

## **Ad Infinitum 351**

### Chapter 351: A Loud Bang

“Don’t look at her too much; it will reveal that we know her.” Bai Chen only cast a brief glance before retracting her gaze.

Back in Weed City, she and Long Yuehong weren’t like Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao—who had made direct contact with her. They had only seen Christina twice and knew what she looked like. Later, it was said that this vice president was suspected to be an Awakened from the Church of Paragon Desire.

Therefore, she didn’t want Christina to discover that Long Yuehong and her not only knew her, but they also seemed to have a deep impression of her. This would add a lot of trouble to the Old Task Force’s mission in First City.

After some thought, Bai Chen added, “You can look at her a little longer.”

It was a man’s instinct after all. Not looking might end up making Christina suspicious.

In Bai Chen’s previous career as a wilderness nomad, she had encountered similar narcissists.

Long Yuehong coughed and retracted his gaze. “I just noticed that the Ruin Hunters with female companions didn’t keep staring.”

As he spoke, he was satisfied with his obvious improvement in observation.

This was his mental journey: No, I can’t keep staring; I’ll be discovered. No, Shang Jianyao said that normal men would look at beautiful ladies for a while longer. There are only two possibilities for them to look away in a hurry. The first is that the other party has already sensed your gaze and is looking back. The second is that there’s something wrong with you. I have to pretend to look at her in passing before looking elsewhere. Eh, why did the man’s arm get pinched by his female companion? Oh, he quickly retracted his gaze from Christina and began to explain himself...

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds before nodding slightly. “That makes sense.”

She then said, “We know that’s not the case, but Christina doesn’t.”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Long Yuehong was a little happy that she approved of his explanation.

At this moment, Christina walked in their direction, passed by them, and entered the stairwell. She sized up Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva, but her attention was mainly on the silver-black robot.

After the former vice president of Weed City’s Hunter’s Guild went upstairs, Long Yuehong looked back at the spot where her figure had disappeared and laughed self-deprecatingly. “Back then, she even invited Shang Jianyao to her office and turned a blind eye to me.”

He originally wanted to say ‘us’ to joke that Christina—an Awakened suspected to be a Church of Paragon Desire member—was the perfect example of a ‘face dog.’ He had learned many Old World terms from Jiang Xiaoyue’s information, but he realized that he seemed to be mocking Bai Chen for not being beautiful enough. Therefore, he forcefully changed it to ‘me.’

In any case, he knew himself well.

Just as he said that, Geneva echoed, “I know the reason. You’re only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement, and your looks are average...”

Long Yuehong’s mouth opened bit by bit as he forgot to close it. Bai Chen was stunned for two seconds before she covered her mouth and turned her head.

“Stop!” Long Yuehong snapped to his senses and stopped Geneva from speaking. He anxiously and blankly asked, “Did Shang Jianyao teach you that?”

“Yes.” Geneva nodded honestly. “He said that every time you deny yourself, I’m to repeat this sentence to stimulate you into working harder.”

“I should really thank him, huh!?” Long Yuehong turned his head awkwardly and cast his gaze at the large screen on the first floor.

The scrolling displayed the available missions: “...We urgently need a batch of water purifying equipment...”

“...There are more mutated creatures in the north bank’s wastelands. We need a one-time clean-up...”

“...A white wolf appeared in the North Shore Mountains...”

“...In search of companions heading to Ruin 9 in the Blood Wastelands...”

“...Hiring bodyguards...”

As Long Yuehong pretended to search for a mission, a team consisting of five to six Ruin Hunters arrived beside them.

The leader was a muscular Red River man with a small beard. He wore an Old World cowboy hat, a linen shirt, and an old black vest. On both sides of his waist was a pistol.

“Hey there. My name is Carlo.” The man greeted Bai Chen and Long Yuehong with a smile, and he spoke in the Red River language.

“Qian Bai.” Bai Chen skillfully gave him her fake name.

“Gu Zhiyong.” Long Yuehong answered almost immediately after her.

Carlo looked at Genova’s silver-black body and smiled. “Are you interested in forming a team to capture that white wolf in the North Shore Mountains?”

Without waiting for Long Yuehong and Bai Chen to answer, Carlo suppressed his voice and whispered, “We have some connections in the guild and obtained a top-secret piece of information. It contains detailed information about the white wolf...”

If I’m not wrong, that piece of information is the one we sold to the guild... Long Yuehong didn’t know how to answer and only muttered inwardly.

Upon seeing that the two-man team seemed to hesitate, Carlo glanced at Genova again and smiled. “Believe me; our cooperation will directly point to success. The risk also won’t be too high.”

Why does he keep staring at Genova... I get it. What caught their eye is actually the robot that's immune to bewitchment. Little White and I are just secondary... Long Yuehong came to a realization.

At this moment, Bai Chen shook her head. "We have other missions."

"It can be done along the way." Carlo tried his best to persuade them. "If you don't trust my team, you can get the guild to bear witness to our cooperation. We've already established ourselves in First City. We won't abandon everything for the sake of some benefits."

Bai Chen shook her head again. "We won't leave the city for quite some time."

"Alright." Carlo looked disappointed.

Bai Chen thought for a moment and reminded him, "That white wolf might be more dangerous than you imagine."

She and Long Yuehong didn't stay in the Hunter's Guild hall any longer. They 'led' Genova back to the street.

Long Yuehong had just taken a deep breath of air when he heard Bai Chen ask, "Did you discover anything suitable for Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others from those available missions?"

The Hunter's Guild's missions often indicated business opportunities.

"Ah, no." Long Yuehong was embarrassed to say that he had only casually taken a few glances.

He was just about to suggest taking a closer look when a loud bang suddenly sounded from somewhere in the city.

Boom!

The glass windows in the surrounding buildings rattled, appearing brittle.

After the loud bang subsided, Long Yuehong looked in the general direction of the sound in confusion. “What happened?”

Bai Chen frowned and replied, “It appears to be an explosion.”

“From a comparative analysis, it was an explosion.” Genava gave the results of his analysis.

Soon, dark armed helicopters appeared in the sky. They flew toward the Red Wolf Zone’s southeast.

After a while, someone finally sold the information to the guild over the phone: There was a vicious explosion at today’s gathering!

When Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava drove to the other streets, they clearly felt the atmosphere in First City tense up. There were clearly more armed personnel patrolling.

This forced them to give up on the idea of loitering around the house of Oray’s grandson, Marcus. It was foreseeable that the Golden Apple Zone would definitely be put under martial law.

After preliminarily gathering information on which businesses in First City were easier to do, Bai Chen drove back to Green Olive Zone’s Iron Medallion Street.

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“An explosion actually happened at the Citizen Conclave. This isn’t a trivial matter...” Jiang Baimian—who was returning to the Green Olive Zone—casually chatted as she drove. “The situation in First City seems to be in chaos.”

She and Shang Jianyao had figured out what the loud bang was through the Black Shirt Gang.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, Jiang Baimian laughed. “This isn’t a bad thing. Some appropriate chaos might help us find an opportunity to make contact with Avia and Marcus.”

“You’re right.” Shang Jianyao was very supportive.

Jiang Baimian glared at him and turned the car onto the road that led to Ugo Hotel.

She and Shang Jianyao were going to retrieve the information regarding the Heartless disease outbreak.

The Old Task Force had paid a total of 10 Oray for this.

The hotel owner, Ugo, didn't lie to them. He gave them a stack of information in a brownish-yellow folder.

"Thank you." Shang Jianyao was rather polite.

He and Jiang Baimian turned around and were about to leave when a figure suddenly jumped in from the door.

The figure was a black-haired, brown-eyed Red River woman in her thirties. However, she had a lot of white hair on her head, and her skin was tanned and rough.

The woman held a simple wooden doll in her hand. Upon seeing people, she giggled and shouted, "Don't be afraid. Philip is very obedient! He won't indiscriminately kill after contracting the Heartless disease; he's very obedient to me!"

As she spoke, she kept pointing at the doll in her hand with a fawning smile.

While Jiang Baimian was still stunned, she heard the hotel owner—Ugo—say, "Her child was the second patient. He just came of age..."

After a pause, Ugo looked at the woman's eyes that were mixed with anxiety and joy. He then added in a deep voice, "She's already gone crazy."

Chapter 352: Drafting

Green Olive Zone, Iron Medallion Street.

When Jiang Baimian mentioned Terrence and the Church of Spiritual Transcendence, Long Yuehong said in surprise, "We happened to bump into Christina today."

On the other hand, their team leader had actually encountered people and matters related to the Church of Paragon Desire.

“As expected of you,” Shang Jianyao concluded.

Long Yuehong replied aggrievedly, “But nothing happened...”

It was purely a chance encounter.

Shang Jianyao pressed his palms together and solemnly explained, “It’s fate to meet someone. Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti.”

Jiang Baimian raised her hand to stop their ‘debate’ and said in a comforting tone, “This only means that First City has many religions and many Awakened. Their relationships are complicated.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped before Jiang Baimian glared at him.

Jiang Baimian then talked about the explosion at the Citizen Conclave. The Old Task Force members discussed it briefly.

When they talked about the mother whose son had contracted the Heartless disease, everyone sighed.

After nearly a minute, Shang Jianyao looked at Genova and asked curiously, “You can sigh over such matters?”

Genava raised his silver-black palm and touched the military cap on his head. As he analyzed his data, he slowly said, “I still can’t relate such matters to the correct reaction, but I feel that this should be similar to witnessing the change in Susanna and Rides. Therefore, I categorized the two similarly. This has a certain level of effect.”

Jiang Baimian praised Genova in a tone that she usually reserved for encouraging Long Yuehong. “Being able to infer the thoughts of others using yourself as an example proves that you’ve taken another step forward in humanization.”

Bai Chen unconsciously smiled. After Shang Jianyao looked at her, she hastily asked, “Should we read the documents now?”

There had been cases of the Heartless disease happening in the Green Olive Zone’s streets recently.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words and picked up the folder on the table. She took out the papers inside and handed them to Genova. “Old Ge, project them so that everyone can read it together.”

This was much more convenient than taking turns reading.

Soon, only a few pages of information were projected onto the cramped rented room’s wall. The five Old Task Force members read it carefully from beginning to end.

During this process, they learned that the mother’s name was Mary. It was a very simple name, and her son’s name was Phillip.

After reading the case notes repeatedly, Long Yuehong frowned and voiced his thoughts. “None of these cases have anything in common. The only common point of intersection is that they all live in that area.”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Shang Jianyao seemed to be deliberately imitating Long Yuehong.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Indeed, there’s something in common between every two cases. But normally speaking, there will be similarities between any two people. When a few cases are put together, there won’t be much intersection. Yes, apart from the outbreak location.”

“My analysis results are the same,” Genova echoed.

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said in a surmising tone, “I remember a sentence in the Old World’s entertainment. It’s probably like this: When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Since the only thing in common is the location,



does that mean that the problem lies in the area? Is the source of the Heartless disease's infection hidden somewhere in that area?"

Long Yuehong subconsciously retorted, "Then, how do you explain that the Heartless disease epidemic will subside after a batch of cases erupts? Then, some time later, there might be another outbreak far away?"

"Maybe the source of the infection has feet." Shang Jianyao sincerely helped in coming up with a reason.

Jiang Baimian laughed and looked at Long Yuehong. "What if the source of the infection is a living creature, such as humans? He stays in an area for a period of time before going elsewhere. This results in the phenomena we see."

"This..." Long Yuehong suddenly felt terrified and desperately thought of the details that allowed him to refute. "But didn't they say that the Heartless disease erupts in many places in the Ashlands from time to time? These places are all over the world. Can the source of the infection travel to all these places?"

Jiang Baimian didn't look away and smiled. "What if the infection's source isn't a person but a group of people?"

Long Yuehong fell silent, finding the room terrifyingly quiet.

Jiang Baimian sighed and said, "After preliminarily confirming that the Clam Dragon Church's Dream Protector was infected with the Heartless disease after entering Jiang Xiaoyue's mind room, I've wondered if there were many people like Jiang Xiaoyue back then. Could some of the experimental subjects still be alive and walking the Ashlands? They unconsciously cause the people around them to contract the Heartless disease?"

"There are two problems with this guess that can't be explained. The first is that the company's employees have undergone strict review and everything about them is known. However, the Heartless disease still erupts at least once a year. The second is that when the Old World was destroyed, countless people in the major cities became Heartless at the same time. This doesn't seem like a change that can be brought about by a walking group of people."

"Indeed." Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief for some reason.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and thoughtfully said, “Could this be related to the Mind Corridor that connects everyone’s consciousness world? Since Jiang Xiaoyue can have a room there, those people most likely have a corresponding room. Did their actions cause the Heartless disease to infiltrate the surrounding rooms?”

“I’ll investigate when I enter the Mind Corridor.” Shang Jianyao looked very confident.

Jiang Baimian touched her cochlear implant and sighed with a bitter smile. “It’s times like this that I especially hope that I’m an Awakened as well.”

As there were no experts at the Mind Corridor level in the Old Task Force for the time being, this meant that their subsequent discussion would be hypothetical. Therefore, Jiang Baimian quickly stopped this discussion and exhaled. “Let’s not go out in the afternoon. We still have things to do, and we might have to burn the midnight oil.”

“What is it?” Long Yuehong subconsciously asked.

Jiang Baimian sighed. “Didn’t I promise Su Na and the others to get them an introductory textbook for the Red River language? Shang Jianyao and I previously window-shopped the city and realized that there’s no such thing. Even if they exist, they are prepared for Red River children. It doesn’t correspond to the Ashlandic language, so we can only draft it up ourselves. We can then assign missions to the guild and find a temporary teacher who’s bilingual.”

“Draft a textbook? There definitely won’t be enough time in such a short period of time.” Long Yuehong recalled his Red River language introductory textbooks and felt that it couldn’t be completed in an afternoon and a single night.

“Normally speaking, we won’t be able to finish it.” Jiang Baimian smiled at Genova. “But we have Old Ge.”

“What do you need me to do?” Genova immediately asked.

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, “Are there Ashlandic dictionaries, Red River dictionaries, and grammar libraries in the information you’ve stored?”

“Yes. Otherwise, how am I able to speak the Red River language and Ashlandic?” Genava moved his metal neck up and down.

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. “Select out the day-to-day words and the simpler ones then. Find a place to print them out. Heh heh, I was wrong. We still need to go out.”

After understanding what was happening, Long Yuehong couldn’t help but praise inwardly. Having a robot companion really saved us a lot of trouble!

Jiang Baimian continued, “When we have the draft, we can combine the company’s textbooks and translator machine to make some modifications and adjustments to the data. Although there’s still a lot of work, I think we should be able to get it out before tomorrow morning.

“Besides...” At this point, Jiang Baimian revealed a smile that inexplicably terrified Long Yuehong. “Besides, I didn’t say that I’m the only one in charge. Everyone has a part in this!”

As she spoke, she took off the rubber band on the back of her head and tied her ponytail a little higher, looking like she was in a combat state.

“Okay.” Bai Chen was the first to agree.

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao was half a second slower.

“Alright.”

“No problem.”

Long Yuehong and Genava answered last.

...

Early the next morning, Jiang Baimian—who had switched the team’s sleeping spot to the three-bedroom apartment in Red Wolf Zone—stretched and looked at the manuscript in front of her.

“Done!”

A simplified version of the introductory textbook to the Red River language for Ashlandics was born.

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and the others were also delighted.

Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist to look at the time and made the call for breakfast. At the same time, she switched on the radio transceiver to see if there was a telegram from the Zhao family.

Just after 8 a.m., a telegram came in.

After Jiang Baimian translated the code, she briskly read the corresponding content. “Please visit General Phocas in the next few days. We’ve already contacted him and agreed on a secret code to prove your identity, Book...”

“His manor is at 18 Citizen Street in Golden Apple Zone...”

Chapter 353: Planning

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genova—who had split up again—arrived at Wolf’s Den near West Por.

“These are the introductory Red River language textbooks for all of you. Spend a few days to familiarize yourselves with the content; someone will teach you in the future.” Bai Chen found a place to print out Genova’s scans as drafts and handed them to Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others.

Su Na was surprised. “That’s fast. Aren’t there no ready-made ones?”

“How do you know?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Su Na revealed her shallow dimples and raised the translation device in her hand. “I used it to ask from th-those servants’ mouths.”

“This is from the teaching materials we used when learning the Red River language. We only made some revisions. Besides, we have a robot assistant. It saved us a lot of time.” Bai Chen was mostly telling the truth.

Su Na and company didn't quite understand why having a robot assistant saved time, but since these magical, capable, and nice people said so, they believed them.

After distributing the textbooks, Su Na and the others eagerly flipped through them and chatted. "How do I read this?"

"Aren't there characters to indicate the tone?"

"I-I can't read..."

"Sigh, I'll teach you."

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong realized that they had made a mistake yesterday because they had been in a rush when writing the textbooks.

Unlike the students who had begun learning the Red River language in Pangu Biology, a large number of the women in Wolf's Den hadn't even grasped Ashlandic. A small number of them were even illiterate.

Fortunately, Su Na, Qin Zhen, and Du Yumei—who were barely literate—could teach the others.

"It seems like we still have to make an introductory Ashlandic textbook..." Long Yuehong muttered softly and subconsciously cast his gaze at Geneva.

Smart bots were really better than carbon-based humans in certain aspects.

Geneva nodded, indicating that it wasn't a problem.

After Su Na and the others quietened down, Bai Chen asked, "Is there enough food?"

"Yes." Li Qiong nodded first. "Boss, uh—Ogre got a lot of food in the building. It's enough for about half a month. Also, the marijuana business is very good, and it's especially profitable..."

At this point, Su Na interrupted her. “However, we won’t continue that business once we gain a foothold. Those people are no different from lunatics, especially those who inhaled the new product from Paradise Island. Once they run out of money and fail to get a hit on time, even I feel terrible for them. If it weren’t for the fact that we have guns and could scare some of them, they might have used their guns on us!”

She spoke haphazardly, having lingering fears from what happened yesterday evening.

“That’s right.”

“Yes.”

“...”

Many women present echoed.

Bai Chen nodded. “That’s good.”

Su Na hesitated and asked, “If we don’t sell them in the future, will those people go crazy from their withdrawal symptoms? Will they rob us? Will we die because of this?”

“It’s times like these that you require good marksmanship,” Bai Chen replied calmly. “Those who can quit will naturally quit. As for those who can’t, it’s also a good thing for them and their families that they die early.”

Bai Chen didn’t continue the topic and said, “What do you plan on doing in the future? What are your thoughts?”

Su Na revealed a reminiscing expression and quickly said, “We plan on renovating the first floor, but we won’t be running a hotpot restaurant. Instead, we’ll be opening a fast-food restaurant. The hotpot you mentioned requires too many spices and ingredients. The price definitely won’t be low. The target audience will only be directed at sailors and businessmen. The people in the nearby few blocks have a high demand for very cheap fast food. Most of them work at the port or in the factories. Couples can be very busy from work, so they return home late and tired. They also have to use coal, wood, or electricity to cook their own meals. As long as the price is appropriate and the supply of food is stable, I think it should sell quite well...”

“We will also consider a hotpot restaurant in the future. It will be on the second floor, but its scale won’t be too large...”

“We also plan on using one floor as a bathhouse—the simplest public bathhouse. There are many low-income citizens living in the surrounding few blocks. They are all eager to shower, and there’s no independent bathhouse where they live. They can only shower in public places; it’s very inconvenient...”

“The nearby bathhouses often have water stoppages, and they are about to go bust. This building has never suffered a water stoppage...” As she spoke, a faint smile appeared on Su Na’s face.

Although Li Qiong, Qin Zhen, and the others already knew of this plan, they still listened with great anticipation as if they would be very happy just by listening to it.

Long Yuehong was stunned. He couldn’t believe that this was a plan that a group of former slaves—who didn’t understand the Red River language or First City—could come up with. Isn’t this analysis too detailed?

Upon sensing the change in his gaze, Su Na said in embarrassment, “For the past two days, we’ve been using the translation device to speak to the servants and ask them questions. They actually know a lot.”

Bai Chen nodded slightly and said, “Well done.”

She then gave some of her suggestions, such as opening a grain shop or attempting to cooperate with some merchants at the port after they accumulated some resources.

Finally, she emphasized, “Remember to train your body and practice your marksmanship.”

“Yes!” Su Na and the others nodded heavily.

After leaving Wolf’s Den and going down to the first floor, Long Yuehong looked back at the seventh and eighth floors—where Su Na and the others lived—and said with emotion, “They sure are motivated. Furthermore, they know what’s good and bad, and they know what to do and what not to do.”

Bai Chen looked at the jeep not far away and said, “They always have beautiful hopes for the future in the beginning. When they experience more difficulties and setbacks, I hope they can still remember their feelings and thoughts today.”

In the Ashlands, very few people could persevere with their original intentions.

Long Yuehong fell silent, not knowing what to say.

Genava said, “In Tarnan, there are actually many people who can at least do so without harming others.”

“That’s because the robot guards are watching.” Bai Chen smiled and glanced at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong had been extorted by the locals previously.

As they spoke, they returned to the jeep.

At this moment, several sheriffs in grayish-blue uniforms ran over from the corner of the street with pistols.

Upon seeing Long Yuehong and the others, the short, fat man in the lead slowed down and asked, “Did you see anyone go over? Wearing a thin black coat and has brown hair and green eyes. He wore a scarf like you, but it covered his mouth.”

He pointed at Bai Chen.

Bai Chen tugged at the elegant thin scarf around her neck and frankly replied, “No, we just came out of the building.”

The short, fat man didn’t ask any further. He led his subordinates and ran again.

Long Yuehong looked at the sheriffs’ backs and muttered, “Did that fellow commit a crime?”



“Maybe.” Bai Chen opened the door and sat in the driver’s seat.

...

Golden Apple Zone, 18 Citizen Street, General Phocas’s residence.

On the way here in the gray SUV, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao underwent at least three spot checks. Fortunately, they didn’t bring any military exoskeletons or heavy weapons. They acted like Ruin Hunters that knew their place.

“Who are you looking for?” The guards at the door stopped them.

Phocas was First City’s most senior and most famous general. Back when Oray died and First City fractured, he firmly stood on the Senate’s side and commanded the army to suppress the rebellion. After that, he repeatedly purged the Heartless, mutated creatures, and other factions, opening up many settlements for First City.

He was in his fifties now, and he was already past his prime. His age in the Ashlands categorized him as having one foot in the coffin. He gradually faded from the list of commanders and was only in charge of a portion of the city defense forces. Of course, he was a Senator as well.

Faced with the guards’ questions, Jiang Baimian smiled. “We have an appointment with the general to discuss a partnership regarding a batch of books.”

After asking for instructions, the guards made way. Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian entered Phocas’s study under the butler’s guidance.

Phocas’s house was paved with marble, and different statues lined the stairwell railing. The walls were decorated with exquisite murals, making them look very luxurious.

His study was the same—rows of books were bathed in golden sunlight.

The moment she saw Phocas, a word surfaced in Jiang Baimian’s mind: Lion!

Be it his appearance or aura, this general was like a lion that was staring at its prey. But perhaps because of his age, his earthen-yellow hair was relatively sparse. This inexplicably made him look a little comical.

Phocas—who was wearing a well-ironed military uniform—stood by the window. His yellow eyes flickered as he glanced at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao and asked in a deep voice, “Are you the Ruin Hunter team that discovered the Anti-intellectualism Church’s tracks?”

Shang Jianyao nodded first. “Yes, they also sponsored us with 50 Oray.”

Phocas frowned, a little confused.

Chapter 354: Eternal Draw

Jiang Baimian quickly helped Shang Jianyao smooth things over. “Investigating this matter gave us an additional 50 Oray.”

Phocas—whose nickname was Lion—nodded. “Explain your investigation in detail.”

He walked back to the desk and sat down. During this process, he didn’t invite Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian to find a seat for themselves. It was as though they were only two subordinates who had come to report the situation.

It’s really not easy to earn some money... Jiang Baimian perked herself up. She began recounting how they ‘chanced upon’ Zhao Yide and took on this mission. It went all the way to waiting for Shen Kui and subduing him, confirming that the Anti-intellectualism Church was really behind this.

As for how they figured out which ‘strangers’ were the ones mentioned by the Zhao family’s steward—Zhao Shouren—and how they got Shen Kui to explain the situation truthfully without taking the initiative to expose the fact that he had been captured, Jiang Baimian only vaguely mentioned ‘we used some tricks.’ She openly assumed a position of having secrets in this regard.

To many Ruin Hunter teams, this was not a rare situation. Everyone had things they didn’t want others to know so as to ensure their safety and survival.

Phocas stroked his chin and suddenly asked, “Why didn’t you monitor the Zhao family manor’s surroundings instead of choosing a far-away road?”

As expected of someone who has gained experience through steel and blood. He has very strong acumen... Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “We were worried that the Anti-intellectualism Church would pay special attention to the areas around the manor that are conducive for surveillance.”

Phocas fell silent for a few seconds before chuckling. “The Hunter team that previously investigated the manor and found strangers entering and leaving was really lucky.”

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao agreed deeply.

Upon seeing that General Phocas easily realized the problem she had deliberately posed, Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and said, “The Anti-intellectualism Church has a precedent.”

She then roughly recounted the operation planned by the real Father in Weed City.

Phocas quietly listened and revealed a slightly mocking smile. “Are they plotting to deal with me?”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian to answer, he stood up in an imposing manner. “I do want to see what they plan on doing. Can you recognize all the suspicious ‘strangers?’”

“Yes,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

Phocas smiled. “That’s good. Meet up with my guards here at 9 a.m. in two days. We’ll capture them directly!”

He didn’t seem worried that they would step into a trap.

“Aren’t you going to choose an auspicious hour?” Shang Jianyao asked.

‘Auspicious hour’ was a term in Ashlandic. As Shang Jianyao was speaking the Red River language, he didn’t know if there was a specialized term, so he used ‘lucky time’ to express his meaning.

“Lucky time?” Phocas asked in confusion.

“For example, when everyone is asleep at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.” Shang Jianyao gave an example.

Phocas roared with laughter. “There’s no need; they aren’t worthy of such treatment.”

There’s often no good ending to saying such things... General, don’t jinx it... Jiang Baimian tried her best to change the topic. “We’ll receive the corresponding payment after participating in this operation?”

As she spoke, she swept her gaze across the two guards on duty in the study.

“This isn’t something I should answer. It’s up to your employer,” Phocas said confidently. “But I think it won’t pose a problem.”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao to ask again, he sat down wearily. “You may leave. Be punctual.”

Shang Jianyao said in surprise, “Aren’t you going to keep us for lunch?”

Phocas sized him up and suddenly smiled. “Is that the price you paid? I’ll invite you to a celebratory feast when the operation is successful.”

“Deal!” Shang Jianyao replied with bright eyes. He then left General Phocas’s residence with Jiang Baimian and returned to the gray SUV.

Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror as she drove. “I even suspect that he’s related to you by blood; he actually chose to rush in.”

Shang Jianyao stroked his hair. “I don’t think so. But if there’s a need for the relationship, it’s not a problem.”

Jiang Baimian immediately laughed. “You want to inherit his estate?”

“I’ll let his assets be used in more meaningful places,” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

Jiang Baimian scoffed. “For example, filling your stomach?”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s answer, she turned the steering wheel and said seriously, “When the time comes, we definitely won’t be the main target. Even if something really happens, we will at most be within the implicated area. The danger level isn’t too high. Yes, get Old Ge to follow us, cloaked. He’s the nemesis of most Awakened.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian smiled. “Phocas is reckless, but he should be very strong. Zhao Zhengqi should’ve mentioned to him that you are an Awakened, but he only arranged for two guards when meeting us. Either the entire building is under the observation of a certain powerhouse, or he’s that powerhouse.”

A powerhouse at that level would find it insulting to act as a guard in the study. They could simply sit beside Phocas.

“He’s very arrogant.” Shang Jianyao voiced his opinion. “But he’s still alright. He actually agreed to treat us to a feast after the matter.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and made the gray SUV drive to the roadblock on the street ahead.

...

Green Olive Zone, Labe Street, Ugo Hotel.

Jiang Baimian brought Shang Jianyao back and asked the boss about the latest situation. “Were there any Heartless cases yesterday?”

Ugo shook his head. “No. You can move back if there aren’t any more cases after two to three days.”

His expression was normal, showing no signs of abnormality.

“I hope so.” Shang Jianyao sincerely expressed his anticipation.

After leaving the hotel, the two of them went to the rented apartment at Iron Medallion Street as planned and met up with Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva.

After exchanging the results of their operations, Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’m quite silly too. I treated them as beginners in the Red River language who had undergone the company’s systematic education. Let’s organize another introductory Ashlandic textbook later. We’ll use the first grade in primary school as a blueprint.

“There’s no rush. Let’s take an afternoon nap.”

After lunch, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong slept in the top bunk.

Long Yuehong was just about to complain that the other party was occupying too much space when Shang Jianyao raised his right hand and massaged his temples.

...

In the Sea of Origins, on the island with the golden elevator.

Shang Jianyao looked at himself—who was sitting cross-legged at the elevator door in a gray camouflage uniform. He shook his head in pity and also sat down.

He sincerely said, “You are me, and I am also you. We are an inseparable part of each other. Everyone has moments when they struggle internally, but we can’t split ourselves and go to extremes because of this.”

Upon seeing the other Shang Jianyao quietly listen to his words at the elevator door, Shang Jianyao laughed and said the last word. “So...”

The other Shang Jianyao raised his hand, dug his ears, and smiled. “What did you say? I couldn’t hear you. I stuffed my ears, afraid that I would be affected by Inference Clowning.”

Shang Jianyao frowned and looked at him. He then raised his hand and dug his ear.

After a few seconds, Shang Jianyao sighed. “We really are alike. We both made the same choice. I still want to accept you and let you receive the best treatment in the hospital we built.”

The other Shang Jianyao continued, “Defeating the last fear is your only way to the Mind Corridor. Since we are afraid of losing our companions, we have to create an opportunity to lose them and find an opportunity to defeat our fear during that process.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “The nine of us get along well, so why are you the only one that’s anti-social? Is there a problem with you? Let’s discuss it. Maybe we can come up with a solution.”

The other Shang Jianyao smiled. “After entering the Mind Corridor, you will undergo a qualitative change and have the ability to complete your ideals. By creating an opportunity to lose our companions by yourself, you can still control it to a certain extent and have a chance to make up for it. However, you might not be able to turn the situation around if you passively wait for an opportunity to descend.”

Shang Jianyao sighed again. “I suddenly don’t know what to say. I’ll wish you a happy new year ahead of time.”

The two of them had their ears stuffed as they conversed like whistling in the wind. In secret, they were both attempting to use Corny Person to get the other party to remove their earplugs and listen to them.

The two of them jumped up at the same time and threw their earplugs at each other.

Once again, Shang Jianyao and Shang Jianyao ended in a draw.

...

After leaving the Sea of Origins, Shang Jianyao took a nap until 4 p.m.

“How was it? I think you entered the Sea of Origins,” Long Yuehong asked in concern and curiosity.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “We know each other too well, so there’s only one outcome.”

A draw.

In the lower bunk, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Why don't you leave everything to me, and I'll formulate a plan for you?"

Chapter 355: High-Class Area

Shang Jianyao shook his head at Jiang Baimian's suggestion. "He will know what I know."

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled bitterly. "This sure is troublesome. The hardest enemy to deal with is indeed yourself."

"I'll observe for a while longer." Shang Jianyao wasn't discouraged.

At this moment, Geneva voiced his thoughts according to the analysis. "This should be a reflection of your dissociative identity disorder. Can you use the corresponding drugs and adjuvant therapy to promote your fusion with him?"

"Uh..." Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others were a little stunned.

In theory, Geneva's plan made sense; it was a solution coming from a medical perspective. But the problem was that this was too scientific. It was on the other extreme end of the mind world and the consciousness space that seemed the least scientific. It was rather absurd to put them together.

After a few seconds of silence, Jiang Baimian smiled. "It's not a bad idea. At least it's logically feasible."

"But I'm worried that it will cause the other eight of me to disappear." Shang Jianyao had a serious expression as though they were companions he equally couldn't lose.

"Let's continue observing; there's no rush. After all, you've already seen your counterpart in the mind world faster than most Awakened." Jiang Baimian did a stretch and got out of bed. "Let's go out for a walk and grab a bite."

At night, they switched on the radio transceiver as usual to see if the company had any new arrangements for them.



At 8:06 p.m., a telegram from Lehman came in. This arms dealer from the Linhai Alliance had already arrived in First City.

Jiang Baimian simply replied: "Let's meet somewhere."

Before long, Lehman replied with a telegram: "10 a.m. tomorrow, Machine 14, reserved under Mr. Heinrich at Old Era Internet Café, 99 Stone Street, Red Wolf Zone."

...

99 Stone Street in Red Wolf Zone was a building left behind by the Old World. It was 40 to 50 stories tall and had undergone many repairs.

The glass walls were clean and reflected the sunlight. It looked indescribably beautiful.

"It's like returning to Swamp Ruin 1." Long Yuehong sighed with emotion.

It was a silhouette of an era, a reenactment of humanity's past.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "These streets in Red Wolf Zone resemble the Old World the most."

As they spoke, the five people from the Old Task Force walked to the Old Era Internet Café on the first floor.

At the Internet café's entrance were four security guards armed with pistols and batons. The moment they saw Shang Jianyao and the others, they stretched out their hands, indicating for them to stop.

"To ensure our customers' safety, robots have to remain outside," said one of the security guards.

Another security guard added, "Most of our guests are of status and value their safety."

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian didn’t insist and turned to glance at Geneva. “Wait for us in the lobby’s lounge.”

The reason she felt that there was nothing wrong with this was that robots were often associated with heavy firepower. They were existences that would definitely be stopped outside when visiting others or entering certain areas.

Previously, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had considered this possibility back when they attempted to convince Terrence. This was why Geneva formed a team with Bai Chen and Long Yuehong instead of following the two of them as added insurance.

This was not discrimination but vigilance.

Of course, with a robot, others would often show them more respect.

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

After they were done with him, Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen walked to the door.

The door opened upon sensing the approaching guests.

Beyond the door stood a young man in a white shirt and a red bow tie. He pressed his hand to his chest, bowed, and asked with a warm smile, “Ladies and gentlemen, do you have a reservation? Is this your first time here?”

“Yes, a reservation under Mr. Heinrich.” As Jiang Baimian spoke, she looked around and took in the Old Era Internet Café’s interior.

This place boldly used the color gold, and it wasn’t stingy with stone materials. There were statues everywhere, like a legendary high-end venue.

The young man took out a palm-sized electronic product and quickly clicked it a few times. He maintained his smile and said, “There’s indeed a reservation for Mr. Heinrich, Machine 14. However, there’s only one machine on the reservation list.”

“Arrange for the others to be assigned to the surrounding machines,” Jiang Baimian said simply.

“Every machine costs one Oray an hour,” said the young man with a smile.

F\*ck, why don't you rob a bank? Isn't this too expensive? Long Yuehong almost blurted out.

The hotel they stayed in only cost one Oray a night.

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to speak, Jiang Baimian nodded. “Alright.”

She then smiled and asked, “We came from Weed City. Your Internet Café seems different from the ones there?”

As the young man bowed slightly and assumed an inviting posture, he smiled and explained, “It's different, completely different. In other places, machines are scavenged from the ruins and repaired. If they don't break down a few times a day, they would be letting down their origins. Here, all the computers come from Mechanical Paradise. They are fast, stable, and smooth. They can definitely give you the best experience.

“Besides, there's only an intranet elsewhere. There are only a few games and other Old World entertainment. Most of them are very lacking, and they mainly allow the practice of guns through virtual reality. We are different. We are connected to First City's network, and we also have a large variety of Old World entertainment and all kinds of useful programs that can give you the best enjoyment.

“You can say that this is pleasure enjoyed by nobles. It's a good place for middle and upper-class people to relax and gather. Many nobles find it boring to play with computers at home and often come here...”

Isn't this similar to the various high-end places mentioned in the Old Era's information? But connecting this concept to Internet cafés is a little... a little funny... Jiang Baimian shut her mouth and maintained a smile as she listened.

If she wasn't born from Management-level parents in Pangu Biology and could often make contact with all kinds of Old World information through the use of her home computer and Internet, she

might've been stunned. That's not to mention her subsequent visit to Tarnan, where she had seen how worthless electronic products were and Internet cafés' in their original forms.

"I can't wait." Shang Jianyao expressed his opinion.

What moved him was undoubtedly the wide variety of Old World entertainment.

As the attendant led the Old Task Force and the others deeper into the Internet café, he suppressed his voice and continued introducing them to the café. "Remember to wear earphones when you need to play music. Our guests here are all of status and have very high requirements for the environment..."

"You can also buy all kinds of rare items here—red wine, Coke, chocolate, coffee, tea, etc.

"If you stay until mealtime and have already played for more than three hours, we will provide each of you our complimentary specialty, stewed rice. The dish is different every day. There's thick gravy tomato stewed rice that suits the local palate, mushroom chicken stewed rice, and seafood stewed rice that originated from the Linhai Alliance..."

"If you guys get tired from playing, we have a free bathroom and lounge upstairs..."

Shang Jianyao gulped without hiding anything.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian had already scanned the Internet café's interior.

There was a certain level of barriers between each area for privacy. There were many plants, and it was quiet.

They soon arrived near Machine 14.

Unlike other computers, there was a telephone beside this machine.

"This is prepared for customers who need to make calls. It's also available at the service counter and other machines." The attendant switched on computers 14 to 17 one after another.

Jiang Baimian sat in front of computer 14. Shang Jianyao sat close to her and chose 15. Bai Chen and Long Yuehong followed behind.

After the attendant left, Jiang Baimian moved the mouse and quickly clicked a few times. She then chuckled. "First City's network coverage is very small. There aren't many people, so there's no interesting or valuable content..."

Customers at the Internet café were either watching Old World dramas or reading novels; otherwise, they were gaming online.

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were still relatively reserved. They didn't join the ranks immediately and patiently waited until 10.

Ding ring ring!

The phone beside Machine 14 rang as expected by Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian picked up the phone and asked with a smile, "Mr. Lehman?"

She spoke in Ashlandic.

The same but awkward language came from the other end of the line: "Yes, have you gathered the supplies needed for the transaction?"

Jiang Baimian frankly said, "Not yet; we just arrived in First City. Give us two more weeks."

"Alright." Lehman didn't refuse.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and asked, "Will you go to Redstone Collection later?"

"No, it's an unpleasant place for me. I might only send an assistant over in the future." Lehman sighed.

Jiang Baimian immediately said, "We made another trip and met Lars."

The other end of the line remained silent, but the sound of breathing became a little clearer.

Jiang Baimian continued, “He didn’t betray you. DiMarco was a powerful Awakened who used a certain ability to control him.”

“Really? How is he now?” Lehman asked anxiously. He unconsciously switched to the Red River language.

Jiang Baimian used a sigh to prepare him. “Unfortunately, he became a sacrifice when the Underground Ark residents resisted DiMarco’s tyranny.”

The other end of the line fell silent again.

“We buried him in the cemetery behind the Vigilance Cathedral and erected a stone monument.” Jiang Baimian recounted the matter.

After dozens of seconds, Lehman slowly said, “Thank you. This news is priceless to me.”

His nasal sound was much heavier than before.

Sigh. Jiang Baimian sighed silently.

At this moment, Lehman hurriedly added, “But in the subsequent transactions, I’ll give you a 30% discount at best. I still have a large group of people to feed.”

“...” Jiang Baimian was speechless.

Chapter 356: Chance Encounter

After ending the call, Jiang Baimian sighed and cast her gaze at the computer screen.

When it was almost noon, she snapped to her senses and muttered silently, “We haven’t even finished one round. Why is it already so late? Old Ge is still waiting in the lobby’s lounge...”

Jiang Baimian quickly stood up and called out to Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen. “It’s time to go.”

Upon noticing their situation, the attendant in a white shirt and red bow tie walked over and asked with a smile, “Are you leaving?”

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao, who had taken off his earpiece and unplugged the small speaker from the computer. She then said to the attendant, “Yes, how much is it in total?”

She could actually count it herself but asking was a form of politeness.

The attendant smiled warmly. “There’s no need. Mr. Heinrich will pay.”

Uh... Jiang Baimian was a little surprised. In her impression, Lehman was equivalent to a miser. She never expected him to be so generous.

All kinds of words from Lehman quickly flashed through her mind before she finally fixed her gaze on the words ‘having good skills is inferior to having good relationships.’

From the looks of it, this fellow is still very generous when it comes to building relationships... Jiang Baimian didn’t have the intention of having the Old Task Force pay for it themselves. She nodded slightly and led Shang Jianyao and the others out of Old Era Internet Café.

Just as she left the door, she suddenly froze and looked back at the Internet café.

“What’s wrong?” Bai Chen asked acutely.

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully said, “I’m wondering who Lehman is related to in First City. Doesn’t Oray’s grandson, Marcus, like watching Gladiator Fights? But he’ll be situated in the nobles’ private rooms, which we can’t get tickets to. It’s easy for the secret protectors to discover us if we use Inference Clowning all the way. It will be much easier if we can get a few tickets through Lehman.”

“Then, we should ask after we complete the transaction.” Bai Chen felt that this was a solution.

Long Yuehong nodded and hesitantly asked, “Will this implicate Lehman?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped, making Long Yuehong a little embarrassed.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “It won’t be a problem if we can complete two things. The first is to wait for Lehman to leave First City and return to the Linhai Alliance before using the tickets to gain access to the nobles’ private rooms. The second is that we shouldn’t be in a rush to make friends with Marcus even if we encounter him in the private rooms. We can make an attempt when an opportunity naturally presents itself.”

Long Yuehong had just heaved a sigh of relief when he suddenly realized a problem. “What if Lehman doesn’t leave First City after giving us the VIP tickets? Those tickets should have an expiry date.”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “He has to leave even if he doesn’t want to.”

“I’ll scare him!” Shang Jianyao was excited.

Bai Chen looked in the direction of the skyscraper’s lobby and said, “Let’s discuss this after we determine that Lehman can really get tickets to the VIP rooms.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “That’s true.”

They then entered the lobby and saw Geneva in a dark-green military uniform sitting on a long sofa, chatting with a few humans.

“It’s time to leave,” Shang Jianyao shouted loudly.

Geneva stood up, bade the few humans—who weren’t too old—farewell, and walked back to Bai Chen and the others.

“What were you guys talking about?” Jiang Baimian casually asked.



Genava replied in a slightly synthetic male voice, “When they saw me sitting there alone, they came over and asked if I was lost. After I said that you guys were in the Internet café, they asked where we were from. When they learned that we came from the south, they asked about the situation along the way...”

After Genava finished speaking, Shang Jianyao said with a heavy expression, “Old Ge, you were almost abducted!”

“Is that so?” Genava said in confusion. “They’re rather friendly, and they didn’t show any inclination to abduct me.”

“If you can sense it, it won’t be called abduction.” Shang Jianyao looked disappointed, expecting better from him.

“Alright, alright. Let’s go back.” Jiang Baimian stopped the carbon-based human and the smart bot’s debate.

After the jeep slowly drove off, Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and said, “Stay in the rented apartment on Iron Medallion Street this afternoon to prepare for the raid of the Zhao family manor.”

“How?” Long Yuehong immediately focused.

Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “There are two things to take note of: The first is to make a backup copy of your key memories, a double copy. It should be written on paper and placed with the companion in charge of liaising with you. It’s also to be recorded into the computer and stored with Old Ge. When the operation is over, you can retrieve the data and make comparisons to see if your memories have been secretly tampered with.

“The second is to discuss the response to various unexpected developments.”

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, “These are necessary.”

At this moment, Shang Jianyao looked at Genava. “Will you peek?”

“You must not insult my integrity,” the silver-black smart bot said truthfully.

“What about you?” Shang Jianyao looked at Long Yuehong again.

“I don’t even want to see it. I’m afraid that my mind will be corrupted!” Long Yuehong replied angrily.

After deciding on the afternoon work, Jiang Baimian placed her right hand on the passenger door and heaved a sigh of relief. “We’ll make the introductory Ashlandic textbooks tomorrow.”

Shang Jianyao suddenly exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” Long Yuehong asked warily.

Shang Jianyao had a look of regret. “In another hour, the Internet Café will give us their complimentary specialty stewed rice.”

“That’s right!” Long Yuehong also recalled this matter and felt like he had missed an opportunity to earn money.

Jiang Baimian was also rather regretful. “I wonder if their specialty stew is delicious...”

This was something that Pangu Biology didn’t have the recipe for.

Without waiting for Bai Chen and the others to respond, Jiang Baimian clapped her hands and said, “I’ve decided. Let’s find a restaurant that serves stewed rice in the Red Wolf Zone at noon.”

She then laughed. “Just take it as if we didn’t get a treat surfing the net through Lehman.”

...

After having their fill, the Old Task Force returned to Iron Medallion Street.

After finding a place to park the jeep and setting up the alarm in a hidden spot, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others strolled along the narrow path to their rented apartment.

As they walked, a person walked toward them.

This person wore a mottled leather coat. He was about the same height as Long Yuehong, and he had brown hair, green eyes, and an old gray scarf around his neck that covered his mouth.

After passing each other, Bai Chen looked ahead and said, “This person looks a little like the one the sheriffs were looking for...”

Although the clothes were different, the other characteristics matched.

Jiang Baimian recalled Bai Chen’s prior description and nodded. “Yes.”

“Shall we go greet him?” Shang Jianyao took the initiative to ask.

“There’s no need. We aren’t First City’s sheriffs.” Jiang Baimian shook her head without hesitation. “Even if he’s related to the Citizen Conclave explosion, it’s not a reason for us to interfere.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was a little stunned. “He’s related to the Citizen Conclave explosion?”

How did Team Leader know? Or was it just an example?

Jiang Baimian smiled and looked around at her team members. “While all of you were engrossed in the Old World’s entertainment, I seriously browsed First City’s public network for a while and realized that someone mentioned that the suspect in this explosion was a man wearing a scarf.”

Shang Jianyao replied in confusion, “Weren’t you playing...”

“Stop!” Jiang Baimian cut him off. “In short, it has nothing to do with us. Besides, the more chaotic First City is, the more advantageous it will be for our subsequent investigations.”

Long Yuehong nodded and asked, “Why does he have to wear a scarf and cover his mouth? He’s already changed his clothes.”

“This means that his mouth has more obvious characteristics.” Bai Chen voiced her guess.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “It shouldn’t just be characteristics. It’s more likely that there’s something around his mouth that allows him to be targeted if a passerby sees it. For example, criminal tattoos, slave markings, or some kind of deformity.”

A term immediately flashed across Long Yuehong’s mind: Subhuman!

...

In the blink of an eye, it was time to raid the Anti-intellectualism Church members in the Zhao family manor. The Old Task Force split up again.

Jiang Baimian led Shang Jianyao and a black-cloaked Genava. As she opened the door to the jeep’s driver’s seat, she said to Long Yuehong and Bai Chen, “Go there and wait. Equip the exoskeletons and come over as soon as you see the signal.”

“Alright.” Long Yuehong and Bai Chen didn’t waste any time. They turned around and walked toward the gray SUV with the two military exoskeletons.

Jiang Baimian entered the driver’s seat, adjusted the rearview mirror in the car, and said to Shang Jianyao and Genava, “Let’s go to General Phocas and meet up with his guards.”

Shang Jianyao replied excitedly, “I hope they are prepared.”

What do you mean by hoping that they are prepared? Who’s the ‘they’ you are referring to? Jiang Baimian didn’t attempt to understand Shang Jianyao’s words. She started the car and drove it forward.

It was just 8:30 a.m. at this moment, and there were very few pedestrians on the streets.

Chapter 357: Military Operation

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava arrived at Phocas’s residence nearly ten minutes before the scheduled time.

Hundreds of people had already gathered in a clearing. They were either gathered around the grayish-green military vehicle or lined up in a straight line.

Jiang Baimian found a guard outside the iron fence and asked him to report to General Phocas that the Ruin Hunter team hired by the Zhao family had arrived.

Three to five minutes later, a man and a woman walked out the main entrance and walked along the path in the middle of the lawn.

They were not short. The man was more than 1.8 meters tall, and the woman was more than 1.7 meters tall. They were both Red River people, and they wore gray military uniforms with epaulets indicating the rank of major.

“The general mentioned you.” The man nodded slightly.

He had short, brownish-red hair, and his eyes were the same color. His arm muscles bulged his clothes, and he had a cold bearing. He wasn’t one to smile.

He then looked at Geneva—who was wearing a cloak. “This is?”

“A member of our team, a secret weapon,” Jiang Baimian said with a smile. She emphasized the last few words.

The male major glanced at the three of them. “You mean you don’t want him to remove the cloak for our inspection?”

“You can go over and take a look, but don’t let him take off his cloak. There are too many people here, and there might be Anti-intellectualism Church spies.” Jiang Baimian had long thought of a solution.

“That’s right. He will be embarrassed if he takes off his clothes in public.” Shang Jianyao considerately helped Geneva consider his dignity.

The male major signaled to his female companion beside him with his eyes, indicating for her to guard against any accidents. He then took two steps forward and approached Geneva.

At such a distance, the difference in height between the two minimized the cover provided by the cloak.

The brownish-red-haired male major immediately revealed a look of enlightenment.

He turned around and restored his coldness. “There’s no need for you to bring him along; we have our preparations. If you bring him along, you have to stay away from the general’s vehicle later.”

“No problem,” Jiang Baimian replied with a smile.

The male major glanced at her and Shang Jianyao before nodding slightly. “With your height, you’re still too thin and lack muscles.”

The sudden change in topic surprised Jiang Baimian—it was as if the person opposite her was another Shang Jianyao.

The male major added, “If you had muscles like mine, I wouldn’t be able to resist pursuing you.”

As he spoke, he bent his elbows and bulged his muscles.

This exaggerated act nearly burst his clothes.

There’s no need for that... Jiang Baimian replied silently.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao scoffed. “Excessive pursuit of muscles are often only good for show.”

The male major glanced at him. “I won’t argue with you during the mission; we can have a one-on-one battle later. You can choose whether we fight or arm-wrestle.”

Shang Jianyao smiled and pointed at Jiang Baimian. “You want to compete with me at arm-wrestling? You can’t even beat her! We’ll talk about it after you defeat her.”

You make it sound like you can defeat my left hand... Jiang Baimian couldn't say the words that she held back.

The muscular man opposite him had clearly fallen into Shang Jianyao's trap.

"Alright." The male major controlled his urge. He turned around and passed through the iron-fenced door, heading for the house's main entrance, prepared to report to General Phocas.

The female major—who came with him—fell a few steps behind him and smiled. "Ignore him. He's obsessed with muscles and almost changed his sexual orientation."

"He's stronger than I imagined," Shang Jianyao praised sincerely.

Upon seeing the female major's amiable attitude, Jiang Baimian asked, "How should I address you?"

The female major's hair was dark-yellow in color. It was combed neatly through the middle, and its length just passed her ears.

Her facial features weren't bad, but like most Red River people, her skin was rough, and her pores were large. In addition, her face wasn't that soft; it was very carved and masculine.

She swung her right hand and smiled. "My name is Cassiel. He's Ducas."

With that said, Cassiel followed behind Ducas and entered the general's residence.

At nine o'clock sharp, a gray armored vehicle drove out. Phocas was wearing his military uniform, and he waved at the soldiers through the window.

He saw the jeep that Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had parked in the distance. He nodded slightly and signaled for them to follow.

The convoy headed south and left the Golden Grain Zone.

Three to four hundred soldiers were waiting outside the city. Some of them drove tanks, some carried drones, some rode motorcycles, some brought along iron-black combat robots, and some drove armored vehicles.

All of them were fully armed.

This was also an army that had accepted Phocas's orders. The two groups combined numbered about 500 people.

It was considered quite a grand lineup to deal with a few cultists hiding in a manor.

It's similar to the company, being able to directly command and mobilize a battalion numbering about 400 to 500 people... Phocas should've obtained permission from the consul and commander-in-chief, Beulis. Otherwise, it would be a very serious mistake for such an army to carry out an independent operation in the suburbs... Jiang Baimian watched from afar through the windshield and tried to understand First City's situation using Pangu Biology's model.

In First City's establishment, this was a city defense battalion. The commanders were often majors.

The team advanced toward the manor where Zhao Yixue and Meng Gang were in an orderly manner. It didn't take long for them to reach their destination.

Under Phocas's command, four-fifths of the troops and a few combat robots spread out and surrounded the area. The two majors, Ducas and Cassiel, led the remaining soldiers and combat robots. Together with Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and Genova, they took out their warrant and forcefully entered the manor.

After taking in the environment that, although small, contained the essentials, Jiang Baimian looked back at the armored command vehicle beside a small forest.

This time, Phocas didn't act rashly. He didn't lead the search of the manor but waited far away.

As Jiang Baimian followed Ducas, Cassiel, and the others, she subconsciously thought about something. He has the qualifications to be the Anti-intellectualism Church's target. There's a high chance that the trap this time was designed for him... If he doesn't enter the manor, how will the trap unfold? The manor's goal is to lure the strongest protective force beside him away and use the



time disparity to attack? It's impossible for Phocas not to think of this and make the corresponding arrangements. Besides, it's very likely that he's a powerhouse himself...

The servants and slaves in the manor shrank in fear when they saw the proper army barge in. Nobody dared to stop them, so the troops easily arrived at the main building.

"Did you discover the target?" Ducas turned his head and asked Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian.

Shang Jianyao shook his head.

The next second, the stewards walked to the main building's door and respectfully waited for their superior to speak.

Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up. He jumped to Zhao Shouren's side and asked with a smile, "Where's Meng Gang, Shen Kui, and Zhao Yixue?"

Upon seeing his brother, Zhao Shouren heaved a sigh of relief. Filled with emotions, he replied, "They entered the basement after breakfast. I've no idea what they're doing. Sigh, they've been acting strange recently!"

"The basement..." Ducas repeated two words and instructed Zhao Shouren, "Lead the way."

The basement entrance was on the first floor of the main building. Jiang Baimian and the others quickly saw the brown wooden door at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

Ducas raised his hand and pressed it down, indicating for everyone to stop. He then instructed the surrounding soldiers, "Blast open the door. Use flashbangs and release the incapacitating rounds."

He had no intention of barging into the basement and fighting them head-on.

He isn't all brawn and no brain... Jiang Baimian sighed silently.

Many soldiers immediately took up the corresponding positions.

Boom!

A round flew out of the shoulder-bearing rocket launcher and blasted the wooden door into pieces. The house shook a few times, and the glass shattered.

Immediately after, flashbangs were thrown into the basement. The sudden explosion of white light temporarily blinded most of the people looking at them.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had already secretly put on their sunglasses. The people without sunglasses chose to turn their backs and close their eyes.

After the flashbangs, shells that release hypnotic gases bombarded their destination one after another.

Before long, Ducas and Cassiel put on gas masks and led the soldiers in similar outfits into the basement.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao also took the corresponding equipment from the soldiers beside them and followed closely behind to help complete the identification.

As for Genava, the hypnotic gases had no effect on him.

The manor's basement wasn't too large—about the size of a normal living room. Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian saw the scene inside as soon as they passed through the broken door.

People had already collapsed on the grayish-white stone ground in the shape of a circle. Everyone wore a black robe and a white mask without facial features; they looked very strange and sinister.

Ducas walked to a black-robed man, squatted down, and removed the Anti-intellectualism Church's signature mask. He looked up and asked Shang Jianyao, "Is he the target?"

"Shen Kui." Shang Jianyao gave the unconscious person's name.

Everything went so smoothly? The might of a proper army? Jiang Baimian frowned suspiciously.

Ducas took off the masks one after another, and Shang Jianyao identified them one after another.

But in the end, they realized that two people were missing: Meng Gang—who had Hypnosis abilities—and the Zhao family’s second son, Zhao Yixue!

Chapter 358: Line

While Shang Jianyao identified the unconscious people, the soldiers weren’t idle. Wearing gas masks, they guarded the surroundings to prevent any accidents or carefully searched every corner of the basement.

At this moment, a soldier shouted, “There’s a door here!”

In the corner to the right of the basement stood a human statue made of marble. Behind it hid a door that almost blended into the wall.

The soldiers tried to push the statue, but they realized that it was very easy because there were wheels and hidden rails at the bottom of the statue.

As the door opened, a dark passage appeared in front of everyone. There was an electric lamp inside, but it seemed like there was only one at long, fixed distances, making it appear dim.

“Flashbangs, incapacitating rounds,” the muscular commander, Ducas, ordered again.

After another clearing, he and Cassiel led a number of soldiers in gas masks and rushed into the passage.

Jiang Baimian curiously followed while Shang Jianyao was faster than her.

The tunnel was rather long. After a few minutes, the pursuers saw the exit and found themselves back at ground level.

This area was already outside the Zhao family manor, near the Taiwei River, and in a hidden spot on a hill.

“There are tire tracks—fresh ones.” The short, dark-yellow-haired Cassiel squatted down and examined them carefully.

Ducas nodded. "There's no rush."

He raised his walkie-talkie and reported the matter to Phocas, seeking his permission to send soldiers over with transportation.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava 'shrank' a little further away and quietly watched everything.

Jiang Baimian pursed her lips and thoughtfully said, "I feel like something is being strung together."

"Fishing line?" Shang Jianyao asked with a smile.

"Maybe." Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

Genava joined their discussion. "Meng Gang and Zhao Yixue are bait? Which fish does the Anti-intellectualism Church want?"

"That depends on the subsequent development." Jiang Baimian smiled. "Maybe it's not a fishing line but a manipulative string from the Old World's marionette shows."

As they spoke, the soldiers in charge of surrounding the Zhao family manor drove military vehicles over. The Old Task Force's military-green jeep clearly wasn't included.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava could only squeeze into a military vehicle's trailer. They propped their hands over the partition and allowed the wind to blow through their hair.

"The countryside here is quite beautiful; the buildings are also very unique." Jiang Baimian observed the local customs and admired the surrounding scenery.

This beautiful scene had a large number of slaves scattered across the fields as they did all kinds of work.

As there weren't many cars coming and going at this time, and the roads outside the city were filled with mud, it was relatively easy for Ducas, Cassiel, and the others to follow the car tracks. They halted and continued repeatedly.

About ten minutes later, the military vehicles stopped outside another manor. Not only were wheat, oats, and rye planted here, but there was also a vineyard.

Cassiel got out of his vehicle, squatted down, and examined it before saying in a deep voice, "It's the vehicle from before. It entered the manor."

Ducas, Jiang Baimian, and the others approached one after another and used their own methods to confirm it.

After Zhao Yixue and Meng Gang's car disappeared at the manor entrance, Ducas looked up and said with a solemn expression, "This is Elder Varro's favorite manor. He often stays here."

Elder Varro... Jiang Baimian silently repeated the name and looked at Shang Jianyao. She mouthed: "It's strung together."

The Elder named Varro was one of those who wielded power in First City. He was the deputy of consul and commander-in-chief, Beulis.

They had a large number of supporters in the Senate. Their philosophy was to keep the status quo as much as possible, provided that there were no major disasters. They were called Conservatives by Pangu Biology's intelligence system.

The new Senate members yearned for reform and gathered around Gaius under the banner of 'rebuilding First City and returning land to the citizens.' He was also a general, the commander of First City's Eastern Army. Pangu Biology's intelligence system called them Reformists.

In addition, many generals and Elders of the inspectorate chose to remain neutral and not participate in the disputes between the two factions. They were known as the Centrist faction. Phocas—the old fellow in his semi-retired state—was one of them.

This was no secret. The other large factions knew this, and Jiang Baimian learned of it from the information provided by the company.

After reading Jiang Baimian's lips, Shang Jianyao nodded seriously.

As for whether he really interpreted her meaning, Jiang Baimian didn't know.

"We can't make a decision ourselves when it involves Elder Varro. We have to consult the General," Cassiel reminded her colleague.

Although Ducas was a muscular man, he still had brains. He didn't act on impulse and informed Phocas of the tracking results via walkie-talkie.

After hearing his report, Phocas calmly said, "Cease all operations and wait for me to come over."

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian took a few steps back and distanced herself from Ducas and the others.

After Shang Jianyao and Genava walked over, she suppressed her voice and said, "I wonder what drama will play out later. Let's just watch and not get involved."

"Sigh, I really want to join this production and perform." Shang Jianyao had a look of regret.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Determine your priorities."

After a while, the soldiers and combat robots—who had originally surrounded the Zhao family manor—rushed over with Phocas's armored command vehicle.

Phocas summoned the two majors and communicated with them for a few minutes to be kept abreast of the situation. He then sat in the armored vehicle for a while.

After an unknown period of time, he finally opened the armored vehicle's door and stood at the edge of the vehicle. He looked around and said loudly, "Soldiers, heed my order."

His expression was abnormally serious, and his sparse, earthen-yellow hair no longer stood out.

After the soldiers looked over, Phocas loudly said, “You should know very well that we are investigating a heretic of the Anti-intellectualism Church. They once assassinated Elder Sols and brought us chaos.

“They are dangerous; they want to subvert us. They want all citizens to be their puppets—to never think and only know how to comply. For the sake of all citizens’ safety and First City’s future, we have to capture those key members as soon as possible and eliminate this organization. During this process, we mustn’t falter no matter who or what obstacles stand in the way. I’ll bear all the consequences. Besides, we have the consul’s warrant. Everything adheres to First City’s laws.”

After hearing Phocas’s speech, many soldiers raised their weapons and shouted, “General! General!”

The other soldiers were inspired by this atmosphere and cheered as well.

After the shouting subsided, Phocas pointed at Varro’s manor. “Soldiers, I order you to take over the compound. Fire at will!!”

At this moment, he was like an old lion that had regained its former might.

“Yes, General!” the soldiers replied in unison.

Phocas nodded in satisfaction and methodically assigned the missions.

Just like before, a portion of the soldiers spread out with a portion of the combat bots and surrounded the manor. The remaining soldiers and combat bots followed the two majors—Ducas and Cassiel—and rushed toward the entrance of Varro’s manor.

When they passed by Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava, Ducas stopped and asked, “Are you guys coming?”

Jiang Baimian shook her head without hesitation. “We’ll identify the targets after you take over the compound.”

Ducas didn’t persuade her and left the hidden spot.

After watching them approach the manor, disarm the guards at the door, and march in, Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and looked at Phocas—who was protected by many soldiers.

The general sat in the passenger seat of the armored command vehicle and focused on Varro's manor, silent and dignified.

Suddenly, a loud boom echoed through the clouds.

An explosion happened in Elder Varro's manor. Following that, concentrated gunshots sounded, mixed with different rumbles.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but chuckle because this was something she had expected.

"Something really will happen..." She sighed at Shang Jianyao and Genava.

"What a lack of creativity," Shang Jianyao criticized.

The intense battle only lasted for a short period of time before silence returned to Varro's manor.

After a while, a military vehicle that entered the manor drove out.

Ducas and Cassiel jumped out of the car one after another and saluted Phocas from afar. "General, mission accomplished. All targets have been captured!"

In the armored command vehicle, Phocas nodded and asked loudly, "Why didn't you report it through the walkie-talkie?"

Ducas and Cassiel looked at each other and hesitated for two seconds before shouting in the same loud voice. "General, apart from the Anti-intellectualism Church's members, there are also Varro's trusted aides, as well as members of the Salvation Army!"

His voice spread across the entire area, allowing many soldiers to hear him clearly.



Salvation Army... Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows.

To First City, the Salvation Army was always their number one enemy.

Chapter 359: On the Way

To First City, if colluding with the Anti-intellectualism Church was considered an internal struggle for power and that there was still room for compromise, then it would be considered enmity once the Salvation Army was involved. It escalated the situation.

As Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows, she cast her gaze at Phocas—who was in the armored command vehicle. She saw that the slightly old General ‘Lion’ had a serious and solemn expression as if he were facing a very thorny, troublesome, and important problem.

At this moment, Genova asked in confusion, “Why didn’t they choose to report the matter over the walkie-talkie? Why did they have to do it in person?”

He wanted to perfect his human behavior analysis and simulation mechanisms.

Jiang Baimian laughed. “The point isn’t to say it in person but to do so in front of everyone. Otherwise, it’s very likely that they will become sacrificial victims after the big shots in First City’s Senate compromise. The more people who know about this now, the safer they will be in the future.”

“Is that so...” Genova took note of such situations.

Shang Jianyao clapped and smiled. “What a good show.”

After a moment of silence, Phocas used the loudspeaker on the armored command vehicle to issue an order to Ducas and Cassiel. “Take the Anti-intellectualism Church’s members, Varro’s trusted aides, and the Salvation Army’s people back into custody and interrogate them separately.”

“Yes, General!” Ducas and Cassiel returned a military salute, clearly relieved.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian muttered to herself thoughtfully, “The Anti-intellectualism Church’s true goal is to intensify the internal conflict in First City and tear apart the upper echelons so that chaos will naturally ensue?”

In other words, this entire plan didn’t target anyone in particular. There were no dangerous traps; they only used this opportunity to unveil certain ‘matters.’

The best candidate for the unveiling was undoubtedly General Phocas—who was a Centrist, had a lofty reputation, controlled a portion of the city defense forces, and had great strength.

Shang Jianyao sighed when he heard that. “We became tools.”

The Old Task Force didn’t do much in this matter. Regardless of whether they had seen through the Anti-intellectualism Church’s other motives, it was difficult to change the final outcome. They could only become tools in charge of ‘running errands.’

As he sighed, Shang Jianyao didn’t appear depressed or disappointed. Instead, he looked rather excited as if he had found an opponent.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “The real Father, or rather, the Anti-intellectualism Church’s Elder in First City, Shepherd Bouillon, is indeed impressive. We can’t underestimate him.”

At this point, she laughed self-deprecatingly. “Regardless, we at least earned 50 Oray from them.”

Before Genava and Shang Jianyao could respond, Ducas walked over and said in a deep voice, “Come and ID them.”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao suddenly became excited.

As they followed the two majors into the manor, Jiang Baimian suppressed her voice and asked, “Why are you so excited?”

Shang Jianyao replied without hiding anything, “I’ll be seeing the Salvation Army later.”

Jiang Baimian came to a realization and expressed her understanding.

Shang Jianyao's slogan for 'saving all of humanity' was modified from the Salvation Army's creed: 'for all of humanity.'

Unfortunately, Shang Jianyao didn't get his wish. The Salvation Army and Varro's trusted aides had already been taken away by another detail and weren't locked up with the Anti-intellectualism Church members.

The Old Task Force only saw the Zhao family's second son—Zhao Yixue—and the suspected fake Father, Meng Gang.

Blindfolded, their mouths were gagged, and their hands were tied to their backs.

The first two were rough precautions against Hypnosis abilities, and the latter was a restriction of their mobility.

Shang Jianyao swept his gaze across the room and said disinterestedly, "Target confirmed."

Zhao Yixue was slightly thinner than his brother. His face was filled with collagen, and his nose was slightly hooked.

Meng Gang looked haggard.

"Bring them back." Ducas waved his hand.

A few soldiers immediately carried Zhao Yixue and Meng Gang out of the manor.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian exclaimed, "There's nothing left for us next, right?"

"That depends on your agreement with your employer," Ducas replied coldly. "There's nothing from us."

He then said, "You have to find time to train your muscles and practice your marksmanship. They are essential to our survival in the Ashlands."

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava didn't comment.

Ducas then looked at Jiang Baimian. "Didn't you say you wanted to compete with me in arm wrestling?"

Jiang Baimian smiled. "First of all, no cheating."

"Alright," Ducas agreed readily.

With an intrigued attitude, Cassiel became a referee alongside Shang Jianyao.

...

In less than a minute, Ducas walked out of the manor in a daze and muttered to himself, "Impossible; it's impossible... How can I lose three times in under ten seconds... It must be because I haven't exercised enough and that my muscles aren't strong enough..."

Cassiel—who was behind him—looked at Jiang Baimian curiously. "Your strength exceeds my imagination."

Furthermore, she couldn't see any exaggerated muscles.

Is this considered cheating... Jiang Baimian fell into deep thought before answering, "It might be a little deformed. Haha, I'm joking."

Cassiel shook her right hand and smiled. "Your appearance confirms that you aren't a Subhuman."

Broadly speaking, I'm really considered a Subhuman after obtaining inhuman abilities through genetic modification. It's just that I don't show it physically... Jiang Baimian muttered silently.

Shang Jianyao helped her explain, "It's actually an abnormal talent."

“Yes, it wasn’t obtained through painstaking training.” Jiang Baimian widened her eyes and spoke the truth. She then smiled and said, “I think Major Ducas suffered quite a blow. It might affect his mental state in the future. Please help me speak to him on my behalf and say that every human is different, all with their limits. There are many situations that can’t be made up for through training. If he really wants to defeat me, he can only say, ‘I’m not going to be human anymore.’”

Cassiel looked at the zombie-like Ducas in front of her and chuckled. “These two statements might agitate him more.”

After they left the manor, they happened to see the city defense forces evacuate in batches. Jiang Baimian then obtained General Phocas’s approval and took their leave.

The subsequent matters weren’t something the Old Task Force could participate in. They only hoped the ensuing chaos would bring about an opportunity.

...

The military-green jeep drove along the tundra road in the suburbs, toward the southern entrance.

As Jiang Baimian drove, she habitually sized up the situation on both sides.

Suddenly, a fiery glow flashed in her eyes. It was the scene she was familiar with—the launching of grenades, rockets, and shells.

Enemy contact! Jiang Baimian turned the steering wheel without a second thought and floored the accelerator.

Amidst the simulated revving, the jeep swung out and turned to the other side of the road.

Boom!

Behind the vehicle, an explosion arrived as expected, stirring up a large amount of dust.

Amidst the dust, a fireball burned brightly.

The jeep accelerated forward in an attempt to escape the area. However, the ground it was on suddenly expanded.

Boom! Boom!

Mines exploded, sending the jeep flying. It landed with a thud and rolled a few times.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian only had a few similar thoughts in her mind: Is that reasonable? This doesn't make sense! This road is considered to have heavy traffic. How could the enemy accurately plant land mines for our vehicle?

The jeep's rolling stopped. Jiang Baimian—who was in an inverted state—made a prompt decision. She released her safety belt, opened the door, and abruptly jumped out.

Shang Jianyao did the same and rolled to the side of the road. At this moment, he saw a pair of brightly polished riding boots.

Panning up from the riding boots was a tall and thin man. His eyes were like dark vortices that seemed to suck away Shang Jianyao's soul.

Shang Jianyao was confused at first, but he soon became stunned. His thoughts raced and jumped as he changed his personality. He immediately shouted, "Old Ge!"

Genava pounced over with a mighty leap, appearing as if a mountain was crashing down.

When the thin and tall man saw that he couldn't hypnotize Shang Jianyao immediately, he quickly turned around and prepared to escape.

At this moment, he suddenly felt aggrieved and angry. He was unwilling to give up and admit defeat. Therefore, he stayed in place and turned around to continue 'hypnotizing' Shang Jianyao.

Genava pounced on him and raised his bowl-sized iron fist.

Bang!

The man was knocked unconscious, but the scene in front of Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao instantly shattered like glass that crashed to the ground.

Jiang Baimian shivered. Having snapped back to her senses, she realized that she was still in the jeep and driving. Shang Jianyao was sitting beside her, showing no difference from before.

Genava—who was in the back row—suddenly shouted anxiously, “Quick, brake!”

Jiang Baimian realized that she had driven the jeep off-road and was rushing toward the surging Taiwei River.

The braking sound dragged on for a long time before the jeep finally came to a halt.

“What just happened?” Genava asked in confusion.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and muttered to herself, “The real Father’s attack?”

Their previous experience was very similar to Xu Liyan’s encounter in Weed City’s Hunter’s Guild.

They had all fallen into a mass hallucination.

The Genava in the illusion came from Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian’s understanding of him, not something that truly existed.

Shang Jianyao replied in a rare serious tone, “The real Father used this method to test Zen Master Jingnian’s abilities. He should now know that I have Corny Person. The price can reduce the effects of hypnosis to a certain extent.”

Jiang Baimian exhaled and sensed the area for a few seconds before saying, “He also knows that we have Old Ge, a weapon that can deal with most Awakened. There are many electric signals around us, but I can’t determine which one is the real Father. It’s also possible that none of them are. After all, the range of this ability is unknown.”

She then turned around and told Genava about her encounter. Finally, she exhorted, “After you discover that we are in a dazed and adrift state, wake us up or knock us out. You can do anything.”

Genava nodded solemnly. "Alright."

Jiang Baimian looked around again and slowly reversed the jeep back onto the main road.

As she drove, she sighed. "Sigh, I wonder if the real Father will give up or plan an attack that targets our traits... Let's rendezvous with Little White and Little Red first."

Chapter 360: "Self-Reflection"

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen hid the gray SUV in the forest beside a necessary road to the Zhao family's manor.

They heaved a sigh of relief when they saw the military-green jeep drive over.

Shang Jianyao rolled down the window and waved at his two companions. "Done!"

"Where are the people who captured the Anti-intellectualism Church members?" Bai Chen asked in surprise.

She and Long Yuehong had heard explosions from the manor by the Taiwei River, but it was in a different direction from the Zhao family manor.

Shang Jianyao sighed pretentiously. "We didn't win, nor did they lose."

So it's a draw... This thought subconsciously flashed across Long Yuehong's mind, but after careful thought, he realized that Shang Jianyao meant something else.

"Did the Anti-intellectualism Church succeed?" Long Yuehong asked as he walked to the halted jeep.

Jiang Baimian pushed open the door and alighted. She nodded slightly. "In a sense, yes."

Upon seeing Bai Chen and Long Yuehong approaching, she suddenly stretched out her right hand and made a 'stop' gesture.



Jiang Baimian then smiled. “We later encountered the real Father. If that’s a rare ability, it should be him. Therefore, Shang Jianyao and I extracted information from Old Ge on the way and compared our memories to make sure that nothing had been secretly tampered with. To be safe, you guys should also compare.”

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong also stored their key memories in Geneva’s body in case of emergencies.

Bai Chen had no objections. She took out a portable computer from her tactical backpack and connected it to Geneva with a data cable.

Jiang Baimian threw her computer to Long Yuehong so that he and Bai Chen could proceed in parallel. After all, Geneva still had many ports.

After downloading the backup memories, Long Yuehong completed the decompression with his password and slowly browsed through the content.

“Shang Jianyao is a classmate and friend who grew up with me. Although he always likes to mock me and agitate me, making me want to beat him up, he’s still quite nice. Most of the time, those jokes are filled with kindness...” Long Yuehong’s expression suddenly turned strange when he scanned the memories.

His face gradually warped, revealing a gloomy bearing.

“No, that’s not right...” Long Yuehong said with difficulty as if he were fighting someone. “He’s clearly an annoying bastard who’s insensitive to other people’s feelings and dignity. I can’t wait to kill him...”

Toward the end, he finally figured out what to use as a benchmark. He bent down, propped his hands on his knees, and panted heavily. “I-I’ve been ‘hypnotized.’ Huff—Or some of my memories have been tampered with!”

Bai Chen’s expression gradually turned cold as she looked at Jiang Baimian and slowly said, “Why would I be jealous of you? I’m jealous of your height, your beauty, your abilities, and your ability to consider everyone’s emotions and get along well with everyone... I-I clearly should...”

“Should what?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

Just as he said that, Jiang Baimian pulled him back, indicating that he shouldn't ask random questions.

Bai Chen didn't answer Shang Jianyao. Her expression slowly returned to normal, but she still didn't speak quickly. "Some of the emotions in my memories have been tampered with."

"And you and Little Red didn't sense it?" Jiang Baimian asked seriously.

Bai Chen recalled and said, "We were waiting here to receive you. From time to time, we'd see cars passing by... Later, a hunter who was chasing a rabbit from the other side of the forest came close to us... He didn't speak to us, nor did he get too close. He was about ten meters away or a little further... Long Yuehong and I were wary of him. I don't remember us looking at each other..."

Jiang Baimian directly asked, "Do you still remember what he looks like?"

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen carefully recalled for more than ten seconds before they said in horror—to varying degrees, "I don't remember!"

"His looks were very blurry."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "From the looks of it, the real Father has indeed taken action personally. If he's a little stronger than back in Weed City, he should be able to use Hypnosis from that distance or memory tampering, which has a range that we aren't aware of."

During his machinations against Xu Liyan in Weed City, the real Father had exposed the fact that Hypnosis had to be done at close range. Jingnian—the mechanical monk—came to a conclusion that its range was approximately four to six meters.

Without waiting for Bai Chen and Long Yuehong's response, Jiang Baimian revealed a thoughtful expression. "I think it's more likely to be Hypnosis. Memory tampering is clearly stronger, so the restrictions should be greater. Its effects shouldn't happen so easily. Your memories of the distance back then might be a little off."

Long Yuehong rejoiced when he heard that. "Fortunately, we made the necessary preparations. Otherwise, it would've been troublesome."

Shang Jianyao looked around and made a shushing gesture. “Hush. The real Father might still be nearby.”

While Long Yuehong was shocked, Jiang Baimian cursed Shang Jianyao. “Don’t scare Little Red. He might really shoot you in the back one day! Look, weren’t the things you did in the past used?”

Shang Jianyao didn’t mind and smiled. “It seems like the real Father truly hates us.”

“It might just be in passing,” Long Yuehong subconsciously retorted.

He then saw Genova shake his head.

“No.” Jiang Baimian then said, “He’s indeed targeting us. I suspect that he appeared near Iron Medallion Street and was secretly observing us. He knew that we split up. One team headed for the manor, and the other provided support. Otherwise, it’s impossible for him to take action in such an orderly manner.

“He first found an opportunity to ‘hypnotize’ you and tamper with a portion of your memories. Then, he used the fact that we had to come over to rendezvous with you and hid by the side of the road in advance to attempt to deal with us using his best techniques. If he had succeeded, we might’ve died back then or become his ‘servants.’ We might’ve helped him do things. Fortunately, we have Old Ge and won’t fall for his tricks.

“He didn’t have absolute confidence in his offensive plan. Therefore, he hypnotized you in advance and made you his contingency. Think about it. If we feel that nothing had happened because we survived the attack and became careless, a few words from Shang Jianyao and I might incite your killing intent on the way back. Apart from defending against ourselves, the hardest to guard against are our companions.”

Bai Chen nodded slightly. “When fighting an enemy like the real Father, I’m not afraid that he will come with great fanfare. I’m just worried that we might brush past him and unknowingly fall into his trap.”

“If he dares to come with great fanfare, I can knock him down five times!” Shang Jianyao shouted as if he were agitating the real Father—who might still be hiding in the surrounding area—since he couldn’t sense anything.

His voice then returned to normal. “Old Ge can knock him down 50 times.”

Robots didn’t suffer from tricks like Hypnosis or memory tampering.

Jiang Baimian smiled and sighed. “The real Father probably knew that we spoiled his plans in Weed City. After discovering that we were involved with the Zhao family’s manor, he conveniently planted a trap for us.”

“That’s right.” Long Yuehong felt a lingering fear.

After experiencing everything in Weed City, Redstone Collection, and Tarnan and obtaining many exoskeleton devices and Genava—a smart bot companion—he originally felt that the Old Task Force could do whatever they wanted in most of the Ashlands. As long as they didn’t provoke a proper army or the various religions’ core forces, it wouldn’t be a problem. Bandits or gangs didn’t pose a threat.

Now, it seemed like just the real Father had almost wiped out the Old Task Force.

“We can’t just let it pass.” Shang Jianyao didn’t appear depressed and expressed his determination.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and looked at Long Yuehong and Bai Chen. “Are there any problems with your current emotions? Don’t be afraid. Frankly speaking, we still have the Destiny Pearl as a backup. When the time comes, we can just get Shang Jianyao to do some clean-sweeping in your mind world.”

“Sure, sure.” Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up as he looked at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong panicked a little. He quickly compared the information and carefully examined himself.

After a few minutes, he heaved a sigh of relief and said, “There are no other problems.”

“After learning what’s real and what’s fake, the hypnosis effects are completely removed.” Bai Chen also voiced her judgment.

Jiang Baimian nodded and laughed. “Before we leave First City, it seems like we have to compare our memories often to prevent ourselves from becoming the real Father’s weapon. Heh heh, we are truly self-reflecting on ourselves three times a day like the sayings go!”

With that said, she said to Genava, “Old Ge, stay here and watch the car with Little White and the others. Hey and I will take a walk in the woods.”

“Why are you going into the forest?” Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “To search for clues. A person like the real Father definitely has a sense of superiority, so he probably won’t pay attention to the domains of ordinary people because he can make others forget his looks. Anyone who walks past will leave behind traces. Since he passed through the forest, it’s very likely that he left behind footprints and other clues.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian concluded with a serious expression, “The more an Awakened thinks that they have transcended ordinary people, the more likely they are to be defeated by ordinary people. Their strength is only one aspect, not everything.”

Long Yuehong was stunned. He found it profound, but he also felt ashamed that he had only wanted to leave this place as soon as possible.

“Team Leader, you’re so cool!” Shang Jianyao praised.

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian look over, he smiled brightly. “I helped Little Red say it.”

I didn’t... Long Yuehong subconsciously wanted to deny it, but he felt that he indeed had such thoughts back then, so he chose to agree tacitly.

Jiang Baimian smiled and called out to Shang Jianyao, a little pleased with herself. “What are you waiting for!? We’ll take turns monitoring the surroundings later to prevent the real Father from boomeranging.”

“He doesn’t know this term,” Shang Jianyao explained seriously. As he spoke, he had already followed Jiang Baimian into the lush forest.