! Tell me, who sent you here to cause trouble?”

As they spoke, the four guards at the door called out to their companions in the Wolf’s Den.

About ten seconds later, four to five people holding mini submachine guns rushed out and aimed at Shang Jianyao and the others. They were also wearing black, short-sleeved T-shirts.

The prostitutes in Wolf’s Den also sensed the abnormality at the entrance. Some people gathered over in a daze and looked toward the elevator.

They were all Ashlandic. Their clothes were thin, and their faces were expressionless. Their eyes were slightly empty, lacking the natural vitality of someone in their teens or twenties.

Shang Jianyao laughed and said to Ogre and the others, “Look, they live here, and so do you. They are humans, and so are you. So...”

As Ogre and the other eight guards wore blank expressions, they suddenly turned around and rushed back to Wolf's Den's reception hall, rushing to the Ashlandic prostitutes' sides. They then stuck their heads out the window and shouted, "Howl!"

They were akin to male wolves begging for a mate.

The only guard who wasn't affected was stunned by this sight.

Although the Ashlandic prostitutes didn't understand Red River language, they could tell what the usually fierce boss and guards were doing. Their eyes darted around as surprise appeared on their blank faces.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and switched to Ashlandic. "Have you thought of a way to deal with the aftermath?"

Shang Jianyao first said to the remaining guard, "Follow me."

As he walked into Wolf's Den, he smiled and answered Jiang Baimian's question. "I just said that I would transform this place into a hotpot restaurant or some other restaurant."

Are you sure the business can last? Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered to sigh at Shang Jianyao's train of thought and subconsciously replied.

At this moment, an Ashlandic prostitute—who had understood their conversation—took a few steps forward timidly and anxiously. "A-are you here to save us?"

Her face was relatively clean, and she could be considered pretty. However, she looked rather exhausted and was in a daze sometimes.

"No, we're here to discuss a partnership with you," Shang Jianyao said seriously. "How about we jointly run a hotpot restaurant or some other restaurant?"

Jiang Baimian resisted the urge to facepalm and asked, "How may I address you?"

The Ashlandic prostitute from before quickly replied, "My name is Su Na."

As she spoke, the other Ashlandic prostitutes slowly surrounded them, their eyes no longer empty.

“Su Na, right...” Jiang Baimian deliberated and asked, “Can you manage a hotpot restaurant or similar types of restaurant here? Can the business support so many of you?”

...Team Leader is also infected by Shang Jianyao... She’s actually considering the possibility of running a restaurant... Long Yuehong tried to seek Bai Chen’s approval, but he realized that his scarved, petite companion was deep in thought.

She seemed to be considering how to settle these Ashlandic prostitutes’ future.

Su Na exchanged looks with her companions in confusion and hesitantly said, “This place definitely won’t do. If we can run it on the first and second floors and obtain cheap food, we can still run the place. This place is close to the harbor, and there are many sailors. They don’t have much money, but they are willing to spend it on women, food, and alcohol. Yes, many merchants and their guards often live in the harbor area.”

“You’re very observant.” Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully.

Su Na pursed her lips and said, “The clients we serve mainly come from the harbor, but Ogre forbids us from learning the Red River language. He’s afraid that we will communicate with our clients and cause trouble for him.”

At this moment, another girl interrupted. “He will make us cook. This saves him the money needed to hire a cook.”

Her eyes were brighter than before, and she was eager to prove that they had basic culinary skills.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “Don’t worry about the ingredients that the restaurant needs. We have the means.”

This referred to the Zhao family’s numerous manors.

If they couldn't drive away the Anti-intellectualism Church, they could contact Xu Liyan. He had also bought manors in First City.

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment and asked curiously, "Can Ogre afford so many thugs just based on the business you do?"

"This building belongs to Ogre. He a-also sells something that makes people excited when they inhale it." Su Na truthfully described the situation she had observed.

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao turned his head to look at the remaining guard amidst the howling male wolves.

The guard 'obediently' explained, "It's marijuana and some new products sourced from Paradise Island."

"Do you guys take it?" Jiang Baimian asked Su Na and the others.

At this moment, the Ashlandic prostitutes—who hadn't come out previously—rushed into the lobby. A small number of their clients followed in confusion, but they were politely invited to stand to the side by Genava and Long Yuehong.

"No, how can he bear to let us use such expensive stuff?" Su Na shook her head. Then, she couldn't help but ask anxiously, "We can run a restaurant, but what about them?"

She was referring to Ogre and the others.

Shang Jianyao laughed, making the remaining guard tremble with fear.

"Leave this to me." He pointed at the room deep in Wolf's Den and said, "Follow me."

His first sentence was in Ashlandic, and the second sentence was in the Red River language.

The guard wore a disconsolate look. "No..."

Even so, he didn't dare to refuse.

Just like that, Shang Jianyao brought Ogre and the others into the room one by one and completed a new round of Inference Clowning, allowing them to form a cyclic reinforcement.

Su Na and the other Ashlandic prostitutes were surprised to discover that the fierce boss and the terrifying guards had become sheep. They were obedient and submissive toward them.

"They're your servants now," Shang Jianyao said as he looked at the piece of paper in his hand. "Yes, persuade all of these on the list one by one, and there won't be any problems for the time being. Wow, it looks like a rather large gang."

"What happens after that short period of time?" Jiang Baimian asked what Su Na and the others were thinking.

Shang Jianyao took the United 202 from Ogre's hand and handed it to Su Na. He sincerely said with a smile, "Make the best use of your time to master it. If any of them show any abnormalities, give them a bang."

"This..." Su Na and the others were a little stunned.

Shang Jianyao's smile became brighter. "I told you, we're here to discuss a partnership. In the end, only you can save yourselves."

Chapter 348: Black Shirts

Su Na looked at Shang Jianyao's smile and slowly raised her hand to take the United 202.

The sensation of something cold and hard entered her brain, making her feel as if she were holding a crutch to aid her walking. Strength appeared out of nowhere in her body.

"Do you know how to use it?" Jiang Baimian asked.

"I've used a hunting rifle before and a shotgun," Su Na said hesitantly. "I think it's about the same."

"I know how to use it. I've used it around our perimeter," blurted out another girl in her twenties.

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Li Qiong.” The girl looked at the beautiful lady in front of her with bright eyes.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, “Who else knows how to use them? Including submachine guns and various rifles.”

Among the original Ashlandic prostitutes, several women slowly raised their hands.

Jiang Baimian smiled warmly. “You will be in charge of teaching everyone how to use such firearms in the future. The more people that are proficient in them, the stronger you will become, and the better the footing you’ll have in First City. Is there anywhere to practice?”

“Yes,” Su Na quickly replied. “There’s a shooting range in the basement. Boss and the others use it for practice.”

“Ogre.” Shang Jianyao emphasized that he was no longer their boss.

“Yes, Ogre.” Su Na looked at her former boss-turned servant and said the name.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. “Don’t be afraid of wasting bullets. You can still recycle the shells after firing all the bullets, and you can also buy new ones. If you die, nothing matters. We’ll get a batch of bullets later; there’ll be a discount. It’s definitely the lowest price in the Green Olive Zone.”

“Okay!” Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others nodded repeatedly.

Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava—who had instinctively scattered around the area to monitor the scene. She deliberated and said to the group of women that was still a little confused and terrified, “Actually, I know that it’s very difficult to support so many of you with just a restaurant. It should be possible before the Old World’s destruction. In the New Calendar, it might take another decade or two, perhaps even longer.

“Beyond the restaurant, you still have to desperately search for other opportunities and do all kinds of things to truly fill your stomach and fantasize about the future. This will be very tiring and risky. Do you think it’s better not to be rescued and maintain your previous state?”



Just as she said that, several women in the group replied in unison, “No! We yearned to be rescued every single day.”

Bai Chen—who was not too far away—was stunned when she heard that and turned her head to the side.

“Is that so?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Among the women, a tall and rather charming woman—who was almost 1.7 meters tall—took a few steps forward and smiled bitterly. “I’ve been here for almost three years, and only four or five people have stayed longer than me. Why do you think so? Nobody here cares about how our bodies are. Nobody cares if we get sick or if we are infected. Many people have only been here for two years, but they are already very sick. Their bodies have festered, and they are then carried to a small room to be locked up. They look forward to receiving some simple treatment, but most of them die not long after.

“That’s for the ones with hope of being cured. The hopeless ones are directly carried to the harbor and thrown into the river. In another year or perhaps in a few months, I might be like one of them. Likewise for the rest.”

Another woman sobbed and added, “I had a good friend; we were sold here together. She contracted a dirty disease in less than a year, and things grew all over her body... When she was about to die, she lay in that dark room and moaned to the air, saying, ‘Xiaozhen, I want to see the sun... Xiaozhen, I miss Mommy’s potato pancakes...’ S-she was only nineteen!”

The woman named Xiaozhen suddenly squatted down and wailed.

The Ashlandic women wiped their tears one after another. Some sobbed, and some cried bitterly.

Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little ashamed. He had previously hesitated about stopping Shang Jianyao.

After the crying subsided a little, Jiang Baimian sighed and said, “In the future, you have to unite and protect each other. In First City and the Green Olive Zone, it’s very easy for a single person—or even a duo or trio—to be bullied by the gangs. Don’t count on the sheriff. You can only expand your living space by keeping your weapons close and giving your backs to one another.”

The women nodded with tears in their eyes.

At this moment, Su Na hesitantly said, "I have another question."

"What?" Jiang Baimian asked with a gentle smile.

Su Na pointed at Ogre and the others. "You previously said that they will be our servants for the time being and will listen to us without resisting. However, we don't know the Red River language. We only know some words related to cooking. We can't communicate with them or instruct them."

Jiang Baimian had long considered this problem and took out a machine from her tactical backpack. "This is a translation device. It can help you translate Red River language into Ashlandic; it can also be done in reverse."

The translation device was one of the Old Task Force's gains in Tarnan. After all, the electronic products there were very cheap.

After teaching Su Na, Li Qiong, Xiaozhen, and the others how to use the translation device, Jiang Baimian coughed lightly. "I have to emphasize something."

The women looked up at the same time and cast their gazes at her.

"The translation device is only a stopgap measure. Uh, it means that there are many problems with it. What if it breaks one day? Besides, there are so many of you. How can one translation device be enough?" Jiang Baimian saw that the women were focused on listening to her and seriously voiced her intention. "You have to master the Red River language as soon as possible. At the very least, you have to be able to deal with daily communication. Yes, this translation device can be used to help you learn the Red River language. I'll also organize a simple textbook and give you some lessons for a period of time."

Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others didn't appear to be put on the spot. They replied in surprise and joy, "Alright!"

"Okay!"

“Alright!”

“...”

Their eyes were filled with desire as they looked at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and said, “We’ll deal with the people and matters related to Ogre and the others. What you need to do now is take over this place with your servants. Uh... The business at Wolf’s Den definitely needs to be ceased. The excuse is that a strange infectious disease was detected. You can maintain the marijuana business for the time being, mainly so that this won’t be discovered by regular customers...”

She methodically arranged what everyone needed to do and distributed the firearms that Ogre and the others had.

During this process, Bai Chen helped her fill in the gaps—this was mainly in matters she was inexperienced with.

Under the guidance of the ‘Lead Party,’ Shang Jianyao visited the people in the building who had deep ties with Ogre and the others with the list he had compiled. He successfully ‘convinced’ them and made them happily choose to cooperate with Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others.

After finishing all of this, it was almost 10 p.m. It was late at night.

As Shang Jianyao walked out of the eight-story building where Wolf’s Den was, he looked at the list in his hand and casually said, “There’s only one person left—the second boss of the Black Shirt Gang, Terrence.”

Previously, the Old Task Force had already learned of the Wolf Den’s background from Ogre. It was the Black Shirt Gang’s business and one of their important sources of income. It was directly managed by the second-in-command—Terrence—and Ogre was his trusted aide.

The Black Shirt Gang was one of the largest gangs in First City. They were inextricably linked to the upper class.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words. “There’s no rush. It’s very easy for Terrence to sense that something’s amiss if we suddenly visit him at this hour. It’s better to bring Ogre over tomorrow morning.”

Shang Jianyao put away the list and mentioned another detail. “In Ogre’s memories, Terrence is a little mysterious and unfathomable. He seems to be involved with some religious figures...”

At this point, he raised his hand to wipe the corners of his mouth.

“Be careful when the time comes.” Jiang Baimian nodded.

After discussing this matter, she subconsciously looked back at the building where the Wolf’s Den was.

The rooms upstairs were dark, and some of them were lit with yellow light.

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and smiled at Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Genava with a sigh. “I can finally deeply understand what An Ruxiang meant.”

She paused and said with a complicated expression, “There’s really light in their eyes.”

Chapter 349: Black Tea

The next morning, the Old Task Force sent a telegram to Zhao Zhengqi, confirming that the manor’s problems were truly a result of the Anti-intellectualism Church’s actions.

They didn’t mention the possibility that this was the Anti-intellectualism Church’s bait because they couldn’t be sure if there were spies around Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide. By the same logic, there might also be Anti-intellectualism Church believers hiding in the households of Weed City’s aristocrats.

Jiang Baimian planned on warning the ultimate leader of the faction formed after Zhao Zhengqi used all his connections in First City and mobilized the resources.

Before long, Zhao Zhengqi sent a telegram back and got the Old Task Force to hold back temporarily and wait for further notice.

This was exactly what Jiang Baimian had expected.

After that, the Old Task Force split up again. Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao 'visited' the Black Shirt Gang's second-in-command, Terrence, and tried to 'persuade' him that Ogre had only found a new mistress he doted on dearly. There was nothing abnormal about Wolf's Den.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava went to the Hunter's Guild to see if anyone had discovered Han Wanghuo's whereabouts. At the same time, they circled the city and familiarized themselves with the terrain while helping Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others understand which jobs in First City had better prospects.

Terrence lived in a bungalow at 25 Stern Street in the Red Wolf Zone. Two subordinates with submachine guns were guarding the door.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian found a spot by the side of the road and parked the jeep. They 'followed' Ogre and walked to the door.

"They are?" The Black Shirt members guarding the door raised their submachine guns.

Ogre smiled and replied, "I've given the boss a call. They are friends I've known for a long time. They want to buy large amounts of marijuana and new toys from Paradise Island."

First City had a telephone network, but it wasn't that widespread. Many people didn't need phones.

One of the Black Shirt members picked up the walkie-talkie beside the door and exchanged a few words. He then put down the walkie-talkie and pointed at the brownish-red double doors. "Go on in. The boss is waiting for you in the activity room."

Ogre opened the door with great familiarity and led Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao through the living room and into the activity room on the first floor.

In the activity room, a middle-aged man in a black shirt carried two white porcelain teacups and placed them on the short table.

"Boss." Ogre nodded respectfully at the man. "These are the clients I mentioned."

He's Terrence... Does his family not have servants? Does he need to serve tea himself? It's not convenient to hire servants because he often does illegal things at home? Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at the middle-aged man.

Terrence was in his forties, and he was very obese. His shirt buttons were almost flying. He had short brown hair, a pair of blue eyes, and a fierce-looking face.

After hearing Ogre's introduction, Terrence looked at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao. He smiled warmly and pointed at the white porcelain teacups on the table. "This is black tea produced by the Linhai Alliance. You can't not try it."

Upon hearing the term 'black tea' and seeing the rippling liquid in the white porcelain teacups, Jiang Baimian immediately felt thirsty and wanted to gulp it down.

However, she didn't dare to eat or drink indiscriminately in the home of a gang leader with a relatively complicated background. Even if she wanted to, she had to wait for Shang Jianyao to make a 'friend.'

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already taken a few steps forward and stretched out his right hand. "Hello."

"Hello." Terrence nodded in greeting but didn't extend his hand. He then explained, "I'm not used to having physical contact with others. Haha, apart from beautiful ladies."

At this moment, there were four armed bodyguards in the room.

Shang Jianyao didn't mind and sighed. "We were introduced by Ogre; friends often only greet each other with 'hello.' So..."

Terrence smiled and nodded in agreement before widening his eyes. He enthusiastically took two steps forward and gave Shang Jianyao a bear hug. "Why didn't you say so earlier? I was just wondering when you would come."

"Are you surprised?" Shang Jianyao smiled and hugged him tightly. He was a full head taller than Terrence.

After letting go of each other, Terrence's expression suddenly changed as he anxiously said, "Don't drink those two cups of tea. They are drugged with potent sleeping pills!"

As his attitude changed, Jiang Baimian felt her thirst instantly ease. Potent sleeping pills? Did he long sense that something was wrong with us? No, if he knew in advance, there wouldn't only be a few people now. For such a trap... He served the tea himself because he was in a rush and needed the tea to be drugged immediately. He didn't have time to get the servants to do it?

As Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced, she heard Ogre ask in surprise, "Boss, why did you want to drug us with sleeping pills?"

Don't ask! Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated, but she couldn't stop him in time.

Upon hearing Ogre's question, Terrence smiled and replied, "I can sense danger within a certain range..."

At this point, he paused and repeated a word in confusion. "Danger..."

Upon seeing the situation turn for the worse, Jiang Baimian gave up on her wishful thinking. She straightened her back, which was already prepared, and pounced at Terrence. At the same time, she drew the Ice Moss pistol hidden at her waist.

Shang Jianyao also made a similar attempt.

Terrence's blue eyes flickered as he fell to the ground, avoiding Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian's pincer attack.

Before the bodyguards in the activity room could react, Jiang Baimian landed, turned around, and aimed her gun at Terrence.

At this moment, she suddenly became abnormally calm. She no longer had the desire to attack, the desire to live, or the desire to turn the situation around. At this moment, she felt like she had entered a Sage Moment mentioned in the Old World's entertainment.

She had abandoned all her desires and felt her mind clear. She began to think about the meaning of life, the essence of the world, the philosophy of existence, the mistakes she had made, and the subsequent responses.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Shang Jianyao freeze.

Terrence rolled out and stood up. As he signaled the bodyguards to point their guns at Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian, he laughed loudly. “You didn’t expect this, did you? I still have such an ability! You can hide from the potent sleeping pills, but you can’t hide from Sage Moment!

“Tell me, who sent you? You, don’t say anything. You do the talking!” He didn’t want to ‘hear’ Shang Jianyao say another word.

Jiang Baimian—who was in a Sage State—was abnormally calm. She simply and quickly said, “Your potent sleeping pills won’t have any effects at all. Our bodies are very strong, and we can resist the drugs’ effects to a large extent.”

Upon hearing this, Terrence seemed to be insulted. “I’ll prove it to you!”

Just as he said that, he had already picked up a cup of black tea and gulped it down.

Upon seeing this, Ogre—who had just escaped the effects of Inference Clowning—was stunned and blurted out, “Boss...”

After drinking most of the tea, Terrence was stunned. Who am I? Where am I? What was I doing just now?

Terrence was confused for a few seconds before he threw away the white porcelain teacup and hurriedly clasped his throat. He tried to vomit out all the black tea he had drunk.

Without his subsequent ‘replenishment,’ the effects of Sage Moment quickly subsided. Shang Jianyao easily subdued the bodyguards—who had yet to react—with Hands Immobility. At the same time, he also made Ogre lose the ability to resist.

Jiang Baimian quickly took three steps forward, raised her palm, and chopped Terrence unconscious.



After ‘convincing’ the others in the activity room, Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian and asked curiously, “How did you know to say that?”

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance. “I noticed that you, like me, tried to stop Ogre from asking that question. You believed that the question might very well remove the effects of Terrence’s Inference Clowning. Since I was able to launch an attack in time, you naturally had the time to give Terrence a relatively strong dose of ‘Corny Person’ for a relatively short period of time. Even if I don’t goad him into drinking the black tea, you would’ve made him unreasonable in another way and create an opportunity.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

...

Two hours later, in the activity room.

Shang Jianyao placed his hand over Terrence’s shoulder and asked with a smile, “Haha, what are your three abilities?”

“Haha, it’s Sage Moment, Eternal Thirst, and Danger Detection. Haha, I can’t tell you the price,” Terrence replied with a beaming smile.

“Haha, which domain is this?” Shang Jianyao asked with a laugh.

“Haha, Mandara.” Terrence—who maintained his arm around Shang Jianyao’s shoulder—laughed as he spoke truthfully.

“Haha, are you from the Church of Paragon Desire?” Shang Jianyao asked amidst his laughter.

In the sincere and exaggerated atmosphere, Jiang Baimian almost facepalmed from watching.

At this moment, Terrence said with a serious expression, “No. They are a bunch of damn heretics!”

## Chapter 350: Divergence

Upon seeing Terrence turn serious, Shang Jianyao stopped his flippant attitude and asked seriously, “Which Church are you from?”

“Church of Spiritual Transcendence,” said Terrence devoutly.

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but join in the discussion. “Regarding the philosophical divergence from the Church of Paragon Desire, uh—what mistakes did they make regarding the Kalendaria's teachings?”

The latter half of her sentence pleased Terrence. He smiled and said, “We all believe that everyone has a spirituality that transcends everything. This is a natural light that lurks in the depths of our hearts.”

“Is this a gift from the Kalendaria, Mandara?” Jiang Baimian had seen some descriptions of the Church of Paragon Desire's teachings in the information provided by the company, but they were lacking in detail. Furthermore, there was no mention of the Church of Spiritual Transcendence.

“No.” Terrence shook his head. He solemnly and devoutly said, “God is a spirituality that transcends everything. God's name is Mandara. God is in everyone's hearts.”

“Then, aren't we born believers of Mandara?” Shang Jianyao had a look as though he was ‘making a fuss.’

Terrence nodded in relief and replied in the preaching manner from before. “God is in everyone's hearts.”

“God is in everyone's hearts,” Shang Jianyao replied, not treating himself as a stranger. He then asked in anticipation, “Doesn't your Church have a way of praying or salutation?”

He strengthened his tone with a gesture.

Prayers without prayer gestures were incomplete!

Terrence laughed and raised his right hand, gently caressing his lips with his index and middle fingers. After he finished caressing, he gave some well-wishes. “May your spirituality transcend everything.”

“May your spirituality transcend everything.” Shang Jianyao did the same.

He’s giving off vibes of a believer in the Lady of Desire, Mandara... Jiang Baimian muttered silently.

Terrence then smiled. “This is actually a gesture when praying, and it’s also used for strangers. Heh heh, although we are very familiar with each other, you aren’t members of our Church yet. We salute each other by kissing each other’s cheeks. This is also a form of etiquette in the Old World.”

I really can’t get used to that... Jiang Baimian pulled the topic back on track. “Please continue.”

The obese Terrence took out a small piece of paper wrapped in tin from his pocket and slowly unfolded it.

Inside was a piece of dark-brown chocolate.

After putting the chocolate into his mouth, he chewed and swallowed it. With his eyes half-closed, Terrence relaxed and said, “Everyone has a spirituality that transcends everything, but it’s very difficult to sense ‘Her’ or see ‘Her.’ This is because we are always entangled by all kinds of desires—the desire to eat, the desire to have sex with ‘prey,’ the desire to compete, the desire to enjoy, the desire to communicate, the desire to slack off, the desire to pursue spiritual stimulation, etc. These desires blind us and wrap around our hearts, preventing us from seeing or sensing the spirituality that transcends everything in our bodies...”

As he recited the teachings, he didn’t notice Shang Jianyao’s disappointed expression because his eyes were half-closed as if he was sensing a spirituality that transcended everything.

Shang Jianyao looked at the tin paper that contained the chocolate and regretfully retracted his gaze.

Jiang Baimian probed, “Therefore, you need to restrain these desires and let your spirituality that transcends everything surface from the bottom of your heart?”

To be honest, she felt that this shouldn't be the Church of Spiritual Transcendence's philosophy. After all, Terrence's figure and performance indicated that he wasn't a person who restrained his desires.

"No." Terrence smiled and opened his eyes. "That's a heretical religion's misconception. They are called the Return Church and are active elsewhere. Ma'am, don't restrain yourself. You can't get rid of your desires; you can only vent them."

He seriously explained the Church of Spiritual Transcendence's philosophy.

"Desire can't be eliminated. As long as you are alive and haven't become a vegetable, desire will definitely arise. We mustn't fear it; we have to learn to recognize and treat it correctly. Think about it. Every time you have sex to your heart's content, don't you enter a magical state? Don't you find calmness in your body and mind and that your mind is clear? Aren't you no longer plagued by all kinds of desires and have a feeling of escaping reality?"

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian were stunned.

They didn't answer, nor could they answer. Their expressions were rather identical.

Terrence didn't want them to tell him the answer to this question. He continued, "That means that you are close to having spirituality that transcends everything. In some of the Old World's literature, this is called Sage Time. The name of my Awakened ability shares the same name. This implies receiving the deity's approval.

"Sage—you can tell that they are very powerful just from the name. They are people who can sense true spirituality. From this point of view, we have a way to see and extract the spirituality in our hearts. That is to indulge our desires and vent them one by one. We will then extract them in extreme calmness while sensing and seeking them out.

"Our way of praying is to indulge our desires at the moment they arise. If you want to have sex, find someone to sleep with. If you want to smoke, finish a pack. If you want to drink, make yourself drink a good meal. If you want to eat something sweet, don't think that it will harm your body. If you want to eat meat, do your best to satisfy your needs. If you want to beat someone up, do it without hesitation..."

This might result in sudden death... or have you beaten to death... Jiang Baimian didn't dare to say a word.

She then asked, “Then, what does the Church of Paragon Desire think of this?”

Terrence’s expression became serious again. “They actually believe that all kinds of desires and spirituality that transcends everything are inseparable. They believe that there’s me in you, and you in me—all different facets of the deity.

“How is that possible? Therefore, they believe that as long as all kinds of desires are ignited and boiled, they can sense and grasp spirituality that transcends everything.”

Jiang Baimian came to a realization. “In other words, you believe that desire is an obstacle to seeing one’s own spirituality and that venting is the most reasonable and effective method. As for them, they believe that desire is sacred?”

“Yes,” Terrence said in a deep voice. “They are desecrating the deity.”

If this is blasphemy against a deity, it means that Mandara still acknowledges their thoughts to a certain extent, or ‘She’ doesn’t care about these baffling matters... Jiang Baimian replied inwardly.

Upon seeing that Terrence had finished, Shang Jianyao eagerly asked, “What’s your Holy Communion?”

Terrence laughed. “It’s something that can satisfy some kind of addiction, such as coffee, red wine, or a special beverage left behind by the Old World. Very few factories can still produce it now.”

As he spoke, Terrence stood up, walked to a relatively new refrigerator that totally resembled one from the Old World in the activity room, opened the door, and took out two bottles of black liquid. He then used an instrument to get some ice from the freezer compartment below.

He quickly sat opposite the coffee table and got Ogre to bring three glass cups from the kitchen.

With a poof, Terrence pried open the lid of the two black beverages and poured the liquid inside into the cups.

Fizzling sounds constantly sounded as coffee-colored bubbles endlessly emitted from the black beverage in the cups.

The last step was to put the ice in and let them sink to the bottom of the cup.

He raised his right hand and gently caressed his lips with his index and middle fingers. After praying, Terrence picked up a cup and saluted Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian. “You can drink it now.”

He then tipped his head slightly and gulped down the black beverage in his cup with a satisfied expression.

Shang Jianyao didn't hesitate to return the gesture before tasting the liquid with ice cubes.

A few seconds later, he lowered the cup that only had a small portion left. He looked at the beverage bottle on the table and nodded sincerely. “Your Church is pretty good.”

Isn't this Coke... Although Jiang Baimian had never tried it before, she knew about it. She controlled her expression and took a small sip of the beverage.

She was rather satisfied with the refreshing and unique taste.

After sharing Holy Communion, Terrence raised a question. “Why did you directly guess that I'm from the Church of Paragon Desire? Have you interacted with them before?”

“Yes,” Jiang Baimian replied frankly. “Our friend in Weed City was scammed by a woman named Christina. She's suspected to be from the Church of Paragon Desire. Suspected.”

“The one from the Hunter's Guild?” Terrence came to a realization. “She's considered a relatively active suspect. Don't be in a rush to take revenge on her. The Church of Paragon Desire has a strong relationship with the higher-ups.”

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian didn't expect to obtain such an unexpected piece of information.

After dealing with the people around Terrence and confirming that Inference Clowning could carry on the cyclic reinforcement for a period of time, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian left 25 Stern Street with Ogre and got into their jeep.

Jiang Baimian sighed as she drove. “First City really has many Awakened. Various religious organizations can be seen everywhere, be it openly or secretly. This also indirectly shows how strong First City is. It can actually suppress such a situation. They haven’t caused any trouble in the city for so many years.”

Shang Jianyao looked at the road ahead and sighed. “Now that Little Red is here...”

“Don’t malign Little Red!” Jiang Baimian laughed.

...

In First City, in the Hunter’s Guild’s lobby.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava returned from the second floor without receiving news about Han Wanghuo.

Long Yuehong suddenly pointed at a spot and said, “Uh, is that the former vice president of Weed City’s Hunter’s Guild, the one called Christina?”

Bai Chen and Genava looked over and saw a blond, blue-eyed woman in her thirties. Apart from her rough skin and slightly large pores, the woman—who was wearing a white top and blue, diagonally-patterned pants—could really be considered very charming. It made people associate her with beds.

She was none other than the former Vice President of Weed City’s Hunter’s Guild, Christina.