

Ad Infinitum 431

Chapter 431: Gift

The Old Task Force deliberately took a detour, crossed the Red River from elsewhere, and returned to First City from the southeast. This was because they were afraid that the advance base camp's garrison would report the fact that they had many military exoskeletons. When the time came, even their acquaintances wouldn't help them and might even add to their troubles.

Compared to the North Shore entrance, there were a large number of manors southeast of First City. Many citizens came and went every day, so the inspection wasn't that strict. In addition, the matter of capturing the colosseum assassination's accomplices had been going on for many days. The soldiers were definitely not putting in as much effort as before.

After entering the city and returning to a safe house, Jiang Baimian looked at the sky and said, "Today's mission is to rest and recuperate. There are three things to do tomorrow. The first is to return the car and get another one. We'll also change the jeep back to its original paint job. The second is to go to the Golden Grain Zone to find the Mirror Church's Smith. The third—which is the most important—is to visit Xiaochong."

Be it to prevent this King of Heartless from instinctively influencing First City residents or asking him for help in certain matters, the Old Task Force had to visit him and 'chat.'

To Shang Jianyao, meeting a friend was a very important matter.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped for Jiang Baimian's arrangement.

"Xiaochong should be pretty friendly to us..." Long Yuehong muttered in a tone of self-consolation.

Bai Chen echoed, "As long as we don't anger him and go along with him, nothing will happen."

At this moment, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Since it's a visit, shouldn't we bring some gifts? Otherwise, it might appear rude?"

Long Yuehong was a little confused and subconsciously wanted to say: “There’s no need for that, right?”

Among Pangu Biology’s ordinary employees, they didn’t have the habit of giving gifts during festive seasons or daily visits because of their limited quota, limited contribution points, and insufficient supplies. Their interactions were more about visits for socializing.

“That’s true.” Bai Chen agreed with her team leader. Among wilderness nomads and Ruin Hunters, it was normal for people to be short on supplies, food, and clothing, so there was no custom like bringing gifts for a house visit. But the less supplies there were, the more effective the bribery effect gifts had. Bai Chen occasionally did something ‘illegal.’ When she sought convenience, she would pool together resources with a few people and bribe the guards or the supervisor.

Genava had a rich database regarding human gifting, so he directly asked, “What should we give?”

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that he had no interest in discussing this topic at all. He looked as if he was saying: “A true friend appreciates the thought, not the gift.”

“Erh, food?” Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and thought for a moment before saying, “I remember Xiaochong saying that he also eats, but that he doesn’t eat a lot. Furthermore, he taught those Superior Heartless how to use fire to roast and cook.”

“Bring a pile of beef, canned food, and potatoes for Xiaochong?” Long Yuehong was especially enthusiastic when it came to this topic. He felt that this was a gift that no human in the Ashlands could resist.

Of course, Xiaochong might not be considered ‘human.’

“Won’t it be a little strange? He still has to prepare the food himself.” Jiang Baimian evaluated politely.

“I usually give food that’s convenient to eat.” Bai Chen recalled her past experiences. “There’s no problem with canned food, so we can strike off the potatoes and beef. They can be switched to bread. There’s also First City’s more unique pizza. It’s best to choose the kind with cream. You can buy it on Red Wolf Zone’s streets that are in better condition. Children prefer such food.”

“You seem to be good at coaxing children.” Jiang Baimian laughed.

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “Sometimes.”

“Is this because they remind you of your childhood?” Genava asked questions for anything he didn’t know.

You stupid robot, pay attention to your EQ! You’re about to form a Heng-Ha[1] duo who are always in cahoots with each other! Jiang Baimian couldn’t stop him in time and could only curse Old Ge inwardly.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and said after a few seconds, “Yes.”

Her voice was very low and unclear, but she wasn’t angry, nor did she seem embarrassed.

Jiang Baimian quickly changed the topic. “Apart from food, we can also consider Xiaochong’s favorite games.”

“A gaming cartridge?” Shang Jianyao perked up as if he wanted to personally choose one for Xiaochong and play with him.

Xiaochong’s Old World game console used cartridges.

“There are very few game cartridges that remain to this day, so it’s not that easy to obtain them.” As she spoke, Jiang Baimian laughed. “However, we have many computer games.”

It was part of the Old World’s entertainment they had gathered in Tarnan.

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s perplexity, Jiang Baimian added, “We’ll gift Xiaochong the latest computer model and install all kinds of games in it!”

From then on, the King of the Heartless will be completely obsessed with games and will never want to destroy the world again... This thought inexplicably surfaced in Long Yuehong’s mind. He then subconsciously said, “It’s very expensive.”

It was especially expensive in First City.

“The latest portable computer here costs about 800 to 900 Oray, or even more,” Bai Chen gave the price.

“800 to 900?” Jiang Baimian was shocked. She knew it was expensive, but she didn’t expect it to be this expensive.

In Mechanical Paradise’s Tarnan, the latest portable computer was only about 100 Oray. A slightly inferior older model could be obtained for 50 to 60 Oray.

“It’s around that price.” Genova confirmed Bai Chen’s words.

When Mechanical Paradise’s delegation transacted with Weed City, they paid attention to the value of the corresponding electronic products in the surrounding area.

Jiang Baimian quickly calmed down and deliberated before saying, “There are two possibilities. The first is to use the funds we applied for on this. In any case, we’ll just keep the tiny bit we owe the Blackshirts after the payment. They probably won’t rush us even if we drag it out for another week or two. The second is to squeeze one from the team for Xiaochong. Hmm, let’s use mine.”

“Use mine. Yours has many documents and data,” Bai Chen calmly suggested.

“That works.” Jiang Baimian waved her hand with feigned lavishness. “I’ll make it up to you later!”

After settling this matter, Jiang Baimian hesitated again. “Isn’t it inappropriate to give such an expensive gift from the beginning? I wonder if Xiaochong has heard of the saying: One who is unaccountably solicitous is hiding evil intentions...”

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong looked at each other and thought for a moment. “We can give it to him on our second visit. We’ll bring some food on the first visit for a pure chat. Don’t mention anything that requires help and focus on deepening our relationship.”

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “This plan is relatively safe.”

“Team Leader, should we bring a set of clothes along?” Long Yuehong took the initiative to add, “I remember that Xiaochong only brought the game console and its components when he left the basement. He didn’t bring any clothes.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Not for the time being. I’m afraid that there’s a special meaning to that set of clothes, so getting him to change might result in something terrifying. But now that you mention it, I remember a situation. Xiaochong really wanted to eat tomato omelet back then. Yes, we can bring some tomatoes and some eggs. We’ll decide if we should cook for him based on the situation.”

“That works!” Shang Jianyao wiped the corners of his mouth.

“Then, it’s decided.” Jiang Baimian exhaled and took out her radio transceiver. As they were only receiving and not sending out signals, they didn’t go to a designated safe house.

At the agreed time, Pangu Biology responded to their report from last night: “As long as you don’t enter Wasteland Ruin 13 again, everything will be fine in three days.”

“I guess it will be tough on us for the next three days.” Jiang Baimian waved the telegram in her hand.

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief when he heard the company’s clear instructions.

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The night passed uneventfully; nothing happened to the Old Task Force.

They returned the car they had rented and went to another rental company to rent a multi-purpose car. They then bought the food they had agreed on.

On the way, they even sprayed their team’s jeep back into its original grayish-green color.

After finishing these matters, the two cars drove into the Red Wolf Zone one after another and went straight to the street Shang Jianyao had gone to in his dream. Before long, they arrived at their destination and found the building by the street.

They walked up to the fifth floor step by step, and Shang Jianyao ran to the door on his right and started banging on it. This time, he didn't shout, "Xiaochong."

After dozens of seconds, the door creaked open. What greeted Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and the others was a terrifying cat creature with exposed blood-red muscles.

"Meow~" It wasn't Slumber Cat who meowed but Shang Jianyao. He tried to greet the other party with his newly learned cat language.

The Slumber Cat glanced at him disdainfully and made way for him to enter the room.

Jiang Baimian looked over and saw the large television, black game console, and corresponding controller. She also saw the black-haired boy in a yellow outfit, Xiaochong.

His red school bag was beside him.

"Xiaochong!" Shang Jianyao shouted sincerely. "Have you eaten? I brought you some pizza and cream buns, as well as tomatoes and eggs. We can make you tomato omelet."

Xiaochong hesitated for a few seconds before pressing the pause button. He reluctantly stood up and said, "Alright."

Gulp.

He gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

Chapter 432: A Few Words

Fifteen minutes later, Xiaochong picked up some tomato omelet and stuffed them into his mouth.

"Delicious," he praised in satisfaction. "They don't know how to cook this. All they know is roasting and boiling. Besides, they sometimes have it either charred or covered in blood."

With that said, he took another bite of a slice of pizza and looked rather happy.

“This dish is very simple.” Jiang Baimian deliberately suggested, “Why don’t I teach them?”

The reason she took 15 minutes was that she still had to clean up the messy kitchen with Long Yuehong and Bai Chen.

Xiaochong hesitated for a moment. “Not for the time being. They can’t learn it now either.”

The Superior Heartless’s intelligence can only be restored to such a level? Jiang Baimian pretended to sigh in disappointment. “Alright.”

She had sensed the bioelectric signals around her, but this was an apartment building. People lived here, so she couldn’t tell where the Superior Heartless—who were protecting Xiaochong—were hiding.

As for the Slumber Cat, it lay on the balcony and dozed off while basking under the sun.

Upon seeing Xiaochong eat happily, Shang Jianyao accompanied him and asked in concern, “Did you directly come here after leaving that area?”

“Mm, mm.” Xiaochong was busy eating and couldn’t answer clearly. “After leaving the swamp, I heard some Hunters say that First City is the largest city in the world. Believing that it should have electricity here, I came over.”

“Have you always lived in this apartment, or have you just moved here?” Jiang Baimian asked casually.

Xiaochong swallowed the tomato omelet in his mouth. “It’s so troublesome to move, so I try not to move if I can. There aren’t many power outages here either.”

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian slowly nodded. If Xiaochong isn’t lying, the Heartless disease epidemic that happened in the Green Olive Zone shouldn’t have been brought about by him based on the current situation. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have turned out that his surroundings weren’t affected while a disaster happened far away.

After Xiaochong was half-full, he politely asked, “Why are you guys here?”

“We’re here to investigate something.” Jiang Baimian used Mechanical Paradise’s concern for Oray’s whereabouts as an excuse to talk about how they had tried to find Avia and Marcus but couldn’t approach them. While doing so, she emphasized the Virtual World.

“Amazing,” Xiaochong praised as if he were listening to a story. As he ate, he listened with relish.

This answer... is almost no different from the company’s response... Jiang Baimian helplessly sighed inwardly. She then said, “We later met a person in a bathhouse. He was scared by your cat, so we knew that you were in First City as well.”

“I see.” Xiaochong came to a realization, but this didn’t stop him from eating the pizza and tomato omelet.

Shang Jianyao added, “We spent some time searching for you. We heard that the Nightmare Horse appeared in the North Shore Mountains, so we went there, hoping to encounter it.”

“It’s taken fancy to a white wolf and spends all its time wandering that area. It doesn’t even spend its time doing proper work,” grumbled Xiaochong.

Does proper work refer to being a laborer to earn money to support you? Long Yuehong couldn’t help but criticize inwardly.

Facing the King of Heartless, he didn’t dare interject, afraid that he would accidentally say something wrong and anger the other party.

The next second, Xiaochong turned his head and glanced at him. This scared Long Yuehong so much that his heart started racing.

He can sense that I’m speaking ill of him behind his back? Long Yuehong couldn’t help but make such a connection and dared not mutter nonsense again.

Jiang Baimian went along with Xiaochong and said, “We also encountered that white wolf. It can control humans...”

She recounted her two encounters with the white wolf and took the opportunity to talk about how the Old Task Force had entered Wasteland Ruin 13. She then mentioned Wu Meng's horror and how Waite, Fars, and Ferrington committed suicide with a tone of lingering fear.

"That person is very strong," said Xiaochong without looking up. His attention was on the plate of tomato omelet and the remaining pizza in front of him. As for the two cream buns, he had already made arrangements and planned on eating them at night.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian to say another word, Xiaochong suddenly looked up and smiled. "If you wish to go again, you can find the Ruin Hunter named Du Heng."

At this moment, Jiang Baimian actually saw craftiness on the seven-year-old boy's face.

"We met Du Heng some time ago," Shang Jianyao immediately reminded his good friend.

"Huh?" Xiaochong's chopsticks froze in midair. After a few seconds, he muttered, "I knew it. I was wondering why I kept getting a little frustrated these days. I wasn't enjoying my games anymore."

"What does he want to do to you?" Jiang Baimian probed.

Xiaochong's face clouded over with a hint of grievance. "He wants to capture me and bring me back."

"Bring you back?" Bai Chen was rather sensitive to this term as she blurted out.

Xiaochong snorted and continued eating his lunch without answering.

Du Heng's background isn't simple... Long Yuehong couldn't help but sigh with emotion.

Jiang Baimian instantly had a guess based on this sentence. Could Du Heng be a high-ranking special agent from a research institute whose mission is to capture Xiaochong? In the end, he lost his memories because of a certain problem during his mission, and all that's left is his obsession?

"Are you moving? We can help," Shang Jianyao suggested enthusiastically.

Xiaochong stopped eating and thought for a moment. “There’s no need. I’m better at playing hide and seek than him, so he shouldn’t be able to find me for the time being. He might go elsewhere in a few days.”

Why does a ‘child’ like you have the problem of procrastination... Jiang Baimian didn’t force him.

As they chatted, Xiaochong finished his lunch and rubbed his stomach in satisfaction. He then turned his head and said to Shang Jianyao with bright eyes, “Let’s play games!”

“Sure!” Shang Jianyao had a look that said: “I’ve been waiting.”

He then said, “We previously obtained a batch of the latest models of portable computers in Tarnan. There are many Old World games installed on them. Do you want one?”

Xiaochong was stunned for all of two seconds. “H-how can I accept it? There’s no need...”

His heart palpitated, and he was just short of opening his bag and getting the Old Task Force to stuff it in as he rejected the offer.

“Are we good friends?” Shang Jianyao asked seriously.

Xiaochong hesitated for a moment. “Yes...”

He then nodded. “Yes.”

“Don’t refuse it then,” Shang Jianyao said righteously.

Xiaochong smiled. “When are you coming next?”

“We’ll come again in a few days.” Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief.

“Can you bring some more food?” Xiaochong had an expectant look. This matched his childlike appearance, inexplicably melting Jiang Baimian and the others’ hearts.

This was what they had planned to do.

“That’s simple,” Shang Jianyao replied with a smile.

Xiaochong immediately beamed and pulled Shang Jianyao to the game console.

At 4 p.m., the Old Task Force—which had other matters to attend to—left Xiaochong’s rented apartment.

“Cya!” Shang Jianyao waved his hand reluctantly.

“Cya!” Xiaochong said the same.

After returning to the jeep, Long Yuehong exhaled and said, “This kind of social interaction is exhausting.”

“How is it exhausting?” Shang Jianyao expressed his confusion.

“Of course, you aren’t exhausted. You were only playing games!” Jiang Baimian snorted. “We still had to help Xiaochong clean the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom.”

This made her no different from a nanny.

Shang Jianyao hesitated for a second and said, “I can let you play games with him next time.”

“Thanks a lot!” Jiang Baimian replied in amusement. She then sighed with emotion. “Our visit met my expectations today.”

“Yes, I can tell that Xiaochong’s impression of us has improved significantly.” Bai Chen—who was driving—also felt that their visit had achieved their goal.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Genava in the backseat. “Did you discover anything abnormal about Xiaochong?”

Genava shook his head.

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9 Haray Street, Golden Grain Zone, under the apartment building rented by the Mirror Church member, Smith.

“503... This door number always reminds me of something bad,” Long Yuehong said in fear.

Jiang Xiaoyue’s room in the Mind Corridor was 503.

Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “This should be a pure coincidence. There doesn’t seem to be a connection between the two.”

Of course, she wasn’t too sure. Anything was possible.

The quintet maintained a vigilant attitude and slowly walked up the stairs. Upon reaching the target floor, Shang Jianyao looked at Room 503 and smiled. “No one.”

Jiang Baimian nodded. “There are no electric signals from medium-large creatures.”

The room was silent.

Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong asked, “Shall we wait a while or find a way to enter to see if there are any clues?”

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, Shang Jianyao had already ‘reprimanded’ Long Yuehong. “That’s rude!”

“Yes, we’re asking about the Mirror Church, not becoming enemies with them. There’s no need to do such a thing.” Jiang Baimian stood on Shang Jianyao’s side this time.

“I’m actually more inclined to wait,” Long Yuehong defended himself softly.

Therefore, the Old Task Force chose to wait. They waited for hours until the sky turned completely dark.

Chapter 433: Ritual

In the multi-purpose car parked by the street, Long Yuehong looked at the apartment entrance illuminated by the street lamps and asked in confusion, “Has he moved away?”

It was already eight or nine in the evening. The Old Task Force members had already taken turns to eat dinner, but Smith still wasn’t back.

They waited outside the apartment building, not outside Smith’s room. If all five of them squatted there, they would definitely scare the people coming and going. In any case, with Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian’s current perception range, they could monitor the corresponding room from the street below.

Shang Jianyao heaved a sigh of relief when he heard Long Yuehong’s words. “That means he hasn’t moved away.”

Jiang Baimian glared at him. “Go up and ask Smith’s neighbor. We can’t just wait.”

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong were in charge of questioning. They were the ones in the team who didn’t stand out and wouldn’t startle the apartment residents.

Room 502.

The person who opened the door was a woman. After she saw that the visitor was a stranger, she closed the door with a bang before Bai Chen could speak.

“Can’t she use the peephole to observe first?” Long Yuehong said aggrievedly. He was already prepared to ask his question.

Bai Chen looked at the peephole above the door lock. “It looks damaged.”

After more than ten seconds, the door opened again.

The person standing at the door switched to a muscular man. He wore a black, short-sleeved T-shirt. Although his clothes were old, there were no traces of sewing.

“You are?” the man asked in confusion.

As Long Yuehong smiled, Bai Chen pointed at Room 503. “We’re Smith’s friends. We came to find him today, but he never returned. Do you know where he went?”

“Him?” The man recalled and said, “He occasionally returns very late. Wait a little longer.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen nodded. “Thank you.”

As they walked down the stairs, Long Yuehong asked in confusion, “What exactly would make him return late occasionally?”

“Getting some enjoyment after receiving his salary, participating in the Church’s activities, being a temporary teacher at a night school...” Bai Chen raised many possibilities.

They quickly passed the information to Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Genava. Everyone unanimously decided to wait until midnight.

The Golden Grain Zone was clearly safer than the Green Olive Zone. The streets were also cleaner, creating a quiet atmosphere in the dark night.

Rain pattered down, making the street lamps on both sides appear dim.

When it was almost 11 p.m., a person appeared from a corner. He held a black umbrella in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other.

He was thin and four to five centimeters shorter than Long Yuehong. He wore a linen shirt and baggy, earthen-yellow pants. His eye sockets were deep, and his skin was brown. His beard was shaved very clean.

He looked nothing special, but he was of mixed-blood, a cross between the Red River ethnicity and Red Coasters. This matched Ferrington’s description of Smith.

Upon seeing this person enter the apartment building, the four Old Task Force members immediately perked up.

Genava also got out of power-saving mode.

After a minute or two, Shang Jianyao laughed. "There's someone in the room."

"But why didn't he switch on the lights?" Long Yuehong looked at Room 503's window.

The lights there weren't switched on.

"To save electricity," Bai Chen gave her explanation.

"Then, let's visit Smith." Jiang Baimian didn't get Genava to stay behind. After all, the other party was involved in a religious organization. Nobody knew if an accident would happen.

With a smart bot like Genava following them, the Old Task Force's fault tolerance would clearly increase.

After returning to the building's fifth floor, Shang Jianyao volunteered to knock on the door. They had already tried before, but Room 503's doorbell was either broken or had no batteries.

He knocked three times, but there was no sound behind the door.

Jiang Baimian frowned and said, "His bioelectric signal is still there, but it's stopped in place and motionless."

Shang Jianyao nodded. "Same for his consciousness."

"He shouldn't have fallen asleep so quickly..." Long Yuehong was suddenly shocked by his guess. "Did something happen?"

Although he felt that it was unlikely to be a coincidence, the Old Task Force had encountered many coincidences all this time.

Shang Jianyao knocked on the door again, but there was still no movement inside.

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and signaled Bai Chen.

Bai Chen took out a piece of metal wire she carried with her and inserted it into the keyhole before twisting it a few times.

The door opened silently.

The apartment was pitch-black. Only the weak light streaming in from the window illuminated some of the walls.

It was a rainy night with no moon or stars.

“In the bedroom,” Jiang Baimian said with a hushed tone.

One could see faint yellow light seeping out of the bedroom door.

The Old Task Force’s four human members drew their pistols and bent their backs slightly as they walked to the room inside. As they advanced, they naturally assumed a combat formation.

Genava followed behind and crept forward, afraid he would create unnecessary sounds.

The bedroom door wasn’t locked and was ajar.

Shang Jianyao glanced at Jiang Baimian and the others—who were already in position—and pushed open the door.

The situation inside quickly reflected in their eyes.

A wooden bed was placed against a curtained window. In front of it was a table, and on the table was a large rectangular mirror.

The only source of light in the dark room came from the two white candles in front of the mirror. They gently flickered with yellowish flames and reflected their figures in the mirror.

Sitting at the table and looking at the mirror and candle was the man in the linen shirt from before. He wore headphones over his head, and a brown paper bag was by his feet. He held a red apple in his hand and was slowly peeling the skin.

With it being almost midnight, why would a man sit in front of a mirror, face a candle, and peel an apple in a room without anyone else?

This scene couldn't help but stoke Long Yuehong's fears. He sensed something bizarre.

Upon sensing the wind blow in, the man turned his head and looked at the door. He jumped up and gestured with the fruit knife in his hand. "Who are you?"

He was clearly terrified.

This instantly dispersed the supernatural atmosphere in the room.

"We're Ferrington's friends. We came here to find you." Jiang Baimian smiled and introduced herself.

The man asked in confusion, "Ah, what did you say?"

"..." Jiang Baimian suddenly felt like she was facing herself.

The next second, the man realized something and took off his headphones.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian repeated her words and added, "You're Smith, right?"

“Yes.” Smith heaved a sigh of relief. “How can you enter someone else’s home without permission?”

“We saw you return, and we knocked on the door. But nobody opened the door, so we thought you had a sudden illness,” Jiang Baimian said sincerely. “I’m very sorry for using some tricks to open the door.”

Smith thought for a moment and felt that the other party was indeed being kind. He then exhaled and said, “Don’t do this in the future. Maybe I’m just constipated?”

“That makes sense.” Shang Jianyao accepted this explanation.

Smith put down the fruit knife and quietly pressed his right palm on the Red River pistol at his waist. He then asked, “Where’s Ferrington? He’s not back yet?”

“He passed away under the white wolf’s influence.” Jiang Baimian spoke a specious truth.

Smith fell silent for a few seconds before sighing. “I knew that it wasn’t simple. I told him not to go.”

After sighing about Ferrington, Smith pointed at the living room outside. “Let’s talk outside.”

Having these people block the bedroom door made him uncomfortable.

The light in the living room was quickly switched on. Smith found a spot conducive for escaping and sat down. He then asked, “Why are you looking for me?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “We come from the south and had a conflict with a group of Clam Dragon Church members. Their illusions are very powerful, and we suffered quite badly. I heard that your Church is also good at this, so we wanted to consult you on how to deal with them.”

Jiang Baimian spoke with a poker face.

Smith’s expression changed a few times. “Those heretics...”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong exclaimed.

Jiang Baimian then asked, “Do you also believe in the Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror?”

Smith nodded slightly, raised his palms, and placed them in front of his face as if he were looking in a mirror. The church parishioner then said in a deep voice, “One will eventually awaken from the dream; the New World lies beyond the mirror.”

Long Yuehong expressed his confusion. “But Ferrington said that you don’t worship any Kalendaria and only believe in mirrors.”

Smith was stunned for two seconds. “I never said that. I only said that we believe in mirrors, and mirrors are the Kalendaria—Shattered Mirror. Yes, it seems like he misunderstood. It’s no wonder he refused to join us.”

At this point, Smith exhaled and said with a solemn expression, “Those heretics actually ignored the sacred mirror and believe that the Kalendaria is a dragon. I wonder where they got that from!”

“Oh.” Shang Jianyao looked enlightened. “Then, what’s your Holy Communion?”

Smith pointed at the bedroom. “An apple. In a room without anyone else, stuff your ears, light a candle, and peel its skin in front of a mirror. It’s a prerequisite ritual for enjoying Holy Communion. If the skin doesn’t break during the peeling process, you will receive the Kalendaria’s blessing for a period of time.”

Don’t you find this ritual terrifying? Long Yuehong immediately muttered.

“Oh.” Shang Jianyao didn’t ask any further.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Good luck. Yes, what is your religion’s name?”

“The Mirror Church,” Smith said proudly. “We don’t casually rope in believers. Only after years of observation and believing that it’s possible will we extend an invitation.”

At this point, he revealed a troubled expression. “I don’t have much research on illusions. I’m more focused on the teachings, so I might not be able to help you.”

Your description for not being an Awakened is quite a new spin... Long Yuehong took a moment before understanding Smith’s true meaning.

Smith paused and said, “I only know how to target the weaknesses. I can also help you contact the priest, but he might not meet you.”

Chapter 434: New Direction

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment and suddenly smiled. “There’s no need for that; we can’t trouble you. This will let the priest know that you didn’t succeed in roping in believers.”

That wasn’t actually the point. Not only had he failed, but he had also exposed the Mirror Church’s situation.

Jiang Baimian didn’t say it out loud, but she believed that Smith could understand.

Smith didn’t know if the other party was being kind or if she was utilizing her retreat as a way to advance and, in a way, threaten him. He hesitated for a few seconds before saying, “Aren’t you taking revenge on the Clam Dragon Church then?”

He wasn’t the only one surprised. Long Yuehong was also confused. What is Team Leader planning?

Jiang Baimian smiled. “We will naturally take revenge if we can; otherwise, forget it. In the Ashlands, it’s very foolish to insist that no losses are taken and that there are no grudges. It’s often a waste of time and resources. One might even lose their lives and their companions’ lives. As long as we’re still alive, it’s nothing serious.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped, stunning Smith.

“I can understand that.” After a while, Smith exhaled and said, “I’ve seen too many people blinded by hatred and become irrational, only to throw away their remaining lives.”

At this point, he nodded gratefully. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of much help.”

Jiang Baimian looked around. “Then, we’ll take our leave. Bye.”

“One will eventually awaken from the dream.” Smith stood up, raised his palms, and shielded his eyes like a mirror.

After leaving the apartment and returning to the car, Long Yuehong—who had been holding back for a long time—couldn’t help but say, “Team Leader, are we giving up just like that? Are we really not meeting the priest?”

Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and smiled. “After discovering that the Mirror Church also believes in a Kalendaria, I didn’t plan on establishing contact with them.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong felt that even Shang Jianyao couldn’t understand his team leader’s train of thought.

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “They believe in the Kalendaria and view the Clam Dragon Church as heretical. They have a sufficient understanding of Awakened, so that means the Mirror Church isn’t small in scale. It has no lack of powerhouses, and they definitely have a corresponding influence in First City. Do you remember? The ones working with First City to protect Oray’s descendants are Mind Corridor-level Awakened who are good at illusions. I suspect that it might be the Mirror Church’s higher-ups and that they have a deep partnership with First City.”

“That’s true...” Long Yuehong was shocked.

If Jiang Baimian’s guess was right, the situation might very well develop into them consulting a Mind Corridor-level Awakened on how to crack the Virtual World if they refused to give up on the Mirror Church.

They would be doomed right there and then!

Bai Chen echoed, “I also think we have to be careful in this matter. One can never be too careful.”

“This is actually an opportunity.” Shang Jianyao flaunted his newly learned mantra. “The more dangerous it is, the more one should take risks...”

He couldn't finish the latter half of the sentence because of the team's glares.

Genava also mimicked Jiang Baimian and cast a red glow at him.

As the jeep drove out of Haray Street, Long Yuehong raised a new question. “What should we do next then? We can't continue with the Mirror Church, so where else can we get information on how to crack the virtual world?”

Jiang Baimian smiled and guided him patiently. “Think about it from a different perspective.”

Long Yuehong thought for a while and secretly glanced at Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen. He realized that they had seemingly come to a realization.

Why am I the only one who can't figure it out... Long Yuehong was a little vexed.

The next second, Bai Chen—who was driving—took the initiative to ask, “Start with the Mirror Church's enemy? The ones who know you best are often your enemies.”

“A child worth teaching.” The one clapping and smiling wasn't Jiang Baimian but Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance and smiled. “We can ask the Clam Dragon Church! They are a religion mainly made up of Ashlandics. They don't have many believers in First City, so they shouldn't have any connection with the Mind Corridor-level Awakened that protects Avia and Marcus. Besides, they are at odds with the Mirror Church. They might be willing to give some hints.”

That's right. The Clam Dragon Church is also an expert in illusions... Long Yuehong completely understood Jiang Baimian's train of thought. He then posed a practical question. “How do we make contact with the Clam Dragon Church?”

They were mainly active south of the Ashlands, and there were almost no believers in First City.

“You have to ask Old Ge this question,” Shang Jianyao replied on Jiang Baimian’s behalf.

Genava moved his metal neck. “I remember the Tarnan Hunter’s Guild’s telegram frequency. We can get their help to contact Abbess Zhou Yue.”

I’m really stupid, really... Old Ge was once mayor of Tarnan. Even if he didn’t know Nanke Convent’s telegraph frequency, he definitely knew the Hunter’s Guild and the various chambers of commerce... While Long Yuehong was a little depressed, he said in relief, “It seems like we can make it in time for the gladiator fights in a few days then.”

During working hours the next day, Jiang Baimian sent a telegram to the Tarnan Hunter’s Guild under the name ‘October Xue’ and asked them to contact Abbess Zhou Yue on her behalf.

...

In Tarnan, the local president—Gu Bo—picked up the telegram sent by his subordinate. His white hair was thinning, but his dark brown eyes remained spirited.

Gu Bo muttered in confusion, “Looking for Zhou Yue? Why are they looking for Zhou Yue when they ran away after causing such a huge commotion?”

He then grumbled, “Seriously, as Ruin Hunters, you don’t have any self-awareness or professionalism. If you want to get someone to do something, you have to commission a mission first! Sigh, on account of the care given by Genava, I’ll reluctantly do the errand.”

At Nanke Convent, Gu Bo met Zhou Yue—who was wearing a white robe that was tied with a hemp rope.

“You are...” Zhou Yue compared her height with the other party and guessed happily, “President Gu?”

The thin and small Gu Bo wasn’t happy that the face-blind patient had memorized his characteristics. He snapped, “Pretend not to recognize me next time.”

“Alright.” Zhou Yue readily agreed. “Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?”

Gu Bo took out the telegram. “October Xue and the others are looking for you.”

Zhou Yue’s eyes widened. “They’re here for the batch of smoked meat?”

Her heart ached a little as she felt the pinch.

...

With the help of the Tarnan Hunter’s Guild, the Old Task Force directly contacted Nanke Convent.

Jiang Baimian didn’t stand on ceremony and expressed that she would reserve the reward for her but that she had to answer one of their questions.

Zhou Yue said that she had to think about it seriously and reply at night.

After finishing this matter, the Old Task Force first went to First City’s Hunter’s Guild and commissioned the mission of finding Waite and the others’ families to return the supplies. They then carried the supplies they had gathered in Wasteland Ruin 13 and headed to the house of the Blackshirts’ second boss, Terrence, on Stern Street.

Terrence’s eyes widened when he saw such a large pile of expensive items. “W-where did this come from?”

October Xue’s team could actually gather so many valuable items so quickly?

Upon hearing his question, Shang Jianyao smiled. “We mugged.”

At this moment, Terrence actually felt a hint of coldness despite the hot summer.

“He’s joking. During our pursuit of the white wolf, we discovered a few ruins in the mountains. Our luck was pretty good.” Jiang Baimian picked up the cup containing iced Coke and drank a mouthful of it in satisfaction.

Terrence heaved a sigh of relief, wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, and seriously examined the pile of items. After a while, he got his subordinate to bring him a calculator as he tapped it.

“After this, there’s still 6,000 Oray left.” Terrence gave the results first before explaining, “I’ve already given your supplies the highest price...”

“Alright, but this 6,000 Oray will take some time.” Jiang Baimian nodded.

Shang Jianyao gulped down his iced Coke beside her, feeling very refreshed.

Terrence replied without hesitation, “No problem!”

He felt that his life was definitely worth 6,000 Oray.

...

At the agreed time at night, Zhou Yue sent a telegram back: “Apart from splashing water, you can consider closing the door and extinguishing the lights while the target is in the bathroom.”

“What weakness is this?” Long Yuehong was especially confused after hearing his team leader’s recount.

“People are always very fragile when they’re in the bathroom.” Shang Jianyao sighed with emotion.

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully replied, “I remember that Abbess Zhou brought a sack with her when she dealt with the Superior Heartless...”

She then said, “Also, I wonder if you’ve noticed that Marcus didn’t go to the bathroom like the other nobles during the colosseum intermission. He was in the nobles’ private room for two hours. Furthermore, he drank very, very little water.”

This wasn’t something worth paying attention to because it was common for adults not to drink water or not go to the bathroom for two hours. Back then, many people in the colosseum did the same, so Jiang Baimian didn’t consider it a problem previously. But now, she couldn’t help but suspect something when she connected the matter to Zhou Yue’s suggestion.

Chapter 435: Data Spoofing

Long Yuehong subconsciously replied to Jiang Baimian, “Back then, many nobles in the room didn’t go to the bathroom despite drinking a lot of water.”

That bit of pressure was nothing to an adult’s bladder.

“That would normally be the case, but there might be a problem in this regard since Abbess Zhou mentioned it.” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Splashing water targets one’s hydrophobia... Switching off the bathroom lights and closing the door is to target the fear of darkness? But this is too complicated. There are many gratuitous actions, and the corresponding price might not be as simple as the fear of the dark.”

Bai Chen thought for a moment before saying, “The most important question now is how to complete this matter. It’s almost impossible to splash water on them because we don’t even know who created the Virtual World or where they are. We can only look forward to a rainy day. It’s not difficult to follow Marcus to the colosseum’s noble bathroom, close the door, and turn off the lights. The difficult part is how to get him to go.”

“No, no, no.” Shang Jianyao raised his finger and wagged it. “The action of you closing the door and switching off the lights will be filtered in the Virtual World. If the person is afraid of such a scene, they definitely won’t let it happen.”

That’s right. Abbess Zhou’s plan doesn’t have any feasibility in a Virtual World... Long Yuehong actually found Shang Jianyao reasonable this time.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “I’ve already considered this problem and have a corresponding plan.”

“How?” Long Yuehong was very curious. Why am I always unable to come up with a way to bypass the Virtual World?

Jiang Baimian glanced at Genava. “In computer science terms, it’s to disguise malicious data as safe. We can prepare a few phones in advance and enter First City’s communications network. Once we see Marcus in the bathroom, we’ll immediately call Old Ge, who is waiting far away.

“On the phone, we will only talk about normal things. It won’t sound problematic, and it won’t arouse suspicion. Among these matters, I will embed some data that Old Ge can decipher using an agreed-upon cipher to figure out how long he should wait before he takes action. After hanging up,

Old Ge will destroy the facilities in the distance at the appointed time or use a more ingenious method to cut the electricity in the arena!

“The bathroom will naturally become dark then. Besides, this is an objective reality. The Virtual World’s owner can’t stop it unless their Virtual World can cover Old Ge—who is two to three kilometers away. That would be too terrifying—there would be too much data to cover. As long as that person hasn’t entered the New World, they shouldn’t be able to do so.”

Awakened who entered the New World wouldn’t be active in the Ashlands.

Jiang Baimian paused and smiled. “Or they might’ve grasped the cipher we agreed on and can determine the key information hidden in our normal conversation, but that’s impossible. They aren’t an Awakened in the Last Man domain who can read our memories.”

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong already thought of terms like viruses, trojan horses, and data spoofing.

That can do? He realized that not only could the knowledge he had learned be used on electronics, but it could also be used in reality. In particular, the remote power outage completely avoided the Virtual World’s filter!

When I say ‘let’s have breakfast together at 8 a.m. tomorrow,’ the Virtual World definitely can’t filter out any problems. But in the ears of Old Ge—who knows the cipher in advance—this sentence is equivalent to ‘power outage in 80 seconds.’ The more he thought about it, the more magical he found it to be... Long Yuehong instantly felt the need to keep learning.

Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian in surprise. “Are you a senior?”

He meant: Are you also an electronics major?

“Self-taught.” Jiang Baimian chuckled. Clearing her throat, she seriously said, “Therefore, the point isn’t how to close the door and turn off the lights. It’s how to get Marcus to the bathroom.”

The Old Task Force members fell into a brief silence. They racked their brains in a bid to find a suitable plan.

Moments later, Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. “Have we considered social engineering? Bribe or persuade Marcus’s servants to give Marcus laxatives or diuretics in advance? We definitely can’t do it directly since those items will be filtered by the Virtual World. However, we can disguise them. For example, we can get Yellow which nobles often eat and complete this matter outside the Virtual World.”

Yellow itself had the ability to cause mild diarrhea. As for the Virtual World’s owner, they probably couldn’t tell if its effects had been enhanced externally. They would simply copy information.

“That’s a solution.” Jiang Baimian nodded. “But it’s not practical. We can’t enforce a situation where Marcus eats Yellow on the day he watches the gladiator fights. With his caution of not drinking water or going to the bathroom, he probably won’t eat such food the day he needs to go out. Also, servants will indeed walk out of the Virtual World’s range when they go out to shop, but we can’t be sure if this is a trap.”

Genava agreed with Jiang Baimian. “Hey, your plan is too idealistic, but I think the focus is right. Data spoofing is a very good direction. We can disguise malicious things that can cause diarrhea or increased urination as safe items to pass the Virtual World’s screening.”

Bai Chen had an idea. “I remember hearing some Ruin Hunters mention that it’s fine to eat some food separately. However, eating them at the same time will cause allergies, diarrhea, vomiting, and other conditions.”

“Yes, cephalosporins and alcohol.” Shang Jianyao gave a specific example.

This was mentioned in the Old World’s entertainment.

“There’s a problem with that too.” Jiang Baimian analyzed the situation from a feasibility perspective again. “If we let Marcus eat at home, he might go to the bathroom frequently before leaving and end up canceling his subsequent schedule. As you know, he doesn’t even drink water.”

The discussion came to a halt again. The five Old Task Force members encountered an insurmountable obstacle regarding how to get a normal person to the bathroom.

In order to gain inspiration, Jiang Baimian told Shang Jianyao not to be limited to food and to come up with anything he wanted.

“I’ll pass by him every five minutes to go to the bathroom to induce his interest.”

“Going to the bathroom doesn’t necessarily mean using the toilet. There are other possibilities. We can find an opportunity to dirty his pants and get him to clean up in the bathroom.”

...

“Figure out his preferences, disguise as his target, and seduce him to the bathroom.”

“There’s a fragrance dispenser in the VIP room. I wonder if the company has developed a diuretic version...”

These plans were eliminated by the other team members. Only the last one allowed everyone to reach a consensus on one matter: Send a telegram to the company to see if there were any new products that could promote bowel movement or diuresis. The premise was that there was no need for consumption and that they could rely on just scent or other methods to achieve their goals.

The Pangu Biology Security Department replied that they would inquire as soon as possible.

“Phew. Everyone, relax. Don’t be too tense.” Jiang Baimian looked out the window. “It’s not too late now. Let’s take a walk and breathe some fresh air.”

The air here isn’t fresh at all... Long Yuehong muttered inwardly, but he didn’t dare to say anything.

First City’s air quality had always been poor, apart from the Golden Apple Zone and the Golden Grain Zone—which were closer to the manors.

The Old Task Force was currently in a safe house near the Green Olive Zone in the Red Wolf Zone.

Since they had nothing to do, the others agreed to take a stroll outside and relax. After all, the team had previously gone to the North Shore Mountains and experienced Wasteland Ruin 13. They were mentally and physically exhausted.

Unlike the Green Olive Zone, not many street lamps in the Red Wolf Zone were malfunctioning. Even at night, people could still see quite well.

The pedestrians came and went in all kinds of clothes. They either rushed past or strolled leisurely.

Long Yuehong glanced at the shop by the street and sighed with emotion. “This place feels like the Old World’s night.”

His impression of the Old World’s nighttime came from two places. One was the appearance of Swamp Ruin 1 after it regained power, and the other was from scenes in the Old World entertainment.

Bai Chen calmly said, “But many of the busy people here are slaves.”

Long Yuehong was speechless.

Jiang Baimian was just about to change the topic when she suddenly heard a commotion coming from the Green Olive Zone. With her hearing, she noticed a rush of footsteps approaching from afar.

Soon, a figure jumped out from the side street and ran toward the alley diagonally opposite.

The figure had brown hair, green eyes, and a scarf covering his mouth. As he ran, his black trench coat rose slightly.

An accomplice to the gladiator assassin? The Citizen Conclave explosion’s suspect? Long Yuehong’s heart palpitated as he cast his gaze at the street where the man had run out.

Down the street, many public security officers were chasing with pistols and batons.

Chapter 436: Shang Jianyao’s New Train of Thought

Jiang Baimian watched the wanted criminal disappear into the alley diagonally opposite and chuckled. “He also came from the port area.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was a little confused. He then subconsciously followed his team leader’s gaze and looked at the ground illuminated by the street lamps.

Left behind on the street where the man suspected to be responsible for the Citizen Conclave explosion ran past and the step between the sidewalk and the motorway, there was some coal residue.

After the matter with the real Father, Jiang Baimian could easily guess where the other party had passed by.

Long Yuehong instantly understood what his team leader's judgment was based on.

As they spoke, the public security officers chasing him rushed to the street and randomly intercepted the passersby, anxiously asking if they had seen the person and where he had gone.

They also asked the Old Task Force.

"He went into that alley," Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others replied almost uniformly.

Coupled with the feedback from the other passersby, the public security officers didn't delay any longer and continued the chase.

"I keep having the feeling that the fellow comes out every few days not to be found but to walk the public security officers." Jiang Baimian looked at the pursuers' backs and smiled thoughtfully. "Or is he doing this to show his presence and attract attention?"

"Why do you say that?" Long Yuehong expressed his confusion again.

Genava sorted out the information in his database and deliberated over the analysis results. "He only encounters ordinary public security officers without any abilities every time. It seems too coincidental and seems selected."

Recalling their previous 'encounters,' Long Yuehong nodded slightly. "Indeed."

He then frowned and said, "But this is logical and reasonable. A large-scale investigation will definitely rely on ordinary public security officers at the grassroots level. The probability of encountering them is much higher than encountering a powerhouse from the Hand of Order."

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Jiang Baimian said with a smile before Shang Jianyao could strike his right fist into his left palm and say: “As expected—he’s walking those public security officers.”

“I’m only making a bold assumption based on the coincidences. I can’t verify it.” At this point, she suddenly sighed. “Actually, I rather hope they do something to generate chaos in First City. That way, our chances of cracking the Virtual World will be higher. Yes, I’m just not sure what they wish to do or what their goal is.”

After hearing Jiang Baimian’s sigh, Bai Chen walked forward and calmly said, “We once destroyed an opportunity to throw First City into chaos.”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian was first stunned before she came to a realization. “You mean the time when the Anti-intellectualism Church teamed up with the Church of Paragon Desire to cause trouble?”

After receiving an affirmative nod, she took a deep breath as if she had a toothache. “That’s true... If we didn’t kill the real Father and didn’t alert the enemy, they might’ve already taken action and created chaos. Sigh, a little impatience will spoil great plans. Back when we locked onto the real Father’s location, we should’ve only done surveillance. We should’ve waited for the chaos to begin before dealing him the fatal blow.”

“But that might not work. In the chaos, Shepherd Bouillon might discover something.” Bai Chen imagined the consequences of such a development and calmly replied.

“Yes, yes.” Jiang Baimian seemed to be waiting for Bai Chen to say that as she grinned. As they conversed, she looked at the silent Shang Jianyao. “What are you thinking about?”

“Thinking of a way to crack the Virtual World,” Shang Jianyao replied seriously. “I already have a plan—I’m just short of perfecting the details.”

“What plan?” Geneva asked cooperatively.

Shang Jianyao laughed. “I was just thinking about it. I might need help this time.”

“But Xiaochong doesn’t seem too willing to go out, and it’s not that easy to bump into Du Heng. Besides, he might not want to be involved in First City’s matters.” The first helpers Long Yuehong

could think of were only Du Heng and Xiaochong. He felt that among the powerhouses his team knew, only these two could firmly crush the Virtual World's owner.

“No, no, no. I want to invite another person.” Shang Jianyao raised his finger and wagged it a few times.

“Who?” Jiang Baimian couldn't think of an answer either.

In this regard, Shang Jianyao's train of thought was always diverse.

Shang Jianyao laughed. “Wu Meng.”

“...” For a moment, the other Old Task Force members—including the smart bot, Genava—wore blank expressions. Although Wu Meng is strong, he is suspected to be sealed. Also, he's a monster. How could we negotiate with him for his help? We can't release this abnormally dangerous existence for our mission, right? Then, the team would really become major villains of the Ashlands!

Shang Jianyao seriously explained his 'train of thought.' “In the beginning, I was thinking that the Virtual World is really troublesome. If the owner had the ability, try replicating the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station and broadcast Wu Meng's voice. Unfortunately, the gladiator fights aren't held at night, so we can't make it in time for the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station's broadcast. Otherwise, we can see if Wu Meng's influence gets filtered out or if the Virtual World's owner gets affected...”

As he spoke, the excitement on his face gradually showed as if he found this very interesting.

“That's right. Gladiator fights are usually held in the afternoon. Besides, Wu Meng's influence might not be the kind we want.” Long Yuehong roughly understood Shang Jianyao's plan.

The latter wanted to bring a radio into the aristocratic VIP room and broadcast the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs for everyone!

Shang Jianyao smiled at him. “We can pretend to be enthusiastic listeners and ask Wu Meng how to make a person take the initiative to go to the bathroom. We can then use a recorder to record his answers and play them in the aristocratic VIP room.”

This... You are spending so much effort just to make Marcus go to the bathroom? According to this train of thought, wouldn't it be fine if Wu Meng directly affected the Virtual World's owner and made them give up on protecting him? Long Yuehong was momentarily at a loss for words. Should I scold Shang Jianyao for going an entire circle just to get Marcus to pee and have diarrhea, or should I praise his strange train of thought?

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and slowly spoke as she strolled forward. "There are a few problems with that. First, it's unknown if there will be any effects after Wu Meng's voice is recorded, but this can be verified in advance.

"Second, you don't have the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station's phone number. How are you going to pretend to be an enthusiastic listener and ask Wu Meng? Are you going to send a telegram directly to that frequency and use a code?

"Third, it's impossible that First City doesn't know Wu Meng. He might be sealed by the Eternal Time Church's Sage. I'm afraid that the Virtual World's owner will make connections and respond the moment you turn on the machine and broadcast Wu Meng's voice."

"Therefore, there are still many details that need to be perfected." Shang Jianyao sincerely indicated that these problems existed.

As for how to record it, it was relatively simple. The frequency could be set in advance, and everyone would evacuate, leaving only one recording device to do all the work.

Furthermore, in First City—which was far away from Wasteland Ruin 13—the smart bot, Genava, wasn't within Wu Meng's immediate range. Thus, he shouldn't be affected.

He had previously been fine monitoring the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station in First City.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "We can put this in the follow-up plan. Yes... Even if it really doesn't work, we will benefit as long as Wu Meng's recorded voice can still produce an effect for a certain period of time."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian revealed a cunning smile. It's simply a great joy in life to be able to fleece the enemy!

This meant that the Old Task Force could borrow Wu Meng's strength in a sense. Even if it couldn't be used to crack the Virtual World, it was still effective against other enemies!

Long Yuehong was stunned when he heard that. He finally realized that it was actually feasible.

It might not be the case for others, but the chance of Wu Meng—who could influence electronic products—having an effect with his recorded voice was rather high.

Long Yuehong wanted to say that there was no time to lose, but he flipped his wrist to look at his watch and realized that it was already past the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station's broadcast time.

"We can only wait until tomorrow night." He sighed.

As they spoke, the Old Task Force quintet turned into another street.

At this moment, a man walked over.

He was about the same height as Long Yuehong. He carried a paper bag and wore a slightly mottled leather coat. His black hair was long and messy, and his eyes were jade green. His facial features weren't deep, making him appear mellow.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and retracted her gaze. She pretended to look at the shop by the street and suppressed her voice. "The wanted criminal."

"Huh?" Long Yuehong also saw the man, but he didn't think that he was any similar to the Citizen Conclave explosion suspect who had been running previously.

Yes, apart from the fact that their eyes were green and that they were of the same height, they had nothing in common. Most importantly, his mouth didn't show any deformities!

Jiang Baimian looked at the ground and said, "He didn't change his shoes. When I was looking at the coal residue, I noticed that his shoes were black and strapless. They were very old and had scratches. Yes, the scratches match."

As Long Yuehong's eyes widened, Bai Chen slowly exhaled. "He's really walking those public security officers."

Jiang Baimian smiled and turned to look at Shang Jianyao and Geneva. She asked with interest, "Want to have a chat with him?"

Chapter 437: Behavioral Art

Shang Jianyao immediately became excited. "Alright."

Jiang Baimian deliberately ignored his expression and said to Geneva, who was moving his neck up and down, "Old Ge, I'll leave this to you."

Shang Jianyao was only slightly disappointed by this. He quickly perked up and pulled Geneva to the side before whispering his exhortations.

...

With one hand in his pocket, Dimis held a paper bag containing his black trench coat. As he admired the night scenery, he walked toward the road that led to the Green Olive Zone.

During this process, it was inevitable that passersby approached him or walked along the same path as him. However, they subconsciously slowed down or chose to circle around him. In short, nobody could follow Dimis by disguising themselves as an ordinary pedestrian. All of this was done unconsciously.

Upon seeing the alley around the corner, Dimis suddenly saw a figure rush over.

The other party was so fast that they were by his side like a car that had gone out of control. Right on the heels of that, a silver-black metal palm slapped Dimis on the shoulder as if they were good friends.

It was only then that Dimis saw that the person was a robot in a dark-green military uniform with an eye that emitted red light.

He opened his mouth, attempting to escape by using the ensuing chaos of a cry. However, Geneva's right palm tightened and gripped his neck, preventing him from making a sound.

"Do you think the public security officers who passed by will return in time?" Geneva tried his best to make his slightly synthetic male voice carry a smiling tone.

Shang Jianyao had taught him this line, so he had to grasp his tone well.

Dimis's expression stiffened, not knowing what had gone wrong.

Geneva took the opportunity to hug him to give off the impression that he was very familiar with him and that they had a good relationship to hide the abnormality in his right palm.

"I just have something to discuss with you." The smart bot repeated Shang Jianyao's lines to keep the target calm. If not for the fact that he couldn't make an expression, he would've smiled.

Dimis's expression had already returned to normal, and there was no sign of fear. He 'followed' Geneva into the quiet alley and came to an empty corner.

"Are you the culprit behind the Citizen Conclave explosion?" Geneva asked.

Dimis nodded calmly. "You've already seen through my disguise. Is there a need to ask this question? Let your master come out."

Geneva noticed a reaction that didn't match his human behavior database, so he asked, "Aren't you afraid?"

"What's the use of being afraid?" Dimis asked calmly.

Geneva moved his metal neck. "Are you also an accomplice to the gladiator arena assassination attempt?"

"You can say that." Dimis actually laughed.

Genava pressed, “Why are you doing these things?”

“To break the current order and create chaos,” Dimis said with a solemn expression. “First City is like a pool of stagnant water that is slowly rising. If this continues, it will become increasingly lifeless and reach the necks of everyone...”

Upon hearing this, Genava corrected him. “Slowly rising and stagnant water are logically contradictory. They can’t be put in the same sentence.”

“...” Dimis was stunned for a moment. “As long as you understand what I mean. In short, we have to break out of the current state. No matter which direction we develop in, it won’t be any worse than now.”

Genava actually agreed with this. “Movement and change are the main themes of this world. The only constant is change.”

“You want to cooperate?” Dimis guessed the goal of the faction behind the robot. Just as he said that, he saw a figure enter the deserted area.

Before this, he had failed to sense anything. This meant that the other party could hide their consciousness—they were also an Awakened.

The person was tall and wore a smug monkey mask.

Taking the opportunity while Dimis’s attention was focused on the mask, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “Look, we want to do something big in First City, and so do you. We are part of a team, and so are you. So...”

Dimis’s expression changed a few times before he finally revealed a friendly and surprised smile. “So it’s you. Why are you meeting in such a terrifying manner?”

“It’s safer and more concealed this way,” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely. Without giving Dimis a chance to speak, he made his voice carry a smiling tone. “You just convinced our robot.”

Dimis laughed. “Not like I can have it another way. We have to prepare various excuses to deal with different people.”

“...” Only then did Geneva realize that he couldn't tell that the other party was lying. Of course, even a lie detector that could monitor the other party's various data might not be accurate, much less an 'amateur' smart bot like him.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Actually, I think what you said makes sense. First City in its current state is in urgent need of change. Any direction in change is better than remaining unchanged. Seriously, are you familiar with the colosseum assassin? You don't seem too worried about him.”

Dimis chuckled. “We only have a little cooperation in that matter. I don't even know if the name he told me was real or fake.”

At this point, he shrugged. “It's the higher-ups' arrangement anyway. I do whatever they order.”

“Which organization is behind you? It's making me a little confused,” Shang Jianyao probed with empty words.

Geneva paid close attention to Dimis's actions. As long as he discovered the latter showing signs of coming to his senses, he would immediately knock him out.

“Didn't they tell you?” Dimis automatically helped Shang Jianyao find a reasonable explanation. His expression became solemn again. “We're from the Behavioral Church.”

At this point, he made a silly face and said in a deep voice, “Actions show thy inner self. May impulsiveness be with thee.”

“Behavioral Church...” Shang Jianyao had read about it from the information the company provided, but he still asked in confirmation, “Which Kalendaria do you believe in?”

“May's Monitor.” Dimis made a silly face again as if he was showing respect for the Kalendaria in this way.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “What's your Holy Communion?”

“All kinds of worms, cooked in various methods,” replied Dimis seriously. “After the Chaotic Era, apart from wilderness nomads and some Ruin Hunters who lack food, nobody else is willing to eat these things. Therefore, our parish’s leader designated them as Holy Communion.”

Trying their best to appear different from the others? Genova tried to analyze the reason.

Shang Jianyao raised his hand and pressed down on the monkey mask on his face. “You can eat it after twisting off its head. It’s rich in protein.”

He then sighed. “What is your goal?”

“You have to ask your superior and mine. I’m only a soldier in charge of the execution.” Dimis indicated that he didn’t know either.

Shang Jianyao looked at Dimis regretfully for a few seconds, making him confused.

“Why are you always being chased by the public security officers? Why are you deliberately showing up to attract their attention?” Shang Jianyao asked.

Dimis smiled smugly. “This is a form of behavioral art.”

“Oh, no wonder you’re called the Behavioral Church.” Shang Jianyao’s eyes—which had been a little uninterested because of the Holy Communion—suddenly lit up.

At this moment, Genova interrupted, “Does this make you happy?”

“Not only does this bring me happiness, but it’s also a form of prayer. It’s something the Kalendaria approves and admires.” Dimis didn’t hide anything.

Shang Jianyao curiously asked, “What other behavioral arts have you completed?”

“Too many to count. Let’s talk about it later; someone might pass by here at any moment.” Dimis was still considered cautious.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “Were you deliberately misleading the pursuers by covering your mouth with a scarf?”

“That’s right. They won’t recognize me the moment I take off my scarf.” The corners of Dimis’s mouth curled up slightly.

Shang Jianyao stretched out his right hand. “That’s all for today. Don’t report your meeting with us for the time being. This way, you can still get our help if you are betrayed. If you need some cooperation for the subsequent missions, you can also get our help.”

Dimis fell silent for a moment before slowly nodding. “You guys are also leaving a way out. Alright, how should I contact you?”

After giving a specific time, another frequency, and a certain telegram password, Shang Jianyao waved goodbye to Dimis.

Genava mimicked him by raising his metal arm, spreading his fingers, and shaking it a few times.

After taking off his mask and making detours until he reached the safe house, Shang Jianyao and Genava waited for a few minutes before seeing Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen return.

They had previously been on watch around the alley. As soon as they discovered anything amiss, they would give a signal.

After hearing Shang Jianyao’s recount, Jiang Baimian frowned and muttered to herself, “Behavioral Church...”

After a few seconds, she sighed. “It’s an orgy of devils!”

She was referring to First City’s situation. All the various factions and Churches were starting to show.

After discussing this matter, Jiang Baimian looked around. “Everyone, get some rest. Old Ge, pay attention. Try recording the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station tomorrow evening.”

Chapter 438: Experiments

At night, in an empty room.

A slightly magnetic male voice sounded from a radio. Opposite it, a recording device was quietly operating.

From time to time, cracking static sounded.

Two minutes after the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs segment ended, a robot in a black military uniform with red-light-emitting eyes pushed open the door.

He listened to the entire recording. After doing this, Geneva walked to another room diagonally opposite him.

“How was it? What did Wu Meng say today?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Geneva raised his right hand and placed it under his chin. This was him unconsciously mimicking Shang Jianyao’s posture. “It was about the spirit of electrical appliance maintenance, something about scholars of the lowest class, and how something not laughed at wouldn’t be fit to be the Dao.” Geneva simply repeated the main content. “But I can’t tell if they can affect humans.”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “This requires us to experiment.”

She led the other Old Task Force members into the spot where the recording equipment was placed. She then closed the door and looked around. “Who wants to go first?”

She didn’t set an example because she was worried that an uncontrollable development would happen midway. In that case, the unaffected her could still use high-voltage electric currents to create a chaotic electromagnetic environment and interfere with subsequent changes so as to prevent any possible accidents.

Long Yuehong glanced at Shang Jianyao before looking at Bai Chen. He gritted his teeth and said, “I’ll do it.”

From his point of view, Shang Jianyao had a relatively strong Awakened ability. He was capable of causing significant damage once he was affected. Bai Chen was a woman, and she wasn’t as tall as him. Getting her to be the guinea pig made him appear timid, weak, and ungentlemanly.

“Alright, be careful.” Jiang Baimian didn’t stop him.

She, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen quickly covered their ears in different ways and looked at Long Yuehong.

Compared to the two team members who wore cupping headphones or stuffed their ears with paper balls, Jiang Baimian’s solution was the simplest—she raised her palms and covered her ears.

Upon seeing that his companions were prepared, Geneva switched on the recording device.

Long Yuehong sat up straight and listened to the recording.

“...Electrical appliances are simple and precise. The simplicity refers to the Dao, and there are only a few fundamental principles. Precision refers to the principles that derive all kinds of patterns and combinations that are complicated and incomparably magical...

“...When we repair appliances, we have to grasp the Dao and use the Dao to understand the patterns and combinations. Only then can we tell what the problem is and what kind of repairs are required...

“...For repairmen who are listening in to our radio station, repairing appliances is an art and an actualization of the Dao. Ordinary people can’t comprehend this—they either find it too complicated and don’t understand it at all, or they don’t think it’s necessary. They believe in products of experience. Just like when you tell a person who doesn’t know much about appliances that ‘there’s a big problem with your television and that it needs to be repaired as soon as possible,’ they will often answer you with ‘it’ll be fine with a smack.’ If one smack isn’t enough, then two...

“As the saying goes: Scholars of the highest class, when they hear about the Dao, earnestly carry it into practice. Scholars of the middle class, when they have heard about it, seem now to keep it and now to lose it. Scholars of the lowest class, when they have heard about it, laugh greatly at it. If it were not (thus) laughed at, it would not be fit to be the Dao[1]...

“Therefore, we have to remember that when facing things we don’t understand, we have to humbly seek guidance and put down the prejudices brought about by experience. Do not be filled with conflicting emotions from the beginning. Adopt an attitude of accepting everything and learn, understand, grasp, and accept...”

Long Yuehong nodded slightly. He felt that Wu Meng was rather good at lecturing regardless.

It was quite a while later when he finished listening.

After receiving his and Genava's signal, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen removed their hearing restrictions.

"I don't think I was affected." Long Yuehong first expressed his feelings before emphasizing Wu Meng's words.

Shang Jianyao suddenly laughed and switched off the lamp on the table. He then said to Long Yuehong, "Look."

Long Yuehong immediately frowned when he heard this word.

Shang Jianyao continued, "This lamp is switched off, and Wang Fugui's old computer also had its keyboard backlight turned off because of a malfunction. This lamp is an electrical appliance, and so is the old computer. The old computer was later smacked twice, so..."

Long Yuehong's frown gradually relaxed. He suddenly stood up, walked to the lamp, and stretched out his right hand to smack the lamp's base. After smacking it three consecutive times, he came to a realization.

The light switch had already been switched off—it wouldn't light up no matter how hard he smacked it!

Long Yuehong turned to look at Shang Jianyao and said angrily, "There's obviously an effect when you use Inference Clowning!"

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and smiled. "I only used the linguistic format of Inference Clowning. In fact, I didn't use my abilities at all."

"..." Long Yuehong's expression froze.

"Really?" he asked again indignantly.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “There’s no need to be so formal when lying to you.”

Jiang Baimian nodded. “From the looks of it, you were indeed affected. The focus should be on ‘when facing things we don’t understand, we have to humbly seek guidance.’ It makes you blindly ignore all your past experiences and lose the ability to selectively discern the words of others. You only know how to accept everything.”

“That’s actually possible...” Long Yuehong immediately came to a realization and felt a lingering fear.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao looked at him and said, “You said you wanted to treat me to iced Coke. There are only a few places in the Red Wolf Zone where you can buy it.”

Long Yuehong was first stunned before he blurted out, “When did I promise you that!?”

“Sigh, the ability is no longer effective.” Shang Jianyao let out a long sigh.

Long Yuehong was caught between laughter and tears.

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen volunteered. “I’ll be the next to try to determine if that sentence has any effect.”

After all, one had to select a sentence with additional effects in order to use it as a ‘weapon.’ Otherwise, they couldn’t get their adversary to patiently listen to the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs for more than half an hour during a battle, right?

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Let Hey do it. He was previously affected, so he can evaluate the difference between the effects from a recording and the direct listening to the radio. Also, we should repeat it a few more times to confirm how the effect declines as we keep playing it.”

Team Leader is so professional. As expected of a researcher... Long Yuehong was secretly speechless.

After putting their lives on the line together for such a long time, the team members basically knew that Jiang Baimian's ears were damaged. Before joining the Security Department, she did research work, and her goal was to become a scientist. As for which field she worked in, she didn't mention it.

After the others stuffed their ears, Shang Jianyao selected a sentence and listened. "Therefore, we have to remember that when facing things we don't understand, we have to humbly seek guidance..."

After he was done, Long Yuehong took off his headphones and probed, "I'm your brother."

Shang Jianyao was stunned for a moment before opening his mouth. The next second, his slightly confused expression warped into a smile. "Hahaha, he's so short. How can he be my brother?"

Hey... Long Yuehong felt insulted.

Shang Jianyao changed his expression and said in all seriousness, "There's a possibility of genetic mutation."

"We can't blindly believe him. Let's do a genetic test first."

"Everything is but a dream. Why so serious?"

...

The few Shang Jianyaos argued for a moment before quickly coming to a conclusion that they had been affected by the recording and escaped the affected state.

He then assumed a professional posture and said, "The effects are much weaker than when I heard it at Lehman's place, but it's enough to affect Awakened at the Sea of Origins level as long as they don't have a special price that can counterbalance it. As for whether it can affect Awakened at the Mind Corridor level, I can't tell since I haven't walked out of the Sea of Origins. I can only say that the effects are definitely very weak even if it does influence someone."

After Shang Jianyao's repeated experiments, the way the effects declined was figured out: It declined by about 15% to 18% from the original version each time.

In other words, one recording could be used six to seven times. The effects were worse after each time.

There were only one to two recordings left.

Regarding this, the Old Task Force didn't mind too much. After all, Wu Meng broadcasted Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs every day. Even if he didn't exert his abilities to influence the listeners every time, he would do so just a few days later.

Therefore, the Old Task Force could recharge regularly and regularly obtain different effects.

“Even if it can't be used to deal with the Virtual World's owner, it might be effective in other aspects.” Jiang Baimian sighed with satisfaction. She then reminded her team members, “After all, touch pitch, and you shall be defiled. I'm worried that there is more than one sentence that will affect listeners in Wu Meng's subsequent radio broadcast, making us ignore certain effects. It's too tiring and a waste of time to check each individual sentence at a time. Therefore, let's use it sparingly if possible and not rely on it.”

“Alright.” The Old Task Force members began to investigate the other words in the recording.

After confirming that there were no other problems, it was already late at night. Everyone was mentally exhausted.

“Phew...” Jiang Baimian exhaled and laughed self-deprecatingly. “Unfortunately, I can't induce Wu Meng to say what we want. I think it's too risky to send him a telegram...”

Shang Jianyao thought for a few seconds and said, “We can consult Xiaochong next time. It would be better if we can meet Teacher Du Heng.”

Chapter 439: Unexpected Harvest

It was another morning when the Old Task Force knocked on Xiaochong's apartment door, bringing with them the latest portable computer that contained all kinds of games and some ingredients.

This time, it wasn't Slumber Cat who opened the door but Xiaochong himself. As if he had long known that the visitors were Shang Jianyao and the others, he eagerly asked, “What games are there?”

After asking the question, he seemed to find it inappropriate and added, “What’s there to eat?”

Jiang Baimian smiled and introduced, “We’ll be making you four dishes and a soup today. It’s a home-cooked meal for Ashlandics.”

Shang Jianyao quickly introduced the games on the computer and sighed regretfully. “It’s just that the hard disk isn’t large enough to fit everything.”

“I’ll swap them out when I’m sick of them.” Xiaochong looked at the portable computer and then at the ingredients in Long Yuehong and Bai Chen’s hands. For a moment, he didn’t know if he should take a gander at the games or wait for lunch.

“You have about an hour.” Jiang Baimian rolled up her sleeves and walked to the kitchen.

Xiaochong watched her figure disappear around the corner and whispered, “If only my mother were that open-minded back then.”

“Because she’s not your mother,” Shang Jianyao replied seriously.

Xiaochong fell silent for a few seconds. “That’s true...”

Shang Jianyao didn’t continue the topic. He pulled Xiaochong to the side and tried different games.

At noon, braised pork, steamed fish from the lake, fried chicken cubes, stir-fried vegetables, and tomato omelet soup were served on the dining table. Compared to last time, there was plenty of food today because the four carbon-based Old Task Force members also planned on having a meal together to create a harmonious and sweet atmosphere.

It was easy to talk at the dining table!

Xiaochong first lowered his head and ate for a while before sighing. “It’s been a long time since I ate these...”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Hurry up and eat, or he’ll finish it.”

'He' was referring to Shang Jianyao.

Xiaochong stopped talking and ate seriously.

After everyone was almost done eating, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "We've been fleecing Wu Meng recently."

"Huh?" Xiaochong looked at her in confusion and curiosity.

Jiang Baimian took the opportunity to mention how she and the others had recorded the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs broadcast and talked about the various interesting experiences gained from the effects.

Finally, she sighed. "Unfortunately, we can't get Wu Meng to say what we want. We can't get the preset effects."

Xiaochong held his chopsticks and looked at the leftovers on the table. He then looked back at the portable computer on the other side and hesitated for a moment. "Why don't I record it for you?"

"Huh?" This time, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were surprised. Their original goal was to see if Xiaochong could come up with a solution, but the other party had ended up volunteering.

Shang Jianyao had a gratified expression as if his 'befriending' of Xiaochong hadn't been in vain.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before agreeing. She didn't pretend to be polite. "Alright."

She was afraid that Xiaochong would take it seriously and give up on the idea.

B-but can you influence others through electronic products like Wu Meng? Can you achieve the goal of making Marcus have the urge to go to the bathroom? These two thoughts subconsciously flashed through Long Yuehong's mind.

Xiaochong then glanced at him.

“Let’s finish eating first.” Jiang Baimian restrained her impatience.

After having their fill, they washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. The five Old Task Force members and Xiaochong then gathered at the dining table again.

During this process, Genava—who had been charging himself at the sofa—Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen returned to the safe house they had stayed in last night and brought over a portable recording device.

Xiaochong sat up straight and eagerly said, “I’m going to begin.”

At this moment, Slumber Cat—who was sleeping on the balcony—stood up with a whoosh. It gently jumped onto the shed below and disappeared into the alley behind.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian subconsciously considered covering her ears.

The next second, Xiaochong opened his mouth and whistled. “Shh...”

“Shh...”

“Shh...”

Amidst this commotion, Long Yuehong’s expression suddenly turned odd. He felt his lower abdomen swell as the pressure on his bladder increased.

In just a few seconds, he had the urge to rush to the bathroom.

It’s really effective... Long Yuehong moved his thigh, wanting to hold it in for a while longer to prevent himself from embarrassing himself.

At this moment, Bai Chen suddenly stood up and walked to the bathroom.

Amidst the whistling, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao lined up behind her.

Long Yuehong almost cried when he saw this because he didn't know if he could hold it in until they were done.

If it really doesn't work out, why don't I water the plants on the balcony? But will I get beaten by Slumber Cat if I do that... Long Yuehong tried his best to divert his attention.

Finally, the first three relieved themselves.

Long Yuehong wanted to rush into the bathroom at the speed of a 100-meter sprint, but his physical condition didn't allow him to do so. He could only squeeze his thighs and walk quickly.

After a while, he opened the door with a relaxed expression.

Xiaochong also shut his mouth and stopped making whistling sounds.

It was only then that Long Yuehong vaguely understood why Slumber Cat stopped sleeping and suddenly went out.

"It's done." Genava patted the portable recording device. "I just don't know how effective it is."

Xiaochong had already left his seat and said to Shang Jianyao, "Let's play games. They can test the effects themselves."

As expected, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen went to the bathroom again.

But compared to before, the amount they expelled was little. After all, they had yet to produce any.

After about two hours, Jiang Baimian forcefully took Shang Jianyao away under Xiaochong's reluctant gaze.

In the jeep, Jiang Baimian said thankfully, "I didn't expect to receive such a harvest."

Bai Chen deliberated and raised her question. “The effects of Xiaochong’s voice can also be recorded by electronic products... I wonder if this is a characteristic shared by powerhouses at their level or if he and Wu Meng belong to the same domain?”

This was something Shang Jianyao couldn’t do at the moment. He could only rely on the loudspeaker to extend his range slightly.

“It’s also possible that the corresponding basic abilities interfere with electromagnetism and not with matter.” Jiang Baimian recalled the Mind Corridor information she had.

“But they are much, much stronger than DiMarco.” Long Yuehong meant that even if these two weren’t Awakened, they were at least equivalent to those who had explored the Mind Corridor’s depths based on their strength. They might even be equipped with both basic abilities.

As the only relatively normal Mind Corridor-level Awakened that the Old Task Force had encountered head-on, DiMarco was naturally used as a comparison.

The Clam Dragon Church’s Superior Heartless lacked sufficient intelligence, so he definitely couldn’t unleash his full strength.

“DiMarco’s condition wasn’t good either,” Jiang Baimian said simply.

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao agreed with this. “Let’s stop talking about him. He later gave us plenty of contributions.”

He was referring to the Destiny Pearl.

Genava in the backseat said, “The two most important questions now are: First, why didn’t the Virtual World’s owner notice that we were recording? Second, how do we make Marcus the only one that needs to use the bathroom?”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian was stunned. “Wait a minute; why did we get Xiaochong to record the sound to urge urination? We could’ve totally gotten him to record the sound of hypnosis! As long as the Virtual World’s owner is affected and dozes off for more than ten seconds, we can achieve our goal through Destiny Pearl!”

In the end, the Old Task Force spent a Herculean effort only to go one big circle to send Marcus to the bathroom.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong looked at each other. There was only one thought in their minds: We were affected by Shang Jianyao...

“Isn’t that good?” Shang Jianyao—who was in charge of driving—indeed felt that this was the perfect step.

“Shall we go back and get Xiaochong to record again?” Long Yuehong suggested.

Jiang Baimian slowly shook her head. “He already felt quite forced this time...”

If they went to trouble him again, he might turn hostile.

After some thought, Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “Actually, there’s some feasibility now. We can include Xiaochong’s voice in a song as background music. When the time comes, we can pretend to be bored and play it.”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao couldn’t wait.

Jiang Baimian continued, “Besides, this is a child’s voice. It doesn’t belong to Wu Meng, so it won’t be sensed immediately... The recording definitely won’t be as effective as the original. Even if it garners a reaction from the Virtual World’s owner, he will definitely be the last one. By the time he discovers it, Marcus would’ve already gone to the bathroom.

“Among the nobles in the VIP room, Marcus seems to be the only one who drinks the least water or doesn’t even drink at all. He definitely pays attention to such matters before setting off. Therefore, he should be the one who can hold it in for a longer period of time. He will most likely be among the last few to go. I only hope that there aren’t any suspected powerhouses in the room, such as General Phocas from before. Otherwise, we won’t be able to control the tempo.

“This can be handled flexibly. If it really doesn’t work out, we won’t play the recorded music at the gladiator fight the day after tomorrow and wait for the next one.”

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao slapped the car horn.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva seriously thought about it and helped find flaws in the various details.

...

In the blink of an eye, it was time for the next gladiator fight at the colosseum.

The Old Task Force disguised themselves and came to the venue's vicinity again.

Jiang Baimian waved the silver-white phone in her hand. "Old Ge, remember the agreed signal. Cut the power supply circuit as soon as the time comes."

"Alright." This mission wasn't difficult for Geneva.

Jiang Baimian then said to Bai Chen, "Try not to expose yourself when taking the vantage point in the distance unless we meet problems with our evacuation. If things don't work out, read the letter I gave you."

The vantage point didn't allow her to see the nobles' VIP room. She could only monitor the escape route.

Bai Chen nodded and touched the Orange rifle beside her.

"Phew..." Jiang Baimian exhaled and said to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "Let's go in."

Chapter 440: Evacuation 'Plan'

Apex Gladiator Arena, in the security inspection area of the nobles' VIP rooms.

Long Yuehong once again followed Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian in disguise as a servant and bodyguard. Upon seeing that the entrance was still a distance away and that nobody was around, he suddenly thought of a question and quickly suppressed his voice. "Team Leader, I think we missed something."

"What?" Jiang Baimian stopped and pretended to scold the servant.

Long Yuehong looked around again. “Our operation plan lacks a very important part—how to evacuate if we fail. Don’t tell me you think we will definitely succeed?”

As the saying goes, one should consider defeat before considering victory. Once things didn’t develop as expected, they had to take the corresponding precautions. They couldn’t panic, move blindly, or surrender.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Facing an Awakened who’s definitely at the Mind Corridor level, skilled in illusions, and surrounded by many nobles and their bodyguards, do you think we can escape if we fail? Even if Old Ge can enter the arena, he should be affected.”

“Ah...” Long Yuehong’s face instantly turned pale.

Shang Jianyao added, “Unlike how we dealt with the Superior Heartless and DiMarco previously, we are in the open this time. The most dangerous enemy is in hiding, and we don’t have any other helpers.”

Long Yuehong’s thoughts raced as he forced a smile at Jiang Baimian. “Team Leader, you must’ve already thought of a solution. Otherwise, you wouldn’t take such a risk.”

This wasn’t the time to risk their lives!

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “The solution is very simple. Once we confirm failure, immediately raise our hands, hug the back of our heads, and squat down.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong imagined the corresponding scene in his mind. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that something was amiss.

Shang Jianyao then smiled. “You can also shout: I surrender! I surrender!”

“...” Long Yuehong finally understood what Jiang Baimian had described. He asked in disbelief, “Team Leader, are you joking?”

Jiang Baimian shook her head seriously. “No, this is the best plan after weighing the pros and cons. In a situation where there’s a huge strength difference with the enemy, it’s too dangerous to rely on your brain, skills, and experience to escape. The chances of success are extremely low.

“Actually, if it weren’t for the fact that this person is a Mind Corridor-level Awakened who’s good at illusions, it’s not impossible to think of a solution. For example, destroying the building structure below the nobles’ VIP room in advance, grabbing a hostage, etc. These plans can’t be used now because we have no way of distinguishing between what’s real, what’s fake, and whether we did it or not. Compared to the resistance that might result in casualties, surrendering might be the best way to ensure our safety.”

“B-but doesn’t this mean that we’re giving up on survival?” Long Yuehong still couldn’t understand.

“No, no, no.” Shang Jianyao shook his head and said, “Going to prison is the beginning of the story. When the time comes, we’ll say that General Phocas made us do it and make the other factions hesitate.”

“General Phocas sure is unlucky to have met you,” Jiang Baimian scolded jokingly.

Upon seeing that nobles were gradually passing by and entering the stands after passing through security, she didn’t leave him hanging and quickly explained, “Did we do anything in First City that the nobles will want us dead for? Apart from those who secretly favor the Anti-intellectualism Church, there shouldn’t be anyone who wants us dead. When we’re captured, we’ll quickly tell them that we killed the real Father and have a deep grudge with the Anti-intellectualism Church. This way, whoever jumps out to target us will be suspected of being Anti-intellectualism Church supporters.

“That’s one thing. More importantly, we are from Pangu Biology. There’s no need to hide anything when the time comes. We’ll tell them everything we know without holding anything back. After losing our intelligence value, the company will send someone to negotiate with them. I believe they will definitely be happy to exchange us for something else.

“There are many similar matters between large factions. When a spy is typically captured and the other party hasn’t caused any major problems, they will be inclined to use the spy for transactions, such as exchanging them for their captured personnel.”

Long Yuehong was dumbfounded—he never expected such unspoken rules between large factions. However, he found it normal after thinking deeply about it.

As a large faction, they naturally had a relatively equal status when it came to negotiation.

“But won’t we be betraying the company if that happens?” Long Yuehong thought of another question.

Jiang Baimian laughed. “Others might not know, but how can the other large factions not know about the company? In past years, more than one or two company field agents have been arrested. The wilderness nomads and small factions might not know where the company’s entrance is, but how many decades can First City and the White Knights be kept in the dark? As for the internal matters, how many secrets do we know? None, right? And during our investigation of the cause of the Old World’s destruction, we only made contact with Oray’s descendants. We don’t know as much as First City.”

Long Yuehong roughly understood what his team leader meant: the problems they could answer wouldn’t harm the company.

“Therefore, our greatest loss is the items we carry with us—the Destiny Pearl, the Bangle of Blindness, Wu Meng’s recording, and Xiaochong’s whistling. That’s all acceptable,” Jiang Baimian concluded.

“B-but...” Long Yuehong still felt that it wasn’t safe to surrender. “Many nobles in First City secretly believe in Mandara and are Church of Paragon Desire members. I-I’m afraid they would be up to no good.”

“Then, wouldn’t you be lucking out?” Shang Jianyao laughed. He then revealed a solemn expression. “Not necessarily. The other party might not be a woman.”

Long Yuehong inexplicably shivered.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “This is also a situation that requires precautions. On the one hand, if we are captured, we can immediately claim that we have cooperated with General Phocas and helped deal with the Anti-intellectualism Church. In short, we will intimidate others using another’s banner.

“On the other hand, Little White has the letter I left her. I gave her instructions on two matters. The first is to return to the safe house and send a telegram to the company to get them to send a representative to negotiate the ransom. The second is to use the contact information I left her and

get help from an Elder in First City. He has a deep relationship with a member of the company. He most likely won't dare to release the hostages without permission, but he should still be able to ensure our safety during our imprisonment. After all, there are plenty of excuses and reasons."

Long Yuehong felt a little relieved when he heard that. He exhaled and said, "Team Leader, why didn't you say so earlier? Why did you have to write a letter?"

Have you watched too many Old World dramas?

Jiang Baimian smiled. "With Little White's temper, would she be willing to obediently stay outside and be a backup if I don't do this?"

"That's true." Long Yuehong didn't ask any further. He followed Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao to the security checkpoint and successfully cleared it.

...

Many people had already arrived in the VIP room, but this didn't include Oray's grandson, Marcus.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao found their seats and sat down to observe the people around them. During this process, Shang Jianyao took out the portable recording device and pretended to play a song out of boredom.

He played normal Red River songs. They weren't too loud and were the kind that people around him could hear but wouldn't find jarring. This was to allow the Virtual World's owner to get used to the music and become numb to it.

Amidst the music, Shang Jianyao occasionally chatted with Jiang Baimian and nodded at the nearby nobles in greeting.

After a while, five minutes before the gladiator fight began, Marcus—who had light-blue eyes and a slightly horizontal face—entered the room with four bodyguards and walked to his own room. Like last time, he always smiled and nodded at every noble he encountered, including Shang Jianyao.

After watching him sit down, Jiang Baimian estimated the distance and nodded at Shang Jianyao. She meant that it wasn't a problem using the current volume at this distance.

Shang Jianyao listened to the song for dozens of seconds and pretended that he wasn't too satisfied with it. He then skipped tracks.

Long Yuehong subconsciously held his breath as his heart raced.

Once the song mixed with Xiaochong's whistling played, there really was no turning back!

Soon, a cheerful song sounded. "Dog goes 'woof,' cat goes 'meow,' bird goes 'tweet,' and mouse goes 'squeek[1]'"...

The comedic nursery rhyme-like lyrics echoed. In the background music that nobody noticed, a child's whistling sounded. "Shh..."

"Shh..."

"Shh..."

Some nobles found the lyrics amusing and specially glanced at Shang Jianyao and the others as if they wanted to ask about the song title.

Some of them came early and drank a lot of water. They were prepared to go to the bathroom before the official match, but they stood up at this moment.

"But there's one sound that no one knows.

"What does the fox say..."

Amidst the song, nobles started walking to the bathroom.