

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 91: Drawing - Read

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Chapter 91: Drawing

In the small canteen beside the Old Task Force's room.

Jiang Baimian returned with the tray and placed the meat dishes down one by one.

There was rich soup filled with soft, sticky potatoes and large chunks of beef. There was a roasted chicken with a magical fragrance and a slightly golden-yellow skin. There was a very light-looking winter melon pork rib soup and pieces of mutton scattered among the onions.

"T-this is too sumptuous." Long Yuehong inhaled the fragrance in the air deeply and gave his sincere compliments. To him, this was only something he would enjoy during a festive season like the Lunar New Year.

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance. "Weren't you having a good time eating in Qifeng Town? I thought such meat dishes couldn't move you as much as they used to."

"How can that be?" retorted Long Yuehong instinctively. He paused and revealed an expression of reminiscence. "However, Qifeng Town's ham and salted meat were really good..."

As they had become Pangu Biology's vassal, Qifeng Town could exchange for very cost-effective and sufficient amounts of salt. This allowed them to preserve the excess meat they obtained from hunting season and harvest season. This created the food reserves they used to fight hunger in the winter when traces of wild beasts were nowhere to be seen.

"Didn't you say that you were tired of eating that?" Shang Jianyao—who was beside Long Yuehong—exposed him.

Long Yuehong's expression froze. "It was only then!"

As they spoke, Bai Chen returned with a tray and four servings of rice. She looked at the meat dishes and the same number of vegetables and blurted out, "Team Leader, won't this cost you a lot?"

"This is a special meat dish. It only costs one contribution point." Jiang Baimian pointed at the roasted chicken and said, "The rest only cost 150 contribution points."

“What do you mean ‘only?’” Long Yuehong asked. “If I eat like this every meal, my monthly salary will only be enough for six days. No, it wouldn’t even last six days. I forgot to count breakfast.”

“If you can eat so much every meal, I can keep treating you,” Shang Jianyao suggested very seriously.

“... I’ll be stuffed to death in a day then.” Long Yuehong thought for a moment and felt that it wasn’t worth it to take Shang Jianyao up on the offer.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “It’s not like I can treat everyone to a meal like this every time. It’s fine if I do so occasionally. I’m already a D6, so you should know how much my basic salary is.”

“An increase of 500 contribution points per grade. D1 will get 1,800 points, D2 will get 2,300 points, and D6 will get 4,300 points. Including all the subsidies, you’ll have at least 4,500 points, even if you don’t go out in the field.” Long Yuehong calculated seriously.

“But if you want to eat well every meal and have enough meat and vegetables, you’ll have to spend at least 2,000 contribution points a month. This is still under the condition that we have a food allowance. Otherwise, it will cost at least 3,000 points. After deducting these points, there will also be expenses for energy, tap water, installation fees, and other necessary expenses. There won’t be much left... If you want to raise a few more children, it will be...”

The more Long Yuehong thought about it, the more he found life difficult. The main reason was that he had already adapted to the ‘luxury’ of having meat dishes and no children every day. If he wanted to achieve the dream of having a wife, two children, and meat three times a week, he couldn’t help but feel like he was retrograding in life.

“Stop, stop!” Jiang Baimian interrupted Long Yuehong’s calculations. “You’re giving me a headache! Besides, why don’t you consider your wife’s salary? A family is supported by two people.”

Jiang Baimian smiled when she said that. “I actually have quite a bit of my monthly salary left every month. My brother has married long ago and moved out. I’ve always lived with my parents. Their salaries are much higher than mine, as are their subsidies and benefits. I take advantage of the meal subsidies during the day and eat the dinner they provide. The company will also issue uniforms. Perfect~”

Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. “You will also receive quite the number of contribution points this time. When Bai Chen becomes an official employee, she will be able to enjoy the treatment of a D1 employee. Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, you have been promoted to D2. You will receive an additional 500 contribution points every month.

“In addition, there’s also a field allowance. Our trip took us about a month. Everyone will receive an additional 800 to 900 contribution points. The biggest gains will come from the compensation of our harvest. I don’t know exactly how much we will gain.”

As they listened, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao couldn’t help but think about how they would spend such a large sum of contribution points.

“I have to apply for a bigger room...” Long Yuehong muttered to himself as he recalled the cramped environment at home and his younger siblings—who had to sleep with adults.

Within Pangu Biology, rooms were typically allocated according to rank. However, one had to pay a fee if they requested a larger room that exceeded their rank’s stipulation. Furthermore, there was an additional rental fee every month.

Of course, employees also had tricks up their sleeve—by not going through the company and swapping rooms themselves. For example, when some older employees’ children were allocated rooms and no longer needed to squeeze in with them, they might charge a sum of money to swap their relatively spacious rooms with people living in crowded rooms.

This way, there was no monthly rental fee. But the problem was that the company would reclaim the rooms according to the registered information when the two elderly employees passed away.

After all this time, Long Yuehong’s mutterings to himself had become much louder than usual.

Jiang Baimian smiled and nodded. “Good ambition.”

She then looked at Bai Chen. “You should be thinking of saving up all your contribution points to undergo genetic modifications when your employee rank is high enough?”

If an employee could pay a large sum of contribution points—or if they were willing to volunteer for certain dangerous experiments—the rank requirement to apply for genetic modification could be reduced. It was possible for a D2 or even a D1 to apply for it successfully.

“Yes.” Bai Chen unconsciously tugged at the old, gray scarf around her neck.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Let me remind you again that the technology for genetic modification is far from mature. There are all kinds of dangers, so it’s best not to attempt it unless you have no choice.”

“Yes... I also know that you definitely have your reasons. I just hope you can weigh the pros and cons.” Without waiting for Bai Chen’s answer, Jiang Baimian sniffed the fragrance that filled the air. “Hurry up and dig in. The food is getting cold!”

As she spoke, she stretched out her chopsticks and neatly tore off the roasted chicken’s wings.

Under the slightly golden-brown skin was a layer of oil that melted the moment it entered her mouth. Coupled with several condiments’ fragrance, Jiang Baimian almost couldn’t stop eating.

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen also joined in the enjoyment of the food. Everyone was focused and had no time to speak.

After finishing her meal, Jiang Baimian drank a mouthful of soup, narrowed her eyes, and said in satisfaction, “Every time I come back from the field, having such a good meal makes me experience the beauty of life.”

“Therefore, we have to save all of humanity.” Shang Jianyao also put down his bowl and chopsticks and wiped the corners of his mouth.

“Can’t you change your lines?” Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him.

Shang Jianyao nodded and suddenly asked, “Then, who do you think Xiaochong is?”

Upon hearing the name ‘Xiaochong,’ Bai Chen and Long Yuehong—who were still sucking on chicken bones—fell silent. To them, this name was both mysterious and terrifying as if it represented a taboo.

In the past few days, they had deliberately forgotten about Xiaochong and had not mentioned him in any discussions.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “I suspect that he is a Heartless, a Superior Heartless among the Superior Heartless. He can even be called the King of the Heartless. Perhaps it was because he was beside me and wanted to watch a real gunfight that I subconsciously ignored Qiao Chu’s other Awakened abilities and the corresponding range...”

“A Heartless who has his human intelligence and memories restored?” Long Yuehong was shocked and muttered to himself, “No, how can a Heartless have human intelligence...”

Jiang Baimian said with a solemn expression, “Not only does he have human intelligence, but he might also have terrifying abilities like those of the mutated creatures and Superior Heartless...”

“A superhuman?” Bai Chen’s tone was inexplicably heavy.

Shang Jianyao raised his hand. “Did he pay the price of never having his body grow in exchange for intelligence?”

“Are you trying to say that Xiaochong also has serious flaws and is far from being considered a superhuman?” Jiang Baimian understood Shang Jianyao’s hidden meaning.

Shang Jianyao hesitated and said, “He’s my friend.”

“So, we can’t badmouth a friend?” Jiang Baimian tried to decipher Shang Jianyao’s jumpy train of thought.

Shang Jianyao didn’t answer.

“Haha.” Long Yuehong laughed before he suddenly came to a realization. “Am I not your friend? Why do you often speak ill of me?”

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “I just repeat what you always say. Sigh, I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My looks are average...”

“Stop!” Long Yuehong interrupted Shang Jianyao’s recital.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t hide her smile as she stood up and said, “Alright, all of you can go back and rest. Sigh... Only I have to work overtime. I need to finish the mission report and submit it.”

“Do you need help?” Bai Chen asked.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Don’t worry. I won’t forget what I should or shouldn’t write.”

Bai Chen—whose thoughts had been exposed—immediately felt a little ashamed and lowered her head slightly.

After bidding Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen farewell, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong entered the elevator and returned to the 495th floor.

As the elevator descended, Long Yuehong looked at his reflection in the metal compartment and suddenly sighed. “I wonder if I can successfully transfer out of the team...”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, he continued in confusion, “Actually, I now understand the meaning behind the Old Task Force’s work... Life in the company with a wife, two children, and three meals of meat a week is indeed beautiful. I still yearn for it, but will I feel like I’ve lived my life in vain when I’m old?”

Shang Jianyao looked ahead and ignored him.

Long Yuehong fell silent. He only smiled when the elevator reached the 495th floor. "I'll leave it to fate."

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. "Go back and change your name then."

As they spoke, they separated at the fork and returned to their respective homes.

Before long, Shang Jianyao arrived at Room 196 in Zone B.

Just as he took out his key, he saw that someone had drawn a simple baby picture with white chalk at the bottom of the door. This was not too surprising in Pangu Biology, where children often graffitied. If one did not like it, they could just wipe it away.

But Shang Jianyao knew that such an image drawn in such a position represented something: At the usual place at 5:30 a.m. tomorrow, there is a Life Ritual parish gathering.

Shang Jianyao raised his hand and gently wiped the corners of his mouth.

Chapter 92: Familiar Life

After opening the door with a brass key, Shang Jianyao used the light from the street lamps on the ceiling to see the familiar wooden bed, sink, burgeoning screws, a red-painted wooden table, and a matching high-back chair.

It was identical to when he left.

Thanks to the underground building's excellent ventilation system and unique geographical environment, Shang Jianyao didn't even find the room depressing, nor did he see any obvious accumulation of dust.

He slowly walked in and closed the door behind him. He removed the old rag hanging by the sink, turned on the tap, and wet it.

Shang Jianyao then bent down, occasionally squatting down to wipe all the spots he could.

When he was done, it was exactly 7 p.m. Shang Jianyao—who had already showered and changed into his regular clothes at the Security Department—immediately took his key and headed for this floor's Rec Center.

Along the way, the employees—who had eaten dinner—returned one after another, many of whom knew Shang Jianyao. They nodded at each other as a form of greeting.

Shang Jianyao soon arrived at Zone C's Rec Center. He saw a few young men chatting by the door, and Shen Du was walking toward him.

The middle-aged man—who had 'guided' Shang Jianyao to join the Life Ritual parish—revealed a look of surprise. "Jianyao, you're back from the field?"

Shang Jianyao smiled and replied, "Yes, I'm back from picking up trash."

"..." Shen Du couldn't quite understand Shang Jianyao's answer. He then explained, "I heard it from Old Chen. I didn't see you for a few days and thought something had happened to you. He ended up telling me that you had joined the Security Department and gone out into the field."

"What a pity," Shang Jianyao replied.

"..." Shen Du couldn't keep up with Shang Jianyao's train of thought at all. He could only speak to himself and smile. "Everyone misses you. See you later."

Shang Jianyao revealed a troubled expression. "Unfortunately, I didn't bring you any gifts. Why don't I give you a performance?"

"No, there's no need." Shen Du realized that he was whistling in the wind. He then hinted at tomorrow morning's gathering and quickly bade Shang Jianyao farewell.

Shang Jianyao entered the Rec Center and greeted people he knew or didn't know.

Chen Xianyu, the Rec Center's PIC, was sitting on a creaking stool. Upon seeing Shang Jianyao enter, he quickly raised his right arm and waved, indicating for Shang Jianyao to come to him.

"How was it? How was your harvest this time?" he asked curiously. Without waiting for Shang Jianyao's answer, Chen Xianyu pointed at the scattered items in front of him. "Do you want me to help you sell anything? I'll only take a few contribution points as commission."

Shang Jianyao squatted down, picked up the tattered mechanical watch that Old Chen had been trying to sell for a long time, and asked seriously, "Won't it be too crowded to have an armored vehicle here?"

"?" Chen Xianyu didn't understand what he meant.

Shang Jianyao continued asking, "Can heavy machine guns be sold in such a place?"

"Do you think the company is dead!?" Old Chen cursed instinctively. "They will definitely get you to hand over such things! Uh... that's true. You just came back, and all your gains are still under review. I wonder what you'll get in the end."

At this point, Chen Xianyu scolded jokingly, “You can just say it directly. Why beat around the bush? Armored vehicles and heavy machine guns? Why didn’t you say that you obtained a military exoskeleton?”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment. “That depends on whether you really want it. What a pity...”

“Pity my ass!” Chen Xianyu cursed and asked in concern, “How was it? Did the fieldwork go well?”

Shang Jianyao recalled. “It was very thrilling.”

“What’s there to be thrilled about!” Chen Xianyu laughed. “How can a rookie like you have any dangerous field missions? At most, you’ll hunt rabbits in the vicinity of the company and play some form of wilderness survival.”

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “Rabbits are really difficult to deal with.”

“Haha.” Chen Xianyu laughed derisively. “Back when I first hunted for rabbits, I remember that I used an Old World rifle, a kind that’s already obsolete. In short, the entire rabbit was reduced to pieces with one shot. It pained my heart...”

At this moment, an employee came over to look at the items on offer. Chen Xianyu quickly introduced the items and ignored Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao slowly straightened his body, walked to the most deserted corner of the Rec Center, pulled out a chair, and sat down. He didn’t chat with anyone and quietly looked around.

A group of men was gathered around a wooden table, playing cards. Whoever lost this round would have their stool removed and could only play while squatting.

Beside them were more people. Some of them had their arms crossed as they gave comments. Some sighed loudly to express their pity, some giggled and constantly mocked, and some frequently urged them to be quicker, eager to have a go.

Further away, Ren Jie and the other women sat together and chatted about the various rumors in the company. Some of them diverted some attention to use shredded cloth to reinforce shoes’ soles, while some used the wool exchanged from the Supplies Allocation Market to knit winter clothes for the children while feeding babies with plastic milk bottles—which had been passed down for generations.

In another corner, a few young couples each occupied a corner. They were whispering. In front of them were packaged candies, desserts, and orange-yellow or green glass bottles. These were all luxury goods exchanged for at the Supplies Allocation Market. Typically, people would only exchange for some during the festive season. However,

young people—who had just been assigned jobs and were in a relationship—were relatively extravagant. After all, they had meals to eat at home.

Outside the Rec Center's window, at the edge of the ceiling lamps' illumination, figures flickered in and out of hiding between the two rows of rooms. Sometimes they stretched out, and they separated at other times.

On the way to the Supplies Allocation Market, someone held empty glass bottles of different colors, wanting to exchange them for some contribution points.

Every relatively empty area inside and outside the rooms had become a battlefield for children to run around...

Shang Jianyao looked at this scene with a calm expression and didn't move at all.

After an unknown period of time, Long Yuehong walked in.

After greeting everyone he knew, Long Yuehong discovered Shang Jianyao in the corner. "Why are you here?"

He remembered that Shang Jianyao liked to stay at home at this time and wait for Newspoint and the various radio programs after that. Furthermore, he had just returned from outside, so he definitely needed more rest.

Shang Jianyao did not answer Long Yuehong's question and asked with a smile, "Why didn't you look for Feng—the girl from the radio station?"

"Feng Yunying." Long Yuehong sat down and let out a long sigh. "I just went to look for her and realized that she's in a relationship with someone."

Shang Jianyao sighed. "Sigh, I've undergone genetic enhancement..."

"Stop!" Long Yuehong cut him off forcefully and said, "Actually, I can understand why. I've been away for a month. She doesn't know when I'll be back, nor does she know if I'll be back. Besides, we've only just met. We can barely be considered friends, so why would she wait for me?"

Shang Jianyao glanced at Long Yuehong. "Do you know what I want to say?"

Long Yuehong replied with a solemn expression, "This is the Ashlands."

"No." Shang Jianyao shook his head. "Even if you didn't go out for fieldwork, the chances weren't high."

"..." Long Yuehong didn't know whether to cry or be angry. "Your words hurt!"

“Let your mother introduce you to another one.” Shang Jianyao pressed the table with one hand and stood up.

“Yes, there are still at least two months until our next field training...” Long Yuehong nodded and asked, “Are you going back?”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, Long Yuehong muttered to himself, “That’s true. After I came back, I felt at ease and relaxed. I feel very, very tired the moment I relax.”

As he spoke, Long Yuehong stood up as well. “I think it’s better I return to sleep.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “Newspoint is about to start.”

“Aren’t you tired? Why are you listening to Newspoint?” Long Yuehong was a little surprised.

Just as he said that, he suddenly came to a realization. In the Old Task Force, he might be the only one who felt that tired...

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything else. He waved his hand, bade Long Yuehong farewell, and returned home.

Under the light from the ceiling lamps, Shang Jianyao’s figure elongated and contracted randomly.

Before long, Shang Jianyao opened the door and entered his room. He took off his coat and lay on the bed. He didn’t switch on the light and allowed the light from the corridor outside to shine through the window, making the room half-bright and half-dark without any obvious dividing line.

In this silence, the loudspeaker hanging from the ceiling outside emitted a static sound before a sweet, childlike voice sounded.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m Newspoint broadcaster, Hou Yi. It’s 8 p.m. now...

“Today, the Vice President of the company’s Board of Directors—Lin Yang—inspected the Energy Zone and emphasized the need to ensure a constant energy supply for winter...

“According to the weather forecast on the surface, a cold tide will come south from the icy plains in the next few days. Temperatures in the Blackmarsh Wilderness will drop by 5°C...

“... Another case of Heartless appeared in the Factory Zone today. The infected person is already under control...

“... The Entertainment Department has invited all department heads to discuss the year-end performance...”

“...”

The voice from the radio echoed in the slightly cold room, adding some life to the area.

Chapter 93: Island

After the street lamps' light extinguished one after another, the surroundings became pitch black. Shang Jianyao raised his right hand and massaged his temples.

He lay down completely and closed his eyes.

...

This time, he didn't appear in Star Cluster Hall but the shimmering illusory sea.

In front of him was a small island. The soil on it was dark-brown and grotesquely rugged. There were no signs of life.

This was the first island Shang Jianyao had encountered after entering the Sea of Origins.

According to the antiquarian—Du Heng—the islands corresponded to the fear hidden in everyone's hearts. Different Awakened encountered absolutely different 'islands,' likewise for the number of islands.

Shang Jianyao had already stayed here for many days, but he still failed to defeat this 'island.'

There were no monsters on the island, but there was an extremely nasty 'natural condition.' Once Shang Jianyao climbed up, all the light in front of him would disappear. There would also be no more sound in his ears.

On the island, he seemed to be in a dark, tightly shut, and strange room. Not only was he unable to see his fingers, but he couldn't even hear his own voice.

This made Shang Jianyao unable to sense the passage of time. He felt that the darkness and silence seemed to materialize and slowly eat at his mind.

He couldn't stay on the island for too long every time. He always retreated when he was close to breaking down mentally or due to extreme fear.

If it weren't for the fact that Du Heng had told him about the Sea of Origins's meaning and the different islands, Shang Jianyao definitely would've given up on trying and turned to search for other islands in the boundless sea.

Shang Jianyao believed that bypassing this place meant that he had been defeated by the fear in his heart. There was a high chance that his Awakened abilities would not improve or change again.

After staring at the island for a while, Shang Jianyao lowered his head according to the plan and looked at his indistinct self in the illusory water ripples.

He hesitated for a few seconds before his eyes gradually turned deep.

"They are employees of Pangu Biology, and so am I. They are very young, and so am I. Their parents are right beside them, so..."

Shang Jianyao paused and replied, "Therefore, my parents are with me."

A gentle and relieved smile gradually appeared on his face.

Without wasting any more time, Shang Jianyao gripped the rock at the edge of the island with both hands and flipped over.

As the Sea of Origins was intrinsically illusory, his clothes did not become wet. No water droplets dripped from his hair either.

Shang Jianyao's feet had just landed when his vision instantly turned pitch black. He couldn't see anything else. Not only did this make him feel like he was about to reach the edge due to the cramped space, but it also made him inexplicably afraid of the unknown danger lurking in the darkness's depths.

"Hey! How are you?" Shang Jianyao tried to speak loudly, but he couldn't hear anything. At this moment, he felt like he had been abandoned by the world and thrown into an extremely terrifying place that no one cared about.

Shang Jianyao tried to take a step forward, using his footsteps to resolve the fear and uneasiness that gradually rose in his heart. But no matter how he comforted himself, the darkness still invaded his heart slowly and uncontrollably.

Shang Jianyao shrunk his body as if he had found something to rely on in the quiet and uninhabited darkness. This made him last longer than he usually did. However, he eventually felt lost due to the fact that there was only air around him.

His heart raced, and his expression gradually wavered.

"It's fake..." Shang Jianyao suddenly muttered.

Cold sweat quickly broke out on his forehead. His knees slowly bent as he squatted down and hugged himself.

...

In Room 196, Shang Jianyao opened his eyes. He panted heavily and looked around.

The room was dark, and it was quiet outside.

Shang Jianyao quickly took out his flashlight from under his pillow and pushed the button.

A beam of light shot out and shone on the opposite wall, illuminating the clothes hanging from the burgeoning screws and the sink beside them.

Shang Jianyao's breathing gradually calmed down as he looked at the yellowish glow. After about a minute, he switched off the flashlight, pulled the blanket over him, and fell asleep.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao was woken up by a knock on the door. The knock was repeated thrice before it gradually faded away.

Shang Jianyao knew that the Life Ritual's parishioners were telling him that it was almost time for the gathering. For members without watches and further away from the clock on the street, the Life Ritual parish would send someone who knew the time to remind them.

It was the individual's choice to get up and participate in the gathering for whatever reason after hearing the knock. If they had already made the decision not to participate in the gathering, or if they had guests at home—which made things inconvenient—they could just wipe away the graffiti on the door before turning the lights off. That way, no one would knock.

Shang Jianyao quickly got off the bed, washed his face, and seriously brushed his teeth. He then put on a dark-green cotton coat and held a flashlight before heading to the nearby public bathroom to relieve himself.

After doing all of this, Shang Jianyao followed the familiar path to Li Zhen's house, which was located in Zone A, Room 35.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Shang Jianyao knocked on the door three times.

Soon, a deliberately suppressed voice sounded from the door. "Life is what's most important."

Shang Jianyao replied very skillfully, “Newborns are likened unto the sun.”

With a slight commotion inside, the door quickly opened, and a faint-yellow glow flowed out.

Li Zhen—who had her eyebrows slightly raised—sized up Shang Jianyao and smiled. “Come in.”

She quickly moved aside and allowed Shang Jianyao to enter the room.

“You have to tell us about the real world outside later.” Li Zhen smiled and made small talk as she opened the door.

“Alright, Auntie Li.” Shang Jianyao was very polite.

Li Zhen casually pointed at a spot. “Have a seat; it’s about to begin. You’re a little late.”

She had only casually said that without any intention of blaming him. After all, it was not really time for the gathering yet.

Shang Jianyao explained seriously, “I brushed my teeth first.”

Speechless, Li Zhen nodded with a stiff smile. “Good; very good.”

Only then did Shang Jianyao walk to the small stool and sit down.

The stool was relatively short. For a tall person like Shang Jianyao, he had to curl his feet as much as possible to rest his butt.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao’s uncomfortable sitting posture, Shen Du—who had already arrived—stood up. “Let’s change seats.”

“Thank you, Uncle Shen.” Shang Jianyao didn’t stand on ceremony.

After sitting down again, he looked around and greeted the other members. Shang Jianyao had already participated in similar parish gatherings several times and was no stranger to all the members on this floor.

After waiting for a while, Ren Jie walked out of the room that led to the inner bedroom and walked between the large bed, the closet, and the cupboard.

“Jianyao, you’re back?” Ren Jie—who was wearing a polyester shirt—nodded and greeted him with a smile.

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, “Thy mercy be praised!”

“...” Ren Jie was stunned for a few seconds before she realized that Shang Jianyao meant that he wanted to thank the Arbiter of Fate for blessing his safe return.

She forced a smile and said, “There’s no need to be so formal. It’s just an ordinary chat.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, she said with a serious expression, “The sermon will officially begin. Today’s sermon will be about death. Life will eventually pass, just like how leaves will always turn yellow and fall to the ground...”

Shang Jianyao suddenly raised his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Ren Jie asked worriedly. She thought that Shang Jianyao had discovered something abnormal.

Shang Jianyao stood up and said, “There are many trees that have leaves that don’t turn yellow...”

Ren Jie’s facial muscles twitched as she interrupted him. “That’s just a metaphor. Don’t ask such questions until after the sermon. Listen well and don’t speak.”

“Okay.” Shang Jianyao sat down in disappointment. He then listened to Ren Jie preach with a very focused expression, but his eyes seemed to be a little blank and lacking focus.

Before long, Ren Jie ended the sermon and said to all the members present, “Next is the confiding phase. You can tell your fellow brothers and sisters your worries and draw strength from them...”

As she spoke, she stared fixedly at Shang Jianyao and used her gaze to suppress this fellow, preventing him from speaking. She remembered that the first time she said such words, Shang Jianyao had suddenly interrupted her.

“It’s not only brothers and sisters, but uncles and aunties as well.”

After she finished speaking and confirmed that Shang Jianyao couldn’t interject, Ren Jie heaved a sigh of relief.

The next second, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to raise his hand and share his worries. “I’m a little hungry now.”

“Next,” Ren Jie replied without hesitation.

A woman in her twenties pursed her lips and said, “Our Supplies Allocation Market’s PIC, Wang Yafei, has been supporting the establishment of the Fertility Center. He

believes that this can reduce the excuse of female employees taking leave. He believes that this can improve the relationship between husband and wife.

“I know that this is a personal opinion and can't represent anything, but I can't help but argue with him. He... he actually found an excuse to transfer me from my original position to the most arduous cleaning post...”

After Ren Jiejing finished listening, she raised her arms like she was cradling a baby. “The Goddess will punish sinners.”

She didn't say anything else and said to Shen Du, “Your turn.”

Shen Du scratched his head. “My child is getting more and more disobedient...”

The members subsequently shared their worries, such as the death of their relatives, the violence of their husbands, the coldness of their wives, the mischievousness of their children, and the hardships at work. They were all consoled by others.

Finally, Ren Jie returned to her original spot and said to the parish's members, “Next, it's time for Holy Communion.”

Shang Jianyao's back immediately straightened, and his eyes shone brightly.

Ren Jie and Li Zhen quickly came out of the room. One of them carried a cylindrical, translucent container, and the other carried all kinds of cutlery.

The container was filled with white, sticky liquid.

Ren Jie was the first to come in front of Shang Jianyao. She scooped a spoonful of liquid into the lunch box in his hand.

“This is today's Holy Communion, yogurt.”

Shang Jianyao took a light breath and replied with abnormal sincerity, “Thy mercy be praised!”

Chapter 94: Consultation

After finishing the lightly-sugared yogurt, Shang Jianyao held the lunch box and cast his gaze at Ren Jie and Li Zhen again.

The two women in charge of distributing Holy Communion deliberately ignored him and served the yogurt in the cylindrical container to different members in a counterclockwise manner.

After Holy Communion, Li Zhen carried the utensils and entered the inner room through the middle door. Ren Jie casually chatted with the parishioners and asked for their opinions on Holy Communion.

During this process, she didn't have any intention of heading toward Shang Jianyao because she had an inkling that she could guess what that fellow would say.

Ren Jie glanced at Shang Jianyao and rationally gave up on the idea of getting him to share the knowledge he obtained from his fieldwork. He will definitely say, 'it tastes good, but there's too little.' Why was he roped into the parish back then? Although the Doctor of the Church has always wanted us to get more young adults—especially those who have just reached the age for marriage assignment—there are different kinds of young adults...

She walked to the aisle leading to the middle door, turned around, and said to everyone, "This is all for today's gathering. You guys can return in sequence. Be careful on the way."

The members bowed at the same time and split up to leave Li Zhen's room. They headed in different directions as they walked along the unlit paths.

On the way, Shang Jianyao and Shen Du wore thick, dark-green cotton coats and silently walked along the edges of the surveillance cameras' field of view with a thick, heavy flashlight.

When they were about to separate, Shen Du looked up at the dark ceiling and asked, "What's the real sky like?"

Shang Jianyao looked at the flashlight beam and said, "Very high, very blue, and very empty."

Shen Du fell silent and separated from Shang Jianyao, walking toward his home.

After Shang Jianyao returned to Room 196 in Zone B, he took a nap. When rush hour ended, he dashed over to have breakfast before the cafeteria closed.

After filling his stomach, he went to the elevator lobby in a corner of Zone C. The 12 elevators here led directly to the Research Zone.

Shang Jianyao skillfully pressed the button for the 25th floor. As the elevator descended, he swiped his card and pressed '3.'

After arriving on the third floor, Shang Jianyao walked along the corridor outside the metal door and came to the innermost room on the right.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

He knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” A gentle female voice sounded.

Shang Jianyao announced his name and said, “Dr. Lin, I want to schedule a follow-up.”

In the room, Dr. Lin immediately smiled and said, “Oh, Jianyao... I happen to be free now. Come on in.”

Shang Jianyao—who had obtained permission—turned the doorknob and pushed open the door.

Dr. Lin was still wearing her gold-rimmed glasses and a white coat. She sat behind the wooden table and played with a pen in her hand. Unlike in the past, her hair was not tied up. It casually scattered down, making her look a few years younger.

“Good morning, Dr. Lin,” Shang Jianyao greeted with a smile.

Dr. Lin pointed at the chair opposite her. “Good morning. Have a seat.”

As she spoke, she looked at the folder in front of her. After Shang Jianyao sat down, she casually asked, “How many days has it been since you came back from the field?”

“I came back yesterday afternoon.” Shang Jianyao didn’t hide the truth.

Dr. Lin tapped the table with the end of her pen and smiled. “It’s too sudden today, so we’ll skip the tests. Let’s just have a chat. How is it? Did the fieldwork go well?”

“It was very thrilling,” replied Shang Jianyao truthfully.

Dr. Lin was a little curious. “How thrilling?”

“Enough to kill ordinary Security Department employees several times over.” Shang Jianyao found a benchmark.

Dr. Lin couldn’t help but sigh. “You sure are lucky to come back alive then.”

She then smiled and said, “Then, tell me about this experience. There’s no need to tell me stuff that needs to be kept confidential.”

Shang Jianyao revealed an expression of reminiscence. “We drove out the door and came to the surface. The sky was very blue, very high, and very empty. It felt like it could suck me up. It was very terrifying, but I got used to it...

“There were many trees around us. Some of the leaves were green, and some were yellowish. The air smelled of fresh shit...”

“Stop!” Dr. Lin pinched her nose. “There’s no need to go into such detail.”

She then picked up her cup and drank a mouthful of tea. “What happened next?”

“There’s nothing else after that,” Shang Jianyao replied calmly.

“Huh?” Dr. Lin was momentarily stunned.

Shang Jianyao explained, “Everything after that involves confidentiality clauses.”

“...” Dr. Lin was a little stunned. “In other words, you’d only been out for a few hours, but you’d already encountered confidential matters? What else can you say after that?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “I ate braised beef canned food, energy bars, and compressed biscuits. I peed in the bushes and killed two mosquitoes...”

“There’s no need to tell me that.” Dr. Lin felt a little exasperated.

She fell silent for a moment before her curiosity got the better of her. “Apart from day-to-day details, everything else involves confidentiality clauses?”

Shang Jianyao nodded. “We can only determine what can and cannot be said after the company’s review.”

“Okay.” Dr. Lin sighed. “What exactly happened to you? Uh, were there any casualties?”

She was worried that this would agitate Shang Jianyao and worsen his condition.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “No.”

Dr. Lin heaved a sigh of relief and decided to change the topic. “From your experiences on the surface, do you feel like you’ve grown?”

“Yes,” Shang Jianyao said with a serious expression. “I realized that saving all of humanity is a very difficult task. We often can’t even save a town, a settlement, or a child.”

Dr. Lin nodded in relief. “It’s good that you understand. I’m not saying that there’s a problem with your ideal, but I think you should set up some easier targets before that. This can enhance your confidence and improve your condition.”

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, “Yes. Therefore, I have to work harder to train and improve myself. Only then can I save all of humanity.”

“...” Dr. Lin’s eyes darted around as she sighed quietly.

Without waiting for her to speak, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to ask, “Dr. Lin, the reason I’m looking for you today is mainly to ask about how I should defeat the fear lurking in my heart?”

Dr. Lin’s expression changed as she smiled. “That’s a good question.”

She didn’t use more professional terms and spoke in a very approachable manner. “Personally, the premise of defeating the fear hidden in one’s heart is to recognize it and face it head-on. Running away will never solve the problem. Sometimes, you might as well look straight at your bloody wound.”

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao’s pensive expression, Dr. Lin added, “But in practice, I don’t advocate facing fear directly because it’s very likely to cause a second round of damage. It can also cause a complete mental breakdown.

“The correct steps to be taken is to employ appropriate methods. Approach the fear step by step, from the periphery to the core. During this process, constantly rebuild the strength in your heart and slowly nibble away at the trauma. When you can completely face those nightmares, you will realize that they aren’t strong and can be easily defeated.”

At this point, Dr. Lin smiled. “You can tell me your general feelings. I’ll help you design something.”

Shang Jianyao remained silent and didn’t answer.

Dr. Lin wasn’t surprised and tersely acknowledged his choice. “There’s no rush. You can slowly consider it for an entire week. Remember to come for a follow-up at this time next week. If you feel that you can’t say it to me, you can use another method or switch to someone you can trust.”

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. “Thank you, Dr. Lin.”

He then stood up and politely bade farewell.

After returning to the 495th floor, Shang Jianyao directly turned into the fourth elevator area in the other direction.

This place led to the Security Department.

Shang Jianyao waited for a while before slowly entering the elevator. He swiped his card and pressed the button for the 647th floor.

He soon arrived at the changing room beside the Old Task Force’s room and changed into light clothes.

Shang Jianyao had just pushed open the training room's door when he saw Jiang Baimian sitting on the bench with her hair tied up in a ponytail, wiping the sweat from her forehead with a towel.

"Why are you here?" Jiang Baimian had sensed his arrival earlier. She remembered that she had given her three team members two days off.

"To train," Shang Jianyao replied truthfully.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and came to a realization. "That's true. Your peers are all working at this time. You won't be able to find anything to do at home other than sleep."

"I can still read," Shang Jianyao replied.

"..." Jiang Baimian was just about to glare at him when she suddenly sensed something and looked at the door again.

Bai Chen appeared there, wrapped in a gray scarf. Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao to speak, she took the initiative to say, "I had nothing to do."

Jiang Baimian smiled and praised, "Not bad."

Bai Chen had just entered when Long Yuehong walked over with a towel.

"W-what are you guys doing here?" Long Yuehong saw his team leader, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen all looking at him. He felt surprised and inexplicably a little terrified.

"Why are you here?" Jiang Baimian asked in response.

Long Yuehong stammered, "The girl my mother introduced to me is at work. We can't meet until after dinner. I thought that I might as well come over and recover my stamina since there's nothing else to do."

Jiang Baimian's smile became more obvious. "Very good."

She then looked around and pretended to be serious. "Since you're already here, let's spar."

"Ah..." Long Yuehong looked like he was placed in a difficult situation.

...

At 8 p.m., Shang Jianyao lay in bed as usual. His eyes were half-closed as he waited for the news broadcast to begin.

Ten seconds later, the familiar sweet voice echoed.

“Good evening, everyone. I’m the news broadcaster, Hou Yi. It’s 8 p.m. now...

“The Board of Directors convened the 22nd meeting this year to discuss the focus of winter work...

“The Indoor Ecosystem has obtained a bumper harvest...

“At 9:35 this morning, Wang Yafei—person-in-charge of the Supplies Allocation Market on the 478th floor—died from a cardiac arrest at work...”

Shang Jianyao’s eyes snapped open as he sat up.

Chapter 95: Individual Reactions

Shang Jianyao had just heard the name Wang Yafei this morning. When he participated in Life Ritual’s gathering, a member had mentioned this person and said that he supported the establishment of a fertility center to allow children to be born via man-made wombs.

The member also said that Wang Yafei abused his power against her as a supervisor because she often argued with Wang Yafei about this matter. He had even found an excuse to transfer her to the most arduous cleaning post.

Back then, Ren Jie’s response was: “The Goddess will punish sinners.”

Less than four hours after she said that, Wang Yafei suddenly passed away at work due to a cardiac arrest.

If he hadn’t heard the relevant conversation in advance, Shang Jianyao definitely wouldn’t have thought that anything was wrong with this piece of news. Within Pangu Biology, it was normal for people to suddenly die from diseases every year.

If Wang Yafei had died two to three years later, Shang Jianyao wouldn’t have thought that anything was abnormal about it. He definitely would’ve treated it as a coincidence.

But on the day Ren Jie said, ‘the Goddess will punish sinners,’ Sinner Wang Yafei died from a heart attack.

Shang Jianyao suddenly stood up, took down the hanging coat, and draped it over his body. He quickly walked out the door and went straight to Zone C.

He gradually slowed down as he walked, and his speed soon became his usual pace.

As he approached the Rec Center, Shang Jianyao swept his gaze around and saw Shen Du standing in the shadows of the wall beside him, immersed in darkness.

Shen Du stood there in a daze. Although his eyes were looking ahead, they were completely unfocused. He didn't even notice Shang Jianyao's approach.

"Uncle Shen," Shang Jianyao called out.

Shen Du suddenly jolted to attention as he turned his head slightly to look at the source of the sound.

"Ah, Jianyao..." He forced a smile.

Shang Jianyao said in a very calm tone, "Wang Yafei is dead."

Shen Du's face was slightly pale, and the muscles on both sides of his mouth twitched. "I know."

His voice was very low as if he was afraid of disturbing something that others couldn't see.

Shang Jianyao looked at him and directly asked, "Is this divine punishment?"

Shen Du trembled again, and his expression instantly became confused. "I don't know..." His gaze went past Shang Jianyao, and his eyes seemed to lose focus again.

Shang Jianyao was just about to ask again when a five-year-old boy ran over, grabbed Shen Du's hanging hand, and shook it. "Daddy, Daddy, it's time to go home!"

"Yes, yes," replied Shen Du before turning his head toward Shang Jianyao. "I'll be heading back first."

"Goodbye." Shang Jianyao waved his hand politely.

Shen Du looked at his child again, and a gentle smile gradually appeared on his face. He held the child's hand and met up with his wife, who had come out of the Rec Center. They walked back to Zone B.

Shang Jianyao stared at Shen Du's back and didn't turn his head for a long time.

During Life Ritual's few gatherings, Shang Jianyao had used his 'talent' to build a good relationship with many members and listened to them as they shared their reason for joining the parish.

Among them, Shen Du had always been unable to get over his child, who died young. When they had their present child, he became even more worried about history repeating itself, afraid that he would also be unable to raise him.

Ren Jie noticed his situation and deliberately befriended him, imparting him with a lot of parenting knowledge.

Later, Shen Du's child slowly grew up and became healthy. He increasingly believed in the deity Ren Jie spoke of and eventually joined the Life Ritual parish.

After a while, Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze and walked towards the Rec Center's entrance.

Since the radio program had begun, there were almost no pedestrians outside at this moment. Only the sounds of people playing cards and chatting could be heard coming from inside.

Of course, if one looked around carefully, they could still find some pairs of figures in the darkness.

Shang Jianyao was just about to pass through the door when he suddenly saw two familiar figures come out.

The 27-year-old woman on the right was Jian Xin, the parishioner who had complained about Wang Yafei at the Life Ritual gathering this morning.

She had beautiful facial features and looked elegant. She could pass off as a beauty. This was thanks to the popularization of genetic enhancement drugs.

The other person was her husband, Zhuo Zhengyuan. He was also a Life Ritual parishioner.

At this moment, Jian Xin's face was pale as if she had contracted a serious illness. She looked rather nervous as if she would be startled by any slight commotion.

Her husband, Zhuo Zhengyuan, had a gloomy expression that kept people at bay.

Shang Jianyao took two steps and stood in front of them.

Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan stopped at the same time, their bodies trembling slightly.

Shang Jianyao suppressed his voice and said, "Wang Yafei is dead."

The short-haired Jian Xin reflexively said, "Coincidence, it must be a coincidence..."

Her voice gradually softened, leaving only a weak echo that carried an indescribable sense of horror and confusion.

Zhuo Zhengyuan gulped and said in a deep voice, "The preliminary autopsy results are out. It's indeed a death caused by cardiac arrest. There's no other cause."

Shang Jianyao nodded. "What a coincidence."

He then stepped aside and allowed Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan to pass. Shang Jianyao only looked back after the couple had distanced themselves from him.

Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan's figures swayed slightly under the ceiling light, appearing a little feeble.

Shang Jianyao remembered that they had joined Life Ritual because Jian Xin had two miscarriages and finally managed to get pregnant with a third child through great difficulty.

Now that their son was born, not only was there nothing wrong with him, but he had also inherited most of the advantages of genetic enhancement from the previous generation. This allowed him to obtain better talent in subsequent drug adjustments.

Putting aside the fact that they liked to argue about the issue regarding childbirth, Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan were very good people. They were compassionate and liked children. During gatherings, they would always take the initiative to comfort other members. When they encountered people that needed help, they wouldn't feign ignorance.

Once, Ren Jie was a little embarrassed by Shang Jianyao's 'too little' comment. Zhuo Zhengyuan even took the initiative to share the Holy Communion that he had yet to finish.

Shang Jianyao slowly retracted his gaze and walked into the Rec Center. He looked over and didn't see Li Zhen and the parish's other members. Only Ren Jie—the Guide—remained in her usual spot and chatted with the women in their forties.

Ren Jie—who had her hair coiled up—seemed to sense his gaze. She turned her head and looked over. Upon seeing an acquaintance, she smiled and nodded affectionately.

Shang Jianyao bowed in response. He didn't approach and casually found a spot to watch the people playing cards and listen to the radio that was always drowned out by the various sounds.

Time passed minute by minute. It wasn't long before the street lamps went out and night arrived.

Ren Jie flipped her wrist and looked at her old electronic watch. She stood up and smiled at the women around her. "Let's go back, let's go back. There's someone waiting for you!"

The group of people giggled and joked for a while before Ren Jie left the Rec Center and walked in the direction of her home.

Shang Jianyao stood up and followed behind her as if everything was normal.

After turning into another street, Ren Jie slowed down when she saw that there was nobody else. She allowed Shang Jianyao to close the distance and walk beside her.

"Jianyao, what's the matter?" asked Ren Jie in a low voice that exhibited a casual tone.

Shang Jianyao's eyes gradually turned dark. "Auntie Ren, look. We live on the same floor. We are all members of the parish, so..."

Ren Jie felt a little confused when she heard that, but she gradually came to a realization. "So, we have to build a closer relationship. For example..."

As she spoke, her eyes gradually turned strange. Her face turned a little red, and it was unknown what connections she was making.

Shang Jianyao's eyebrows twitched, and he immediately shouted, "Mom!"

Ren Jie was stunned for a moment before her expression returned to normal.

She chuckled and said, "Then, I'll acknowledge you as my godson. If your parents were still alive, they would be about my age."

After acknowledging her godson, her attitude clearly became much warmer.

Shang Jianyao restrained his expression and repeated his previous words. "Wang Yafei is dead."

Ren Jie tilted her head and glanced at him. After a few seconds of silence, she asked, "Do you feel terrified and uneasy?"

"There's also surprise," Shang Jianyao added.

Ren Jie smiled and questioned, "Do you suspect that this is the punishment a deity gives sinners?"

"Or a reward?" Shang Jianyao's thoughts jumped uncontrollably.

Ren Jie almost didn't manage to resume the conversation's tempo. She paused and smiled. "I can't answer your question on behalf of the Goddess. I can only say that the Arbiter of Fate has always been watching us, respectively rewarding and punishing the good and evil.

"As for whether it's true or not, I'm not sure. However, I don't think it would be such a coincidence if it weren't for the Goddess's punishment."

Shang Jianyao asked, "Who would know?"

Ren Jie's expression immediately turned serious. "The Doctor of the Church."

Chapter 96: Shang Jianyao's Countermeasure

Upon hearing Ren Jie's answer, Shang Jianyao thought for two seconds before continuing to ask, "Who is the Doctor of the Church?"

Ren Jie smiled. "This isn't something you should know now. When you become a Guide, the Doctor of the Church will take the initiative to summon you. When the time comes, you'll know who he is."

Shang Jianyao continued inquiring without being discouraged. "How can I become a Guide then?"

"By doing well enough." Ren Jie was very patient when facing her new godson.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to ask again, she added, "As long as you perform well, the Doctor of the Church won't ignore you."

As she spoke, her expression became serious again. "The Doctor of the Church has always been watching us."

At this moment, the people—who were returning one after another due to the street lamps extinguishing—passed by.

Ren Jie looked around and said, "Let's talk about it another time."

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly before quickly saying, "I really can't say it out. Let's forget about the matter from before..."

With that said, he turned around and left, not giving Ren Jie a chance to ask.

Ren Jie was stunned before she laughed. "This child actually gets embarrassed..."

...

The next morning after breakfast, Shang Jianyao came to Room 14 on the 647th floor.

Jiang Baimian came earlier than him; she was already flipping through some information there.

“You’re early?” Jiang Baimian looked up and laughed. “Do you want to practice spar again?”

She looked eager.

Shang Jianyao walked to her desk, pulled out a chair, and sat down. He didn’t make any small talk and directly asked, “Team Leader, can an Awakened’s ability cause cardiac arrest?”

“I’m not too sure. I don’t know much about an Awakened’s abilities,” Jiang Baimian replied in confusion. “If it’s not a direct cardiac arrest but an indirect method, I know of one. Heh heh, you should be able to imagine it. Yes, it’s the Nightmare Horse’s ‘Real Nightmare’ ability. Once one dies in a dream, the likely cause of death in reality will be cardiac arrest.”

“What if the person wasn’t sleeping but working?” asked Shang Jianyao without hiding anything.

“That detailed? It really happened?” With Jiang Baimian’s sharp intuition, she immediately sensed that something was amiss.

She then recalled the news on Newspoint last night and frowned. “Wang—Wang something? The Supplies Allocation Market PIC that died from a cardiac arrest? You suspect that he was killed by an Awakened?”

“Is there any evidence? Many people in the company die from heart problems every year.”

Shang Jianyao frankly said, “I joined a parish in the company, the kind that often gathers and distributes Holy Communion. At the gathering yesterday morning, they accused Wang Yafei of desecrating the sacred duty of giving birth and abused his power for personal gain to punish a member of the parish.

“Back then, the Guide in charge of our floor said, ‘the Goddess will punish sinners.’ Wang Yafei passed away less than four hours later.”

“That’s indeed a little suspicious.” Jiang Baimian gave an honest evaluation before coming to a realization. “Wait, you said you joined a secret parish? Is this a religion that started inside the company or some kind of external intrusion?”

This was a big problem!

“They believe in the Arbiter of Fate, December’s Kalendaria.” Shang Jianyao’s tone was very calm as if he was discussing who the principal of this floor’s primary school was.

Jiang Baimian wanted to laugh when she heard that, but she felt a little strange. She didn’t beat around the bush and directly asked, “Since you think the parish is suspicious, go ahead and report it to the Order Supervisors. This is an act of meritorious service. You don’t have to worry about being implicated. Or can you not bear to part with that parish?”

“A little. Their Holy Communion is very delicious,” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

Jiang Baimian had long given up on the idea of arguing with Shang Jianyao. She forced a smile onto her face and asked, “Just because of this reason?”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for two seconds before seriously saying, “Most of the parishioners are good people. They joined the parish because of some sad experiences. They didn’t do anything bad. The main reason they gather is to find spiritual sustenance and comfort from each other.”

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “Are you worried that they will be implicated and suffer severe punishment when the company finds out about the parish? If we ultimately prove that Wang Yafei died normally and that the entire matter is a coincidence, wouldn’t it really be unjust for the parish to be reported and punished?”

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged her words, agreeing that they were his concerns.

Jiang Baimian’s eyes slightly flickered before she smiled. “Are you willing to tell me the secret regarding the parish because I’m trustworthy?”

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao didn’t hide it.

The smile on Jiang Baimian’s face became increasingly obvious.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao added, “Even if you aren’t trustworthy, I can rely on my Inference Clowning ability to make you trustworthy.”

“...” Jiang Baimian narrowed her eyes and raised her left hand, letting the fine, silver-white electric arcs run wild in her palm. “Say that one more time.”

“Yes, you are trustworthy.” Shang Jianyao readily agreed.

Jiang Baimian lowered her palm and casually asked, “Why did you want to discuss this with me?”

“You’re smarter.” Shang Jianyao was rather honest.

Jiang Baimian smiled again. “Good that you know.”

She curiously asked, “If I were to let you deal with it yourself, what do you plan on doing about this matter?”

Shang Jianyao had long considered this question and smoothly replied, “Find the Doctor of the Church—who is above the Guide; find the person who issued the order; find the Awakened who executed the mission; find the parish’s high-ranking members who haven’t been acting appropriately and secretly kill them all.

“This way, the parish will be completely harmless. It will be where everyone will share their knowledge, worries, and food.”

He spoke as if he was going to the Supplies Allocation Market to buy some groceries on his day off.

Jiang Baimian was momentarily at a loss for words. After a few seconds, she said, “That’s a little difficult... An Awakened with the ability to cause cardiac arrest is not easy to deal with, especially in such a cramped environment like the company. Besides, there might not only be one Awakened in the parish. It might be the same for some of the higher-ranking members. It’s too difficult to kill all of them, and it’s highly likely that you’d be the one dying.

“In addition, it’s basically impossible to hide the truth after killing so many people. Do you think the company is just a decoration?”

Jiang Baimian continued with this train of thought. “Although you have the Inference Cloning ability, you definitely can’t compare to the company when it directs the investigations. They can mobilize all the resources to discover the truth and resolve the problem quickly.

“Therefore, my suggestion is still: Report to the company. As for the parish’s ordinary members, the company won’t punish them too severely as long as they didn’t do anything bad. The company will only teach them a lesson. After all, everyone is a precious resource. Besides, you can use your contributions to reduce their punishment.”

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao’s thoughtful expression, she added, “Everyone lives here, so they definitely want the company to be stable. If we keep covering up such problems and try to resolve them by ourselves, it will only worsen.”

Shang Jianyao stood up. “I’ll go to the Order Supervisory Bureau now.”

“Stop, stop! There’s no rush. I’m not done!” shouted Jiang Baimian quickly.

Shang Jianyao sat down again and looked at Jiang Baimian, waiting for her to continue.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Tell me everything again. Give me the whole story.”

Shang Jianyao recalled the incident without hiding anything. He even told her what time he went to the bathroom.

Jiang Baimian listened very seriously and did not interrupt Shang Jianyao’s recount, afraid that it would affect his train of thought and cause him to miss something. But even though she was already very familiar with Shang Jianyao’s style, she still slightly opened her mouth when she heard him take the initiative to call Auntie Ren ‘Mom’ in order to ‘gain’ her trust.

She felt surprised and amused.

“...Every time I feel like I know you well enough, you overturn my understanding again.” Jiang Baimian sighed helplessly. She then nodded slightly and said, “There’s something that doesn’t make sense.”

“What?” Shang Jianyao asked very cooperatively.

Jiang Baimian organized her words and said, “If Wang Yafei had died in two to three weeks—or a month from now—I don’t think there would’ve been any problems. It would’ve been a normal progression.

“But just after 6 a.m., the Guide labeled Wang Yafei as a sinner and said that the Goddess would punish sinners. More than three hours later, Wang Yafei died from a cardiac arrest. This brings about an obvious problem. All the members present back then will link Wang Yafei’s death to divine punishment.”

“Yes, that’s how it is.” Shang Jianyao confirmed Jiang Baimian’s words. “Everyone thinks so.”

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, “Then, what’s their reaction? Is there reverence, fear, panic, and confusion?”

Shang Jianyao nodded.

Jiang Baimian continued speaking. “Under such an explosive emotional impact, different members will definitely make different choices because of their personalities and experiences. I admit that most people will become more respectful toward the gods and completely believe in the Arbiter of Fate, becoming extremely pious.

“However, a small number of members will definitely want to report this matter to the company due to fear, panic, guilt, and a sense of justice. You are one such example.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a while and roughly understood Jiang Baimian's meaning. "If Wang Yafei's death had happened a month later, everyone wouldn't have suffered such a great impact. Instead, they would've made associations and guesses, becoming more respectful of the gods. But with such a huge impact, it's very possible that different people will make different choices now?"

Jiang Baimian nodded solemnly. "This raises a question: Why are the parish's higher-ups so sure that nobody will betray them? There are two explanations. First, they are religious lunatics. They don't care about the consequences or their own safety. They only want to sentence the sinners.

"Second, they are confident that any betrayals and reports won't succeed." Jiang Baimian then looked into Shang Jianyao's eyes and asked seriously, "Which one do you think it is?"

Chapter 97: Experience Counts

Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian without flinching. "It could also be a misunderstanding. The parish's higher-ups didn't do anything, and Wang Yafei's sudden death was purely coincidental."

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. "Not bad. You even found a third explanation."

After complimenting him, she changed the topic. "I was actually leaning toward this just now, believing that your parish's higher-ups wouldn't take such a risk. But after careful consideration, I still find them highly suspicious."

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to raise a question, Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, "Let's first assume that it was indeed a misunderstanding and a coincidence and that you are a high-ranking member of the parish. Then, what will you think and do when you learn that Ren Jie said Wang Yafei is a sinner and that the Goddess will punish a sinner?"

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment. "I would think: So our parish is that impressive? So the Arbiter of Fate is this powerful? I never knew I was so impressive. I actually joined such a powerful parish and even managed to become a part of its brass?"

"... I shouldn't have asked you." Jiang Baimian raised her hand to her forehead. She thought for a moment and said, "If it really wasn't Wang Yafei who was punished by the parish, and he had never done such a thing in the past, the higher-ups might really have such thoughts..."

Jiang Baimian then asked, "What other relatively normal ideas would they have after coming to this realization?"

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to answer, she continued, "On the one hand, will they be overjoyed and think that this matter can be used to show how resourceful the Arbiter of Fate is? Will it be used to make believers more pious, more obedient, and take the initiative to spread the faith?"

Shang Jianyao nodded, indicating that normal higher-ups would think that way.

Jiang Baimian continued, "On the other hand, will they be a little worried that this matter is too coincidental and too sudden? They might end up scaring some of their believers and make them overreact, such as reporting this to the company, committing suicide, or beginning to preach openly?"

Shang Jianyao thought seriously for a few seconds before nodding again.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. "Let's assume that the brains of the parish's brass are intact. What will they do after they have these two thoughts?"

She also didn't make Shang Jianyao speak. She answered her question, "Immediately get your 'Guides' to convene another gathering. As they calm everyone down, they will preach the Arbiter of Fate's holiness and power so as to prevent anything unexpected from happening and lead things in a good direction.

"But a day has already passed now, but you still haven't received any news of a gathering. You have to understand that such urgent matters definitely can't be delayed. They will be resolved immediately."

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. "Maybe they were more stupid and didn't think of that."

Jiang Baimian smiled. "That's indeed a reason. We can't expect the enemy to be smart, take care of everything, and not make any mistakes all the time. However, the fact that your parish has been developing without any problems for so many years means that the higher-ups aren't a bunch of pigs. Furthermore, Wang Yafei's death is too much of a coincidence. Therefore, I'm more inclined to believe that they did it. They are either religious lunatics or have sufficient confidence."

"It's more likely to be the latter." Shang Jianyao seemed to have switched back to a normal person's train of thought.

"Yes... Either that or both," Jiang Baimian agreed. "Pure religious lunatics would've been discovered and arrested long ago."

She then looked at Shang Jianyao and reminded him, "I suspect that an accident will happen if you directly go to the Order Supervisory Department. This might be where the confidence of the parish's brass lies, preventing all the betrayals from succeeding.

“Don’t be in a rush to report or investigate. Wait a while first.

“Wait a few days or maybe even a week. When the parish’s upper echelons feel that things have calmed down and that nothing has happened, they will let down their guard and stop being so vigilant. That’s when you can attempt to do something.”

Shang Jianyao frowned and said, “In a few days, there won’t be any traces left.”

The corpse, in particular, would soon be disposed of.

Jiang Baimian had clearly considered this problem and nodded slightly. “During this period of time, I’ll try to use my personal connections to find an opportunity to look at the surveillance footage on the corresponding floor.”

She casually explained, “You just said that Wang Yafei suddenly died around 9 a.m., and it isn’t the weekend today. At that time, most of the residents on each floor will be in the Factory Zone or the Indoor Ecosystem Zone. They will all be at their jobs, and the Residential Zone will definitely be very quiet.

“In such a situation, anyone who comes to the floor where Wang Yafei is the Supplies Allocation Market’s PIC will definitely stand out. The surveillance cameras at the elevator entrance will faithfully record his traces.

“There won’t be many people walking around during work hours.

“Yes, not only do we have to look at the surveillance cameras at the scene, but we also have to look at the cameras on the two floors above and below. An Awakened’s ability should be usable through the ceiling as long as it satisfies the straight-line distance.”

This was something Shang Jianyao had previously said, and Qiao Chu’s Bewitchment fully demonstrated this.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “It can be used through obstacles, but the range will be reduced. Besides, there’s no way to determine who the target is. We can only determine which area within a corresponding range has people and the corresponding number.”

In other words, it was very easy for the Awakened to kill another person by accident and fail to achieve their goal if they attempted to ‘execute’ Wang Yaifei through the ceiling or upstairs.

“That’s true.” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Wang Yafei will stay in a specific place at specific times, like his office for example? This way, one can perfectly kill him once they grasp the time and location... No, it’s only been slightly more than three hours since he became a sinner and suddenly died. It’s impossible for the Awakened to figure out his activity patterns. It would be too late even if they ask.

“Yes... We just have to look at the surveillance cameras of the particular floor to see who enters and leaves before and after the incident. No, it's better to look at the three floors' cameras. It's better to be careful. After all, we can't directly generalize your situation as a commonality among the Awakened.”

Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, “What if there's no such person?”

“That means that the killer might also be working on the same floor or even inside the Supplies Allocation Market. Although the probability is very low, we can't eliminate the possibility.” Jiang Baimian pursed her lips and said, “We can see if anyone approached the Supplies Allocation Market back then. We can also investigate the respective characteristics of the Supplies Allocation Market's employees.”

At this point, she looked at Shang Jianyao and smiled. “Don't Awakened pay one price to exchange for three abilities? Since they have paid the price, they will definitely display an abnormality. This is a clue.”

Shang Jianyao nodded before twitching his eyebrows.

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. “Have you figured it out? It's indeed a good idea to use a mental illness to hide the jump and abnormalities in one's thoughts. However, this is also an abnormality in the company's eyes. It's worth tracking and observing.”

“Don't tell me you think the company's higher-ups don't even have the basic information on Awakened?”

“Don't tell me you think it's so easy for them to give a pass on the abnormalities of a research project's volunteer?”

“Don't tell me you think a person with moderate mental abnormalities can join the Old Task Force and casually head to the surface just because they applied?”

“The company definitely wants to put you in different environments to observe your situation and determine if there's anything wrong with you. I'm the observer.” Upon seeing Shang Jianyao's expression turn more and more solemn, Jiang Baimian smiled and sighed. “Fortunately, I'm a soft-hearted person... Although I don't know why you're hiding it, you can hide it if you want to.”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before saying, “I can take people by surprise.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and changed the topic. “The investigation of Wang Yafei's death will be conducted according to our plan. Patiently wait for a while before attempting to make a report. I'll take the opportunity to conduct some peripheral and technical investigations.”

Shang Jianyao didn't retort and whispered, “Be careful.”

Jiang Baimian smiled brightly. "I'll definitely find another excuse and reason. I'm not stupid."

As she spoke, she stroked her metal cochlear implant and smirked. "I almost didn't hear you clearly! In the future, remember to be louder when you care about others."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Shang Jianyao's voice was full of confidence.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and pointed at the book on the table. "This is some information regarding the Old World. Take a look. From now on, we will read up on information and discuss it in the morning. We will train in the afternoon."

Shang Jianyao took the book, found a seat, and sat down, reading it very quietly.

Before long, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong took the initiative to come over for overtime during their holidays.

...

In the evening, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong—who had eaten in the small canteen—returned to the 495th floor via elevator.

They had just approached the Rec Center when they suddenly heard a commotion.

The two of them didn't say a word. They tacitly walked over quickly and saw two Order Supervisors in black uniforms escorting a person.

The person's hands were cuffed behind him, and his face was extremely warped. His eyes were wide, turbid, and bloodshot.

Long Yuehong was shocked. "Heartless!"

Shang Jianyao recognized the person: Shen Du.

Further away, a child was being hugged tightly by his mother as he wailed. "Daddy, Daddy..."

Chapter 98: Understanding the Situation

Shang Jianyao couldn't see the gentleness that was originally on Shen Du's face. His face had warped like that of a crazy beast.

His eyes didn't have any sign of rationality. They weren't even as clear as some animals' eyes.

The abnormally turbid and dense blood vessels seemed to come from the depths of everyone's nightmares.

Shen Du struggled with all his might. Even though his hands were handcuffed, and he was being controlled by two muscular young men, he still gave off the feeling that he could escape from the restraints at any moment and hunt the living beings around him.

This was an ability he never had in the past.

Amidst a low and hoarse roar, Shen Du was taken away step by step.

The child's heart-wrenching cries sounded behind him. "Daddy, Daddy..."

Faced with such a scene, everyone who witnessed all of this remained silent. They were terrified, flustered, and sad.

Shen Du was finally brought out of the Rec Center, leaving behind only a series of echoing roars.

Shang Jianyao expressionlessly watched all of this before suddenly turning around and walking in the direction he had come from.

"That's Uncle Shen, right? He actually contracted the Heartless disease..." Long Yuehong was also affected by this matter. He stared in the direction Shen Du had disappeared in and subconsciously sighed at Shang Jianyao.

It was only at this moment that he realized that Shang Jianyao was not beside him. "Hey! Hey, where are you going?"

Shang Jianyao ignored Long Yueyue and turned into the path leading to the fourth elevator lobby. He walked at a moderate pace as if he had suddenly thought of something else to do.

He soon returned to the 647th floor and entered Room 14—the Old Task Force's assigned room.

Jiang Baimian had yet to leave. She was still operating the only computer there and typing away on the keyboard.

Sensing his arrival, Jiang Baimian looked up and asked, "What's wrong? Did you forget something?"

Shang Jianyao walked to her table and stated in a low voice, "Shen Du contracted the Heartless disease."

Jiang Baimian was stunned for two seconds before she recalled who Shen Du was. "The middle-aged man who brought you into the Life Ritual parish?"

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily.

Jiang Baimian frowned. "Was he very scared and terrified after he learned of Wang Yafei's sudden death?"

"He also felt a little confused." Shang Jianyao confirmed Jiang Baimian's guess by giving more details.

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. "You suspect that Shen Du suddenly contracted the Heartless disease because he wanted to report the parish?"

"Yes." Shang Jianyao didn't deny it.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "Did you return here to remind me not to rashly investigate in the near future in case I become a Heartless too?"

As if he didn't hear Jiang Baimian's question, Shang Jianyao suddenly said, "First-generation Heartless have a terrible image."

"That's true. It's tragic to become a Heartless like this." Jiang Baimian understood what he meant and nodded slightly. "Don't worry. I'm most wary of being discovered by the parish. The investigation I plan on conducting now is mainly to search for clues from public information. Yes, don't worry. I won't use my connections to gain access to the surveillance cameras for the time being. I'll wait a little longer until they no longer care about this incident."

Shang Jianyao replied simply, "Alright."

With that said, Shang Jianyao prepared to turn around and return to the 495th floor.

Jiang Baimian stopped him and thoughtfully said, "Don't be depressed. Although this matter is a tragedy, it gives me considerable confidence. The more they do, the more traces and flaws they leave behind. This makes it easier to catch their mistakes..."

She paused and continued with a serious expression, "Actually, I don't really believe that Shen Du suddenly contracted the Heartless disease because he wanted to report the Life Ritual parish. You've also heard Newspoint and know that the company has recently discovered several Heartless infections. Having one more case is considered normal."

Over the years, although humans had yet to discover the Heartless disease's pathology and infection patterns, they had at least concluded some of the phenomena.

One of them was: As long as the Heartless disease appeared, it wouldn't be isolated to a single case. Within a certain range and a certain period of time, there would definitely be several or even more cases. Most of these cases did not intersect.

Fortunately, the Heartless disease only appeared once in a long time after each outbreak. Otherwise, humanity would have long collapsed.

It was like a human's shadow. It was unknown where it hid at night, but it would naturally appear at dawn.

"It's even more coincidental than us encountering Qiao Chu," Shang Jianyao commented.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "If it weren't a coincidence, the meaning behind this matter would be extraordinary. Could it be that the Life Ritual parish has already grasped all of the Heartless disease's secrets and can use it to deal with the enemy?"

"How did they know that Shen Du was going to betray them? How did they make the Heartless disease coincidentally erupt before Shen Du reported them?"

"Why didn't any accidents happen when you told me about the matter?"

"What's the difference?"

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao's response, Jiang Baimian exhaled and said, "These are all questions that require thought. They might contain the most important clues. You and I should take the time to think about it.

"Go back. Don't take the initiative to ask about such matters, much less carry out an investigation. Just show appropriate curiosity."

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao's expression remained serious, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "Don't be too afraid of them. If they can casually infect someone with the Heartless disease, they would've long eliminated all the board members and replaced them with their own people.

"We would also most likely be sincerely praising the Arbiter of Fate's tolerance and not be vexed about such matters."

Shang Jianyao nodded. "Take your time. There's no rush."

"... Shouldn't I be the one telling you that?" Jiang Baimian waved her hand. "Go back and have a good rest. The parish will likely inform you of a gathering soon.

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao was a little confused, she smiled and sighed. "Since this has happened to Shen Du, the parish's higher-ups should be able to figure out that

they have to convene the parishioners as soon as possible as long as they haven't sacrificed their brains to the Arbiter of Fate. They have to unify the parishioners' thoughts at the gathering. Be it intimidation or appeasement, they can't let the situation continue developing this way.

"If more than ten to twenty Heartless cases appear at once, we don't need to make a report. The company will deploy elite troops for the most thorough investigation."

Shang Jianyao quietly listened before suddenly saying, "Team Leader, I want to sing a song for you."

"No thanks. You can sing after this matter is settled." Jiang Baimian smoothly continued, "I know you want to praise me."

Shang Jianyao didn't say anything else. He turned around and walked out of Room 14 before taking the elevator back to the 495th floor.

At this moment, many employees were gathered inside and around the Rec Center. They discussed the matter in groups of three to five.

To many people, this was like a long-forgotten nightmare rearing its head again. They couldn't help but feel fear and panic.

The current rate of contracting the Heartless disease was very low. Many young people might've faced infected people two or three times in the past few years, and sometimes not a single one. They had mostly heard of the cases.

The shadow that had always loomed over humans appeared again.

Shang Jianyao was in no rush to return home. He first walked into the Rec Center and found Long Yuehong—as expected.

He was chatting with Yang Zhenyuan in a corner.

"Where did you go?" questioned Long Yuehong curiously when he saw Shang Jianyao walking over.

"I forgot something." Shang Jianyao casually found an excuse.

"Oh, I see." Long Yuehong expressed his understanding.

Shang Jianyao sat down as if he wanted to prove that he was not anxious. He looked at Yang Zhenyuan and asked with a smile, "Didn't you move to the 569th floor?"

Yang Zhenyuan's wife, Zhou Qi, was ten years older than him. She once had a husband and was assigned a room. Therefore, after the two of them were successfully matched

together, Yang Zhenyuan directly lost the right to be assigned a room and could only move to Zhou Qi's apartment on the 569th floor.

"Can't I come back to visit my parents?" Yang Zhenyuan replied with a smile.

Shang Jianyao sized him up. "Your wife has taught you well."

"Huh?" Yang Zhenyuan's fair and clean face inexplicably flushed red.

Long Yuehong helped translate. "He means that you're much more cheerful than before."

"A little. I guess... I'm more confident." Yang Zhenyuan scratched his head.

After chatting about Yang Zhenyuan's work at the research institute, Shang Jianyao turned to Long Yuehong. "What happened to Uncle Shen?"

Long Yuehong had already heard the gossip and sighed. "They said that something was wrong with Uncle Shen last night and that he looked distracted. Sigh, if I had gotten him to see a doctor earlier, he might've been fine."

"If he's already infected with the Heartless disease, early treatment would be useless as well." Yang Zhenyuan worked at a certain biological research institute that was more focused on medical matters. But due to his profession, he was mostly in charge of the electronic equipment inside.

Long Yuehong sighed again. "That's right... How tragic. Uncle Shen's child is still so young..."

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a few seconds before asking, "When did Uncle Shen fall ill? Who was the first to see it?"

Long Yuehong pointed outside. "Uncle Shen became ill in the Order Supervisory Room beside us. He didn't manage to say a word after entering when his illness acted up. Phew, it's a good thing it happened there. They quickly restrained Uncle Shen. Otherwise, people probably would've been injured."

"Order Supervisory Department..." Shang Jianyao repeated. "How many people were there back then? "

"About three or four? It's definitely impossible for two people to subdue a Heartless," guessed Long Yuehong.

Shang Jianyao didn't hide his 'curiosity' as he asked about the various details. He gained a preliminary impression of the entire matter:

After dinner, Shen Du paced around the Rec Center's entrance for a while. He had a dazed expression, and his expression was nasty. About ten minutes later, he began walking to the Order Supervisory Room beside him. Moments after he entered—perhaps less than a minute—sounds of fighting and roars erupted from inside...

At that time, it was the peak of after-meal leisure time. Many people had witnessed the corresponding situation.

They chatted until 7:40 p.m. Shang Jianyao bade farewell to Long Yuehong, Yang Zhenyuan, and Zhou Qi—who had come to look for her husband. He left the Rec Center and walked home.

As he approached Zone B, Room 196, he first swept his gaze below the door.

There was a simple baby drawing drawn with white chalk. This meant that the Life Ritual parish had a gathering at 5:30 a.m. the next day.

...

On the 647th floor, Jiang Baimian packed her things and entered an elevator in a remote corner.

She swiped her electronic card and pressed '349.'

Chapter 99: Clues in Public News

Unlike most of the other floors' Residential Zones, the rooms on the 349th floor were not built densely packed together. It could even be described as sparse.

As soon as Jiang Baimian stepped out of the elevator, she saw a small square.

In the middle of the square was a flower bed filled with soil. Green plants of different shapes were planted inside.

The light that scattered from the ceiling in this area was closer to the natural light on the surface, and it was not the usual illumination.

Jiang Baimian looked at the different flowers that had withered or bloomed. She turned into the left street and entered Zone C, Room 12.

After entering, she first saw a living room with a sofa, a coffee table, a chair, a radio, and other items. The living room was to the left, and an area that led to the kitchen was the dining room.

Deep in the living room were more rooms.

At this moment, a middle-aged man was sitting on a recliner by the window. He was reading a book under the light of the street lamps outside.

The elder's black hair was still very thick, but it was mixed with a few silver strands. His eyebrows were like swords, and his eyes were large. If he were decades older, he would definitely be a handsome lad not much worse than this genetically enhanced generation.

Jiang Baimian glanced at the elder, frowned, and pressed the switch on the wall beside the door.

Click!

The lights in the room were switched on, illuminating the place as if it were daytime.

"Dad, why aren't you turning on the lights again?" Jiang Baimian reprimanded him with concern.

Jiang Wenfeng lowered the book in his hand and chuckled. "The street lamps are so bright, so why turn on the lights? You have to know how to conserve energy. Back when I was young..."

Jiang Baimian quickly touched her ear. "Ah, Dad, what did you say? Anyway, you have to protect your eyes!"

Jiang Wenfeng was wearing black clothes with pockets on both sides of his chest. He put down the book in his hand and stood up.

"Your ear is even worse than your grandfather's before he passed away!" He deliberately walked to Jiang Baimian's side and shouted, "Hurry up and undergo surgery. The effects of an implanted biological cochlear implant are at least three times better than yours!"

Jiang Baimian opened her mouth and laughed dryly. "I'm just afraid of surgery. It's fine as long as it works."

"What's there to be afraid of?" Jiang Wenfeng repeated the words he had said countless times. "Weren't you also not afraid when you underwent genetic modification and underwent the biological prosthetic transplant?"

Jiang Baimian argued in amusement and exasperation. "I was already unconscious back then. How would I be afraid?"

"Won't there also be anesthesia for surgery?" Jiang Wenfeng increasingly felt that his younger daughter would never allay his concerns.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before pursing her lips. "I'm just afraid of the feeling of not having any control. It feels like I'm dead."

Without waiting for Jiang Wenfeng to say anything, she quickly looked around. "Where's Mom?"

"The company sent two boxes of apples. She took one to your brother's place," replied Jiang Wenfeng helplessly.

"Oh, oh." Jiang Baimian pretended to be enlightened. "Do you want me to peel an apple for you?"

Jiang Wenfeng shook his head. "There's no need. We just had dinner not long ago."

Jiang Baimian then pointed at the study. "I'll use your computer."

"Go ahead." Jiang Wenfeng had a look of disdain.

Jiang Baimian briskly walked into the study, switched on her father's computer, and logged into his company internal account.

Pangu Biology had a local area network. People with computers and the authorization could log in and browse through public information to deal with matters at their corresponding rank.

Of course, the content and functions that different personnel with different clearance could see and use were definitely different. There were even different restrictions when logging in at different locations.

For most employees of Pangu Biology, computers were a rarity. They could only be seen at their workplaces, and even so, there weren't many of them.

Using her father's account, Jiang Baimian read the lowly classified contents one by one according to the temporal sequence of events.

She was not impatient, just like how she usually browsed.

The information provided here was much more abundant than Newspoint. It went into way more detail.

Finally, Jiang Baimian saw a title: "Routine investigation report of D8 employee Wang Yafei's death."

Jiang Baimian immediately clicked on it and read through it seriously. "... In the hour before and after, the surveillance at the elevator lobby didn't discover any outsiders who didn't belong to the floor where the incident happened..."

“... Many employees have confirmed that nobody approached Wang Yafei back then...

“... The autopsy results showed sudden cardiac arrest...

“Conclusion: Foul play eliminated. Case will be handled as a natural death.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and sighed silently.

The company's various systems were very mature... This meant that, after the company's establishment, it had some experience in guarding against various factors, including Awakened elements.

Jiang Baimian didn't stay on the page for too long. She quickly closed it and browsed through other content.

After reading a large number of unrelated things, she entered the medical department page and checked all kinds of healthcare information.

During this process, she casually did a search. “Sudden cardiac arrest cases in the past five years.”

The results were soon revealed. The overall probability was in the normal range.

Jiang Baimian continued jotting down notes when her eyebrows suddenly twitched. In recent years, there have been two sudden cardiac arrest cases on the 478th floor. The 478th floor was the floor where Wang Yafei was in charge of the Supplies Allocation Market. It was also where he died. He was the second case.

In terms of population ratio, such an incidence rate was not considered high, and it was completely acceptable. However, it appeared very suspicious in Jiang Baimian's eyes, especially when she was filled with speculations.

As the records went further back, the rate of sudden cardiac arrests on the 478th floor returned to normal. It happened once a year, or never.

Jiang Baimian closed the page and began browsing through other content. However, her eyes had lost focus. This means that the Awakened is a resident of the 478th floor? Furthermore, he has only awakened in the past year? From a psychological point of view, it's very difficult not to give the abilities a try when a person has obtained such great strength... There's a high chance of taking revenge on the target they hate...

Besides, this also explains why the Life Ritual's parish executed Wang Yafei... Logically speaking, there will always be members criticizing each other at every—uh—frustration sharing session. However, Shang Jianyao has never seen anyone die because of this...

It's precisely because there's an Awakened from the parish on the floor where Wang Yafei works that they can carry this deed out well without leaving behind any clues and without being discovered by the company. Therefore, the Life Ritual parish decided to implement 'divine punishment' this time, making the believers on the 495th floor more reverent of the Arbiter of Fate.

This will then cause them to become more pious and obedient? Then, why was Shen Du infected with the Heartless disease?

If there's such a convenient method, why did they get an Awakened to kill Wang Yafei? Wouldn't it be better if they infected him with the Heartless disease? This will make it more inconspicuous and have better effects.

Could it be that it's not the Heartless disease but a similar symptom caused by an Awakened's ability?

Thoughts tumbled through Jiang Baimian's mind, but she continued browsing without batting an eyelid.

...

At five in the morning, Shang Jianyao woke up with a light knock on the door.

This time, he didn't brush his teeth. He only washed his face with cold water to energize himself. He then put on the thick, dark-green cotton coat that was the same as Shen Du's. He held the thick, heavy flashlight and walked out the door toward Zone A.

As he walked, he looked up at the ceiling. A red dot flickered there, representing a surveillance camera.

Many employees believed that, apart from a few key areas, most of the surveillance cameras were already damaged and unusable. They were only placed there as a deterrence. However, Shang Jianyao had previously heard Jiang Baimian mention that there should be more functioning cameras than he imagined.

He suddenly raised his arm and shone the flashlight at the camera. He then approached the wall and entered a blind spot.

Before long, Shang Jianyao arrived at Li Zhen's room in Zone A.

After matching the countersign according to the procedure, he entered the room and found a seat.

Unlike usual, everyone seemed depressed at this gathering. Before the Guide, Ren Jie, came out, nobody spoke or chatted. It was unknown what they were thinking.

Among them, Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan would occasionally fidget in their seats, appearing very restless.

Finally, Ren Jie—the Guide—came out of the inner room and walked to the area between the closet, cupboard, and the large bed. She looked around and said with a serious expression, “I gathered everyone for a gathering today because I have something to report.”

As she spoke, her body trembled slightly as if she was afraid of something. However, her face revealed a fervent expression. After a pause, Ren Jie said in a low voice, “Shen Du wanted to betray the parish, and he has already suffered divine punishment.”

Chapter 100: Evernight Parish

“Shen Du wanted to betray the parish, and he has already suffered divine punishment.”

The dim yellow light scattered unevenly on everyone in Li Zhen’s house, bringing with it different shades of light and darkness.

For nearly ten seconds, nobody spoke. Even their breathing didn’t seem to exist. It was as if someone had pressed the pause button for the entire room.

Finally, Ren Jie broke the silence. She raised her arms like she was cradling a baby. “Thy mercy be praised!”

Just as she said that, rapid and heavy breaths sounded in the room. They seemed to have been held in for a long time.

“We praise thy tolerance!” All the members of the parish bowed—they were more pious than ever.

Shang Jianyao joined in and meticulously did the cradling action. His voice did not waver at all.

Ren Jie then said, “Sinner Wang Yafei also suffered a divine punishment.”

With that said, she slowly looked around, making everyone bow their heads.

Ren Jie stopped mentioning Shen Du and Wang Yafei and began to preach. This time, she spoke of the Arbiter of Fate’s grandeur and holiness.

As she came to an end, she scanned each member again. “Our Lady is tolerant and dignified. ‘She’ has always been watching the world. The Doctor of the Church has always been paying attention to us. No one can hide from him.”

Ren Jie had just mentioned the Life Ritual’s internal structure for the very first time.

Newcomers were considered Newborn. After they made some contributions and managed to bring in more believers, they could be promoted to a Guide. Above the Guides was the Doctor of the Church.

Ren Jie did not mention if there were any others above the Doctor of the Church.

“We praise thy tolerance!” The Newborn once again did the cradling action.

As this was a last-minute gathering, and there was no Holy Communion, the parish members quickly got up and left in batches.

Shang Jianyao was just about to leave when Ren Jie stopped him.

The Guide smiled at him and said, “Don’t be too afraid. The Arbiter of Fate is tolerant. As long as you do not blaspheme or betray the parish, ‘She’ will only give blessings, not divine punishment.”

Ren Jie’s attitude toward Shang Jianyao was much friendlier than before.

“I praise thy tolerance,” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

After leaving Li Zhen’s house, he held the flashlight and approached the wall, walking forward at a moderate speed.

As far as he could see, he saw Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan—who were the cause of Wang Yafei’s death.

The light from their flashlights was very weak as if new batteries were needed.

The couple walked very anxiously in the dim, swaying light as if they were afraid a monster would pounce out of the darkness.

Shang Jianyao’s pace quickened slightly before he returned to normal. He watched as the dim figures representing Jian Xin and Zhuo Zhengyuan disappeared around the corner.

...

Room 14 on the 647th floor, 7:50 a.m.

Shang Jianyao didn’t wait for Long Yuehong and first went to the room assigned to the Old Task Force.

As expected, Jiang Baimian had already arrived. She was sitting in her seat, holding a fountain pen dazedly.

Upon sensing Shang Jianyao enter, Jiang Baimian waved her hand. "I found something."

Shang Jianyao immediately jumped over.

"... There's no need for such exaggerated actions." Jiang Baimian's expression was a little dull.

"My brain had a spasm," Shang Jianyao explained seriously.

"Alright, I know you have a doctor's certificate." Jiang Baimian sighed helplessly. She then said seriously, "Preliminary clues point toward an Awakened that is very likely a resident of the 478th floor, or someone who works there."

Before Shang Jianyao could speak, she roughly explained the source of the clues and the basis of her judgment. Finally, she said, "You can try asking the person in question, Jian Xin, to see if she noticed any resident on that floor not going to work on the day of Wang Yafei's death. Or perhaps, which employee of the Rec Center, primary school, and Order Supervisory Department approached the Supplies Allocation Market before and after Wang Yafei's death."

"What if there's none? None at all?" Shang Jianyao asked in response.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "That would mean that the Awakened might very well be a member of the Supplies Allocation Market on the 478th floor. When the time comes, find a friend who lives on that floor, have a meal, and go over to take a look around to see if there are any abnormalities among the employees.

"You can also get some understanding of this through Jian Xin." At this point, she reminded him, "But don't go there for the time being. It's best to wait a few days. Find a quiet corner in a place like the Rec Center to ask when there are many people around. Also, be tactful. Don't be so direct. It will scare the other party.

"I know you're not afraid of attracting danger to yourself, but you have to consider if this will bring danger to the other party. You don't want Shen Du's matter to happen again, right?"

Shang Jianyao frankly said, "I'm scared too. However, there are things that we have to do, no matter how scared we are."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "Alright, go read the information. Forget about this for the next few days. Don't think about it anymore."

Shang Jianyao turned around before returning. "I have another question."

“What?” Jiang Baimian suddenly felt a little scared. She was worried that something major had happened.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and inquired, “How can a person defeat the fear lurking in their hearts?”

Jiang Baimian’s eyes widened as she subconsciously shrank back. She looked at Shang Jianyao suspiciously. “Why are you suddenly asking this question?”

Shang Jianyao boldly said, “Have you forgotten? Du Heng said that one has to face the fear in their hearts after entering the Sea of Origins and defeat them one by one.”

“Oh, about that. I thought...” Jiang Baimian shut her mouth in time and suddenly came to a realization. “You’ve entered the Sea of Origins?”

Shang Jianyao nodded.

“When was this? Did your abilities change?” Jiang Baimian blurted out a question.

Shang Jianyao was very honest. “No.”

“That’s true. You haven’t overcome even one fear in your heart...” Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. She hesitated for a moment and decided to be direct. “What fear are you facing now? I can only think of a suitable solution if I know the exact situation.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything. He took out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over.

Jiang Baimian reached out to take the piece of paper and quickly unfolded it.

Many disorderly blue lines were reflected in her eyes.

These lines—created by a ballpoint pen—seemed to form a shadow, which surrounded a circle and ‘eroded’ it.

At the edge of the paper—above the messy lines—were two other circles. Apart from that, there was a large blank space.

Jiang Baimian looked at it for a while. Coupled with Shang Jianyao’s information, she had some ideas.

She deliberated and said, “I’ll try my best to think about it in the next two days. I hope I can give you some suggestions as soon as possible.”

After saying that, she seemed to recall something and curiously asked, “Is this the drawing you drew in the car when Qiao Chu ordered you to draw?”

“You still remember?” Shang Jianyao didn’t hide his surprise.

The smile on Jiang Baimian’s face gradually became obvious. “I’ve said it before. I’ve always been a very petty and vengeful person.”

Shang Jianyao was just about to respond when Bai Chen and Long Yuehong entered the room one after another.

Jiang Baimian stood up and smiled. “We have two days at most before we know what items we can keep and how much compensation we can get.”

...

Shang Jianyao and the others spent the day reading information and doing all kinds of training. It was mundane but fulfilling.

After dinner, Shang Jianyao returned home. After some thought, he walked to the Rec Center.

He glanced over and saw Long Yuehong chatting with a beautiful girl with short hair in the corner.

Shang Jianyao couldn’t help but shake his head.

At this moment, a clear female voice sounded in Shang Jianyao’s ear. “Do you also think Long Yuehong is stupid? He actually decided to have a chat at the Rec Center on his first date?”

Shang Jianyao turned his head and realized that it was Meng Xia.

This girl was the same age as Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Yang Zhenyuan. She also lived on the same floor, so she definitely had a classmate relationship with him. He was relatively familiar with her.

Meng Xia was tall and had a clean and exquisite face. She wore a long, camel-colored coat and looked much more mature than before.

Beside her was a man in his twenties. He was more than 1.7 meters tall and about the same height as Meng Xia. He looked decent, but his skin was a little tanned. His face showed signs of the elements, and his eyes were rather sharp.

Meng Xia and the man held hands as if they didn’t want to be separated for even a moment.

“That’s right.” Shang Jianyao replied to Meng Xia’s evaluation of Long Yuehong.

Meng Xia immediately smiled and said, "My husband just said that it's very normal. Seriously, it's so noisy here. It's better to take a walk on a quiet street."

Shang Jianyao nodded. "It's useless for him to be doing this. He should've sung a song the moment he met her."

"..." Meng Xia didn't know how to respond.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao didn't continue the topic. He looked at the man beside Meng Xia and questioned, "Your husband?"

He remembered that Meng Xia's husband was a wilderness nomad and was currently a D4 employee. Therefore, Meng Xia had already moved to his apartment on the 622nd floor. It was usually very difficult to meet her here.

"Yes, Zhang Lei." Meng Xia introduced him. "This is my classmate, Shang Jianyao. He's the one who just went to the surface."

Zhang Lei took a step forward and stretched out his right hand. "Hello." He habitually shielded Meng Xia behind him.

"Hello." Shang Jianyao shook hands with him. He then asked Meng Xia, "Why are you back?"

"Something happened to Uncle Shen, so I came back to visit Mom and Dad." Meng Xia sighed.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and suddenly asked, "Can I have a word with your husband?"

"Huh?" Meng Xia was confused.

Shang Jianyao politely explained, "I have something to ask him."

Meng Xia laughed. "Go ahead. Don't borrow him for too long."

Shang Jianyao and Zhang Lei went to an empty corner in the Rec Center. After sitting down, Shang Jianyao directly asked, "Do you know anything about the Kalendarium and Awakened?"

Zhang Lei raised his eyebrows. "Xi Xia said you've been to the surface. It seems like you know a lot. Yes, I've wandered the wilderness for many years, so I know some things."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and inquired, "Have you ever encountered an Awakened who can affect other people's hearts?"

Zhang Lei's expression gradually turned serious. "Yes, but it wasn't me. It was a friend of mine. Back in Weed City, he made a bet with a member of the Ever Noctium Parish in a game of arm-wrestling. But just as he was about to win, his heart suddenly palpitated crazily. He almost couldn't calm down."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and questioned, "Who does the Evernight Parish believe in?"

Zhang Lei looked around and answered in a low voice, "The Arbiter of Fate."