

Ancient 103

Chapter 103 - 53: The Haven of the Fallen

Rather than calling it a basement, it would be better described as a narrow passage extending into the depths of the earth.

Gu Jianlin found it hard to imagine that beneath the landfill of Black Cloud City, there was such a hidden place. On the sides of the narrow corridor hung occasional handcrafted cement candle holders, each holding a nearly melted candle.

"Make sure to close that stone slab."

The little girl walking ahead turned around and reminded him.

Gu Jianlin turned back and slid the stone slab shut.

In the faint light, he noticed the stone slab was smeared with splashes of blood. At the top of the entrance hung a black flower, withered and lifeless, exuding an ashen shade.

"Brother Lin, what is this place?"

Cheng Youyu, surviving by a whisker, slumped against the wall and exhaled heavily as he spoke.

Gu Jianlin shook his head, gesturing to keep quiet, as he firmly sealed the exit with the stone slab.

In the darkness, the little girl struck a piece of kindling, sparking a flame and lighting a candle.

The warm fire illuminated her tender features, though malnourishment left her thin and sallow.

However, her eyes were crystal-clear, bright and lively under the flickering light.

"That's a mixture of Stone Statue Tree Oil and human blood. A few years ago, someone discovered that when paired with the scent of Faceless Flowers, it could transform a sealed space into a barrier independent of the outside world when the black mist descends. This way, we can sleep peacefully at night without fearing the Great Ruins."

The little girl explained softly, "The black mist can't penetrate."

Gu Jianlin vaguely grasped the idea.

The so-called Great Ruins referred to the monsters.

And the black mist seemed to be a plague haunting this Forbidden Zone for years.

People living here had become used to employing methods to circumvent the disaster.

"Wait, young lady."

Cheng Youyu panted as he asked, "Those monsters—why do they transform into human-like figures? And also..."

The little girl lifted her face, glanced at him, and replied, "I don't know. But an uncle I know once said that memories are a punishment, but only for those who live in the past."

She blew out the matchstick and carefully placed it back in its box before tucking it into her pocket.

Even a used matchstick was too precious for her to discard.

"My name is Wanwan. Follow me."

The little girl led the way: "Your friends have been poisoned and need rest."

Gu Jianlin hefted two burlap sacks and followed behind.

After undoing his Ghost Transformation, he found it somewhat exhausting.

Luckily, the overweight Cheng Youyu was still mobile; otherwise, he might have been overwhelmed.

The little girl occasionally glanced back at him as she guided them, her curious gaze lingering.

Gu Jianlin noticed her quiet observations but said nothing.

This underground space—whoever had excavated it—extended deep into the earth, opening into an area as large as a small supermarket.

Yet it still felt cramped and damp, with poor lighting.

Gu Jianlin instinctively examined his surroundings for clues, constructing mental models as he always did upon entering a new environment.

This time, however, he found himself oddly disoriented and overwhelmed.

He wasn't a wealthy heir but had led a reasonably average urban lifestyle. Occasionally, he would accompany his elders back to rural villages. No matter where, material conditions were always sufficient—he had never known true hardship.

Until arriving at Black Cloud City, Gu Jianlin realized that such subsistence-level existence was the reality for some in this world.

He was shocked but still able to accept it.

Yet now, he struggled to find the words to describe his surroundings.

Exiting the passageway, he found himself in a warehouse piled high with assorted garbage and miscellaneous items.

Broken phones, mud-streaked cups, snapped charging cables, filthy mattresses.

Above the warehouse, a sign read: "Supply Depot."

An elderly man sat expressionlessly on a stool, gazing at them.

His legs were both amputated, and he cradled a wrinkled cigarette, not lighting it but holding it under his nose to sniff.

"Wanwan has returned?"

The old man grinned at the little girl, exposing the fierce tiger tattoo on his neck.

"Uncle Sun!"

Wanwan beamed brightly, "I'm bringing these refugees to see my dad."

Uncle Sun grunted, his gaze sweeping coldly over those behind her before slightly pausing.

Gu Jianlin narrowed his eyes, noticing how intensely the old man focused his stare on him.

His gaze felt unsettling, forcing Gu Jianlin to clutch his burlap sacks tightly.

"Tiger tattoo—surname Sun?"

Cheng Youyu murmured suspiciously from behind, "Why does that feel oddly familiar...?"

Gu Jianlin glanced at him, lowering his voice: "You know him?"

Cheng Youyu hastily withdrew his attention, replying, "Not sure—I heard rumors before. Apparently, before the Immortal Palace project officially began, a group of elites ventured down. Most of them perished. Their leader was said to have the tiger tattoo below his neck. Rumor has it he, too, was eventually corrupted and disappeared."

Past the supply depot, they arrived at a site marked "Food Reserve."

The makeshift wooden shelves inside had clearly been painstakingly constructed by hand.

On the shelves were five barrels of peanut oil, three bags of flour, two bottles of soy sauce, half a pack of salt.

Even half a jar of Lao Gan Ma chili sauce.

There were also some less-than-fresh vegetables—the likes of tomatoes, string beans, and cabbages.

Meat was notably scarce—only a small portion of pork belly stored inside the cabinet.

Potatoes and sweet potatoes were abundant, as they could be stored longer.

A one-armed woman, likely in her forties, hummed a lullaby by the door, cradling an infant in swaddling clothes. Every so often, she exhaled icy breath into the food reserve.

She walked the Second Rank of the Heavenly Master Path.

Utilizing her abilities, she kept the perishable goods fresh.

This underground space lacked an electrical grid, let alone refrigeration.

When newcomers arrived, the woman showed little reaction.

Yet her gaze lingered on Gu Jianlin for an extended moment.

Deeper inside lay the Taboo Items Storage Room, secured with ten heavy locks.

Five physically able middle-aged men guarded the entrance, armed with firearms and blades, ready for action.

Gu Jianlin's instincts told him that what lay inside must be extremely important to the inhabitants.

Everything here required vigilant protection.

Reaching the storage facility, Gu Jianlin put down his burlap sacks.

The five guards scrutinized him the whole time, their intense gazes sending chills down his spine.

"Brother Lin..."

Cheng Youyu stammered, "Something feels off."

Gu Jianlin shook his head: "We're fine."

In the dim lamplight, a communal sleeping area came into view—large bunks occupied by numerous sleeping figures, their snores filling the air.

Looking closer, some were missing eyes or ears.

Most were visibly disabled.

Daily essentials were haphazardly stored in basins under the bunks.

This appeared to be the designated resting area. There was no extra furniture, only a few worn dining tables and plastic stools.

A burly elderly man sat on a chair, clad in a tattered leather jacket, with a rough-hewn, imposing blade at his feet.

In one hand, he held a mirror that reflected the swirling black mist—the same mist that shrouded ghost shadows.

"Dad, I'm back!"

Wanwan chirped brightly, "I've brought these people; let's try to help them."

The old man raised his hand, signaling her to hold back her words.

He lifted his gaze and studied the two young men before him, as well as the burlap sacks they carried.

"Hello."

Gu Jianlin tentatively greeted.

He noticed the old man's gaze—a mix of distant recognition and wistful sentiment directed at him.

"Hello," the old man calmly replied. "Let me ask—who told you about this place?"

Gu Jianlin hesitated.

"I was observing you earlier; you were the only one who headed East at first." The old man's voice was sharp. "Now tell me—who gave you that direction?"

After a moment's pause, Gu Jianlin answered truthfully: "Lu Zicheng."

Understanding dawned upon the old man, his expression softening: "Him? I see. That boy has some decency left—sending you here for shelter and warning us it's time to leave."

His words roused reactions—a stir among those asleep on the bunks.

The guards at the Taboo Items Storage sharpened their alertness.

The woman managing food reserves wore sorrow on her face.

Uncle Sun broke into laughter.

"Two years—it's been long enough, hasn't it? Haha, more deaths incoming..."

The old man laughed with a chaotic blend of fatigue and madness.

Yet predominantly it carried bitterness and resignation.

Ignoring the others, the old man remarked, "Welcome to our refuge. As you see, most of us here are Fallen—shadowed beings unfit for the light. But fear not—we take Heavenly Born Grass extracted from the Immortal Palace's periphery. It suppresses our deformations effectively."

"Even though it shortens lifespan, it prevents us from harming you."

He paused before continuing: "You are all clean, albeit spiritually poisoned in some cases. Rest here tonight—after the black mist disperses, our field team will return with antidotes."

Gu Jianlin said nothing, though he had already confirmed their identities through Life Perception.

Almost all of them were Fallen.

The only clean individual was the little girl.

The Joker once told him:

All Fallens must bear the curse of disgrace for life—they can never step into sunlight.

They've been banished from the world, confined to the Forbidden Zone of Black Cloud City.

Yet, for reasons unknown, they didn't reside in the main city but huddled underground.

Drawing comfort from each other's proximity.

Gu Jianlin, passing through this somber space, witnessed countless traces of life.

Peeling walls, worn-out furniture, outdated supplies.

People scarred deeply by disability.

Each scene told its own story.

"You're Wanwan's father? Mind if I call you Uncle?"

Gu Jianlin composedly asked: "Aren't you curious about where we come from?"

Cheng Youyu's silent unease was understandable, seeing the Fallen among them.

"What's there to ask? You're from the association, aren't you?"

The old man said offhandedly.

Gu Jianlin nodded lightly in confirmation.

Cheng Youyu shivered at how quickly their identity was exposed, visibly panic-stricken.

They were near destitution and carrying two injured companions.

If these people turned hostile, they'd scarcely stand a chance.

"Everyone here belonged to the association once, only to be discarded."

The old man chuckled: "You're different: clean and uncorrupted. If you leave quietly, forgetting our existence, your future prospects remain unhindered."