

## **Ad Infinitum 591**

### Chapter 591: Wariness Above All

The Underground Ark's Iron Mountain entrance was no longer hidden, unlike when Jiang Baimian and the others had departed previously. A repaired road that could accommodate two trucks stretched from the foot of the mountain to the cave.

After all, with everyone in Redstone Collection and the mountain monsters knowing about this spot, it couldn't be used as a secret entrance anymore. It was better to improve the surroundings so that it was easier to escape by car when problems arose.

The Old Task Force drove the jeep to the entrance.

Standing there were four guards in olive-green uniforms with submachine guns. They were now part of the Ark Management Committee.

"Halt!" Although they found the jeep a little familiar, they still dutifully stopped it.

Behind them, deep in the cave, a few cannons and clustered rocket launchers adhered to their programming. They adjusted their bearings and were ready to fire.

Yes, Geneva's program.

As the former interim president and current honorary president of the Ark Management Committee, he had personally modified the Underground Ark's defense system back then.

Jiang Baimian pushed open the door and asked with a smile, "Don't you recognize us?"

The four guards in different masks estimated her height and confirmed the number of team members before coming to a realization.

But as Eidolon Nun believers and parishioners of the Vigilance Church, how could they believe them so easily? They remained vigilant and wary, abiding to the maxim that distance was a friend.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian felt someone gently, carefully, and very vigilantly poke her upper arm. Without making any inference, Shang Jianyao's figure surfaced in her mind.

She turned her head and saw that it was indeed the case.

At some point in time, Shang Jianyao had already taken out the monkey mask with the furry face and protruding mouth. He suppressed his voice and said, “Put it on first. Always be vigilant!”

Although Jiang Baimian didn’t want to imitate him as she watched him put on the monkey mask, she still followed the local folk tradition. She found her graceful monk mask and wore it.

Thankfully, I didn’t throw it away... Long Yuehong put on the fat pig mask amidst joy and sorrow. At the same time, he saw Bai Chen take out the ferocious man mask from her tactical backpack.

Just as the Old Task Force members finished their ‘disguises,’ the guards at the cave entrance took a step back at the same time, lowered their vigilance, and shouted, “Greetings, Presidents!”

They managed to fully match Jiang Baimian and the others’ appearances with the past and confirmed their authenticity.

The reason they didn’t cross their arms and place them in front of their chests while taking a step back was that they found it unsuitable for greeting the presidents. After all, it required the corresponding prayers.

Finally... Jiang Baimian straightened the mask on her face. She then had mixed feelings. Only someone like Shang Jianyao can blend in seamlessly in this magical place like a fish in water...

The only thing she felt gratified about was that the Underground Ark’s guards still had the habits they had developed during DiMarco’s era and adhered to the corresponding rules. They weren’t like the armed forces of the Vigilance Cathedral, the town guards at Redstone Collection’s entrance, or the people from the Public Security Department who had to hide when carrying out sentry duty, preventing others from finding them.

“Wariness is a hint from the Goddess!” Shang Jianyao replied with the Vigilance Church’s etiquette without worrying about the consequences.

Jiang Baimian composed herself and asked, “Where do we park?”

One of the guards pointed to his left. “There’s a parking lot around the bend.”

He then recalled something and quickly reported, “President Xue, the cemetery has been repaired. It’s behind the parking lot.”

The last time the Old Task Force left Redstone Collection, they had the Ark Management Committee’s commissioners organize people to build a cemetery for the dead servants during their leisure time.

“Very good.” Jiang Baimian wasn’t stingy with her praise. She then asked, “Are there so many cars that need parking? Why specially build a parking lot?”

The guard in a comical mask who had just spoken replied, “Yeah. Apart from a few people who are accustomed to living underground, everyone has moved to the ruins to guard their fields. However, we still choose to store many important items in the Ark. It’s safer and easier to defend here.”

The current Underground Ark was equivalent to all the members’ backup warehouses, final refuge shelter, and psychological reliance. Several key departments of the Administrative Committee were set up here. Therefore, members often needed to enter and leave, and many of them had cars.

On the one hand, this was thanks to DiMarco’s era. On the other hand, the management committee deliberately used some of the firearms they had stored in consideration of the need for escorts, wilderness hunting, and the traversing of city ruins. They traded for a batch of derelict vehicles from the Old World and repaired them.

Impressive... Jiang Baimian nodded in relief.

They parked their vehicle and were about to pass through the cave entrance when one of the guards suddenly said, “Wait!”

Jiang Baimian—who was wearing a graceful monk mask—turned her head and asked, “What’s wrong?”

The guard pointed at Long Yuehong’s right arm and quickly said, “I-I remember that President Gu didn’t have a mechanical arm last time. Could he be someone else in disguise now?”

“...” Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong were speechless. You guys are too vigilant!

Shang Jianyao—who understood and respected Redstone Collection’s folk tradition—helped explain. “He saved a damsel in distress previously and had one of his arms blown off. He could only exchange it for a mechanical arm.”

Long Yuehong’s face heated up when he heard about how he had saved a damsel in distress. He was especially glad that he was wearing a mask. Redstone Collection’s folk tradition is sometimes pretty good...

Upon seeing that the other three honorary presidents were willing to testify for Gu Zhiyong, the guards made way and stopped suspecting him.

...

In basement two of the Ark, in the reception room where DiMarco had previously met the Old Task Force.

On the long sofa opposite Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others sat Ulrich, Yu Tian, and Bode—the Ark Management Committee members who happened to be underground today.

Among them, although Ulrich was once one of DiMarco’s three butlers, he hadn’t stood on the enemy’s side back then. He only helped quell the servants’ uneasiness after DiMarco vented his emotions. Therefore, he obtained everyone’s approval. As a key person familiar with the smuggling business and having the corresponding connections, he entered the Ark Management Committee.

Compared to the other councilors—who were servants or guards—he was experienced, sophisticated, and trustworthy. Hence, he was elected as interim president when Genava left.

The term ‘interim’ would be removed after he served for two years without making any mistakes.

Yu Tian and Bode were the first guards to surrender and provide help to the Old Task Force—they were the two cards they had established. Therefore, when Genava was still in the Ark, he had specially given them advice following Jiang Baimian’s suggestion. After they received Genava’s teachings, they were already qualified to carry out their duties as councilors.

After exchanging pleasantries, Jiang Baimian asked, “Have people from the Salvation Army come to Redstone Collection recently?”

Ulrich was in his forties. His black hair was still neatly combed, and he wore a dark formal suit, which was straight and tidy. However, he was no longer wearing a bowtie like before.

His blue eyes flickered as he thought for a moment and said, “I’m not sure if it’s the Salvation Army because they aren’t dealing with us. They went straight to the Ashlanders—uh, the Ashlandics. Less than 20 of them are Ashlandic. They live in an abandoned building near a few Tan family members, not the hotel camp.”

The Salvation Army had Red River members, and this reflected their philosophy of shared human destiny. But as their sphere of influence was considered a general Ashlandic dominion in the Old World, there weren’t many non-Ashlandics.

“Do you know why they’re here?” Shang Jianyao was rather curious as if he wanted to provide help. Of course, others couldn’t tell because they were wearing masks.

Ulrich shook his head. “I don’t know, but we can observe what the Tan family members or other Ashlandics are searching for or gathering in the future.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and looked at the ceiling above her. “Have some strangers come to the Vigilance Cathedral recently?”

“Yes,” Yu Tian—who had a square face—immediately replied. “Several batches of people from other places now live in the cathedral, but Bishop Antonella didn’t tell everyone the reason or introduce them.”

Inside the Ark, the three commissioners didn’t wear masks.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, “What about Harbinger Song? What did he say?”

“Nothing,” replied the freckled Bode quickly.

Shang Jianyao suddenly lowered his voice as if he were vigilant of someone and asked, “Did those people quarrel with each other?”

Yu Tian thought for a few seconds and said, “I encountered it once. They sat on both sides of the Kalendaria’s Sacred Emblem and accused each other. One said that vigilance is the outcome, not the reason, while the other said that vigilance is the most important goal. Another was trying to mediate the quarrel and get them to get along peacefully.”

For some reason, Jiang Baimian recalled Kanna—who reared a vulgar parrot.

This Mind Corridor-level Awakened had once shown an ability that made people friendly.

### Chapter 592: Arrangements

What Jiang Baimian said was different from what was on her mind. She asked for information pertaining to the Old Task Force’s mission. “What do you know about Iron Mountain City’s ruins?”

Ulrich—who had a meticulous and serious appearance—didn’t show any signs of complacency in front of Jiang Baimian and the others just because he had become the interim president of the Ark Management Committee. He acted as if he had returned to the past and was facing the tyrannical DiMarco. His attitude was so impeccably respectful.

This might be his instinct and habit. Before DiMarco was killed, he had been a warden and butler for half of his life.

Half his life was equivalent to the entire lives of many wilderness nomads. Even if they were lucky and didn’t encounter any disasters or dangers, just the two problems of extreme malnutrition and the relatively harsh environment made them suffer physical ailments once they survived past their prime. They would gradually be plagued by illnesses and pain until they passed away. At such times, they would often only be in their forties.

Therefore, those older than 35 were considered elderly in some wilderness nomad settlements.

Ulrich organized his words and answered Jiang Baimian’s question. “The Ark and even the entire Redstone Collection don’t know much about Iron Mountain City’s ruins. After the Chaotic Era, most of Iron Mountain City’s ruins had been excavated by the time order here was restored and there were spare resources for expansions. It wasn’t of much value. We also began our smuggling business, so...”

Ulrich didn't finish his sentence, but his meaning was crystal-clear—even a child could understand it.

He paused and said, “Perhaps the mountain monsters will know better. They lived deep in Iron Mountain not long after the Old World was destroyed. They should've come into contact with the ruins over there.”

“Okay.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. At the same time, she muttered inwardly, You were born after the New Calendar, so you don't know that the Underground Ark had plenty of strength during the mid-stages of the Chaotic Era. However, DiMarco had focused his efforts on resisting Yama Tiger and the residents of Lake Heart Island. Later, the Vigilance Church came to preach...

Jiang Baimian went along with Ulrich's answer and asked about something else she had previously instructed. “It's been almost a year. How's your contact with the merfolk and mountain monsters?”

Ulrich leaned forward slightly, leaving only half of his butt sitting on the sofa. He replied unhurriedly, “Over the past year, the merfolk and mountain monsters didn't launch sporadic attacks like before due to the serious damage they suffered from their previous attack on Redstone Collection, so the situation has been relatively stable. They aren't resistant to making contact with us. They hope to exchange the ores in the mountains and the lake's produce for more useful smuggled items like food, weapons, and drugs.

“However, they are still very vigilant against humans with obvious hatred. If it weren't for the fact that the Ark members had never participated in the defense of Redstone Collection, it wouldn't have been easy for me to make contact with them.

“After much contact, the attitudes of some merfolk and mountain monsters toward us have softened significantly. I also instructed the people in charge of the transactions to talk to them about humanity and civilization. I repeatedly told them that the reason humans are humans isn't because of appearance. They seem to like hearing this, or at least they don't mind chatting with us.”

When she left Redstone Collection, in order to satisfy Shang Jianyao's 'great ideals' of resolving the hatred between all parties and to prevent the merfolk, mountain monsters, and Redstone Collection's residents from attacking each other without using Inference Clowning to achieve false peace, Jiang Baimian had specially instructed the Ark Management Committee's commissioners to organize a smuggling team and make contact with the merfolk and mountain monsters. Through their interactions and the instillation of certain beliefs, they could close the distance between the two parties.

She didn't have the grandiose hope that things would work out in a few years. This was something that would only happen after one or two generations of people died and their hatred was basically forgotten.

Furthermore, both parties had to work hard to maintain a 'ceasefire.' By using the smuggling trade to satisfy the merfolk and mountain monsters' basic needs, they could suppress their desire to return to Redstone Collection through dialogues. Strength had to be shown to intimidate them...

In short, this was a complicated and difficult matter. It was definitely not as simple as Shang Jianyao moving his lips.

At this thought, Jiang Baimian was suddenly stunned. She was surprised to discover that to the current Shang Jianyao, this might really be a matter of moving his lips a few times.

He was now a Mind Corridor-level Awakened and had Thought Guidance. This could separately show the characteristics of Thought Implantation and Inference Clowning. It was easy to make the merfolk and mountain monsters accept certain philosophies and beliefs.

Furthermore, there weren't many merfolk or mountain monsters. Shang Jianyao could 'cover' all of them in about half a month with some concealed hard work. He then needed to 'plant' the idea of listening to the radio regularly to cement the 'treatment effects.'

This could likely allow the merfolk and mountain monsters to get along peacefully with Redstone Collection's residents until all the Subhumans with deep-seated hatred died.

As for Redstone Collection, Shang Jianyao definitely couldn't do anything on a large scale with the Vigilance Cathedral watching. But thankfully, Redstone Collection's townsfolk weren't interested in the harsh environments. As long as the merfolk and mountain monsters didn't provoke them, most of them were willing to maintain the status quo.

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Jiang Baimian's expression changed slightly. She almost shook her head in front of Long Yuehong, Ulrich, and the other Ark Management Committee members.

She had actually begun considering using Awakened abilities to forcefully resolve the problems plaguing Redstone Collection!



This was a rather evil act from her previous point of view. Using one's abilities to directly distort another person's will was no different from creating puppets. It was only suitable for enemies.

Although she still felt that this wasn't desirable, she couldn't help but list out the steps to the plan. Sigh, we still have to respect the merfolk and mountain monsters' wills. We can't mock ourselves as villains and do what villains do... However, if we can't suppress the merfolk and mountain monsters' urge to return to Redstone Collection in the future and can't find a way to make the townsfolk accept it, we can temporarily use abilities to suppress the possible large-scale bloody conflict and let them continue maintaining peace. That's still on the table...

Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at Shang Jianyao. In the Ashlands, one mustn't have moral mysophobia. This can sometimes kill many people... The guilt of having their will temporarily warped for a few years, thereby allowing more people to survive and welcome the dawn of hope, guilt is nothing...

She didn't know which Shang Jianyao was in control of the body now. In any case, he didn't show any signs of eagerness because of Ulrich's words.

"You guys did well. You have to persist on this matter for a long time." Jiang Baimian nodded at Ulrich, Yu Tian, and Bode.

"The smuggling business with merfolk and mountain monsters also benefits us." Ulrich indicated that the Ark Management Committee would continue this matter even if Honorary President October Xue didn't remind them.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and pondered for a moment. "When's your next transaction?"

Ulrich didn't answer and instead said, "We can have it at any time, but you have to tell me a day in advance so that I can send people to contact them."

Whoa, the former butler and current president is really considerate. He actually understood the meaning behind my words... It's no wonder that people with money and status in the Old World wish to find a good butler... Jiang Baimian glanced at Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao from the corner of her eye and realized that one of them was confused while the other was daydreaming.

After some thought, Jiang Baimian asked, "Shall we meet the merfolk tomorrow afternoon and the mountain monsters the day after tomorrow?"

“No problem.” Ulrich remained calm.

After discussing other matters and dismissing the three Ark Management Committee members, Jiang Baimian stood up and stretched without maintaining her image. “We’ll stay on this floor tonight and try to meet the merfolk and mountain monsters before Old Ge comes.”

Long Yuehong finally couldn’t help but ask, “Team Leader, I can understand meeting the mountain monsters. It’s to obtain more information regarding Iron Mountain City’s ruins. But what’s the point of meeting the merfolk?”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “I wanted to do this back then, but we were still too weak. The knowledge might’ve brought us trouble. Do you still remember the murloc Oracle?”

“I remember.” Bai Chen was the first to answer.

Shang Jianyao had been awake for too long today, and his dizziness had worsened.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “The first to discover Yama Tiger Temple wasn’t the murloc Oracle but some young merfolk. They went to the island and entered the town. They discovered the temple and found it a little strange. They didn’t dare to enter and sent someone to inform the murloc Oracle. I’m wondering if they waited for the murloc Oracle in town for more than half an hour..”

Long Yuehong came to a realization. He recalled the third thing the company had told them to take note of when exploring Lake Heart Island: “Do not spend more than 15 minutes in the temple. You can’t exceed half an hour in the temple’s vicinity, and you can’t exceed three days elsewhere on the island.”

The merfolk didn’t enter the temple, nor had they been on the island for more than three days. However, it was very likely that they had been waiting for the murloc Oracle in the town near the temple for a period of time!

Long Yuehong probed, “Team Leader, do you want to investigate if anything abnormal happened to the merfolk back then or later?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao got a hold of himself and applauded.

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. “Yes.”

With that said, she pointed at the door. “Let’s get some food first before having an early night so that we can rise and shine early. We won’t be going out tonight.”

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao deliberately suppressed his voice and said, “Are we really not going out? Are we not going to listen to what the people from the Vigilance Cathedral are arguing about?”

“Not for the time being.” Jiang Baimian shook her head.

The Shang Jianyao that sought novelty continued suppressing his voice. “Different interpretations of the teachings are reflected in different folk traditions in their daily life. Folk tradition...”

He deliberately emphasized ‘folk tradition.’

Jiang Baimian hesitated.

“It’s still early anyway,” Bai Chen interrupted.

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian exhaled. “Let’s visit Harbinger Song at the Vigilance Cathedral, or else others might find us rude.”

Chapter 593: Purpose

As they walked to the elevator after leaving the reception room, Shang Jianyao—who was clearly dizzy—continued to use his excitement to defeat his frailty as he walked beside Jiang Baimian and continued chattering. “You were born in October, which happens to come under Eidolon Nun. Furthermore, you have sensed ‘Her’ gaze. This means that you two are fated. It’s time for you to pray...”

“Stop, stop, stop!” Jiang Baimian stopped Zen Master Redemption from preaching.

In order to match his persona, this fellow had recently watched a lot of relevant Old World entertainment. This made him appear strange and garrulous.

Is it really a good idea to mention Eidolon Nun’s gaze at the bottom of the Vigilance Cathedral? Do you want to be trapped in the Ark like DiMarco, never to leave or enter the New World? As Jiang Baimian muttered inwardly, she changed the topic by adding angrily, “You were born in September, but you don’t seem like a believer of Mandara.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t answer and silently took off his tactical backpack.

“What are you doing?” Long Yuehong couldn’t keep up with this fellow’s train of thought..

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “I’ll take out the Six Senses Beads and wear them. That way, I’ll be a qualified Mandara believer.”

As he spoke, he even raised his finger and caressed his lips.

This was the Church of Spiritual Transcendence’s etiquette. Shang Jianyao had learned it from his good brother—the Blackshirts’ second boss, Terrence.

“Manners!” Jiang Baimian chose a reason that Shang Jianyao would find most acceptable. “I wonder how many people there will be later.”

“Yeah.” Shang Jianyao strongly agreed and unzipped his tactical backpack.

At this moment, Bai Chen muttered to herself, “I was born in May, which comes under Monitor. Little Red was born in November, and it comes under Shattered Mirror...”

“I don’t think the relationships between the Kalendarium and the months are that strong. At least I don’t have the belief: ‘everything is but a dream; why so serious?’” Long Yuehong immediately discussed the topic Bai Chen raised.

Jiang Baimian silently rolled her eyes. She then pressed the button to ‘summon’ the elevator.

After arriving at the Vigilance Cathedral's basement one, they put on their masks again and walked up the relatively familiar path.

The hall here was still what Jiang Baimian remembered. It was deep and wide, and it was mostly red in color. It gave off a very dangerous feeling that required vigilance.

Gold was mixed in with the redness, exuding a strong sense of holiness.

On the walls deep in the hall, the gigantic symbol formed by the white, half-closed door, the darkness behind it, and the female silhouette instinctively made every person who entered want to lower their heads and escape the unknown existence's gaze through the mysterious door.

At this moment, two groups of people were sitting on each side of the gigantic symbol, communicating across space. Their tones were sometimes intense and sometimes slow.

Long Yuehong looked over and felt that the seven to eight people on the left of the Sacred Emblem likely belonged to the Vigilance Cathedral. This wasn't because he recognized these fellows but because they were wearing iconic masks and hoods.

The five to six people on the right side of the Sacred Emblem were huddled closer to the back, almost hiding in the darkness that the evening brought to the hall.

They didn't wear masks. From time to time, they would tremble in fear like a group of frightened quails.

Perhaps it was because they were too focused on arguing, or perhaps it was because the sky was almost completely dark with only a few candles shining in front of the Sacred Emblem in the cathedral hall for illumination, but the two groups didn't notice the Old Task Force's arrival.

Shang Jianyao tip-toed and sneaked over with his hide-and-seek professionalism forged from his youth.

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen followed behind without hiding themselves. However, the two groups of people didn't even look at them.

Wariness! Where's your vigilance? Jiang Baimian chuckled inwardly.

At this moment, she saw Shang Jianyao—who had already arrived near the Sacred Emblem—quietly sit down.

Wearing the monkey mask, he sat close to the Vigilance Church members, so close that it seemed like he was one of them.

The corners of Long Yuehong's mouth twitched. He was glad that he was wearing a mask and not embarrassing himself.

As the distance shortened, Jiang Baimian and the others heard what the two groups of people were arguing about.

An ordinary clergyman from the Vigilance Cathedral said in a serious tone, "This world is too dangerous, and all kinds of disasters might happen at any moment. Therefore, we have to be vigilant and face life with such an attitude. Only then can we completely survive the Old World's destruction and welcome the opening of the New World. This is what the Kalendaria really wants to warn us about."

A middle-aged man—who looked like he was trembling from fear—shouted shrilly, "Yes, that's right! But your focus is wrong—the focus should be on fear! Terror is humanity's oldest and most primitive emotion; it has helped humans survive to this day. Only by knowing how to fear deities and everything worth fearing will we naturally develop vigilant emotions and make the necessary preparations. Therefore, vigilance is only an inevitable outcome when we strictly adhere to the teachings, not its essence!"

Another Vigilance Cathedral personnel in a muslin hood retorted sharply, "The goal of fear is to make you vigilant, not to immerse you in fear and chase after your fear pathologically. You guys are putting the cart before the horse!"

This seemed to be an Ashlandic.

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong came to a realization and immediately criticized inwardly. Therefore, you wear masks and hide while acting as if a gun is pressed against your waist...

Jiang Baimian listened with relish and sat down a distance away. Frankly speaking, she felt that the two parties' debate standards and theoretical standards weren't too high. From the many books she had read, the debates regarding the teachings of the Old World's religions—which had been passed down for more than a thousand years—had reached a philosophical level. They each took a side, citing the scriptures and debated with eloquence.

Of course, this didn't stop Jiang Baimian from listening seriously. Such matters were rare in the Ashlands.

“That's right, that's right. How can you use the conditions as a conclusion?”

“No, no, no. This isn't a relationship between conditions and conclusions. This is a relationship between the source and its outcome!”

“...”

Jiang Baimian suddenly felt that something was amiss. She found some of the words in the conversation familiar.

She subconsciously looked at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao had straightened his neck and echoed loudly. The next second, he quietly shrank to the ground and crawled to the other side, away from the illumination.

After sitting down again, he took off the monkey mask with the furry face and protruding mouth and retorted his own words.

He's having a swell time... I can't tell that he's sick... Jiang Baimian was almost amused in exasperation.

At this moment, a loud boom sounded in midair. It was the first thunder in this year's spring at the Lake of Wrath.

After the thunder subsided, the group of people who promoted fear had already fled the hall and hidden back in their rooms.

The Vigilance Cathedral each found a place to hide, preventing themselves from being exposed to outsiders.

In just more than ten seconds, only Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao—who was sitting alone near the Sacred Emblem—were left in the hall.

After a while, Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled. “Let’s go and visit Harbinger Song.”

In Song He’s room, the Old Task Force met this acquaintance again.

He was still the same. His eyebrows were slightly sparse, and his sideburns were a little white. His beard was shaved clean, and he didn’t look a day older.

“May your vigilance last forever.” Song He raised his arms, crossed them, and took a step back.

“Distance is our friend!” Shang Jianyao replied in the same posture.

Song He didn’t have any change in expression as he looked at October Xue—who was wearing a graceful monk mask—and asked with a smile, “Why are you guys back at Redstone Collection?”

“We are planning on going to Iron Mountain City Ruin and rendezvous with the smart bot here,” Jiang Baimian replied simply. Without waiting for Song He to ask again, she curiously asked, “Harbinger Song, what’s going on with the people in the lobby?”

Song He smiled bitterly. “Parishioners of the same roots are debating the teachings.”

He then explained, “After the Old World was destroyed, the first batch of Blessed who received the Kalendaria’s revelation proselytized and established the religion. But as time passed, there were differences among them. One group believed that the Kalendaria was the embodiment of vigilance, while the other insisted that fear was the root.

“Neither could convince the other. After arguing for a few years, they each pulled their supporters into their own factions. The original Eidolon Nun Church split into the Vigilance Church and the



Terror Church. After that, they will choose representatives to meet at particular locations every few years to continue their original debate.”

“That explains it...” Shang Jianyao looked enlightened. Unfortunately, he was wearing a mask.

Jiang Baimian continued asking, “What about the group of people that promotes friendliness?”

“That’s something else.” Song He’s expression darkened, clearly unwilling to say anything else.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao raised a question that he couldn’t figure out. “Doesn’t the Kalendaria point out which side is wrong?”

Was the teacher not giving an answer for reference or marking the test scripts?

Song He smiled gently. “Even now, the two Churches still receive the Kalendaria’s response—occasionally, every year. Therefore, in my opinion, both are actually reasonable. They have both fulfilled the Kalendaria’s teachings to a certain extent, but they are reflected in different aspects. Heh heh, I can’t say anything else. Don’t tell anyone either, or the bishop will punish me by making me copy the Vigilance-related teachings.”

Since Song He had said so, Jiang Baimian naturally couldn’t ask further. After all, this was the Vigilance Cathedral, and it was under Eidolon Nun’s watch.

She deliberated and said, “Harbinger Song, did DiMarco’s father, grandfather, or great-grandfather leave the Underground Ark back then and head to Iron Mountain City Ruin?”

Ah... What does Team Leader mean? Why is she asking such a strange question? Long Yuehong was stunned before he suddenly jolted.

DiMarco—or rather, the Awakened who had ‘played’ DiMarco, his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather—was in the Subhuti domain!

Iron Mountain City Ruin were just a mountain away from one of Buddhism’s five Great Holy Lands! This seemed a little coincidental.

It was only then that Long Yuehong truly understood why his team leader insisted on waiting for Genava in Redstone Collection and not in the area near Iron Mountain City Ruin.

Not only did she want to see the fruits of the Ark Management Committee's work, but she also planned on investigating Yama Tiger's problem as well as DiMarco's relationship with the Buddhist Holy Land in Iron Mountain City Ruin.

#### Chapter 594: The Devil Opens Its Eyes

A hint of surprise flashed across Song He's face when he heard Jiang Baimian's words.

Her question was very strange. Furthermore, it had a clear direction as if she was investigating something.

As a Vigilance Church clergyman who was content with exercising sovereignty over a small area, Song He's understanding of things was ultimately limited to a small place like Redstone Collection despite having plenty of life experience and sufficient knowledge. It mostly involved the Church's personnel changes and religious disputes. He had almost zero understanding of the city ruin a mountain away. This resulted in him being unable to make a guess despite clearly learning that Jiang Baimian was trying to investigate a secret.

As his thoughts raced, Song He laughed bitterly. "To be honest, I've only met DiMarco's great-grandfather, Modeus. I was only a nobody back then. Heh heh, it's the same now. In short, I interacted with him not more than five times. From time to time, he would leave the Ark and come to the surface to go to different places. As for where he went, I'm not sure. Later, he converted to our religion and believed in the Kalendaria. Then, he never left the Underground Ark until he died. His son and grandson—in other words, DiMarco's grandfather and father—were the same."

Perhaps it was because he had been in Redstone Collection for too long and needed to use the Red River language to preach to his believers from time to time, but Song He would occasionally use this language's grammatical characteristics.

Uh, you call that conversion to your religion and believing in the Kalendaria? He was beaten into submission... Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "What kind of person was DiMarco's great-grandfather, Modeus?"

"He was arrogant to the point of being insufferable, and his gaze was very intimidating," Song He replied frankly. "As for his exact personality, I don't know him well since I didn't interact with him

much as I've just said. Compared to me, you might as well ask the Ark's old servants and old guards and flip through Modeus's library. Perhaps he has a habit of writing a journal?"

Shang Jianyao laughed. "Which normal person would..."

He was cut off by Jiang Baimian. "If Modeus was hiding a secret, he definitely wouldn't keep it in his diary unless he wanted to inform others via appropriate methods at an appropriate time."

"What if he has OCD?" The honest Shang Jianyao argued.

Song He's expression didn't change, and his tone remained gentle. "I'm only raising a direction for the investigation."

"Understood," Jiang Baimian said sincerely. "Thank you."

She then bade farewell and walked to the door with Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong.

With the corridor just inches away, she suddenly turned around and casually asked, "Did your cathedral send people to investigate the Underground Ark's library back then?"

After forming the Ark Management Committee, the Old Task Force actually hadn't written off the books underground. They just didn't know that there was a Buddhist holy land in the nearby Iron Mountain City ruins. They weren't interested in what kind of person DiMarco used to be or what he had experienced. Their focus was mainly on the books regarding the apocalypse.

The DiMarco family's ancestors were apocalyptic fanatics, and they specially built the Underground Ark for this very reason. Their family's library naturally had the corresponding content.

Song He's eyes flickered as he nodded slightly. "We sent a few clergymen because the Underground Ark's library has plenty of technical information and precious books that involve Old World civilization. This has a relatively important role for Redstone Collection's future and for humans to welcome the New World's descent. This is the wealth our ancestors—Old Calendar humans—left us."

At this point, Song He changed the topic. “However, we didn’t take away any lone books. We only copied them.”

His other meaning was that the Vigilance Church had taken one or two of the more common books.

“Okay.” Jiang Baimian nodded slowly. “Did you discover any records worth paying attention to?”

Song He shook his head.

...

In basement two inside the Ark, in the reception room from before.

The Old Task Force had gotten Ulrich, the former Ark butler, over.

Jiang Baimian went straight to the point. “What kind of person was the Ark’s first owner—DiMarco’s great-grandfather, Mr. Modeus?”

Ulrich recalled for a few seconds and deliberated over his words. “He died before I was born, but my grandfather was a warden he appointed. He mentioned him to me. His personality was very similar to DiMarco in all aspects, but he wasn’t that irritable or brutal.”

That’s because he hadn’t been confined to the Ark for years. His mind was completely warped in his later years... Long Yuehong ‘helped’ explain inwardly.

“What about things besides personality?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Ulrich looked at Shang Jianyao—who was still wearing the monkey mask. “He was once a believer of an ancient religion in the Old World and often carried the religion’s Holy Bible with him. DiMarco, his father, and grandfather always wore the clothes of the Old World’s clergymen because they were directly influenced by him. However, he ultimately believed in the Kalendaria and joined the Church. He obtained peace in the last few years of his life.”

That’s because the same person has a consistent fashion sense... Long Yuehong replied inwardly again.

Religion... Scriptures... Jiang Baimian muttered silently.

Bai Chen asked, “Is the Holy Bible—the one that Modeus often carried with him— still in the library?”

“Yes, the Church only took away the other Holy Bibles.” Ulrich was rather certain.

As Shang Jianyao was already on the brink of drowsiness, Jiang Baimian—who didn’t need to worry about the topic deviating—tersely acknowledged his words. “Do you know what books Mr. Modeus often read? Did he leave a diary?”

Ulrich shook his head. “He’s not a person who likes to keep track of things. Besides, him, DiMarco’s father, grandfather, and even DiMarco himself hated it when others pried into their privacy. They never let anyone know their reading preferences.”

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before asking, “Oh, right. The family autobiographies we saw last time are still there, right?”

It was an autobiography written by the DiMarco family before the Old World was destroyed. The Old Task Force had previously flipped through the parts regarding the apocalypse and the Ark and realized that their ancestor was indeed fanatical. This resulted in him building the Underground Ark, not because he had obtained some information in advance.

Jiang Baimian decided to go through it again. She planned on carefully reading the stuff she had previously skipped or scanned through a few times.

“It’s there,” Ulrich replied calmly.

...

In a library on a certain floor of the Underground Ark.

Ulrich picked up a dark-red, leather-bound Holy Bible from the desk in the middle and handed it to Jiang Baimian. “This is the book Mr. Modeus often carried.”

As Jiang Baimian took it, she looked at the bookshelves around her. She felt that this place was more like a stack room than a library.

“Thanks, we’ll call you if we need your help,” she said to Ulrich.

Ulrich didn’t insist on staying because he didn’t know if it was suitable for him to participate in the subsequent matters.

After Ulrich left the library, Jiang Baimian said to Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao, “I’ll read this Holy Bible. You guys read those DiMarco family autobiographies again. Hey, sleep against the bookshelf for a while if you feel dizzy.”

“Alright,” Shang Jianyao said with his eyes closed. Then, he slowly slid to the ground and fell asleep on the spot.

He really doesn’t care about the little things... Long Yuehong muttered and picked up a book of autobiographies that Ulrich had placed on the desk.

Time quietly passed, and only the rustling sound of page-flipping was heard.

After an unknown period of time, Jiang Baimian saw the parts regarding hell and the Devil in the Holy Bible.

She suddenly found a sentence in dark-blue ink at the bottom of a blank page. The sentence was written in the Red River language: “I awaken from the darkness; the Devil opens its eyes.”

For some reason, this sentence written in a scrawl sent a chill down Jiang Baimian’s spine.

She quickly flipped through the next few pages and didn’t find a new ‘comment.’ This seemed to be the only additional ‘content’ in the entire Holy Bible.

“Take a look at this.” Jiang Baimian made a guess as she summoned Long Yuehong and Bai Chen. “After the Old World was destroyed, did Modeus leave behind this sentence when he first woke up

in the Ark? Back then, he had already figured out what abilities he had obtained. His emotions were complicated and uncontrollable, so he wrote this sentence and felt that he had become a devil?”

Long Yuehong was just about to stand up and walk to his team leader when he suddenly saw a sentence in the autobiography: “To expand the family’s architectural business, the eldest son—Modeus—was sent to the neighboring country’s Iron Mountain City to participate in an old city rejuvenation bidding...”

Long Yuehong’s pupils dilated as he blurted out, “Team Leader, Modeus has been to Iron Mountain City! Before the Old World was destroyed!”

There was actually a certain connection between the two!

#### Chapter 595: Longing Thoughts Day and Night

Long Yuehong’s words echoed in the library like thunder exploding in Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen’s hearts.

The Underground Ark’s first owner, Modeus—who was suspected to be DiMarco’s true self—had actually been to Iron Mountain City!

To Jiang Baimian’s surprise, he hadn’t gone there during the Chaotic Era but before the Old World was destroyed.

Jiang Baimian stood up, walked to Long Yuehong’s side, and took the autobiography from his hand. After reading it several times, she then looked at Long Yuehong and Bai Chen in surprise. “Let’s find out when Modeus returned, where he went in Iron Mountain City, and what he did there.”

The three of them lowered their heads and flipped through the autobiographies. They even filtered the punctuation subconsciously.

Jiang Baimian and the others eventually extracted all the information regarding Modeus in the autobiographies.

In the era when the autobiographies were written, he wasn't the family head. He was only the eldest son, who was more forward in the line of succession. Therefore, there wasn't much mention of his various activities. He was only occasionally mentioned in the records of other matters.

The family's autobiographies didn't specify if Modeus's bid in Iron Mountain City regarding the old city rejuvenation project was successful or not. However, Jiang Baimian determined that he had likely made a successful bid and had been situated in Iron Mountain City for a long time through the fact that he had only participated in the family's other matters more than a year later.

Jiang Baimian made a reasonable guess. "After he left Iron Mountain City, he was sent to be in charge of the construction of the city's landmark buildings until the Old World was destroyed... This means that he left Iron Mountain City a few years before the Old World was destroyed... There's something fishy about Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company in the Old World?"

The city corresponding to the ruins where Redstone Collection was situated was considered relatively advanced in the Old World. The autobiographies mentioned that the cost of labor was very high and that the efficiency was low. The construction of various large-scale projects was no longer as rapid, so it was normal for buildings on the surface to take several years to be built.

"The Underground Ark was built many years before he went to Iron Mountain City. It clearly has nothing to do with the Second Food Company's fishiness." Bai Chen felt that there was no way to connect the dots.

After discussing it for a while, Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her electronic watch. Following that, she covered her mouth and yawned. "It's getting late. Let's get some sleep; we'll continue tomorrow morning."

She felt that there were many books here and that it was impossible to cover everything in one go. Since they had already made some progress, they might as well get some good rest and energize themselves for tomorrow morning.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong looked at the sentence written in the Holy Bible by Modeus or someone else. Stumped for the time being, they agreed with Jiang Baimian's suggestion.

Jiang Baimian took a few steps to the side, bent down, and grabbed Shang Jianyao with her left hand. Then, she lifted Shang Jianyao and made him lean against her for support.

This fellow had no intention of waking up.



Long Yuehong—who had wanted to volunteer to help—suddenly had a thought and closed his mouth again.

The quartet returned to basement two and came to the two rooms that Ulrich had gotten people to tidy up.

Jiang Baimian had specially requested for the two rooms to ensure that they could look after each other.

Before parting, Jiang Baimian habitually reminded them, “Go back to your room and get some rest. Try not to wake up at night. If you really need to, wake the other party up. Don’t act alone.”

The bathroom to the two guest rooms was outside.

“Alright.” Bai Chen agreed.

“Yes, Team Leader,” Long Yuehong replied, his heart beating rapidly.

Although everyone was already accustomed to this division that had always been the standard operating procedure for the Old Task Force and that there was nothing to be embarrassed about since they knew each other well, Long Yuehong still felt that things were different from before.

His mentality was different.

Ever since he recovered from his injuries, he had never slept in the same room as Little White. On the way back to Pangu Biology from First City and from Pangu Biology to Redstone Collection, the Old Task Force only occasionally found settlements to replenish their supplies. They never stayed in a hotel or rented rooms; they didn’t even pitch tents. They formed teams of two and took turns sleeping in the jeep.

Under the watch of ‘everyone,’ it undoubtedly felt different compared to sleeping in the same room.

Long Yuehong originally imagined that after everyone grew stronger, Jiang Baimian would reorganize their teams and stop partnering males with females to prevent everyone from constantly

feeling uncomfortable. After all, the situation of a veteran guiding a newbie no longer existed. He could barely shoulder the responsibility of watching over Shang Jianyao.

Unexpectedly, Jiang Baimian seemed to have forgotten this matter and never mentioned it again.

Long Yuehong didn't take the initiative to help Jiang Baimian carry Shang Jianyao because he was suddenly afraid that she would remember to adjust their team composition.

After entering the room, Long Yuehong turned to look at Bai Chen. "Which bed are you sleeping in?"

"It's all the same." Bai Chen took off her tactical backpack and casually threw it on the bed on the right.

"O-okay." Long Yuehong walked to the left bed and sat down.

He saw Bai Chen take off her coat. Although this was a common sight and Bai Chen also wore a long-sleeved camouflage T-shirt underneath, making it impossible to expose anything, Long Yuehong still felt inexplicably uncomfortable.

He cleared his throat indiscernibly and cast his gaze to the side.

"Aren't you going to shower?" Bai Chen took out her toiletries.

"O-okay." Long Yuehong suddenly stood up and searched frantically.

Can openers, iron combs, and other items would occasionally flick out before being put away.

After they were done, they lay on their beds.

Long Yuehong opened his eyes and stared at the dark ceiling for a long time, unable to sleep.

He didn't know when he had fallen asleep, but it was already midnight when he woke up. Perhaps due to his nervousness, Long Yuehong felt the need to pee.

He heard Bai Chen's dragged-out breathing—a clear sign that she was sleeping soundly. He didn't want to wake her up, so he could only toss and turn in an attempt to hold it in.

He lay on his side for a while and lay on his back for another while before lying on his other side. He constantly adjusted his posture in search of the least uncomfortable state.

He suddenly heard rustling coming from Bai Chen's side.

“Are you awake? I want to go to the bathroom,” Bai Chen said.

“Alright.” Long Yuehong sat up.

The two of them teamed up and brought their weapons with them as they left the room and went to the room opposite.

“You first.” Long Yuehong pointed at the bathroom door gentlemanly.

Bai Chen didn't refuse and quickly walked in.

As her figure disappeared in front of him, Long Yuehong suddenly felt the cold wind in the corridor. Only a few wall lamps were switched on, yellow and dim.

He immediately recalled the situation when he fought DiMarco. In the indescribably gloomy and terrifying atmosphere, he felt like he had been possessed by a ghost, making it difficult for him to control his body.

Could it be that DiMarco still has some aura left and is floating around the Underground Ark in a ghost-like state??The more Long Yuehong thought about it, the more afraid he became. He kept having the feeling that someone was secretly watching him.

His eyes darted around as he slowly turned his body and carefully looked behind.

He saw a pair of eyes the next second—eyes that shone out from behind a monkey mask.

Long Yuehong calmed his beating heart and blurted out a question. “Why didn’t you make a sound?”

“It will disturb others,” Shang Jianyao explained with a suppressed voice.

“...” Long Yuehong didn’t snap back. “Why are you awake?”

“I’ve slept for too long. I need to use the bathroom,” Shang Jianyao said confidently.

“Why are you alone? Where’s Team Leader?” Long Yuehong asked with a frown.

“At such a distance, she can rely on her senses. There’s no need for her to get up,” Shang Jianyao replied casually. He then asked, “Did you discover anything in the library?”

“Yes.”

Long Yuehong had just replied when Bai Chen walked out of the bathroom and said, “It’s your turn.”

“Wait a minute. Tell me about the discoveries first.” Shang Jianyao took off his monkey mask and wore a curious expression.

Long Yuehong—whose bladder was bursting—took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and decided to finish the recount quickly.

“I’ll do it.” Bai Chen walked between him and Shang Jianyao.

“Alright.” Long Yuehong was inexplicably happy.

After he finished relieving himself and washed his hands, Bai Chen had already briefed Shang Jianyao about the general situation.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and muttered to himself, “Back then, Modeus believed that he was possessed by the Devil? He didn’t know that it was an Awakening?”

“He probably hadn’t come into contact with such concepts back then.” Long Yuehong voiced his opinion.

Shang Jianyao didn’t answer and instead rushed into the bathroom.

...

The next morning after breakfast, the Old Task Force came to the Underground Ark’s library again.

Shang Jianyao didn’t flip through Modeus’s Holy Bible and the DiMarco family’s autobiographies. Instead, he looked at Ulrich and sincerely asked, “Are there any books on mysticism here?”

“There are a few,” Ulrich replied. “Although Mr. Modeus was a pious parishioner and didn’t like mysticism at all, his parents and ancestors had such hobbies. They had brought copies into the Ark.”

“Take me there,” Shang Jianyao said bluntly.

After Jiang Baimian heard their conversation, she thoughtfully said, “You suspect that Modeus once tried to find the corresponding source and solution from mysticism after he believed that he was possessed by the Devil?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

He was refreshed and in good condition in the morning. It was impossible to tell that he had suffered mental damage.

He, Ulrich, and Long Yuehong quickly brought back three stacks of books on mysticism.

After Ulrich left, the Old Task Force quartet divided the work, and each of them was in charge of checking a portion.

As he flipped through the pages, Long Yuehong discovered something: some of the words and sentences in the book were drawn with a blue-black pen at the bottom.

He immediately reported this situation, and Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen expressed that their books were similar.

They realized after comparison that the words and sentences drawn were related to the spirit, soul, and spirituality. This involved different mysticism theories, including etherism and animism.

As the inspection progressed, Bai Chen found new clues at the end of a book.

The blue-black pen wrote a word with very heavy strokes in the margins: “Price?”

#### Chapter 596: Meeting the Merfolk Again

Long Yuehong looked at the book Bai Chen showed them and asked in confusion, “Why did Modeus end up writing ‘price?’ Furthermore, there’s an additional question mark?”

Bai Chen didn’t answer his question and only pointed out a fact. “Modeus was clearly very agitated when he wrote the word ‘price.’ His strokes were very heavy, and the ink stains smudged a little. There are also traces on the other side of the paper.”

“Price...” Jiang Baimian muttered this word and constantly made all kinds of surmises in her mind before rejecting them.

Shang Jianyao made a mocking sound. “What’s there to be excited about ‘price?’ Why is there a need to write it down so hard? How ignorant!”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian’s heart palpitated as she looked around. “Could it be that Modeus didn’t know a price needed to be paid to obtain abilities back then? This resulted in him realizing that it was becoming increasingly difficult to control his emotions. Coupled with his knowledge in mysticism, he suspected that he had unconsciously paid a price...”

The mysticism book Bai Chen found that contained the word ‘price’ was mainly about the Devil. Several of its chapters mentioned mortals selling their souls to the Devil in exchange for power, money, bodies, or beauty.

“But didn’t you say that Star Cluster Hall keeps echoing the words ‘three bestowments for one price?’ As an Awakened, it’s impossible for Modeus not to hear it and know about it...” Long Yuehong voiced his opinion.

He originally wanted to use Shang Jianyao as an example to enhance his persuasiveness. After all, even this fellow whose brain was no longer normal knew the price. However, he decided against inviting trouble after some thought.

Just as Long Yuehong said that, Jiang Baimian said with a relatively serious expression, “What if that’s really the case? Modeus really didn’t know the price of Awakening? Could it be that he didn’t go through Star Cluster Hall during his Awakening, or did Star Cluster Hall not exist back then?”

While Bai Chen and Long Yuehong were shocked, Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “I get it!”

“What do you get?” Jiang Baimian asked warily.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “The Old World was destroyed because the advancement of Awakened was chaotic and disorderly, just like Brownian motion. This resulted in a constant increase in entropy that eventually reached a critical point, erupting with the symbol of chaos—the Heartless disease. After the Old World was destroyed, the Kalendarium built Star Cluster Hall, Sea of Origins, Mind Corridor, and the New World as a warning for the future. They started managing Awakenings and gave it order.”

That’s rather imaginative... What entertainment material have you been watching recently? Jiang Baimian glanced at the confused Long Yuehong and Bai Chen and cleared her throat. “There’s no need to discuss the reason behind this phenomenon for the time being. What we need to confirm now is: did Modeus not know about the price because Star Cluster Hall didn’t exist when he Awakened or was it because he had gone to Iron Mountain City, went to the Second Food Company, and received a certain ‘blessing,’ which resulted in him avoiding Star Cluster Hall and completing his Awakening? Is that equivalent to being a stowaway?”

Long Yuehong couldn’t determine which was likely the case, so he could only say in an empirical manner, “Let’s flip through the books here and see what other messages Modeus left behind. If not, the answer to the question might be in Iron Mountain City’s ruins.”

“Yes...” Jiang Baimian slowly nodded. “Let’s find the relevant books and read them. These include religion, mysticism, research on superpowers, unsolved mysteries of the world, and novels in the corresponding genre...”

This was a sizable project. The Old Task Force didn’t even complete one-tenth of it even as noon approached.

“Phew, we can’t abuse ourselves like this.” Jiang Baimian stretched. “After we meet the merfolk, we’ll hire about 20 Ark residents to help with the preliminary screening with some of our supplies. They don’t have to know the words; they just have to choose books with comments and notes.”

Ah... Long Yuehong held back the words that rushed to his mouth.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” Shang Jianyao had an ‘aggrieved’ expression. “Otherwise, we would’ve completed at least half of the mission by now.”

Jiang Baimian laughed dryly. “I underestimated the difficulty.”

She couldn’t say that she was too anxious and that her mind was filled with finding the next book with Modeus’s ‘comments,’ thus forgetting that she could hire help, right?

Shang Jianyao didn’t care about Jiang Baimian’s explanation. He had long forgotten the emotions he just had and rubbed his stomach. “What are we having for lunch?”

...

At 2 p.m., the Old Task Force followed the Underground Ark’s smuggling team to the Lake of Wrath’s shore.

Located in this remote area was an abandoned dock far away from Redstone Collection. It had already been repaired by the Ark Management Committee, which allowed the boats they acquired to dock.



After moving the boxes containing canned food and medicine onto a small cargo ship, Bode—who was in charge of this operation—quickly invited Jiang Baimian and the others to board.

With the turbine revving, the small, brown cargo ship sent ripples through the water and sailed further into the Lake of Wrath.

After making many turns, the ship arrived at a desolate island in the middle of the lake.

This island wasn't large, far from comparable to Lake Heart Island where Yama Tiger was sleeping. It could be seen from end to end in one glance, and it bordered the sunlight-reflecting lake.

“Let's wait on the island.” The freckled Bode pointed at the strange, rugged island in front of him. Without waiting for Long Yuehong and the others to ask, he simply explained, “We have to be wary of the merfolk turning hostile. We are completely no match for them on the lake or in the water. They aren't willing to leave the Lake of Wrath and come ashore to trade with us, so we can only choose this island as a meeting place. According to your Ashlandic saying, it's a compromise.

“Although this island isn't too large, we can build fortifications to resist attacks by ships. Once the merfolk come with ill intentions, we will defend and send a telegram to request backup. When the time comes, the reinforcements should be able to evacuate us with the drones and Awakened we obtained half a year ago.”

Not bad. The ordinary guards from back then are now well organized... Jiang Baimian praised inwardly and continued on this topic. “How are the Awakened's attitudes?”

She was referring to the Awakened that DiMarco reared.

“Two of them were very enthusiastic and have already been recruited into the Administrative Committee. This is something that can't be helped; their abilities are very useful to us,” Bode replied truthfully. “The rest were unwilling to shoulder management duties, but we also provide them very good treatment.”

Indeed. If the Administrative Committee doesn't have sufficient strength, they will be overthrown sooner or later... Jiang Baimian had left Geneva as interim president in the Underground Ark to intimidate the Awakened. She believed that they couldn't completely rely on the Vigilance Cathedral.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao was bored from waiting. He exerted strength with his waist and abdomen and began jumping away.

He jumped from the edge of the cargo ship to the island and didn't even use the gangway.

Bode and the others' foreheads twitched when they saw this. Is this a monster?

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian didn't delay any further. She jumped onto the gangway with a small leap and walked onto the island.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen followed closely behind.

After about 15 minutes, the merfolk arrived at the transaction location on a wooden cruise ship.

They had actually gathered all kinds of boats scattered around the Lake of Wrath. Furthermore, their ancestors had passed down the corresponding repair skills. But due to the lack of gasoline, steel, batteries, and other resources, many boats were either impossible to repair or couldn't be steered after the repairs.

In comparison, the ancient wooden boats suited them better.

Long Yuehong felt dizzy as he looked at the grayish-black faces that shimmered with a weak glow. He looked at their protruding eyes that were more white than black and the gills below their ears, which stretched all the way to their necks.

He felt like he had prosopagnosia. For a moment, he could only rely on the merfolk's heights and weights for identification.

The tall murloc in the lead swept his gaze around and suddenly jumped back two steps before landing on the shore, a short distance from the lake.

As the other merfolk stirred, he raised his palm—which was covered in grayish-black scales—and pointed at Jiang Baimian and the others. He then said in the Red River language, "Who are they? They weren't present in all the previous transactions!"

In order to dispel the merfolk's wariness, the Ark Management Committee tried their best to be uniform when forming the smuggling team each time. If anyone really couldn't participate, they would rather have one fewer person.

Whoa, these merfolk have been forced by life to almost believe in Eidolon Nun. They've become vigilant to a certain extent... Jiang Baimian turned to look at Bode, indicating that he should deal with it.

Without waiting for Bode to explain, Shang Jianyao laughed. "We are the Ark Management Committee's honorary presidents and the bosses behind this smuggling business. Don't worry. If we really wanted to deal with you, we could've done so long ago. Why wait until now?"

These words weren't too convincing, and even Bode and the others felt that they were riddled with flaws.

They believed that the merfolk definitely wouldn't believe them, so they quickly shielded Shang Jianyao behind them and tried to use the words President Ulrich had prepared to reduce the merfolk's wariness.

Bode and the others knew that Jiang Baimian and the others were very powerful. They shielded Shang Jianyao because they were afraid that the merfolk would fall out with them. It was to resolve the conflict and not escalate it so as to prevent the failure of their original goal.

But at this moment, the merfolk in the lead took the initiative to walk back. He looked at Shang Jianyao and nodded. "You're right."

Although the other merfolk didn't say a word, they supported their leader with their actions.

While Bode and the others were surprised, Jiang Baimian thoughtfully said, "We came here to exchange supplies for information."

"What information?" The leader of the merfolk was confused.

Jiang Baimian said seriously, "How long did the first batch of people who went to Lake Heart Island wait for the Oracle? Where did they wait?"

The murloc's eyes bulged even more as he blurted out in surprise, "Why are you asking?"

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she changed the topic and anxiously asked, "How are they now?"

The lead murloc fell silent for a few seconds before saying in a terrified tone, "A-all of them contracted the Heartless disease."

#### Chapter 597: New Hypothesis

On the way back to the Lake of Wrath's shore from the island and then to the Underground Ark Iron Mountain entrance, the Old Task Force members remained silent as their conversation kept echoing in their minds.

"How long did the first batch of people that went to Lake Heart Island wait for the Oracle? Where did they wait?"

"Why are you asking?"

"How are they now?"

"A-all of them contracted the Heartless disease."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

After returning to basement two and entering the reception room, Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at Shang Jianyao and broke the indescribable atmosphere. "Why aren't you saying anything? You're the last person to be scared."

Shang Jianyao rubbed his temples. "It's afternoon, and I used my abilities again. I'm almost out of juice."

He had yet to fully recover from his damaged psyche.

With this interlude, Long Yuehong finally couldn't help but say, "If you stay inside Yama Tiger Temple for more than 15 minutes, stay in the area around the temple for more than half an hour, and stay elsewhere on the island for more than three days, you will definitely be infected with the Heartless disease?"

Jiang Baimian nodded indiscernibly. "From the looks of it, yes. I wonder if the company figured this out at the cost of human lives..."

"Then, what's the reason for all of this?" Bai Chen didn't care much about how Pangu Biology could formulate such precautions. She was concerned about the connection between the sleeping Yama Tiger and the Heartless disease.

On the way back, Jiang Baimian had long thought of many possibilities and rejected them one by one. At this moment, she threw out the one she felt was most reasonable. "Yama Tiger is actually trapped in the New World, so his body is equivalent to a node where the New World and reality intersect? Such nodes are uncontrollable. They will slowly leak the New World's aura, matter, and..."

At this point, Jiang Baimian paused and added, "Virus."

Long Yuehong's eyes suddenly widened. "Are you saying that the Heartless virus comes from the New World and spreads to the Ashlands through similar nodes, infecting the surrounding people? Just like how the human settlements on Lake Heart Island were quickly destroyed by the Heartless disease after Yama Tiger fell asleep?"

"That's one explanation. We need more evidence." Jiang Baimian tried her best to calm down.

Investigating the source of the Heartless disease had always been her dream.

She exhaled and added, "To the New World, the Heartless virus might be nothing—it might not even be a virus. However, it's highly fatal for people living in the Ashlands."

This reminded her of some books she had read in the past. After humans came to a place isolated from the world, the bacteria and viruses that were harmless to them brought large-scale deaths to the natives.

“B-but isn’t it said that the New World is a paradise. There’s no Heartless disease, no famine, no cold, no monsters, and no mutations...” Long Yuehong felt like the holy land in his heart had been tainted.

“There might not be any humans either,” the listless and mentally exhausted Shang Jianyao added.

This sentence made Long Yuehong’s hair stand on end.

Bai Chen nodded. “The New World might not be a good place. Didn’t Oray say that he would rather die than go to the New World?”

Jiang Baimian gave a terse acknowledgment and recalled. “We previously discovered that the date of the company’s Heartless outbreak matches the time of First City’s chaos. Didn’t we make a guess? The uprising in First City might very well be noticed by the Kalendarium, or they might even directly intervene. ‘Their’ clash produced a certain high-level fluctuation, causing small-scale Heartless disease outbreaks to erupt in many places in the Ashlands... From the looks of it, we have to correct this guess.”

Shang Jianyao raised his hand and tried to answer, but he weakly rubbed his forehead. “Forget it. I can’t be bothered to think.”

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and deliberated over her words. “During the First City uprising, the powerhouses from the various large factions—whose minds had entered the New World but had their bodies remain in the Ashlands—more or less returned. Coupled with the Kalendarium’s attention and interference, many tunnels definitely appeared between the New World and the Ashlands that morning, causing the Heartless disease to leak out again.”

Compared to the fluctuations produced by a power struggle, this guess seemed more reasonable and realistic.

Long Yuehong nodded and remarked, “Since we can’t stay in Yama Tiger’s sleeping temple and the surrounding area for too long lest we get infected with the Heartless disease, it’s impossible for humans to exist in the area inside and streets around the interior of the Crystal Consciousness Church’s Sikhara Temple. The same goes for First City’s Golden Apple Zone or even the entire city. It should’ve long been ruled by the Heartless.”

From Long Yuehong’s point of view, the Buddha’s Nirmanakaya was essentially no different from the sleeping Yama Tiger. There was definitely more than one active powerhouse in First City who

had entered the New World in a similar situation—where their mind had entered the New World while leaving their body in the Ashlands.

They would also bring what Yama Tiger would bring!

Jiang Baimian replied with a bitter smile, “Why do you think Heartless cases occasionally appear in First City then?”

This question gave Long Yuehong the creeps.

Jiang Baimian continued, “But compared to the unlucky Yama Tiger, they have more freedom. They can choose when to return and sleep. Furthermore, they maintain a certain level of control over their surroundings. They can drastically suppress the Heartless disease’s leakage and spread. Besides, I suspect that they can still consciously allocate strength to selectively protect people. Therefore, very few people in the company’s management contract the Heartless disease, whereas the employee population suffers from it once or twice a year, or even more.

“Regarding this, we can verify it when we return to First City in the future. We can compare the incidence rates of Heartless cases among the nobles, officials, and ordinary citizens.”

Bai Chen recalled a certain detail and echoed in enlightenment, “It’s no wonder that Oray didn’t feel sad, panic, or fear after his butler contracted the Heartless disease. Instead, he was angry and confused... He believed that the person who was supposed to protect the butler hadn’t fulfilled their duties.”

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong felt like another clue had been linked.

Smack!

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm as he forced a gratified expression onto his face. “Therefore, we really wronged Xiaochong back then!”

For a period of time, the Old Task Force had suspected that the Heartless disease outbreak in First City’s Green Olive Zone was related to Xiaochong.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Don’t forget how Teacher Du Heng evaluated Wu Meng and Xiaochong. As this world’s poisonous sores, their connection with the New World might not be weaker than those sleeping old fellows.”

Silence ruled the reception room once again.

After a while, Bai Chen took the initiative to raise a question. “Since Yama Tiger is very likely an Awakened whose mind has entered the New World while leaving his body in the Ashlands, why did he shout ‘save me?’ Besides, he can’t occasionally return like other New World powerhouses.”

Jiang Baimian had some thoughts on that. She said with a smile, “Yama Tiger calls himself Yama and is considered a deity in the present world. He clearly doesn’t believe in any Kalendaria. When he reached the New World, there was naturally nobody to take him in or protect him. He probably encountered something subsequently. I suspect that he’s suppressed by a Kalendaria, just like how DiMarco was sealed in the Ark by Eidolon Nun...”

Jiang Baimian spoke the latter half of the sentence in a softer voice.

This was once a place Eidolon Nun often watched.

For this, Jiang Baimian deliberately changed the topic and scoffed at Shang Jianyao. “For someone like you who carries the Blessings from all Kalendarium, you will probably be in a worse state than Yama Tiger when you enter the New World.”

Shang Jianyao sighed. “‘They’ will understand my good intentions.”

“What good intentions do you have?” Long Yuehong knew that Shang Jianyao couldn’t give a serious answer, so he wanted to hear what ‘superb theory’ the latter had.

Shang Jianyao shrugged. “I haven’t thought of it. It’s still early anyway.”

As he spoke, he yawned.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian concluded, “We gained much more from this trip to Redstone Collection than we imagined. Furthermore, it’s crucial information. Next, let’s temporarily put aside



the exact connection between the New World and the Heartless disease because there are no clues to continue the investigation. We'll consider it later.

“Hey, follow us to the library and line some books to sleep on. We'll get the Ark residents to help filter them. We'll try to dig up every comment that Modeus left behind before we meet the mountain monsters tomorrow afternoon.”

The Old Task Force's current direction for investigation was the relationship between Modeus and Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company, a Buddhist holy land.

...

In the dead of night, Jiang Baimian directed a question at Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao—who had woken up from his 'afternoon nap.' “Any progress?”

“No,” Bai Chen replied first.

Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao shook their heads.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly. “After the initial shock, panic, and confusion, Modeus seemed to become careful. He no longer left behind any clues.”

After pondering for a few seconds, Jiang Baimian asked, “Are there any Buddhist scriptures in the library?”

Zen Master Redemption Shang Jianyao was very sure of this. “No, I was planning to find a few volumes to learn from.”

He was the only one who wanted to learn the Buddhist scriptures; there was no 'we.'

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “He's never read the Buddhist scriptures and doesn't seem to have passed Star Cluster Hall. Where did DiMarco—or Modeus—learn that one of his abilities is named Destiny Connection? This is a Buddhist term that many Ashlandics don't know or don't understand. How did he, a Red River person, come up with it?”

## Chapter 598: Friendly Hand

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen had no answer, and Zen Master Redemption Shang Jianyao seemed unfazed.

He raised his left palm vertically and chanted a Buddhist proclamation. “Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti. We generally call this celestial wisdom. Perhaps Modeus was a Buddhist in his previous or previous, previous life. He fell into the sea of bitterness and reincarnated again and again. It was only when he Awakened that he slowly recalled his previous lives.”

Although Jiang Baimian knew that this fellow was blowing smoke, she had a pragmatic spirit. She thought for a moment and said, “We can’t rule out the possibility of such a situation, but it’s very unlikely. Up till now, only Destiny Connection has shown the potential to complete such matters, but it hasn’t eliminated the part about memories awaiting to be awakened. Unless the Subhuti domain still has abilities similar to Destiny Connection but pertains to different details...”

Jiang Baimian didn’t continue that topic. “The two feasible directions now are: first, finish flipping through the remaining books.. We can leave that for tomorrow morning. Second, enter Iron Mountain City Ruin and see if there are any clues left.

“If we have time tomorrow, we can also pay the Vigilance Cathedral’s bishop and the local Hunter’s Guild a visit to see if they have gathered more information on Iron Mountain City Ruin. It’s not a bad thing to make more preparations in this regard. Alright, get some sleep. Stay sharp.”

...

Two modified vehicles drove into Redstone Collection the next morning.

“Why don’t I see anyone here?” Bai Chen’s former companion, Chu Ge, stuck his head out the window and sized up the surrounding buildings that had either collapsed or been abandoned.

He looked out and felt that he had come to a ruin that had been unexplored for a long time, not a reputable smuggling node with considerable strength. The only signs of life here were the lush-green plants under the spring sun.

The elder sitting beside the floral-clothed Shao Liang smiled and said, “This is a characteristic of the Vigilance Church. It seems like the residents of Redstone Collection have already integrated their faith into their lives.”

He was also Ashlandic, and his hair was sparse to the point that one could see his scalp. The wrinkles on his face weren’t too exaggerated. The corners of his mouth remained curled into a smile, and he looked amiable.

“Your Grace, you mean...” Chu Ge asked respectfully but not sycophantically. Although he also believed in Eidolon Nun, he actually didn’t know much about the Vigilance Church and the Terror Church. If not for the fact that he had recently come to the south to proselytize on the importance of friendliness and trust and that it happened to be on the way, he wouldn’t have wanted to participate in the baffling parish assembly.

Before Chu Ge could finish speaking, he suddenly sensed something. He jerked his head and cast his gaze at a relatively intact high-rise building.

“There’s someone there.” He acted as if he had chanced upon a friendly neighbor while strolling. Although he was a little surprised, he was mostly happy.

The old man—who he addressed as archbishop—nodded, indicating that there was nothing wrong with Chu Ge’s discovery.

“I’ll go over to greet him and ask for directions.” Chu Ge confidently pushed open the door and alighted.

Mu Chi, who was wearing smoky makeup, parked the car by the roadside once Chu Ge pointed out that there was someone nearby.

“Hey, the one in the building. We’re here...” As Chu Ge walked to the tall building and climbed the steps leading to the door, he waved his right hand.

A black grenade was suddenly thrown out.

Chu Ge’s pupils dilated. With his rich experience, he pounced to the side, flew away from the steps, and hid behind cover.

Boom!

Amidst the explosion, Chu Ge felt the wall bordering the steps he was leaning against tremble violently. He then realized that the person in the building had escaped his perception range in the opposite direction.

“We mean no harm! Hey, we’re here to make friends!” Chu Ge shouted a few times, but nobody replied.

He could only walk back to the modified vehicle and look at the elder. “Archbishop, why didn’t you stop him? He probably hasn’t escaped your perception range yet.”

The archbishop shook his head and smiled. “That’s rude—we have to show our friendliness first. Believe that there are shared emotions. The Kalendaria said: trust one another.”

His conversation with Chu Ge didn’t exhibit a particularly strong sense of hierarchy.

Chu Ge expressed his understanding. “The New World isn’t suspicion and envy. Then, let’s continue forward and find other townfolk to ask for directions. Shall we use our sincerity to dispel their excessive vigilance?”

He was already accustomed to having his good intentions treated as ill intentions ever since he joined the Friendly Hand. After all, people like them were considered anomalies in the Ashlands.

The archbishop nodded in satisfaction.

As Chu Ge opened the door and sat back in the passenger seat, he thought for a moment and said, “We might as well circle to the lake and find the farmlands that Redstone Collection cultivate. It’s the season for sowing and plowing the fields. There must be people there, and it’s not easy to hide.”

Mu Chi and Shao Liang agreed with his suggestion.

After some time, the three vehicles finally circled to the nearby lake northwest of Redstone Collection. They saw a large number of cultivated farmlands.

Many figures were busy in the farmlands.

After they discovered Chu Ge and the others approaching, they gathered at their designated spots in a very disciplined manner. Some hid behind simple fortifications, and some stood outside. They forced themselves to observe the subsequent changes and assumed a pose that seemed conducive to communication.

This scene nearly brought tears to Chu Ge's eyes. That's what I call normal vigilance! The person in the city ruin was so extreme that he was on the brink of being mentally ill! Yes, the only problem is: Is there a need for all of you to wear masks?

"We would like to ask for directions." Chu Ge waved his hand, indicating his intention.

He learned from his previous lesson and shortened the sentence, quickly repeating it in Ashlandic and the Red River language.

Among the 'farmers,' a man in an indigo-blue theatrical mask mustered his courage, took a few steps forward, and asked in the Red River language, "Where do you want to go?"

"Vigilance Cathedral," Chu Ge replied loudly.

The man immediately heaved a sigh of relief. He was accustomed to strangers searching for the Vigilance Cathedral.

He pointed in the southeast direction and said, "Go straight along this path. When you're almost entering the ruins, you'll see the cathedral. If you accidentally take a wrong turn, search the surrounding farmlands. Many of us are still busy there, so they can correct your route."

"Thank you!" Chu Ge cupped his hands around his mouth like a trumpet. He then asked, "How many factions does Redstone Collection have now?"

"The original Ashlanders, Red River people, and our Underground Ark, but everyone believes in Eidolon Nun and adheres to the cathedral's orders."

Chu Ge smiled in relief.

He suddenly turned around and used his back to face the Underground Ark members. He then sincerely praised, "Alone we are weak; together we are strong."

This was Friendly Hand's etiquette. It indicated his trust in the other party, to the point of daring to face his back to them.

After asking what the Underground Ark was, Chu Ge bade the group farewell and walked back to the car.

The archbishop in the backseat retracted his gaze and said with emotion, "The one in the Underground Ark isn't a simple character."

The floral-clothed Shao Liang smiled. "Can he be as strong as you, Your Grace?"

The archbishop fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "That's very likely, but his condition isn't too right."

The driving Mu Chi didn't expect the Underground Ark's owner to be so powerful. She blurted out, "Is he considered a Vigilance Church member, a Terror Bishop?"

"No, he's only an ordinary believer of the Kalendaria," the archbishop replied simply.

Upon hearing this, Chu Ge turned his head. "Your Grace, you're very familiar with the Underground Ark..."

The archbishop smiled amiably. "I heard about the Ark's owner from the Hand of God back when I was young and specially came over to stay for a period of time."

"Then, you definitely know where the Vigilance Cathedral is..." Chu Ge said in surprise.

He didn't need to specially find someone to ask for directions!

The archbishop smiled. “This happened almost 50 years ago. At my age, how can I remember the exact path?”

As the few of them conversed, two modified vehicles drove to the Vigilance Cathedral.

After driving for a while, they saw that some of the original wilderness had been plowed and that many people were toiling in the fields.

Upon seeing this, the archbishop thought for a moment and instructed Chu Ge, “Go and ask about the Underground Ark in detail. Sigh, I wonder how my old friend is doing...”

Chu Ge immediately agreed. After the car stopped, he pushed open the door, walked out, and found a girl wearing a ghoul mask nearby.

Considering that the other party was from the Vigilance Church, he deliberately maintained sufficient distance and asked in a loud voice, “Are you from the Underground Ark?”

“Yes.” The girl didn’t deliberately raise her voice, so Chu Ge barely heard her.

As the other party was speaking Ashlandic, he switched to his mother tongue and continued asking, “Who’s the Ark’s current owner?”

“Owner?” the girl asked in confusion. “There’s no owner. The management committee is in charge now.”

Ah...?Chu Ge almost doubted his ears. He couldn’t help but take two steps forward, scaring the girl into taking several steps in retreat.

The ‘farmers’ around her quickly came over and drew their guns.

Chu Ge raised his hands without minding his image. “What happened to the Ark’s original owner? Did he die without offspring?”

“He was overthrown and died at the hands of our five presidents.” The girl’s voice carried a hint of pride.

Chu Ge's eyes flickered as he resisted the urge to ask before returning to the car. Then, he repeated what he had learned.

"The Ark's owner was actually killed..." The archbishop was clearly a little shocked.

Shao Liang didn't have a clear idea of how strong the Ark's original owner was, so he only scoffed. "The Vigilance Cathedral just watched those five people finish off its parishioner?"

"Yes, this matter seems a little complicated. Let's ask in detail when we reach the Vigilance Cathedral." The archbishop had already restrained any unnecessary expressions.

The cars continued forward. Before long, Chu Ge and the others finally arrived at the Vigilance Cathedral.

Under the gazes of hidden pairs of eyes, they walked into the blood-red hall that had a hint of gold.

"This use of color here is too..." As a believer of Eidolon Nun, Shao Liang barely resisted the urge to mock his fellow parishioners.

Chu Ge saw four familiar figures. They happened to enter the elevator and went down.

"Bai Chen and the others?" Chu Ge stared in that direction for a while before nodding slightly.

He planned on greeting them later if they returned to the hall.

Chapter 599: Another Bunch of People

The Friendly Hand archbishop led Chu Ge, Shao Liang, Mu Chi, and the others to meet the local bishop, Antonella, under the Vigilance Sacred Emblem.



This relatively bald but muscular clergyman—who was more than 1.8 meters tall and wore a black cloak and an extremely simple mask—raised his arms, crossed them, and took a step back. “Wariness is a hint from the Goddess. Archbishop Delro, your rooms have been prepared.”

The thin-haired Archbishop Delro wanted to give Antonella a hug according to the Friendly Hand’s most formal and sincere etiquette. However, he could only turn around and show his back to Antonella when he saw the latter’s undisguised vigilance. He then said in the Red River language, “Be friendly; trust one another.”

The differences between the two religions were obvious. Furthermore, this was different from the Vigilance Church and the Terror Church’s disparate emphasis on the teachings. The Friendly Hand was diametrically opposite, having nothing similar to the other two.

The only thing in common was that Friendly Hand also believed in October’s Kalendaria, Eidolon Nun.

If the Vigilance Church and the Terror Church stemmed from the same source, Friendly Hand was akin to a child picked up from the streets.

In a sense, this was also equivalent to the truth. In the Chaotic Era, Friendly Hand originated from people who needed to unite to resist the Heartless and various mutated creatures. Those people relied on watching each other and cooperation before they barely carved out a bloody path and established different settlements to spread their faith in Eidolon Nun.

Friendly Hand’s philosophy and the Salvation Army essentially had something in common. Both parties did share a long and close partnership.

It was only in the tenth year of the New Calendar that Friendly Hand regularly sent people to participate in the parish assembly between the Vigilance Church and the Terror Church due to Eidolon Nun’s oracle.

It was precisely because of their existence that the murderous fighting between the Vigilance Church and the Terror Church didn’t repeat.

In Chu Ge’s self-deprecating words: the Kalendaria couldn’t bear to see ‘Her’ believers suffer unnecessary casualties because of a little religious dispute, so ‘She’ specially sent people from the Friendly Hand to mediate.

After the personnel following him turned around in unison and bowed at the Vigilance Church's bishop, Antonella, Delro spoke in a relaxed and amiable tone. "I once came to Redstone Collection and made contact with the one in the Underground Ark. We can be considered old friends. I wonder how he is now. Can I visit him?"

Antonella wore an extremely simple white mask and said in a deep voice, "DiMarco is already dead, and the Underground Ark has changed owners."

"You guys did this?" Delro acted as if this was the first time he had heard of this.

Antonella shook his head. "No. Five foreigners."

"Are they also the Kalendaria's believers?" Delro asked in 'surprise.'

Antonella shook his head again. "I'm not sure about their faith, but they definitely aren't believers of the Kalendaria. They don't usually live in Redstone Collection and only come occasionally. Actually, you should've met them just now. They happened to leave the hall and return underground when you entered the cathedral."

"..." Chu Ge seriously thought for a moment before realizing that Bishop Antonella was likely referring to Bai Chen and the others. Them? They killed an Awakened that Archbishop Delro believes is stronger than him? When did Bai Chen become so powerful? Although her companions look like they come from a large faction, they can't be that strong, right? They are too young...

As these thoughts raced through his mind, Chu Ge instinctively suspected something and asked, "Your Excellency, didn't you say that five people killed the Underground Ark's original owner? We only saw four..."

Antonella didn't hide anything. "The other one is a smart bot. He didn't come this time."

Bai Chen's smart bot? Chu Ge felt that things finally matched up, but he was still unwilling to believe it. It has only been a few years, yet Bai Chen has grown to a level that I have to look up to. Furthermore, she has joined a team with unfathomable strength? In addition, it's not like I haven't gained anything over the years. There is already a world of difference between the current me and the past me.

Archbishop Delro deliberated for a moment and asked, “The main force was that smart bot?”

That’s right. Smart bots are very resistant to Awakened in certain domains, even if the other party has already entered the Mind Corridor...?Upon recalling this, Chu Ge subconsciously heaved a sigh of relief and found it reasonable.

“I’m not sure. I wasn’t involved, and there was no surveillance footage at the scene,” Antonella replied calmly.

Upon seeing this, the Friendly Hand archbishop, Delro, couldn’t help but feel puzzled. “They are foreigners, and they don’t believe in the Kalendaria. Did you just watch them break into the cathedral’s basement and kill the Ark’s owner? The Ark’s owner is a believer of the Kalendaria.”

Even their own religion—which was known for its friendliness—wouldn’t invite bandits in with an open door!

Antonella subconsciously lowered his voice a little. “The Kalendaria tacitly approved of it.”

Delro was shocked. He looked around and said, “The Kalendaria tacitly approved the murder of the Ark’s owner? Then, why didn’t you do it yourself? With your Church’s strength, it’s more than enough to complete this matter. It happened so suddenly that you didn’t have the time to request a Terror Bishop’s help?”

Antonella didn’t answer and only raised his hand again and bowed. “Wariness is a hint from the Goddess.”

...

In the afternoon, the Old Task Force followed another smuggling team deep into Iron Mountain.

They had already screened the remaining books in the Ark in the morning and didn’t find any valuable clues. In addition, they took the time to go to the Vigilance Cathedral and visit Harbinger Song He and Bishop Antonella to obtain some information on Iron Mountain City Ruin from them.

The Underground Ark Management Committee and the mountain monsters agreed to meet at a bend on a mountain road.

On one side was a rupe, and on the other was a cliff. The terrain was very precipitous.

For the mountain monsters, their companions hiding on the cliffs would push down the boulders and muddy the situation once the smugglers revealed their hostility. They would then rely on their talents to climb down the cliffs and disappear into the forest.

The four Old Task Force members alighted from the jeep one after another and waited by the car.

After about ten minutes, mountain monsters with blue skin and sharp teeth swung down from the cliff with the help of vines.

Like the merfolk, they were also sufficiently vigilant. After sizing them up, they realized that there were four more strangers.

Without waiting for them to speak, Shang Jianyao had already raised his blue and white loudspeaker and weakly shouted, "Don't be nervous. You are humans, and so are we. You are here to trade resources, and so are we. So..."

In order to conserve energy, Shang Jianyao used the Inference Clowning that he was more familiar with.

The mountain monsters were instantly 'convinced.' They elected a representative and took the initiative to ask, "What resources do you want to trade?"

He spoke in a relatively dialectical Ashlandic.

Jiang Baimian took two steps forward and said, "We'll use three boxes of flour to exchange for information regarding Iron Mountain City Ruin."

They had exchanged these three boxes of flour from the Underground Ark with their excess firearms.

The mountain monster representative was stunned for a few seconds before saying, "Ask."

Jiang Baimian first asked the simplest question. “Did your tribe explore Iron Mountain City Ruin in the Chaotic Era?”

“Not at first—that place was too dangerous. Our elders only tried to gather food from over there after many of the Heartless were eliminated,” the mountain monster representative replied skillfully.

Jiang Baimian immediately asked, “Did your elders encounter anything strange there? Did they gather any useful items or information?”

The mountain monster shook his head like a rattle. “All this while, we mainly searched for food, clothes, and blankets. The other items we occasionally brought back were sold once anyone came up to the mountain to trade. Uh... There were many powerful Heartless in Iron Mountain City Ruin back then. They had terrifying abilities, so we only dared to circle around them. There’s nothing strange elsewhere.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, “Did you bring back any newspapers, magazines, or books?”

Normally speaking, it was very difficult to exchange such items unless one encountered scholars studying the Old World.

The mountain monster’s blue face revealed a slightly strange expression. “We did, but we used them for starting fires, plastering the walls, as mattresses, and as children textbooks. However, someone asked about this two days ago. They even read it on the spot without picking out any books.”

Someone asked? Just two days ago??Jiang Baimian’s eyes suddenly turned sharp. “Who are they?”

Shang Jianyao spoke as well. He was abnormally ‘shocked’ and felt pained. “Y-you guys aren’t vigilant enough! How can you bring strangers back to the tribe?”

The mountain monster fell silent at the same time as if he had only just realized that this was a very serious problem.

Chapter 600: Surname

After some communication, the Old Task Force realized that the people who had ‘visited’ the mountain monsters two days ago were the people suspected to be from the Salvation Army they had previously encountered.

They appeared to have used a certain ability that deprived the mountain monsters of their vigilance and become filled with the enthusiasm of welcoming guests.

There are also Awakened among the mountain monsters, just that there’s a relatively small number of them. For them to temporarily control the entire tribe and have the influence remain to this day, they are definitely Awakened at the Mind Corridor level or above...

Since that group of people didn’t take away books, magazines, and newspapers from the mountain monsters, it means that those things lack valuable clues. Yes... We can’t make a definite judgment on this matter. They might not have as much information as us, or there might be deviations in both parties’ information. Some clues are only ordinary records in their eyes, so it’s not worth fussing over...?Jiang Baimian’s thoughts raced as she tried to find the hidden meaning under the surface.

From her point of view, the group of people suspected to be from the Salvation Army might know more. Therefore, they treated the clues that were useful to the Old Task Force as ordinary and left them with the mountain monsters. Or perhaps they had relatively little information and didn’t understand what earth-shattering secrets some seemingly ordinary words implied.

There was a high chance of either situation happening, so the Old Task Force had to pay strong attention to everything to prevent themselves from missing any valuable clues.

At this thought, Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao. She signaled him with her eyes and secretly gestured, meaning: ‘Go! Boldly ‘make friends!’

The listless Shang Jianyao perked up and raised the blue and white loudspeaker again. “Everyone, have you discovered that something is amiss? Don’t you have to thank me and invite us to your tribe as guests? As the saying goes, count on your parents at home, but count on friends when out. Making more friends ensures that you can exchange for sufficient food and cloth in the future...”

After some ‘guidance,’ the mountain monsters in front and the hidden mountain monsters on the cliffs agreed with Shang Jianyao. They were convinced that any day worked, and they decided to entertain the guests enthusiastically today.

Their performance stunned the Underground Ark smugglers.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before saying to the Ark personnel, “Complete the transaction now and return directly. There’s no need to follow us.”

She wasn’t worried that the Underground Ark people would show hostility to the mountain monsters to the point of finding an opportunity to surround and attack the mountain monsters after learning of their settlement’s location. After all, the favor and deterrence of the five honorary presidents remained strong. She was only afraid that the Underground Ark people would leak the information to Redstone Collection’s residents during their daily contact after they grasped the mountain monsters’ lair.

Those townsfolk had a blood feud with the mountain monsters.

“Yes, President Xue!” The Ark guard leader in charge of this smuggling team immediately agreed.

They also didn’t want to climb mountains and cross rivers to go to the mountain monster settlement that was worthless to them.

At this moment, Long Yuehong raised a question. “What about our cars?”

There was a high chance that the mountain monsters’ lair was somewhere that wasn’t conducive for car travel. This allowed them to leverage their talent and avoid most dangers.

“Unfortunately, it can’t turn into a robot and follow us.” Shang Jianyao had a look of regret.

He missed Tarnan’s Autobots very much.

Jiang Baimian originally wanted Long Yuehong and Bai Chen to guard the car while she and Shang Jianyao went to the mountain monsters’ lair. They could attack and retreat at will. However, she realized that Bai Chen wasn’t too happy after looking at her. She could only say to the Underground Ark’s smuggling team, “Leave two people behind and help us watch the car.”

After informing them of the things to take note of, she, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong each carried a crate containing a military exoskeleton. They also stuffed some high-performance batteries

into their tactical backpacks and followed the mountain monsters onto a mountain road that gradually turned rugged.

Bai Chen was in charge of the crate containing the two bionic artificial intelligence armor.

...

The mountain monsters lived on a cliff. Some places along the way were so steep that it was difficult for normal humans to traverse them, much less cars. The blue-faced and sharp-toothed mountain monsters moved quickly while carrying boxes containing different supplies as if they were on flat ground.

Fortunately, the Old Task Force were agile people who had undergone genetic enhancement or modification, allowing them to barely keep up.

After arriving at their destination, Jiang Baimian looked into the distance and saw many mountain monsters of various sizes. However, she didn't discover anyone that looked especially old.

Most of them were simply wrapped in animal hide. Only the children wore clothes that weren't well-tailored, thanks to the smuggling business.

Upon seeing the adults return with boxes, these children eagerly watched. They hoped that their fathers, uncles, mothers, or aunts would take out a sweet and sour plum candy—which they had exchanged for during the transaction—from their pockets and throw it to them.

But their hopes seemed to be dashed today.

Shang Jianyao picked up the blue and white loudspeaker and modified his previous words, convincing the mountain monsters in the cliff camp over and over again.

This place was only a residence to one of the mountain monster tribes, and it only had a total of about 200 people. Shang Jianyao only repeated it three times before completing the job.

The calm and rational him strictly did a categorization when 'convincing' them. He began with the groups with a possibility of having Awakened and older experienced ones before going for the ones who were very normal in every aspect before finally dealing with the confused children.



Upon seeing all the mountain monsters turn enthusiastic, Shang Jianyao propped up his eyelids with one hand to prevent them from falling. He reached into his pocket with the other and took out a large handful of colorful sweets.

“Why did you bring so much candy?” Long Yuehong’s eyes almost popped out. He could tell at a glance that the candy in Shang Jianyao’s hand came from the company and needed contribution points for the exchange.

Back when he was still on blind dates and showing off in front of his siblings, he was no stranger to these candies.

Shang Jianyao weakly replied, “One of us never grew up. He likes to wear our childhood clothes and also likes to eat candy.”

As he spoke, he smiled and said to the mountain monster children, “Do you want this? Each person gets one, but you have to say ‘thank you, Brother’ before eating it. You still have to join me in dancing after finishing it.”

Is this the Shang Jianyao that can’t grow up?? Long Yuehong seemed to understand something.

The mountain monster children—who had their vigilance eliminated by Thought Guidance—surrounded Shang Jianyao amidst the adults’ indulgent smiles and shouted, “Thank you, Brother.”

Their young voices were no different from that of a normal human toddler.

Jiang Baimian quietly watched for a while before summoning Bai Chen and Long Yuehong. They then entered the rock cave on the cliff and gathered the books, magazines, and newspapers with the owner’s help.

“Did the situation you previously mentioned only refer to your tribe or other mountain monster tribes as well?” Jiang Baimian asked cautiously.

The mountain monster representative from before scratched his head. “We only have one tribe, but there are too many of us. If we gather together, we won’t be able to fit in the relatively safe areas on the mountain. The potable water won’t be enough either. Furthermore, it’s easily polluted, so we can

only live separately following our surnames. How can a surname family like ours decide to trade with you? We can't gather so many things ourselves."

Jiang Baimian felt relieved and smiled. "Then, please borrow all their books, magazines, and newspapers when you hand the supplies to the other surname families."

"Alright," the mountain monster representative said, not finding it difficult. "They don't have that many either. We're the only surname family that likes to gather books and magazines. I'll let you in on this: before the Old World was destroyed, the majority of people from our surname were admitted to good schools!"

"What's your surname?" Bai Chen interrupted and asked.

The mountain monster representative replied with abnormal pride, "Our ancestors were the Li family of Shanyang."

Shanyang was north of Iron Mountain City Ruin. Back then, many people had gone abroad, and some had settled around the Lake of Wrath, the city Redstone Collection now occupied.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen's response, the mountain monster representative emphasized, "We are people from the Li family of Shanyang, not monsters or Subhumans."

Long Yuehong suddenly felt inexplicably emotional. He turned around and cast his gaze outside the cave.

He saw a mountain monster child stuff the candy into his mouth without throwing away the colorful candy wrapper. Instead, he rolled it together and placed it in his pocket.

"It's worthless," Long Yuehong reminded kindly.

The mountain monster child replied loudly but vaguely, "I-it's so pretty!"

Long Yuehong was speechless.

After Shang Jianyao and the children finished their mass dance, they found a place to sleep. Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen began to flip through the text the mountain monsters had gathered.

To improve their efficiency, they first read the table of contents or the titles. They would only pick out those that they felt might be problematic and placed them to the side, after which they would read them carefully.

During this process, Bai Chen suddenly noticed a title: ‘The 23-year-old genius scientist, Lin Sui.’