

Ad Infinitum 361

Chapter 361: Reenactment

The woods in the suburbs had interlocking branches and leaves. Sunlight could only filter through the gaps, making the place appear dim and quiet.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao were in no rush to go deeper. They came to the spot where Bai Chen and Long Yuehong had parked their cars in hiding. With this as the center, they searched their surroundings bit by bit.

During this process, they took out flashlights, snapped tree branches, and pushed aside the grass to search for traces.

Jiang Baimian was still relatively relaxed. As she searched seriously, she laughed. “Those who often hunt in the woods will use a thin wooden stick or branch to hit the bushes and shrubs in front of them. Just like what we are doing now, their goal is to scare away the poisonous snakes and insects that might be lurking so as to prevent themselves from accidentally stepping on them and getting bitten.”

“Why scare them away? They can be used as food after scaring and capturing them.” Shang Jianyao—who was monitoring the surroundings—expressed how wasteful it was.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “Starving humans can do anything, and they have ideas and tools. I’ve always said so. Apart from a few species that have mutated into monsters, the most dangerous creatures in the Ashlands are humans. Uh, Superior Heartless are also considered humans.”

As she spoke, she suddenly squatted down and shone the flashlight beam at the ground ahead.

“There are indeed footprints,” Jiang Baimian said calmly. She then reminded Shang Jianyao, “Be careful when you come over. Don’t destroy any other traces. Also, don’t relax your observation of the surroundings.”

Shang Jianyao immediately lightened his footsteps and slowly approached Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian looked back and estimated. “It’s about five meters away from Little White and the others. Little White’s related memories have indeed been tampered with or blurred. From the looks

of it, Father's abilities haven't improved that much compared to when we were in Weed City. He probably hasn't had a qualitative breakthrough and hasn't entered the Mind Corridor.

“Sigh, I didn't warn Little White and Little Red previously. I should've gotten them to draw their guns and aim the moment they find someone entering a ten-meter radius, warning the other party not to approach. I also didn't expect the real Father to target us like this. There's no need for him to personally dig a trap for the capture operation.”

Shang Jianyao came to Jiang Baimian's side, squatted down, and smiled. “I think you look down on Little White too much.”

Jiang Baimian turned her head and glanced at him. “You mean that Little White—who knows that the real Father needs to close the distance to ‘hypnotize’ or ‘tamper with memories’—won't let others enter within ten meters of her? She didn't draw her gun to warn him because she was affected by some other influence?”

At this point, Jiang Baimian came to a realization. “The real Father chasing the rabbit they saw was actually an illusion, just like what we encountered previously. The real Father took this opportunity to sneak to their side. Once the illusion ended, he hypnotized them. Yes, this was how Xu Liyan was hypnotized back then. Yes, since the illusion and reality happened in succession, and Little White and Little Red were affected, some memories became blurry. Therefore, he mixed the hunter and Hypnosis together and established a causal relationship.

“It's no wonder Little White said that the hunter was about ten meters away from them or even further. She was likely prepared to draw her gun and warn the hunter if they dared to approach any closer. Therefore, her impression of this wasn't that vague.”

Jiang Baimian suddenly gritted her teeth. “The real Father is indeed cunning. I hope he uses this against me now!”

In such an illusion, the real Father seemed to be able to hide his human consciousness or use other means to hide from the Awakened present. Zen Master Jingnian didn't discover it back then, but Jiang Baimian believed that the real Father—who definitely didn't study science or pursue cutting-edge technology—was unlikely to hide his bioelectric signals.

When the time came, Jiang Baimian would give him a surprise and let him know what a blind snipe was.

Shang Jianyao didn't respond to Jiang Baimian and suddenly sighed. "I really want to see Father catch rabbits..."

Jiang Baimian imagined the scene and found it rather strange. An infamous villain—who was known for his cunningness and good planning—painstakingly catching rabbits in the forest.

It was funny.

"Search for traces!" Jiang Baimian stopped her train of thought. She then aimed the flashlight at the footprints and did a simple measurement.

Finally, she made a vague estimate. "The traces are relatively fresh... He's between 1.75 to 1.80 meters tall... Male... He's relatively light and should be lighter than me. The specifics have to be calculated based on the soil situation. I'll get Old Ge to come later and extract the micro-clues, take photos, and store a copy... The front foot is heavy, and the back foot is light. His gait tends to lean forward... I can't confirm that the patterns on the soles are commonly seen in First City. The wear is relatively serious..."

Jiang Baimian then shone the flashlight's beam not far away and searched for the second footprint.

Due to the heavy spring rain, the soil in the forest was relatively soft. She and Shang Jianyao quickly found a series of footprints—the footprints that approached Bai Chen and Long Yuehong.

After Jiang Baimian stored the trajectory into her auxiliary chip, she frowned slightly. "The real Father's gait is a little weird, but it doesn't look like drunken footsteps."

Normally speaking, as long as one's eyes weren't blindfolded, they would generally maintain a certain level of speed when advancing alone. They would only adjust their direction when they needed to make a turn.

However, the footprints on the ground sometimes veered left, sometimes right, sometimes deep, and sometimes shallow. It gave off the feeling that the target was staggering slightly.

If these changes were relatively disparate, it could also be explained as the real Father avoiding Bai Chen and Long Yuehong's attention or that he was drunk. However, the deviation in all the footprints was relatively small.

Shang Jianyao nodded seriously. “It seems like he’s also a dance enthusiast or likes to jump around.”

A scene immediately flashed across Jiang Baimian’s mind, and she almost couldn’t shake it off. It was the scene of the real Father and Shang Jianyao dancing Little Apple together.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao added, “Or his body is weak.”

Jiang Baimian’s eyes lit up. “Coupled with the fact that he’s relatively light, I suspect that the real Father’s health isn’t too good. His three abilities are Hypnosis, Memory Tampering, and the one related to hallucinations; they don’t involve his physical health. Therefore, it’s either the price he paid is related to this, or he’s relatively weak to begin with.

“Yes... I remember that one of the prices paid in the Last Man domain is a sleep disorder... Could the real Father’s price be this? Don’t you think these footprints are left behind by a walking person who isn’t sober?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

“What characteristics will someone with a long-term sleep disorder have? Dark eye circles, a rather exhausted state, and a slightly haggard complexion. Also, their reliance on items that can stimulate the mind...” Jiang Baimian became more and more excited as she spoke.

Shang Jianyao was also excited. “I have an image in my mind.”

Jiang Baimian fixed these footprints and led Shang Jianyao into the forest.

On the way, there were cases of footprints being destroyed or not left behind. But after widening the search range, the two of them still found new traces and tracked them down.

Quite some time later, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao passed through the forest and came out the other side.

This was also a paved road. Cars came and went from time to time.

The two of them searched around for a while, but they couldn't find where the footprints disappeared due to the serious damage.

However, Shang Jianyao still picked up something—a muddy cigarette butt.

Jiang Baimian put on her gloves and placed the cigarette into a small bag that was originally filled with medicine. “Coupled with the fact that cigarettes can keep one awake, the real Father seems to have sleep disorders. This might very well be left behind by him. I'll get someone to analyze it later.”

They found wheel tracks where the cigarette butt was found.

“It looks like a modified off-road vehicle. It's heavier than normal,” Jiang Baimian said as she estimated.

The two of them searched for a long time, but they didn't find anything else. Therefore, they returned to the jeep and the gray SUV and got Genava to do the extraction of clues and take photos of the scene.

After finishing all of this, the Old Task Force members drove back to First City. To be safe, they didn't return to the rented apartment on Green Olive Zone's Iron Medallion Street and lived in the Red Wolf Zone safe house.

“Phew, contact Zhao Zhengqi tomorrow morning and see what payment we can get.” Jiang Baimian threw herself into the reclining chair.

Long Yuehong hesitantly said, “Will he not give us as much as we want? After all, we didn't do anything after that. The thing about the manor might not be considered a promise. Besides, he has also established a connection with General Phocas.”

“Then, we can arm ourselves and request payment,” Shang Jianyao said eagerly.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “But the risk we took wasn’t small either. We almost died at the hands of the real Father. I think he can understand our hard work and at least give us a manor. Yes, I’ll also hint to him that we will continue investigating this matter until we resolve the matter with the real Father. Heh heh, he definitely doesn’t want this person to be alive. Although the Zhao family will feel the pinch of losing a manor, it won’t be to the extent of hurting them.”

Long Yuehong blurted out in surprise, “We still have to investigate the Anti-intellectualism Church and finish off the real Father?”

Jiang Baimian sat up straight. “This isn’t about whether we should resolve the problem of the real Father but whether he will continue taking revenge on us. With such a time bomb hiding around, we won’t be at ease no matter what we do. Even if he doesn’t appear personally, he can suddenly shout when we find an opportunity to approach our two targets and doom us all.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian smiled warmly. “Besides, I’ve always said that I’m petty!”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao’s applause was never absent.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Bai Chen and Genava. “But we have to maintain some distance from General Phocas as much as possible. At most, we can get partial results of the interrogation through Zhao Zhengqi or Xu Liyan. We don’t have the ability to participate in First City’s power struggle unless the company involves itself.”

With that said, she clapped her hands and smiled. “Little Red and Little White, quickly rest up and let your emotions recover. The three of us will research the clues we obtained and produce some introductory Ashlandic textbooks.”

Before Long Yuehong and Bai Chen could respond, Shang Jianyao ‘hesitated’ and asked, “Are we still participating in the celebratory feast then?”

Chapter 362: Coal Residue

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and saw his face filled with anticipation. She deliberated and said, “If we are invited, we can consider participating.”

She spoke with a measured tone, using the word ‘consider.’ The outcome of the consideration depended on the situation and subsequent developments.

Shang Jianyao nodded in satisfaction and didn't ask any further.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen were indeed a little exhausted after the ups and downs. Therefore, they walked to their different bedrooms.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian exhorted them, "Don't close the door."

"Huh?" Long Yuehong was momentarily confused.

Jiang Baimian smiled and explained, "I'm afraid that there will still be some residual effects left on you. I have to pay attention to your condition at all times. If you feel that you won't be able to sleep under our occasional gazes, you can choose to undergo Destiny Pearl's clean-sweeping."

Shang Jianyao looked at Long Yuehong, and his tone gradually turned sinister. "I'm afraid that you would suddenly raise your hands and strangle yourself while sleeping..."

"You've watched too much Old World entertainment!" Long Yuehong said, but he didn't dare not take precautions against such a situation. Without any scruples, he opened the bedroom door a little wider.

After he and Bai Chen fell asleep, Jiang Baimian stood up and said to Shang Jianyao and Genava, "Let's study the things we gathered at the scene first."

As she spoke, she took out the small envelope containing the cigarette butt and placed it on the dining table.

The room rented by the Old Task Force in the Red Wolf Zone had a total of three bedrooms, one living room, and one bathroom. It wasn't cheap, but they weren't stingy with money in this regard due to their budget.

Genava also took out a pile of items that had been categorized and scanned them with the red glow in his eyes.

"What's this?" Shang Jianyao swaggered over and sat down before picking up a container.

There were two black granules in the container.

“I’ve analyzed it. It should be coal residue.” Geneva also pulled a chair over and slowly sat down.

Of course, he considered the old chair’s weight limits and let his feet share some of the weight.

“Where did you find it?” Jiang Baimian also sat down.

Geneva explained in detail, “Several footprints were found on shrubs and rocks. These were extracted from the surfaces.

“This too.” He pushed out another container.

Inside the container was charred black soil. It looked ordinary and nothing special.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian to ask, Geneva explained the reason. “It is darker than the soil in the forest, and it is different from the soil in the southern suburbs. Furthermore, I’ve detected a slight amount of radiation. After comparison, there’s a 95% chance that it comes from the wastelands on the Red River’s north bank.”

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “In other words, Father really left the city and went to the North Shore after changing his shoes recently... How did he step on the coal residue?”

As she muttered to herself, she recalled some of the phenomena she had observed while wandering First City.

Green Olive Zone often suffered from power outages, and the price of electricity wasn’t low. Therefore, the lower-class citizens and slaves preferred to use coal residue to create ‘pancakes’ with holes. They used low-quality charcoal and cheap firewood to start a fire, cook, and keep warm.

This resulted in there being many coal pancake factories on many streets near the Red River in the Green Olive Zone. If one passed by those areas, there was a high chance of stepping on some coal residue.

Similarly, the coal factory on the Red River's north bank and the factory district in First City's western suburbs had a similar environment.

"There are too many possibilities," Jiang Baimian replied. "The greatest possibility is that the real Father recently passed by a coal factory on the Red River's north bank."

Genava added, "We can't rule out the possibility that the real Father got it while in the Green Olive Zone. There are many low-class citizens who are part-time Ruin Hunters here. They often enter and exit the North Shore's wastelands, so it's normal for them to bring back some soil unconsciously. Iron Medallion Street isn't too far from the port."

It was the same for the coal pancake factories.

"You mean that the real Father stepped on it while monitoring us?" Jiang Baimian easily understood Genava's meaning.

Genava moved his metal neck up and down. "It's a possibility."

"There's another possibility," Shang Jianyao said quickly.

"What is it?" Jiang Baimian wanted to see what magical train of thought this fellow had. It might give her inspiration.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, "The real Father might be working at a coal factory in the North Shore wastelands."

"..." Jiang Baimian was first speechless before she laughed. "Has the Anti-intellectualism Church developed to the point of needing a quasi-high-ranking parishioner like Father to provide for the believers who have given up on thinking?"

"The real Father's health might be poor because he works too hard." Shang Jianyao further inferred.

Jiang Baimian imagined the scene and tried her best not to laugh out loud. The real Father's mysterious and dangerous image temporarily collapsed.

Jiang Baimian, Genava, and Shang Jianyao discussed for a while with regards to what the coal residue and scorched soil could represent. However, they didn't obtain a clear direction for investigation. They could only decide on finding time to visit the suspected locations later.

Jiang Baimian looked at the other containers and frowned. "We were saying that the real Father might've been monitoring us. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to grasp Little White and Little Red's whereabouts accurately, nor could he have found them in time and 'hypnotized' them. However, I've thought it through, and I don't think we'd exposed our tracks.

"We paid attention during every segment. We didn't directly investigate the manor's surroundings. When we returned, we seriously completed the necessary anti-tracking procedures, regardless of whether we sensed anything. Our vehicle's appearance is relatively common, so it can't be considered unique... With my, your, and Shang Jianyao's senses and reconnaissance abilities, could we really be secretly followed by the real Father without noticing it?

"The real Father will at most know from Shen Kui's memories that a few of us are investigating the Zhao family manor and will figure out from the spies in Weed City as to who sabotaged his business back then."

Shang Jianyao raised another possibility. "Maybe the one following us is an Anti-intellectualism Church powerhouse at the Mind Corridor level. Their perception range is larger than ours. They might even be able to remember the characteristics of different consciousnesses and complete the tracking from afar."

Jiang Baimian felt like laughing. "In theory, yes. However, is it necessary for an Awakened at the Mind Corridor level to do so? Couldn't they just launch a sudden attack?"

At this point, Jiang Baimian exclaimed because she recalled Genava's existence.

With such a smart bot around, an Awakened at the Mind Corridor level might not be effective. They might even be beaten up.

After all, abilities that could affect robots weren't common.

Jiang Baimian added, "What I mean is that most Awakened abilities are bizarre, strange, and difficult to guard against. At the Mind Corridor level, they can completely toy with us without showing themselves, preventing Old Ge from even discovering the enemy. He can only watch us be affected and face danger.

“If they don’t want to ruin the matter of infighting in First City, they should’ve personally intervened in the future instead of letting the real Father make the attempt, thereby making us vigilant.”

“This might be their price.” Shang Jianyao pointed at his head. “Their train of thought is abnormal.”

They discussed for a long time and didn’t come up with a reasonable explanation. They could only continue examining the clues they had gathered from the scene to see what they could find.

“There’s no conclusive evidence.” Jiang Baimian sighed and said, “I can only hope that chemical tests of the cigarette butt will come up with something.”

She planned on using the company’s intelligence system to find a trustworthy laboratory to complete it without letting the Anti-intellectualism Church discover it to the greatest extent.

In the subsequent hours, the three of them revised and wrote introductory Ashlandic textbooks with the information they had previously printed.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen woke up at three in the afternoon and joined their ranks. They worked until evening.

“What are we eating?” Long Yuehong put away the papers on the table and raised this eternal question.

“Noodles?” Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “After a few days in First City, I suddenly have a craving for noodles.”

Bai Chen doused her enthusiasm. “There are very few places in First City that sell noodles unless you go to the streets where Ashlandics gather. However, most of them are in the Green Olive Zone.”

“We have flour; we can make it ourselves,” Geneva said.

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao was excited.

Before long, the four carbon-based humans from the Old Task Force surrounded the dining table and watched Genava tie a white cloth around himself to act as an apron. He skillfully and accurately kneaded the flour, kneading it into dough before slicing it into noodles.

Although the entire process wasn't pleasing to the eye, it was definitely smooth and natural.

"How impressive." Long Yuehong praised Genava.

The red light in Genava's eyes flickered twice. "I previously downloaded some cooking videos in Tarnan to make myself more like a human. I didn't expect them to come in handy today."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped for Chef Genava.

Long Yuehong hesitated for a moment and decided to applaud to boost Old Ge's confidence. At this moment, Bai Chen was already clapping.

The only one who didn't move was Jiang Baimian. She seemed to be in deep thought.

Shang Jianyao immediately waved his hand in front of her eyes.

Jiang Baimian snapped to her senses and deliberated before saying, "I just thought of a place that might put us in the sights of the Anti-intellectualism Church's attention."

"Where?" Bai Chen and Long Yuehong asked in unison.

Jiang Baimian's expression gradually turned solemn. "General Phocas's manor."

Chapter 363: Impossible to Guard Against

"General Phocas's manor..." Long Yuehong asked in confusion, "Why do you say that? Did you encounter anything strange back then?"

Jiang Baimian shook her head. "I only listed all the matters regarding the Zhao family manor in my mind. During the entire process, we didn't have much direct contact with many people. The Zhao

family's spies, the Harvest Bathhouse's boss—Lance—the Zhao family manor's steward Zhao Shouren, the Anti-intellectualism Church's Shen Kui, General Phocas, and some of his servants and guards.

“When facing them, Shang Jianyao and I maintained sufficient vigilance. We weren't negligent in any way, and there was virtually no way for us to be monitored and followed to the point of pinpointing our residence without us noticing anything.”

“That's right. Then, why do you think there's a problem with General Phocas's residence?” Long Yuehong asked.

Jiang Baimian explained her analysis one step further. “That's the place where an oversight is most possible. Isn't it normal to be secretly monitored in the general's residence? This is a form of security that poses no problems.

“Therefore, Shang Jianyao and I weren't that vigilant in this regard and were very cooperative with their work. Perhaps it was during this process that seeds were unconsciously planted in us. On the way back, we relaxed our standards and no longer followed them seriously, resulting in our exposure. Yes, perhaps it was only a hint—something we recovered from after a nap. We then completely ignored this problem.

“Back then, we didn't bring Old Ge with us. No smart bot was available to resist such matters. Yes, I remember that time. After we left General Phocas's manor, we first went to a hotel to inquire about the Heartless disease outbreak. We then returned to the rented apartment on Iron Medallion Street. Us splitting up started from there.”

“Isn't this too exaggerated? Seeds were planted in you unconsciously...” Long Yuehong was shocked. Isn't the Anti-intellectualism Church too terrifying?

Bai Chen nodded, also of the belief that this didn't seem like something humanly capable.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and turned to look at Shang Jianyao beside her. “Use the Destiny Pearl to review those memories and see if there's anything wrong with our words and actions.”

The Destiny Pearl was one of the Old Task Force's greatest contingencies in resisting the Anti-intellectualism Church.

The other was Genava.

Jiang Baimian was especially grateful toward DiMarco every time she encountered such matters.

Shang Jianyao had been listening quietly as if he had entered a serious state of thought. He quickly took out the night pearl that emitted a blueish-green glow and held it in his palm.

Compared to the past, the Destiny Pearl's glow was clearly a little dimmer.

It then lit up.

...

In the Sea of Origins, Shang Jianyao sat cross-legged in midair and split into nine.

A gigantic wave surged upward as the countless glimmers contained in it swelled and magnified, freezing into all kinds of images.

The Shang Jianyaos were each in charge of a portion. They screened the memories of their visit to General Phocas to their return to Iron Medallion Street as they narrowed things down.

They watched the memories frame by frame as if they were considering how to edit these scenes into a movie. Before long, they completed the inspection, combined into one, and returned to the real world.

As he put away the Destiny Pearl, Shang Jianyao said, "Mianmian and I... Big White and I did relax our anti-tracking efforts after leaving Phocas's residence. We weren't that careful."

Long Yuehong's pupils dilated when he heard that. They really had seeds planted at General Phocas's residence! Something really happened without their knowing!

At this moment, Shang Jianyao added, "But it cannot be confirmed if we relaxed because of the changes in the situation or if we were affected by external factors."

Jiang Baimian retracted her glare at him and asked, “Did you notice when we were affected?”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “We only came into contact with a few people in the general’s residence. The conversations were very normal, and there was no momentary pause when our eyes met.”

That’s the most terrifying thing! Long Yuehong looked at Bai Chen and realized that her expression was equally solemn.

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully said, “Therefore, the problem lies with those people? Simply planting a seed might not be as complicated as Hypnosis. It might just be a gesture, an exchange of looks, or an ordinary sentence that can unknowingly influence us... Yes, the Anti-intellectualism Church might indeed send people to infiltrate General Phocas’s manor to control the development of matters if they want to incite internal conflict in First City.”

“It’s also possible that the person secretly monitoring the area is an Awakened at the Mind Corridor level. For example, Shepherd Bouillon. We were exposed to his abilities for extended periods, and we believed that the surveillance was normal. Therefore, the seed was slowly planted in us remotely.” Shang Jianyao raised another possibility.

Long Yuehong was terrified and blurted out, “Should we inform General Phocas?”

Jiang Baimian suddenly laughed. “What if General Phocas is the problem? He was the one who spoke to us the most at his residence that day.”

Long Yuehong was stunned.

“That’s why it’s said that there are deep undercurrents in this area. We can’t figure it out, so it’s better not to get involved. We just have to cut off the real Father’s hand that’s reaching out to us.” Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Geneva. “Old Ge, don’t just listen. Cook the noodles.”

“We don’t have soy sauce.” Geneva voiced his dilemma.

In First City, most people were of Red River ethnicity, so they didn’t have the habit of using soy sauce. If they wanted to head to the streets where the Ashlandics resided, the Old Task Force had no need to make handmade noodles.

Fortunately, the Red Wolf Zone was considered a place with relatively high standards of living in the Ashlands. Jiang Baimian and the others obtained other condiments and made do with the noodles.

...

The next morning, Jiang Baimian sent a telegram to Zhao Zhengqi at the agreed time and roughly explained the matter's development.

She believed that the other party definitely knew the exact details, such as knowing that the Anti-intellectualism Church's people had been 'wiped out' and that Zhao Yixue was locked in General Phocas's residence. But as a Ruin Hunter team with ideals and morals, they still had to report what needed to be reported. Furthermore, they had to color their report about the real Father's assault on them.

Before long, the Zhao family sent back a telegram.

"He wants us to contact Lance and find Zhao Shouyi—the Zhao family's steward here—to complete the transfer of ownership of Left Bank Manor." Jiang Baimian finished translating the code and laughed. "He wants us to stop the investigation and leave everything to General Phocas. Heh heh, isn't Old Zhao too timid? The Anti-intellectualism Church is already bullying them, but they aren't willing to fall out with them completely. They stop at the tip of the iceberg. Uh, he didn't mention the celebratory feast. It's probably because General Phocas didn't mention anything. It seems like there's still a long time before the celebration."

"At least he gave us a manor as payment." Although Bai Chen's expression didn't change, her tone was rather satisfied. As a Ruin Hunter born as a wilderness nomad, she was happy every time she obtained a considerable harvest.

In contrast to her was the slightly disappointed Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian nodded and sighed. "If there's only one manor, we can only choose one between the military exoskeleton and mechanical arm."

Even if Lehman gave a 30% discount, they could only choose one. Such controlled items were often priceless. If not for the Old Task Force establishing a connection with Lehman—the Linhai

Alliance's arms dealer—and shocking him and helping him figure out the truth he desired, it would've been impossible for them to buy these items.

“A mechanical arm is cooler!” Shang Jianyao immediately voiced his opinion.

“But it's easier to use a military exoskeleton. It can be put to use immediately,” Long Yuehong objected.

“You already have one,” Shang Jianyao pointed out.

“But Team Leader doesn't have one yet. Even if you don't need one, Team Leader needs one too,” Long Yuehong argued.

Shang Jianyao fell silent as if he was in a dilemma.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian smiled. “We'll talk about it when the time comes. Maybe our problem isn't which one to choose but which one we can afford.”

After ending the argument, Jiang Baimian raised her hands and slowly stretched her body. “There are three things to do today. The first is to obtain the manor and make sure it's in the bag. The second is to meet with the company's intelligence agent and give him the items that require testing. The third is to go to the hotel and find the boss.”

“Why are we looking for Boss Ugo?” Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

Bai Chen frowned slightly, similarly not understanding her team leader's thoughts. She probed, “To see if the Heartless outbreak has ended and whether we should move back?”

Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. “That's one aspect. The other is to ask him who was following us that day when we went to the hotel to ask about the Heartless disease. He's not a simple hotel owner; he might've noticed.”

‘That day’ referred to the day Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao visited General Phocas.

Chapter 364: When You Gotta Go, You Gotta Go

After breakfast, the five Old Task Force members did some simple disguise before heading out and getting into the gray SUV.

They planned on going to the rental outlet to swap a car so that it wouldn't be on the Anti-intellectualism Church's radar.

Long Yuehong—who was sitting left of the backseat—subconsciously looked out the window and realized that cars were coming and going on the road. The surrounding shops were all operating normally.

“I thought the military would take over today and that there would be armed soldiers patrolling everywhere.” He didn't hide his perplexity.

“Have you watched too much of the Old World's entertainment?” Shang Jianyao—who was sitting beside him—smiled.

Although Long Yuehong didn't want to admit it, he had to admit that he had made that judgment based on Old World entertainment.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Do you think Phocas will quickly take action after capturing members of the Anti-intellectualism Church and the Salvation Army in Varro's manor? That he would contact other Elders, mobilize the army, and control Varro's faction?”

“Shouldn't such matters be done at lightning speed to prevent the other party from being prepared?” Long Yuehong voiced his thoughts.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Every situation calls for its own analysis. It's possible that Phocas hasn't found sufficient support, and it's possible that he doesn't want to launch a coup. It's also possible that he really has nothing to do with the Anti-intellectualism Church. He feels that he can't do as the cult wants and chose a safer method that would be less prone to causing chaos.”

Bai Chen—who was driving—also said, “Without sufficient information, any judgment is inaccurate.”

“That's true.” Long Yuehong admitted that he had indeed been led astray by some of the Old World's entertainment.

At this moment, Genova suddenly asked, “Don’t you take umbrage at this? Everyone repeatedly denies your views.”

“Isn’t that normal...” Long Yuehong was suddenly at a loss for words. He then smiled and said, “Nobody can guarantee that their opinion is correct.”

“But you can...” Before Shang Jianyao could finish speaking, he saw Jiang Baimian cast her gaze over.

Genava moved his metal neck up and down. “I see.”

He seemed to be building a new sample for human behavior.

The car drove at a moderate speed, turning from a street the Old Task Force had never been to into the Green Olive Zone.

This time, they switched to a dark-red but tanky SUV.

Upon arriving at the hotel, Jiang Baimian immediately saw the blond-haired, slightly wrinkled boss, Ugo, sitting at the front desk. He was eating rye bread with clear water.

“Don’t you get sick of eating something similar every day?” Shang Jianyao asked curiously.

Ugo looked up at him and replied emotionlessly, “It’s pretty good if most people in the Ashlands have food.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t mind and said with a smile, “And you aren’t most people.”

Ugo’s gaze swept across Bai Chen and the others. “I was.”

He succinctly expressed his meaning—this was a habit formed from his previous suffering.

Jiang Baimian didn't let Shang Jianyao continue the topic and asked casually, "Were there any Heartless cases in the past few days?"

"No, you can move back," said Ugo calmly.

In other words, the Heartless outbreak stopped after nearly ten cases in just a few days... Jiang Baimian sighed and got to the point. "Mr. Ugo, do you remember when we last came back?"

"I remember." Ugo didn't say an additional word.

Jiang Baimian asked seriously, "Then, did you notice that someone was tailing us back then?"

"Yes," Ugo tersely replied again.

Yes... Long Yuehong was immediately pleasantly surprised. We really found clues through Boss Ugo!

Bai Chen—who was most familiar with Ugo—asked, "Did you see what kind of person they were?"

Ugo glanced at the door. "The stalker didn't get out of the car. He drove a modified, dark-green SUV. After you came in, he parked the car a distance away. Once you left and got in the car, he started the car again and followed behind."

"A distance away... How did you discover it?" Long Yuehong asked curiously.

According to his team leader and Shang Jianyao, Boss Ugo had been at the hotel's front desk back then. He could only see the area corresponding to the door.

Ugo glanced at him. "I installed surveillance cameras at the door."

"..." Long Yuehong didn't expect this answer.

"Technology changes lives." Shang Jianyao praised as he clapped.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Genava strongly agreed with this and clapped.

Jiang Baimian resisted the urge to cover her face and made a request to the hotel owner. “Mr. Ugo, can we take a look at the surveillance footage?”

Ugo was just about to answer when his expression suddenly changed. The muscles on his face vaguely twisted.

“Let me use the bathroom first,” he said quickly. As he spoke, he had already stood up and rushed to the room behind the front desk. He didn’t wait for Jiang Baimian and the others to respond.

“Yes, when you gotta go, you gotta go.” Shang Jianyao expressed his understanding. He then asked loudly, “Do you need my help to watch the place?”

Bang!

Ugo opened the door and rushed in, and the only response was the heavy thud of the closing door.

Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong looked at each other in confusion.

The next second, Jiang Baimian recalled the panting sounds she had heard from the room in front of her back then—the beast-like gasps.

“A recurring disease?” she muttered to herself.

Of course, her muttering was enough for Shang Jianyao and the others to hear her clearly.

“Maybe he really couldn’t hold it in any longer,” Shang Jianyao argued for Ugo.

Upon thinking that Ugo was in the room behind the front desk, Long Yuehong gave up on arguing with Shang Jianyao.

After two to three minutes, the tightly shut wooden door opened.

Ugo slowly walked out. His blond hair was a little moist, likewise for his old linen shirt. His face was a little pale, and he didn't look well.

"There's something wrong with my digestive system," Ugo explained casually.

"I knew it." Shang Jianyao had a look of relief. He then suggested, "Do you need medical treatment? Do you need special medicine?"

Ugo shook his head. "It's a chronic disease; it's fine."

Jiang Baimian didn't say a word and quietly watched. She realized that Boss Ugo's condition was improving at a visible speed as if it had just been an interlude.

"You can watch the surveillance now." Ugo took out a rather old portable computer from under the counter and skillfully connected the wires before switching it on.

After finding the surveillance footage, he placed the computer on the wooden board at the front desk and turned it, letting it face Jiang Baimian and the others.

On the screen, a dark-green SUV followed Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao's gray SUV into the surveillance area and maintained a certain distance from them.

"Yes, we drove the gray car back then. It was also the one Little White and Little Red drove when they were providing support." Jiang Baimian found another connection.

As she spoke, the clearly modified, dark-green car approached the street as the gray SUV stopped outside the hotel.

There seemed to be a dark film adhered to the car's sides, preventing anyone from seeing who was inside.

However, the surveillance cameras captured the windshield. They could make out a single person in the car; he wore a baseball cap very low and black clothes.

After Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao left the hotel, they started the gray SUV and drove forward for a distance. The car also started up again and followed behind.

“There’s no car plate.” Long Yuehong thought of the Old World’s mature car plate system and felt a sense of pity.

If there were car plates, the Old Task Force would be able to follow the clues. Unfortunately, there were many Ruin Hunters coming and going in First City, and the number of vehicles that were scrapped was very high. Not only was it troublesome to manage traffic by issuing car plates, but it also wasn’t pragmatic. Therefore, the administration didn’t force the use of car plates.

It was purely voluntary.

As for what would happen if a person without a license violated the traffic rules, First City’s answer was to equip the Public Security officers in charge of transportation with adequate firepower. Whoever dared to do anything rash would be met with the following: a warning first, followed by a warning shot, before bombardment finally.

Of course, similar bills were often tabled in the Senate. For example, every foreign car had to pay a certain fee to enter the city and receive a temporary license. However, the problem was that it wouldn’t establish a connection with the car owner. It lacked practical significance since many foreign car owners weren’t First City citizens. They had no identities here, so even if they gave their names, nobody could prove their authenticity.

The easiest way to do this was to cooperate with the Hunter’s Guild and obtain the corresponding registration information. However, First City’s Senate had always refused to bow their heads.

To them, this matter was often tabled because they could use this opportunity to collect a sum of money. It was equivalent to a disguised city entrance tax.

After carefully watching the surveillance footage, Jiang Baimian temporarily didn’t discover any useful clues. She could only look up and ask the boss, “Mr. Ugo, can we copy this video?”

“I’ll take it as payment for the few nights you weren’t staying here.” Ugo nodded.

Genava immediately stepped forward and began the process.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao asked about something else. “How’s Ma’am Mary now?”

Jiang Baimian immediately added, “The one whose child contracted the Heartless disease.”

Ugo calmly replied, “I saw her the day before yesterday, but she’s vanished for the past two days. In Green Olive Zone, it’s a little difficult for most people to support themselves. A crazy woman can’t last more than a few days.”

He paused and said, “I hope she left this painful world in a relatively easy manner.”

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and the others immediately fell silent.

Chapter 365: Persistently Haunting

The tanky, dark-red SUV drove through the Green Olive Zone’s different streets at a moderate speed as if it wanted to tour the area.

As Bai Chen drove, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Genava cast their gazes out the window, searching for places with coal residue and scorched earth.

At the same time, they also tried to find the crazy woman who had disappeared.

Without realizing it, the car entered a familiar area—the street where Wolf’s Den was.

Jiang Baimian looked at the eight-story building and thought for a moment. “Let’s go up and see Su Na and the others. We can also give them the first part of the Ashlandic introductory textbooks. The earlier they start learning, the better.”

The Old Task Force had only finished two-fifths of the Ashlandic introductory textbooks.

“Yes.” Long Yuehong and the others didn’t object.

On the seventh floor, the five Old Task Force members saw the original gang members. They were still holding pistols and wearing the same short-sleeved black T-shirt, but unlike before, their expressions and attitudes seemed rather respectful.

“Is Su Na around?” Bai Chen asked.

Recently, Su Na and the others had taken turns bringing the translation device and a few ‘servants’ out every day to make preparations for the fast-food business. They might not be at Wolf’s Den.

A gang member recognized the visitors and quickly smiled obsequiously. “Miss Su Na is available. They are learning the Red River language.”

Jiang Baimian and the others had obvious characteristics. Furthermore, they had Genava—a robot—following them. Even if they disguised themselves, they couldn’t hide from people who had made close contact with them.

Jiang Baimian nodded. Just as she was about to enter Wolf’s Den, she suddenly recalled something and asked the gang member, “Have you seen such cigarettes?”

As she spoke, she took out the transparent bag containing the cigarette butt from her pocket.

Bai Chen didn’t smoke, and it wasn’t like she had been to every spot in First City. Hence, she didn’t know much about it.

The Black Shirts member took the bag and looked at it carefully. “Isn’t this a Flagship cigarette? The sailors’ favorite cigarettes are cheap and strong; it’s just that the smell is overwhelming. It’s about the same as the earthy cigarettes that are dried and rolled up using inferior tobacco.”

“What do you mean by ‘strong?’” Jiang Baimian didn’t have experience in this aspect.

The Black Shirts member gestured a few times and said, “I don’t know how to describe it. It’s just that it has a... a strong feeling. Uh, it’s especially refreshing and satisfying.”

“Especially refreshing.” Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at Shang Jianyao and realized that he was raising his right hand and covering his mouth to yawn.

Based on the traces at the scene and combining it with information regarding the Last Man domain, their initial judgment of the real Father was: A person with a sleep disorder, thereby requiring an external object to keep him refreshed!

“Where can I buy such cigarettes?” Jiang Baimian asked further.

The Black Shirts member pointed out the window. “At the port. Several provision shops sell it.”

“Port...” When Jiang Baimian ruminated over this word, Shang Jianyao had already entered the Wolf’s Den and walked to the row of glass windows facing the port. This was also the spot where Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others had previously sprawled by the windowsill to howl like a female wolf.

Jiang Baimian followed and looked at West Port.

There were many boats and cargo bays everywhere. From time to time, a steam whistle sounded.

“There’s not only one port along the Red River. There are two to three others that are related to the northern shore wastelands,” Bai Chen said calmly.

Jiang Baimian looked at her and thoughtfully asked, “You mean that the sailors disembarked at other ports, hunted in the wastelands, and brought the scorched earth to First City?”

“Very likely.” Bai Chen nodded and said, “They don’t like maintaining hygiene, much less wash their clothes, pants, and shoes.”

Genava quickly said, “Most of the coal pancake factories are by the river, not far from the port.”

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

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong looked at him in anticipation.

Shang Jianyao looked like there was only one truth. “After the real Father tried Flagship cigarettes by chance, he felt that they suited him well. Therefore, he often goes to the port to buy a bunch at a

time. During this process, he accidentally stepped on the scorched earth brought by the sailors from the North Shore and the coal residue. We just have to ask the provision shops one by one and find their biggest buyer. That way, we can find the real Father.”

Long Yuehong originally wanted to retort Shang Jianyao, but after careful thought, he realized that it was actually possible.

Under the premise that they lacked information regarding what kind of cigarettes the real Father used to smoke, Shang Jianyao’s inference was logical but not necessarily correct.

Jiang Baimian doused his enthusiasm. “The provision shop owners might not remember what the real Father looks like. With the real Father’s habits, altering the other party’s memories should be an instinct—unless it’s a chance encounter where nobody notices the other.”

Bai Chen also shook her head. “This isn’t the real Father’s style. Unless it’s necessary to take action personally, I don’t think he will directly appear in a situation where he might expose himself. He has many ‘servants’ and even ‘puppets.’ It’s not a complicated matter to get them to buy a few packs of cigarettes for him. There’s no need for him to drive here personally and go to those provision shops on foot.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao applauded Bai Chen’s analysis. His praise was never targeted.

Bai Chen was no longer as embarrassed as before unless she also felt that there was something wrong with her words.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Yes, we’ve interacted with the real Father twice. We’ve also obtained the corresponding information from the company. Although our judgment of his style might not be 100% accurate, it’s not far from the truth. Therefore, the person who drove the dark-green SUV to tail us was most likely not the real Father, but we can basically confirm that he was the person who attacked us that day.

“Hmm, let’s talk hypothetically. Assuming that the real Father did come to the port and stepped on the North Shore’s scorched earth and coal residue to buy a pack of Flagship cigarettes, is there anything he needs to do here personally?”

Just as she said that, Jiang Baimian anxiously spoke before Shang Jianyao, Genava, and company could answer. “Could Father’s servant have tailed one of our teams and discovered Wolf’s Den? Then, the real Father came and personally took action.”

Long Yuehong was alarmed.

This was a logical deduction!

Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes and walked deeper into the Wolf Den’s with him. Genava, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong followed closely behind.

Recitals sounded from the innermost room. It was Su Na and the others memorizing different letters and the corresponding pronunciation.

Jiang Baimian stopped in front of the wooden door, bent her finger, and knocked thrice.

The recital stopped.

Genava also followed standard operating procedure and checked his surroundings. In this regard, he worked with Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian. On the one hand, he mainly examined non-lifeforms, while the other two focused on human consciousness and bioelectric signals.

“What’s the matter?” Su Na’s voice sounded. She spoke very awkwardly in the Red River language as if she had taken several days to finally memorize this sentence.

She thought that it was one of the ‘servants’ knocking on the door.

Jiang Baimian pushed open the door and saw Su Na, Li Qiong, and the others sitting by the bed or chairs that had been moved over. They were seriously studying the Red River language.

“You guys are here.” Su Na happily stood up and greeted them. She subconsciously placed her right hand into her pocket.

The others stood up as well. A few also stuffed their hands into their shirt pockets or trouser pockets.

Upon seeing this, alarm bells rang in Jiang Baimian's mind.

Without needing her to give the order, Shang Jianyao's eyes suddenly turned deep.

Su Na, Li Qiong, and the other women's hands in their pockets immediately stopped moving.

At the same time, Genava took a few steps forward and blocked the carbon-based humans. He shouted, "There are many explosives here!"

"Explosives..." Long Yuehong almost hissed. This Father sure is persistently haunting and impossible to guard against!

Facing the confused Su Na and the others, Jiang Baimian said to Bai Chen, "Go and see what's in their pockets.

"Old Ge, gather the servants outside and watch them. Execute anyone who makes any abnormal moves."

"Alright." Genava obeyed the order, turned around, and went to the door to find the Black Shirts members.

"Did something happen?" Su Na asked in confusion.

"No worries; it has nothing to do with you. I'm mainly worried that you will be hurt," Jiang Baimian consoled.

Bai Chen quickly walked over and found a trigger from the girl's pocket.

"What's this..." Su Na was also rather surprised. She then held her head as if someone was striking her hard.

Bai Chen found seven triggers one after another, making all the women in the room show pained expressions.

Ten seconds later, Su Na struggled and shouted, “Run! There’s a bomb!”

The moment this was said, she and her companions seemed to have finally escaped their nightmares and returned to normal.

Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled and said, “Don’t worry; it’s fine.”

She then turned her head and said to Long Yuehong, “Let’s get rid of the bomb first.”

“Yes, Team Leader,” Long Yuehong replied instinctively.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao again and realized that he had a serious and solemn expression. That’s right. If Father isn’t eliminated, there will be no end to our troubles!

Chapter 366: Contingency Plan

The Old Task Force’s training included the dismantling of bombs. Since there was a remote-controlled detonator, there was definitely an electric circuit and something that received the electric signals. Therefore, Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong quickly found all the bombs and removed the threat.

Upon seeing these dangerous items, Su Na and the others were terrified and flustered. They couldn’t believe that they had lived in such an environment for several days.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian consoled them. “You were only being used; you won’t be targeted.”

At this moment, Bai Chen looked at these former Ashlandic prostitutes and calmly said, “It’s our enemy. As long as you have nothing to do with us from now on, you shouldn’t encounter such matters in the future.”

Su Na, Li Qiong, Qin Zhen, and the others looked at each other, feeling a little flustered and confused.

After a few seconds, Su Na smiled and said, “You saved me; I owe my life to you. How can there not be a connection?”

“Yes.”

“That’s right.” The other women echoed such a statement at various speeds.

Su Na then looked at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao and said in anticipation, “I believe you can resolve this matter.”

Humans at the bottom of society are street smart... Jiang Baimian secretly sighed and said, “We will do our best, but we don’t have absolute confidence. During this process, you might encounter danger again. Many people might die.”

Su Na and the others fell silent.

After a while, Su Na forced a smile and said, “In any case, I’d have died in a year or two if it weren’t for you.”

Her attitude made the other women in the room say similar words one after another, regardless of their hesitation.

It’s not like I’m asking you to express your loyalty! You can go back on your words later... Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but criticize inwardly.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “I can give you the strength to resist such matters when you encounter them. I can also nip the danger in the bud as long as you trust me.”

He looked at Su Na with clear eyes and waited for her answer.

Su Na thought of their previous boss—Ogre’s current state and hesitated for a few seconds before saying, “I trust you.”

“Then, follow me to the room next door.” Shang Jianyao pointed at the door.

Jiang Baimian watched quietly and didn’t stop him.

After arriving in the next room, Shang Jianyao looked into Su Na's eyes again and said, "I'll only state two facts: First, we saved you. Second, we have been doing our best to help you gain a foothold in First City and truly survive. So if someone wants you to deal with us, you will..."

Su Na nodded slightly before revealing a determined and indignant expression. "I'll shoot him on the spot!"

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped and smiled. "That's a better answer than I imagined."

A little embarrassed, Su Na said, "I-I don't really know how to use that kind of pistol."

"Just practice more," Shang Jianyao said as he walked to the door.

Su Na was a little confused. "That's it?"

She felt like nothing had changed.

"That's enough; you did well." Shang Jianyao praised her and led Su Na—who still didn't understand what had happened—back to the room where they used to learn the Red River language.

He then spoke to the Ashlandic women individually, making them wary of the people who tried to harm the Old Task Force.

Among them, some were willing to draw their guns and counterattack like Su Na. Some expressed that they wouldn't listen to the other party. Some said that they would appear to be cooperating on the surface but would secretly inform the Old Task Force.

Shang Jianyao didn't remember who made what choice.

While he was busy with this matter, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Geneva finished interrogating the Black Shirts members—who were now fast-food restaurant servants. They carefully searched the Wolf's Den again and didn't discover any other traps left behind by Father.

After Shang Jianyao returned to the lobby, Long Yuehong asked curiously, “This can allow them to effectively resist Father’s hypnosis?”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Not only can it effectively resist him, but they can also counterattack. If Father really accidentally dies under Su Na and the others’ muzzles, I’ll bury him somewhere in the North Shore’s wastelands. I’ll play music and dance at his grave from time to time and mock him loudly.”

That’s brutal... This word suddenly appeared in Long Yuehong’s ‘mind.’ He deliberated and said, “Then, can you give us a similar ‘inference’ to prevent Father’s ‘hypnosis,’ just like how you dealt with Qiao Chu back then?”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “It’s mainly because I can’t predict Father’s goal in hypnotizing you, while I can roughly guess what Su Na and the others will be asked to do. I can give specific conditions and obtain the desired effects.”

At this point, Shang Jianyao laughed. “If you don’t mind, we can list all the possibilities. I’ll add immunity to them one by one. But with so many inference effects stacked together, it will likely affect your day-to-day life.”

As he spoke, he revealed an eager expression as if he wanted Long Yuehong to agree to the experiment.

“Forget it then.” Long Yuehong knew better.

Jiang Baimian nodded as well. “Let’s try our best not to split up. With Old Ge around, we don’t have to worry too much about being secretly affected by the real Father.”

After discussing this matter, Jiang Baimian looked at Wolf’s Den’s original boss—Ogre—and asked, “There should be surveillance cameras installed here, right?”

Ogre nodded. “Yes, this place is still relatively important. There’s a surveillance camera installed at the door.”

“Take out the surveillance footage from the past few days then.” Jiang Baimian’s eyes lit up slightly.

Su Na replied before Ogre could. “That camera is already broken.”

“When was it broken?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“I-I think it was the night before yesterday.” Li Qiong remembered that a servant had reported this matter back then.

The night before yesterday? The night before the arrest of the Anti-intellectualism Church members in the Zhao family manor... When did Father really come to the Wolf’s Den?

As Long Yuehong’s thoughts raced, he heard his team leader ask Su Na and the others, “The surveillance footage is still there, right?”

“The hard disk was stolen,” Ogre replied honestly.

Jiang Baimian sighed. “How cautious. Father is still somewhat wary of technological products.”

At this moment, Bai Chen asked, “Are there any other cameras? Are they all broken?”

Ogre pointed at a hidden spot at the lobby’s ceiling. “There’s another one there.”

Jiang Baimian wasn’t surprised at all. She had long discovered the camera that could capture the depths of Wolf’s Den.

She glanced at the surveillance camera and asked, “It’s broken too?”

“Yes.” Ogre nodded heavily.

Jiang Baimian was just about to ask about something else when an idea suddenly flashed across her mind. She casually asked, “This camera doesn’t seem to be the same model as the camera at the door. They weren’t installed at the same time?”

Ogre smiled obsequiously. “The camera at the door was installed a few years ago. I haven’t been able to find such a model recently. This one... This one...”

As he spoke, he suddenly froze. “I don’t remember when I installed it...”

“I don’t remember either...” The other Black Shirts members, Su Na, and the others shook their heads.

Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little suffocated. How many other setups did the real Father implement that have yet to be discovered?

Jiang Baimian drew her gun and aimed at the camera, but she ultimately didn’t pull the trigger.

“It seems like the real Father knows how to use technological products.” Jiang Baimian laughed and inserted the Ice Moss pistol back into her belt. “Besides, he was adequately prepared. It’s naturally best if he can blow us up. If he can’t, he’ll use this surveillance camera to figure out how we resolved the crisis and what hidden means we have.”

“With cameras already here, it’s very difficult to discover any problems with an additional camera,” Bai Chen said.

In particular, the few people who knew the camera’s exact location had been hypnotized.

Jiang Baimian sighed. “Fortunately, I have a certain level of research on electronic products and paid attention to the details.”

As Long Yuehong felt a lingering fear, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “The jig is up!”

Uh... Long Yuehong was a little confused.

Jiang Baimian smiled as well. “If there’s no explosion after some time, he will send someone back to retrieve the card that stores the surveillance footage.”

At this point, she clapped her hands. “Alright, we just need to wait and see who retrieves the surveillance footage.”

This street—and even most of the Green Olive Zone—wasn’t wired to the Internet, much less a wireless signal. Even if some merchants had phones and could connect to First City’s network, they were only limited to calling and texting.

Chapter 367: Tracking

Two days later, the owner of an appliance repair shop arrived at Wolf’s Den in the morning.

He was relatively familiar with Ogre. Usually, they would hire him if there were any wiring malfunctions. As long as it wasn’t complicated and was an urgent matter, they would hire him.

“Is the camera broken?” The middle-aged man looked up at the equipment by the door. Like most Red River people, he looked older than his age. His skin looked like it had been ground by sand.

Although Ogre was no longer hypnotized and lost his memory about the repair, he still nodded. “Yes, it’s down. Thus, I got you to take a look. If it really doesn’t work out, I’ll get a new one. It’s been used for years anyway.”

The electronics repair shop owner smiled. “Sure, I have a few second-hand ones. Their quality ain’t too bad.”

“Ricky, are you sure it’s second-hand, not third or fourth-hand?” Ogre joked and called for the other Black Shirts members to bring over a simple ladder for the appliance shop owner.

Ricky did the checks one after another. When he dealt with the camera that aimed deep into the Wolf’s Den, his expression suddenly froze.

He took out a memory card from his tool bag and switched the one inside the camera. After a simple inspection and confirming that there were no items like trackers, Ricky stuffed the surveillance camera-equipped electronic product into his pocket.

He quickly ‘repaired’ the camera, collected Ogre’s money, and left Wolf’s Den. After returning to the shop, he found an envelope with an address and recipient written at some point in time.

At this moment, a man and a woman in sunglasses entered his shop.

“Can this be repaired?” The woman with a ponytail took out a small black speaker with a blue bottom.

Ricky could only put down the envelope and memory card in his hand. He took the speaker, connected it to his N-handed computer, and checked for problems.

The tall man quickly picked up the envelope and chuckled. “Love letter?”

“No.” Ricky reflexively snatched the envelope back; he didn’t want the other party to see the address.

The man didn’t insist and waited for Ricky to repair the speaker.

“Hey, I really miss you[1]...” Music soon sounded.

“There’s no problem with it?” Ricky said in confusion.

The man in the sunglasses opened his mouth. “You’re amazing; you fixed it just by touching it!”

“...” Ricky didn’t know how to respond.

The woman with the ponytail immediately asked, “How much?”

“1-1 Drace.” Ricky didn’t plan on accepting money, but he didn’t want to give up the opportunity to earn money since the other party had already said so.

The woman with the ponytail took out a Drace coin and pushed it to him.

After watching the two of them leave with the small speaker, Ricky checked the envelope and confirmed that there were no trackers inside. Then, he quickly inserted the memory card into the envelope and sealed it.

When it was almost noon, he closed his store's shutters and threw the letter into the only mailbox in the block.

In the afternoon, a postman in a green uniform riding an old bicycle took away the letter and stuffed it into his satchel, along with the other letters. He then followed a fixed route and passed by different mailboxes.

When he approached an apartment in the Red Wolf Zone, the postman's expression suddenly turned blank.

He took out Ricky's letter. The address on the letter wasn't at the spot he was in—the two were in completely opposite directions.

After mistakenly throwing the letter into the apartment's mailbox, the postman left.

Time quickly passed as night gradually descended.

A man who lived in this apartment finished his day of work and returned. When he passed by the mailboxes, he opened his and took out the letter inside.

Upon seeing the address in the letter that was completely wrong, the short man's expression changed slightly. He climbed the stairs to the fifth floor and walked along the aisle to his residence.

As he passed by a neighbor, he suddenly bent down and tied his shoelaces. During this process, he quietly stuffed the letter in his hand under the neighbor's door.

In the dimly lit room which had the curtains drawn, a slightly pale hand picked up the letter. The hand then opened the letter and took out the memory card inside.

The hand's owner did a simple inspection and confirmed that there were no additional electronic products attached to the envelope and the memory card's surface.

He discovered a dead bug in the envelope and believed that it had flown in before the letter was sealed.

The owner of the hand switched on his portable computer and inserted the memory card into the attached card reader. Just as he opened the newly appeared drive, the computer suddenly slowed down.

Right on the heels of that, the computer was unmuted, and the volume was raised to its maximum.

“Woo!”

“Woo!”

The sound of a fire engine sounded ear-piercing, echoing throughout the room and coming from the tightly shut windows.

A male voice shouted at the top of his lungs: “I’m a priest from the Anti-intellectualism Church. Come and capture me!”

“I’m a priest from the Anti-intellectualism Church. Come and capture me!”

The hand’s owner suddenly stood up and ran to the door without attempting to stop the out-of-control computer.

When he pulled open the door, the voice coming from the computer speaker changed again.

He heard a male voice that sounded a little resentful. “Hey, I really miss you...”

The hand’s owner slowed down before quickly returning to normal. He ran up the stairs to the second floor and directly turned into the corridor. He rushed into one of the families that were making dinner by the door and jumped into the alley behind the apartment through their windows.

Bang!

A stone flew right in front of the hand owner’s feet, and a bullet almost hit him.

This didn't seem like a sniper failing to score a hit. It appeared deliberate instead, almost equivalent to a warning.

The hand's owner was stunned for a moment before slowly raising his hands. He stopped trying to escape because the next shot might hit him.

The sniper was dozens of meters away, way beyond his range of influence.

First City didn't restrict weapons, and the back alley was relatively quiet. After the gunshot created a brief moment of tension, the pedestrians on the street outside quickly forgot about it. Only a small number of enthusiastic citizens tried to find the sheriff and got him to send his subordinates down the alley to see what was happening.

The hand's owner waited for a while before a figure appeared in front of him.

The person who came was Shang Jianyao in a long-sleeved, black T-shirt. He closed his eyes and smiled warmly. "I'm not the one who fired."

He meant that the person in charge of sniping was still around and that it was best he didn't pull off any tricks.

The hand's owner remained silent and didn't respond as thoughts raced through his mind. The best solution he came up with was to restrain the person in front of him and use him as a hostage to resist the distant sniper.

Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and saw a brown-haired, brown-eyed man—who was about 1.7 meters tall. He had a relatively haggard expression, and he didn't seem to be in the right state of mind.

"A fake Father." He sighed and shook his head.

This pursuit utilized Jiang Baimian's ability to sense bioelectric signals and the virus written by Geneva.

They had originally followed the electronics repair shop owner—Ricky—but they realized that he was only a tool. Therefore, they used the excuse of repairing the small speaker as an excuse to get a bug in before he finished sealing the envelope.

In the eyes of people who didn't know the corresponding abilities, this was an insignificant matter that wasn't worth noticing. The other letters on the mailman often didn't have such things.

This was equivalent to having a biological locator in the letter.

Considering that the bug in the letter might not live long enough, Genova had infected the memory card with a virus in advance. It could allow the infected computer to turn on its speaker and play the content that the virus scheduled.

With it, the Old Task Force—which had narrowed down the scope—could use the sound to lock onto the target and ambush the other party's fleeing path.

Through the synergy of these two means, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao—who were in charge of the back alley—successfully intercepted the fleeing enemy.

Unfortunately, their target was only a fake Father.

“Fake Father...” The man—who had planned on hypnotizing Shang Jianyao when their eyes met—was stunned. His expression changed several times before he blurted out, “Why did you say that I'm the fake Father?”

Shang Jianyao didn't answer him immediately and threw him a black cloth. “Blindfold yourself.”

As he spoke, he closed his eyes again.

The fake Father hesitated for a few seconds. Upon seeing that there was no opportunity to take advantage and that the sniper in the distance was watching him, he could only blindfold himself with the black cloth obediently.

After receiving Jiang Baimian's confirmation message through the walkie-talkie, Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and smiled at the fake Father. “Because the real Father is 1.75 to 1.8 meters tall, has relatively dark eye circles, and looks very tired...”

As he listened, the fake Father suddenly held his head and revealed a pained expression.

Shang Jianyao asked, "After obtaining the memory card and reading the contents, who will you pass the information you gathered to?"

At this moment, music sounded from an upstairs room. "Hey, I really miss you..."

Chapter 368: Decoy

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao's question, the fake Father's pained expression became increasingly obvious. The muscles on his face warped, making him look rather hideous.

He said with all his might, "I-It's Shepherd, Elder... Bouillon."

Shang Jianyao wasn't surprised at all and repeated after him. "Bouillon? Could it be that he's also between 1.75 to 1.8 meters tall and has dark eye circles? Does he look very tired?"

He clearly believed that the Elder Bouillon the fake Father spoke of was actually the real Father in disguise.

This poor guy who had been controlled had never seen the real Shepherd, Bouillon.

The fake Father's warped face revealed unconcealed horror. "Yes, how did you know... Why did this happen..."

He quickly became hysterical as if he was close to a complete breakdown.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, "You have to thank me."

He then took a step forward, raised his right hand, and accurately struck the back of the fake Father's ear.

The fake Father fainted and escaped the indescribable pain.

Shang Jianyao quickly dragged him to an empty alley and took out the blueish-green night pearl in his pocket.

...

In the shimmering Sea of Origins, Shang Jianyao—who had split into nine—used the Destiny Pearl's power to stir up all the fake Father's memories.

They divided up the work and searched for the clearest and most recent scenes from the frozen waves. They constantly backtracked, hoping to discover the real Father.

Before long, Shang Jianyao found a related memory.

The fake Father named Sandel had received a letter from Shepherd Bouillon the day before yesterday. After confirming that it was real by matching the countersigns, he began plotting how to obtain surveillance footage from Wolf's Den.

According to this memory, Shang Jianyao realized that the so-called Shepherd—Bouillon—mainly sent orders to Sandel via mailing letters. The sender's address was always different from the one in the letter. The former was clearly a tool that had been hypnotized, and the latter was clearly fake.

He would occasionally call Sandel and had met the fake Father three times.

In the memories of the three times they met, Bouillon's image was very fuzzy. He didn't have any obvious characteristics, and there weren't sufficient scenes of him walking. Shang Jianyao could only tell that he was about the same height as Jiang Baimian. He had dark circles under his eyes, revealing an unconcealed fatigue.

In other words, the man suspected to be the real Father was indeed between 1.75 to 1.80 meters tall.

The way Sandel reported the situation was to send a telegram at an agreed time. However, the other party would only receive and not send a response. There was radio silence, so they couldn't use technology to locate the signal source.

Shang Jianyao quickly retraced the memories and found the scene when Sandel 'became' 'Father.'

It was obvious that there were signs of tampering.

Shang Jianyao—who was only using a tool—found it difficult to stir the deepest and most subconscious memories and couldn't reenact them.

In order to conserve the energy in the Destiny Pearl, Shang Jianyao quickly ended his inspection and returned to the real world.

After putting away the blueish-green night pearl, he looked around. Upon seeing that nobody was approaching, he picked up the walkie-talkie and briefly reported his gains.

After Jiang Baimian heard this, she slowly exhaled and said, "Bring the fake Father back to his room and wait for me to come over."

She then put away the Orange rifle she had obtained from the Black Shirts and issued orders to Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava. "Continue staying in position and observe if there are any men between 1.75 to 1.80 meters tall—who look exhausted and have dark eye circles—in the surrounding houses."

She suspected that the real Father might be monitoring everything nearby. Once anything happened to the fake Father, the connection would immediately be severed.

Just now, the fire engine sirens and Shang Jianyao's loud shout in the fake Father's room could be vaguely heard from the surrounding streets.

Of course, Jiang Baimian felt that the real Father wouldn't personally monitor the area, given his style. It was more likely that he would hypnotize two to three ordinary people and get them to take turns paying attention. They would immediately send a telegram if anything abnormal happened.

After all, there was more than one fake Father. The real Father couldn't split himself up, so he could only use less efficient but safer and more concealed methods.

Due to this inference, Jiang Baimian specially said to Genava, "Old Ge, monitor radio signals of this wavelength..."

Although it was very likely too late, it was better than nothing.

As Jiang Baimian issued orders to the other Old Task Force members, Shang Jianyao had already helped the fake Father up and brought him back to the original apartment as if he were helping a sick companion.

After closing the door, Shang Jianyao forcefully switched off the computer and ended the looping music.

Jiang Baimian quickly rushed over and entered the room.

She and Shang Jianyao carefully searched the area and only found some information regarding the Anti-intellectualism Church's promotional material that was filled with spelling errors.

"He's clearly not illiterate. He even knows how to use a computer. Why did he spell the words wrongly..." Jiang Baimian muttered softly.

"If his spelling and grammar are all correct, how can he convince those believers?" Shang Jianyao felt that there was no problem.

Jiang Baimian looked at the unconscious fake Father—Sandel—and deliberated before saying,

"I'll restore the computer to normal using the program Old Ge wrote up and see if there are any clues inside. Wake him up and befriend him."

"Alright." The corners of Shang Jianyao's mouth curled up as he walked to the bed.

After Jiang Baimian cleansed the portable computer of its virus infection, Shang Jianyao was already chatting happily with the awakened Sandel.

He used facts to prove that the other party was a fake Father, the real Father's puppet. This incited Sandel's hatred.

He didn't even use his abilities for this part.

Jiang Baimian turned her chair around and looked at Sandel. “Although I’m not sure if the real Father has discovered anything wrong with you, we can pretend that nothing has happened.”

She organized her words and offered her plan. “Pretend to escape in a sorry state later and move elsewhere. Then, send a telegram to the real Father at an agreed time and say that you were targeted by us and almost captured. You went through great difficulty to escape.”

“Alright!” Sandel replied firmly. He thought for a moment and gritted his teeth. “He has been playing with my mind for a long time. If I don’t take revenge, I’d have lived all this while in vain! But after killing Father, I will leave this place and quietly leave the Anti-intellectualism Church.”

He had deep reservations about figures at the Anti-intellectualism Church’s Elder level.

There were a total of eight such powerhouses. The Anti-intellectualism Church’s organization that wielded executive power was the Eight-Man Council. The Pope above them was said to have gone to the New World to serve the Kalendaria, Last Man.

“That’s your freedom.” Jiang Baimian nodded.

As for whether Shang Jianyao would lock Sandel up for doing so many bad things, that was another matter.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao asked questions related to the Anti-intellectualism Church again, but they didn’t obtain anything new that exceeded their previous understanding.

As this place wasn’t suitable for them to ‘stay’ for long, they watched Sandel ‘escape’ in a rush.

“Goodbye! We must meet again!” Shang Jianyao waved his right hand reluctantly.

Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes and said seriously, “We’ll evacuate too.”

They quickly left the apartment and went to the agreed rendezvous point.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva reported their situation. They didn’t discover the man suspected to be the real Father.

Genava didn't gain anything from monitoring the radio signals either.

Jiang Baimian held the walkie-talkie and ordered, "Withdraw."

On the return trip in their dark-red, off-road vehicle, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—summarized the operation. She sighed and said, "We still haven't caught the real Father's foxtail. Sandel can only be considered a decoy, and it's highly likely that it won't be of any use."

"The real Father is really too cunning and careful..." Long Yuehong sighed.

Everyone in the car immediately fell silent, feeling a little depressed and disheartened. They had finally found a useful clue after spending a great deal of effort, but they still couldn't capture the real Father.

Genava could also correctly respond to failure, just like when he was in Tarnan.

A few seconds later, Shang Jianyao said confidently and excitedly, "Such an opponent is more interesting!"

He wasn't depressed at all and even added, "When we capture the real Father and hang him up for a beating, it will definitely be especially satisfying."

"That's right." Jiang Baimian laughed after hearing that. Her emotions had already returned to normal, and she also had the desire to accept the challenge.

"Yes, the real Father will eventually be exposed as long as he still has things to do and has other operations to carry out." Bai Chen also exhaled.

After some thought, Jiang Baimian said, "Take it slow; there's no rush. Let's take over the Zhao family's Left Bank Manor first. Heh heh, perhaps the real Father is waiting for us there."

In First City—where some semblance of order had been maintained—transferring ownership of a manor wasn't a simple matter. It also required the Administrative Department's approval. Therefore, the Old Task Force had to wait a few days.

At this moment, Long Yuehong—who was sitting in the backseat—glanced at Shang Jianyao and asked, “What are you thinking about?”

One could tell from Shang Jianyao’s face that he was deep in thought.

Upon hearing Long Yuehong’s question, he thought for a moment and said, “I’m thinking that if we have nothing to do recently, we’ll go to the places where the real Father might appear. When we discover people that match his characteristics, I’ll get Old Ge to ‘hit on’ them and drag them deep into the alley to have a chat...”

“I-isn’t this searching for a needle in a haystack?” Long Yuehong said in amusement.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “No, it’s fishing. What’s most important when fishing is patience. The problem now is where the real Father might appear.”

Jiang Baimian opened her mouth and closed it again, revealing a thoughtful expression.

Chapter 369: Feedback

As Jiang Baimian thought about it, the driving Bai Chen listed out the places she felt that Father might appear at. “Will he become addicted to Flagship cigarettes after smoking them? Will he often need to buy them at the port?”

“Based on Father’s prolonged lack of sleep, he will definitely continue using such items as long as they are effective,” echoed Long Yuehong.

Shang Jianyao scoffed when he heard that. “But there are only five of us.”

Jiang Baimian nodded. “The possibility of the real Father continuing to buy Flagship cigarettes is indeed very high, but the problem is that there are many shops selling such cheap cigarettes at the port alone. Many people purchase from the port every day. The real Father definitely won’t personally appear. He will definitely hypnotize passersby and use them as tools. We can’t monitor so many shops at the same time, nor can we determine who the tools among the purchasers are.”

“That’s right.” It was unknown when Genova had started using Long Yuehong’s mantra. “If only the port area, including the entire Green Olive Zone, could be filled with cameras like Tarnan.”

That way, he could hack into the municipal system, write a program, filter through the surveillance cameras, and use time and patience to find clues about the real Father.

“This place does need some revamps,” Shang Jianyao agreed.

After a brief silence, Long Yuehong raised the second possibility. “Monitor General Phocas’s residence? Since you were planted with seeds there and were tailed by the real Father’s puppet, could the real Father be hiding there? Or does he often need to go there to communicate with the hidden Anti-intellectualism Church experts in the residence? Once we discover a target that matches his characteristics, we’ll get Old Ge to confirm it.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “This is an idea, but I don’t think it’s likely. Since there are puppets, there’s no need for the real Father to establish communications personally. He can just use someone like Sandel, a fake Father.”

She deliberated and continued, “From the way the real Father does things, he will only walk out of the darkness and appear under the sun when he needs to do things himself.”

“Therefore, we need to find a target that the real Father might personally deal with?” Long Yuehong asked in response.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “The Anti-intellectualism Church’s current focus should be to stir up internal strife in First City and make the situation here chaotic. Now that they’ve taken the first step, we need to know who the key figure that’s preventing them from taking the second step is. This can be gathered through the company’s intelligence network. On the account that Elder Varro is involved in colluding with the Salvation Army and the Anti-intellectualism Church, whoever is trying their best to maintain stability and suppress excessive behavior is the obstacle between the Conservatives and the Reformists. They are the one preventing them from completely falling out with each other, and it’s also their death that will worsen the conflict.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian laughed. “After locking onto the corresponding target, we might have to act as free and hidden bodyguards. When the time comes, we won’t participate in a confrontation at the Mind Corridor level. We will only find an opportunity to deliver a blow to the real Father.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped, and he asked in anticipation, “Shall we meet Garibaldi again? Will he switch to a better café this time?”

“Maybe it will be a restaurant?” Jiang Baimian replied with a smile.

Shang Jianyao’s eyes lit up immediately.

...

Two days later, the fake Father—Sandel—sent a telegram reporting an assault on him to the real Father. After barely escaping, he didn’t appear to have been suspected or investigated, but he didn’t receive any further orders by mail.

He felt that the real Father should’ve sensed something and that he might just be reserving him as poison bait.

During the hidden contest with the real Father, the Old Task Force became increasingly careful. Not only did they secretly move back to Ugo Hotel, but they also rented a few additional rooms as safe houses.

They didn’t send any more telegrams from their residences, afraid that someone would monitor the radio signals and lock onto their locations. They would always go to a specific safe house to deal with such matters.

Near this safe house that was specially used for telegrams was another safe house. Its purpose was to monitor if the former was exposed and if there were any suspicious people lurking.

In this aspect, the Old Task Force quickly accumulated sufficient experience.

This was a ‘subject’ that Jiang Baimian and the others had been exposed to, but nothing considered in-depth. It was more of a theoretical approach.

After getting the fake Father—Sandel—to continue lurking, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao went to Silver Candle Café in Red Wolf Zone’s Bulis Street like before.

Yes, the intelligence agent—Garibaldi—had chosen the same old place.

Before leaving, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao did some level of disguise. The military-green jeep had completed a new round of spray painting at a modification factory Bai Chen trusted. It was now dark green.

This was quite different from what the real Father knew.

In fact, there were several Rootless campsites around First City, but Ferlin's Hometown caravan wasn't in the vicinity during this period of time. Jiang Baimian didn't trust the other Rootless teams.

At Silver Candle Café, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao—who deliberately acted like mercenaries—each ordered a cup of coffee and sat in their usual seats by the window in the corner.

Afraid of an accident, Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava didn't split into three teams. All of them stayed in the same surveillance spot.

As he drank the inferior Bouchard coffee, Shang Jianyao raised an idea. "Our height and race are still too eye-catching in First City. Even if we disguise ourselves, it's easy to leave an impression on others. Why don't we get the Rootless to dye our hair? Sigh, it's a pity that there are very few contact lenses that can change the color of our eyes in the Ashlands."

Even ordinary contact lenses were in very low production.

Ordinary people didn't care if they were short-sighted. They didn't have the capability to get glasses at all.

As for middle-class people who led slightly better lives, normal glasses were enough. There was no need to get contacts.

Only the group of people at the top of the pyramid in the Ashlands had the leisure and motivation to seek out contact lenses.

Jiang Baimian held in her laughter and suggested, "You can shave your head."

Surprisingly, Shang Jianyao seriously considered it.

“That would be more eye-catching.” Jiang Baimian quickly dismissed his idea. To be honest, she couldn’t imagine Shang Jianyao bald—even though he might become stronger as a result.

As the two of them spoke, a man—who was less than 1.75 meters tall—wearing a thin, black coat and a cap entered Silver Candle Café.

He quickly scanned the area and chose to sit behind Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao. As he passed by Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian, the man took the opportunity to draw out his right hand and wipe his face before taking out a neatly folded piece of paper.

The piece of paper landed in front of Shang Jianyao, which he easily scooped up in a concealed manner.

The man didn’t seem to notice and sat in the spot he had chosen.

He was one of Pangu Biology’s intelligence agents in First City, Garibaldi. This time, he didn’t introduce himself or ask anything. Instead, he patiently waited for Jiang Baimian’s new requests.

As for his feedback, it was in the folded pieces of paper.

This included the details of the assassination conducted by the real Father on First City’s Elder—Sols—the results of the cigarette butt test, First City’s current political situation, and the roles of several key Elders.

The latter two were used to analyze the Anti-intellectualism Church’s next target.

Jiang Baimian then picked up her cup and drank a mouthful of coffee. “There’s nothing else this time.”

She deliberately suppressed her voice as if she didn’t want to disturb the other customers in the café.

Shang Jianyao then helped by repeating it.

Garibaldi didn't leave immediately. Like an ordinary customer, he waited for his coffee and slowly finished it.

Jiang Baimian was in no rush either. After a while, she unfolded the piece of paper Shang Jianyao handed her and quickly scanned it.

On the first page were the cigarette butt's test results. "Human saliva was extracted... There's a mint component in the saliva. After comparison, it's been pinpointed to be Ralph sugar. It contains root parts of a plant like Ralph. It can effectively enhance one's mind and cause diarrhea to a certain extent. It's relatively popular in First City. (Note: First City's dietary system makes one prone to constipation and indigestion)... DNA doesn't match any sample in the laboratory database. It's impossible to confirm the identity..."

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian sensed that Garibaldi had put down his cup and slowly walked out of the café.

She lowered her head and continued reading the information.

Suddenly, a gunshot sounded outside.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao suddenly looked up at the window and saw a person lying on the street.

He wore a thin black coat and a cap—Garibaldi!

Chapter 370: Old K

Pangu Biology's First City intelligence agent, Garibaldi, had actually been shot on the street. Furthermore, it had happened right after he met the Old Task Force.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao stood up abruptly.

At the same time, another gunshot sounded.

A few meters away from Garibaldi, the right thigh of a man in a tattered shirt and gray pants suddenly burst into a plume of splattered flesh and blood.

As he fell in agony, a black pistol landed on the ground.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian instantly understood what had happened. The second man to be shot was the murderer who assassinated Garibaldi on the streets.

The one attacking him was Bai Chen—who was in a position of surveillance and had reacted in turn. She used the Orange rifle to disable the murderer’s right leg.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao didn’t hesitate to run out of Silver Candle Café and onto the street. They rushed to Garibaldi’s side amidst the large number of pedestrians fleeing and hiding.

They squatted down and examined Garibaldi’s injuries.

The Pangu Biology intelligence agent’s chest was blood-red, and his injuries looked rather serious.

He remained conscious, and his pleading eyes were filled with desire as he looked at Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao.

It was only then that Jiang Baimian saw his face clearly.

He wasn’t Ashlandic; he was mixed at best. His face was thin, and his eyes were dark. He had a handsome appearance, and his black hair was messy. This intelligence agent looked to be in his twenties—he was still very young.

As Jiang Baimian examined the wound on his chest to see where he had been hit, she took off her tactical backpack and took out a FECA biological agent.

Administering first-aid for injuries was a skill every experienced Ruin Hunter came equipped with. It was also a compulsory lesson for the Old Task Force during training.

“Hang in there,” Jiang Baimian said simply and did some preliminary resuscitation on the spot.

Just as she said that, she turned to glance at Shang Jianyao. “Observe the murderer’s situation and try to figure out who instigated it.”

Shang Jianyao immediately stood up and walked toward the gunman—who was covered in blood.

Jiang Baimian quickly injected the FECA biological agent and used her tactical backpack to cover herself before taking out the walkie-talkie. “Little White, stay where you are with Genava and monitor the surroundings to prevent any accidents. Little Red, drive the car to the intersection ahead but don’t be in a rush to come over. Wait for my subsequent notice.” Jiang Baimian quickly gave instructions to the other three Old Task Force members.

A few meters away, Shang Jianyao squatted at the edge of the blood pool and looked at the man in the tattered shirt. He said in the Red River language, “Any last words?”

The man had an ordinary face of Red River ethnicity. He had just woken up from the coma brought about by the intense pain, and he was already on the brink of death. It was probably his last moment of clarity.

His gray pants had become extremely tattered, completely dyed blood-red.

As a gunman, he had seen too many of his companions die. Although he wasn’t satisfied with his outcome, he wasn’t surprised at all. He originally wanted to shut his mouth and wait for the moment his life ended, but for some reason, he suddenly felt that he should say something and not die so simply.

“I-I was just... paid to do the job,” he said with difficulty.

“Who instructed you?” Shang Jianyao maintained his squatting posture. He didn’t attempt to inject the gunman with a FECA biological agent to treat his wounds.

The gunman gradually entered a dying state. With the mindset that he would drag a person to hell even if he died, he weakly replied, “I-it’s Old K...”

He slowly closed his eyes, and the air he inhaled was less than he exhaled.

Shang Jianyao stood up and walked back to Jiang Baimian’s side.

Jiang Baimian had already treated Garibaldi's wound. She raised the back of her hand, wiped her forehead, and said in Ashlandic, "Fortunately, you didn't get shot in the heart. You probably won't die as long as a qualified doctor treats you."

Upon hearing the words 'qualified doctor,' Garibaldi's expression changed as if he wasn't that confident of having one.

In this day and age, there were really few qualified doctors. Of course, thanks to the chaotic environment, there were more doctors who dealt with gunshot wounds than qualified doctors.

Jiang Baimian then turned her head to look at the squatting Shang Jianyao. "Any gains?"

"He said that he was instructed by a person named Old K," Shang Jianyao recounted the gunman's words.

Upon hearing the name 'Old K,' Garibaldi's expression changed again.

Jiang Baimian didn't point it out and asked, "Do we take you away and get a doctor to treat you, or should we leave you here and let the sheriff take over?"

Garibaldi hesitated for two seconds. "Leave me here, but remember to inform the company that I was shot."

Yes, the company definitely has more than one intelligence agent in First City. Garibaldi also has many companions, so we don't have to worry... Jiang Baimian quickly put away the various tools used to treat his wounds into her tactical backpack.

She and Shang Jianyao waited for nearly a minute before the sheriff arrived with seven to eight subordinates.

The sheriff looked at Garibaldi on the ground and asked with a Red River accent, "Are you friends?"

He had an impressionable figure. Not only did he grow upward, but his entire body also extended in all directions.

He wasn't too fat, but his shoulders were broad, and his body was wide like a wall.

“No.” Jiang Baimian—who had disguised herself—shook her head without hesitation. “We were at the café by the side of the road. There—that one. We are Ruin Hunters who were drinking coffee there. When we saw this person injured, we came out to provide first-aid. Sir, as you know, this is a necessary skill for Ruin Hunters.”

“That's right, that's right.” Shang Jianyao nodded in agreement.

The wall-like sheriff looked down at Garibaldi. “You guys are pretty good at first aid, but we will need your statement at the Public Security Department. Also, if the coffee isn't paid for, go back and make up for it.”

“We paid for it when ordering.” Jiang Baimian wanted to make it clear that they weren't people who ate without paying.

Shang Jianyao diverted the topic. “Maybe the boss will waive the bill because of our chivalrous act.”

He wanted to say ‘act bravely for a just cause,’ but he momentarily forgot what the corresponding phrases in Red River language were. Hence, he could only use ‘chivalrous act.’

The sheriff ignored him. As he led the two of them to examine the gunman's corpse, he got his subordinates to ask the bystanders in the surrounding shops and onlookers by the side of the road to gather more clues.

During this process, he didn't forget to get a sheriff to drive Garibaldi to the nearest hospital.

“Quite methodical...” Jiang Baimian praised softly.

She realized that First City wasn't too decadent. There were still many talents at the bottom ranks of society.

“That's right. The smartest thing he did was not respond to me.” Shang Jianyao agreed deeply.

As all the witnesses confirmed that Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao had later left the café to help the injured, they were 'chased out' from the Public Security Department after recording their statements. They weren't provided dinner.

They also learned that the sheriff was named Wall and that he seemed to be a descendant of a noble.

...

In the rented apartment at Red Wolf Zone, the Old Task Force's five people gathered again.

"Who did it?" Long Yuehong asked eagerly.

"It was ordered by a person named Old K. I don't know the exact reason, but we'll just report it to the company." Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "From the change in Garibaldi's expression, I suspect it's a personal grudge."

"He looks alright. Maybe he stole the other guy's wife," Shang Jianyao guessed.

Long Yuehong muttered, "Not everyone is Weiler."

Weiler was Redstone Collection's coroner. He was a playboy who had once seduced his superior's wife and had no choice but to flee.

"But there are many such people," Genova said truthfully.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and took out the pieces of paper that Garibaldi had given her. "In any case, it doesn't involve us. Old Ge, project these out. Everyone, let's read the information together."

As she had already scanned through the cigarette butt's laboratory report, Jiang Baimian focused her attention on the real Father's assassination of Senate Elder Sols and the current political situation in First City.

Sols was targeted by the Anti-intellectualism Church because of his main promotion of civic education. As an Elder, he definitely had no lack of protection. As for the real Father's method, it was still his modus operandi—a diversion. After Sols—who had participated in a public activity—believed that he had escaped danger and felt relieved, the real Father suddenly appeared and completed the culling under the weakened security.

The key to the successful assassination was to catch the enemy by surprise. First City's Elders had learned a lesson from this and specially enhanced the relevant measures.

From then on, the Anti-intellectualism Church's sporadic operations didn't succeed.

At present, Jiang Baimian noticed that the conflict between the Reformists and the Conservatives in First City had indeed intensified. The latter's leader—Consul Beulis—wanted to protect Varro, while the former's representative, Gaius, was aggressive.

There were mainly two people that prevented the two parties from falling out. One was General Phocas—who led the Zhao family manor's operation—and the other was Superintendent Alexander.