

Ice Age 781

Chapter 781: Sea Monster [Bonus 1]

After surveying the area, Zhang Yi turned to Chen Jingguan and said, "We must strengthen our coastal defenses! Land-based enemies are basically non-existent now, so we need to guard against threats from the sea."

Chen Jingguan scratched his head. "But our armed forces were nearly depleted last time. And we're short on personnel too."

Zhang Yi replied calmly, "Don't worry about that. I've already requested a batch of weapons from Blizzard City."

He led Chen Jingguan back to the shelter and directly deposited a large quantity of weapons in the armory—over twenty massive coastal defense cannons, ample ammunition, and numerous other heavy firearms. With these weapons, they could intercept any hostile ships within 30 kilometers of the coastline.

Chen Jingguan was overjoyed at the sight of the arsenal and immediately promised to arrange their deployment and train his soldiers in operating them.

Later, Zhang Yi also acquired the icebreaker ship he wanted. Chen Jingguan assigned him several experienced sailors, and Zhang Yi set off from Tianhai City with the women from his household for some leisure time along the coastal waters.

Zhang Yi remained cautious, avoiding deep waters. The ship sailed along the edges of the coastal ice, allowing everyone to enjoy the sea view and try their hand at fishing. Though they didn't venture far, this outing still felt like an adventure compared to their usual routine, bringing smiles to everyone's faces.

Zhang Yi had all the fishing gear stored in his spatial inventory. Bundled in cold-resistant clothing, they braved the biting wind on the deck, using frozen fish chunks as bait to lure larger catches.

Each person held a fishing rod, initially full of enthusiasm. But after an hour, not a single fish had bitten—not even a nibble.

"What's going on? Did all the fish in these waters freeze to death?" Zhang Yi wondered aloud, stroking his chin.

Liang Yue stared at her hands in frustration, muttering, "These hands have wielded hundred-pound blades and shattered solid stone slabs. How can they fail to catch even a single fish?"

The veteran sailor aboard, Tian Shouyi—fondly called Old Tian—was a burly, bearded man in his forties. Chuckling heartily, he came over to explain.

"Mr. Zhang, the surface water is too cold—the fish have all gone deeper."

Leaning on the railing, Zhang Yi asked with a smile, "So to catch big fish, we'd have to go to the deep sea?"

Old Tian nodded. "Fishing here is tricky. We usually use trawl nets. But I wouldn't recommend going to the deep sea."

Zhang Yi smirked. "Don't worry. Right now, I'm more interested in enjoying the scenery." He glanced beside him, where Zhou Ke'er, Yang Xinxin, and the others clutched their fishing rods, eyes fixed on the ice-dotted water despite their reddened cheeks from the cold wind. The peaceful atmosphere was enough to satisfy Zhang Yi.

Old Tian nodded, relieved. But he couldn't help murmuring, "Though fishing near shore is tough, it's still strange that not a single fish has bitten after all this time..."

Unbeknownst to them, as their ship floated quietly on the water, a massive shadow slowly rose from the depths.

Liang Yue was the first to notice something amiss. "Huh? Why is the water turning dark?" She peered down and immediately stiffened, her pupils contracting. "There's something in the water!!"

Her sharp warning instantly drew Zhang Yi and Old Tian's attention. Zhang Yi turned and saw the enormous dark shape beneath the surface—so massive that even he was stunned.

The Leisure measured 62 meters in length, yet the shadow hadn't fully surfaced and was already nearly half the ship's size!

Old Tian yelled in alarm, "Dammit, it's a mutated sea beast!"

The women screamed and instinctively did the same thing—huddling close to Zhang Yi for protection. Only Liang Yue remained composed. Though shocked, her first instinct wasn't panic but finding a solution.

Old Tian and the crew scrambled to prepare. Against such a colossal creature, all they could do was brace themselves to avoid being thrown overboard—and pray.

"Everyone, get inside the cabin and strap yourselves in! Now, hurry!"

But Zhang Yi ignored Old Tian's warning. His right hand rested on the railing.

"First, use [Skywalk] to levitate the entire icebreaker."

A faint white glow enveloped the ship. Though it remained above the water, an unseen force now lifted it.

"Whoosh—"

The entire vessel lifted from the sea's surface, hovering in place.

"Next—Absolute Barrier Between Two Realms!"

A brilliant light flashed in Zhang Yi's right eye as a massive spherical space instantly encased the ship. The vessel stabilized as if anchored on solid ground.

Old Tian gaped in disbelief. Looking outside, he realized the ship was now floating midair! The turbulent waves below couldn't affect it at all.

"A miracle... This is a miracle!" Old Tian and the crew stared dumbfounded at their leader. Though they'd heard of Zhang Yi's power and knew abilities could defy logic, this was beyond comprehension.

Zhang Yi leaped onto the railing, gazing down at the dark waters. Suddenly, a massive ice-blue eye locked onto him from below. Then three, five, ten—countless eerie eyes emerged across the creature's body.

"So this is a mutated sea beast?"

A sudden urge gripped Zhang Yi. He wanted to capture this creature—to study it.

"Moooo—"

A deep bellow erupted from the depths, resonating like a village ox's call but magnified a thousandfold.

Zhang Yi drew Holy Judgment with his right hand, dark matter swirling around the blade like black flames.

At that moment, the sea beast burst from the water, sending towering waves crashing upward! Had Zhang Yi not shielded the ship, the impact would have smashed a gaping hole in its hull.

"Void Slash!"

Zhang Yi swung downward. Dark matter surged from the blade like an ink stroke across the horizon. His mastery over void energy had grown—he could now concentrate immense power into precise strikes.

The sea monster charged toward the ship, unaware it would never reach its target. Instead, its body split cleanly down the middle, as effortlessly as a hot knife through butter.

Blood rained down, dyeing the sea crimson.

"BOOM!!!!"

The bisected carcass crashed into the water, sending up another wave of blood-stained foam.

Chapter 782: Peaceful Days [Bonus 2]

The massive corpse of a sea beast floated on the ocean's surface, its blood staining a vast expanse of the sea red. Before long, sharks smelling the blood began swimming over from afar, their black dorsal fins cutting through the water. Only then did Zhang Yi lower the boat down.

"Splash!"

Water sprayed in all directions.

The crew members were utterly awestruck by Zhang Yi's abilities, exclaiming "miracle" repeatedly. Yang Xinxin clung to Zhang Yi's arm, gazing up at him adoringly. "Brother, you're amazing!"

Though startled, the others weren't overly panicked, having complete faith in Zhang Yi's strength. When everyone gathered at the bow to examine the sea monster, they saw it was a mutated whale. Its head was now covered with densely packed eyes, its body riddled with tumor-like protrusions, and its size far exceeded even the largest blue whale. Its original species was unrecognizable.

Below, a feeding frenzy had already begun as carnivorous fish fought viciously over its corpse, churning the bloody waters.

"It looks big, but doesn't seem that scary!" Yang Siya said with a laugh, pressing a hand to her ample chest.

"No, this thing is extremely dangerous," Zhang Yi corrected her. "If not for me, this creature could capsize a several-thousand-ton steel warship. Its underwater strength is terrifying - by superhuman standards, its destructive power reaches Delta-level."

Liang Yue's eyes lit up as she suddenly picked up a fishing rod and cast it into the water. "Now I refuse to believe I can't catch anything!" The others immediately caught on - the slain sea monster would undoubtedly attract schools of fish, so they all hurried to start fishing too.

Zhang Yi, however, noticed Old Tian leaning against the railing, frowning in thought. He walked over, hands in pockets. "What's wrong? Something bothering you?"

Old Tian quickly responded, "Mr. Zhang, I just find this situation rather strange."

"Strange how? Explain."

Gesturing at the sea monster's corpse below, Old Tian said seriously, "Normally, creatures of this size inhabit deep ocean regions and rarely approach coastal waters. There simply isn't enough food for them here. That's why encountering it here is so unusual."

Not particularly knowledgeable about ocean life, Zhang Yi asked curiously, "What could cause this then?"

Old Tian explained methodically: "Sometimes extreme weather, undersea volcanic eruptions or earthquakes can drive deep-sea creatures to shallower waters for refuge. Alternatively... they might be fleeing predators."

A cautious gleam flashed in Zhang Yi's eyes. "Predators?" Even this massive sea monster had natural enemies? His gaze involuntarily turned toward the deep ocean. The sea was vast and unfathomable - even pre-apocalypse, it held countless terrifying unknown creatures, let alone after the Great Mutation.

"Best not to linger here," Zhang Yi concluded. He'd originally considered harvesting the sea monster for fresh meat, but its grotesque appearance turned his stomach. Better to let it nourish the ocean while serving as chum for their fishing.

True enough, the massive bait made fishing remarkably productive. Though Zhang Yi warned them not to eat the catch - either release the fish or keep them as pets.

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In the following days, life became quite leisurely for Zhang Yi's group. Though the Celestial Hound Squad remained officially active, Zhang Yi only responded to orders selectively. Zhu Zheng, eager to maintain their alliance, avoided assigning him missions.

Old You and Fatty Xu returned from their visit to the Deng Group noticeably changed. Old You's strength had increased dramatically, and both had undergone professional combat training that significantly improved their skills.

The most dramatic transformation was Fatty Xu's. He'd become shockingly thin, almost emaciated - reportedly from enduring brutal military-style training. Though Zhang Yi knew the real reason. Afterwards, Fatty Xu couldn't stop talking about Blizzard City, constantly begging Zhang Yi to let him return. Zhang Yi, being a good brother, mentioned it to Deng Shentong and secured Fatty Xu a small residence in Blizzard City - even a long-term bus pass for regular stress-relief visits.

While both men paid a steep price, their gains were substantial. However, as proven, temporary weight loss from exercise rebounds easily. Back at the shelter, Fatty Xu wept while binge-eating, regaining all the weight plus extra within two weeks.

As for Zhang Yi? He spent peaceful days playing cards with Zhou Ke'er, Yang Siya and Yang Xinxin, or games like Wild Ball Fist. But he also dedicated two daily hours to martial arts training with Liang Yue.

His close combat skills remained a weakness. As his power grew, Zhang Yi realized high-level superhumans developed all-round capabilities. The barrel effect meant one's lowest skill determined overall strength - any critical deficiency could prove fatal in battle. Fortunately, years of warehouse work and regular exercise gave Zhang Yi decent physical foundations, allowing him to keep up with Liang Yue's training over time.

Martial arts required patient accumulation though - no instant mastery. Impatient at times, Zhang Yi once asked, "Any shortcuts?"

Liang Yue rolled her eyes. "Yes - it's called the Sunflower Manual."

Zhang Yi chuckled. "I'd prefer the Taoist method of yin-yang harmony." Naturally, this earned him a punch from Liang Yue.

"I was just suggesting," Zhang Yi quickly explained. "Effectiveness doesn't matter - I just want to experience the process."

Thus Zhang Yi gradually improved his close combat skills. Liang Yue designed a special training regimen for him. For quick results, she focused on defensive tactics - Holy Judgment's broadsword form excelled at blocking. If he could withstand initial assaults, his spatial traversal ability could create distance, letting him utilize Thunderbolt, White Owl or Void Slash optimally.

Two months slipped by unnoticed, bringing them to July - the year's hottest season, though the planet's aphelion position meant Tianhai City temperatures plunged to -30°C!

Now let's shift our gaze thousands of nautical miles away, to the South Seas where a volcanic island called Rockflow Island rises. Rich in geothermal energy, this former tourist hotspot now shelters refugees from surrounding nations after the apocalypse.

Chapter 784: New Mission

Zhu Yunque's simple action made Zhang Yi realize one fact.

He and the woman before him existed on different social strata—at least before the apocalypse.

But in these times, those who still clung to past formalities were either exceedingly powerful or hopelessly naive.

Zhang Yi ignored Zhu Yunque's words, merely glancing at his Rolex. "It's almost noon. Let's go—I still need to have lunch after meeting Commander Zhu."

With that, he stepped past Zhu Yunque and headed outside.

Zhu Yunque froze momentarily.

She hadn't expected Zhang Yi to so blatantly disregard her face—she'd offered polite criticism, yet he'd completely ignored her?

"You... wait! The commander instructed me to escort you," Zhu Yunque said with visible displeasure.

Zhang Yi didn't even turn his head. "I know the way."

Zhu Yunque clenched her fists inside her pockets, biting her lip as she glared at Zhang Yi's retreating back.

If looks could kill, the fabric of his jacket would have been shredded by her razor-sharp glare.

Remembering Zhu Zheng's warnings, she composed herself and hurried after him.

"That won't do—I'm under orders. If I don't bring you back properly, my salary gets docked!"

Zhang Yi merely glanced at her before continuing in silence.

He'd encountered young ladies from prominent families before—back during his corporate days, he'd dealt with several privileged individuals.

While not exactly arrogant, they all carried an innate sense of superiority.

No matter how polished their manners, that condescension inevitably leaked through.

Zhu Yunque had taken offense at him not removing his gloves for their handshake.

However proper her demeanor, the unspoken message was clear—she considered herself above Zhang Yi.

Yet no sane person would fuss over glove etiquette during an apocalyptic freeze.

Noticing Zhang Yi's displeasure, Zhu Yunque forced a smile. "What, are you really upset over something so trivial?"

Her eyebrows danced with mock surprise.

"The commander said you were extraordinary. Surely you're not this petty?"

Zhang Yi replied in a tone dripping with disinterest: "Motion sickness. Don't feel like talking."

They reached the parking area where Zhu Yunque's vehicle waited.

She didn't believe his excuse, recognizing it as blatant dismissal, and couldn't suppress her irritation.

Internally, she was already criticizing Zhang Yi—he violated basic etiquette, she offered gentle correction, yet he was the one acting offended?

Then, considering both their backgrounds alongside what she knew of Zhang Yi, she suddenly understood.

Just a warehouse keeper after all—not even middle-class, let alone high society. Can't expect too much.

Recalling Zhu Zheng's advice, she bit her lip and opened the passenger door herself.

"My mistake, alright? I should've been more understanding. Get in."

Zhang Yi eyed the open door, then wordlessly moved to the rear seats instead.

"Need rest. Wake me when we arrive."

He immediately closed his eyes, leaving Zhu Yunque's smile frozen in place.

Had word gotten out that the esteemed Zhu heiress had her car door refused, the entire Jiangnan Region's elite would know by sundown.

"Fine! Sleep all you want!"

She slammed the door petulantly and took the wheel.

The entire drive became an exercise in childish retaliation—swerving unpredictably, sudden brakes every few minutes.

Zhang Yi found the antics more amusing than annoying, refusing to indulge her tantrum.

Thirty minutes later, they arrived at the new command center.

"Hey! We're here!" Zhu Yunque snapped at the "sleeping" Zhang Yi via rearview mirror.

Zhang Yi opened his eyes.

"Oh. Arrived."

He promptly exited and strode inside, sending Zhu Yunque into silent rage.

She'd gone out of her way to fetch him, and he treated her like air?

"What an infuriating man!" she fumed.

At the command center entrance, guards immediately saluted Zhang Yi, eyes shining with admiration.

With a nod, he entered the building while Zhu Yunque had her car parked before hurrying to catch up.

The elevator ride passed in frosty silence—Zhang Yi couldn't be bothered with troublesome women, regardless of beauty.

Zhu Yunque stood pointedly apart, radiating displeasure.

Ding!

The sixth-floor doors opened directly into Zhu Zheng's expansive office.

The commander was reviewing documents when their arrival sparked immediate enthusiasm.

"Zhang Yi! Come, sit!"

Removing his glasses, Zhu Zheng ordered Lan Xincheng to prepare Zhang Yi's usual Blue Mountain coffee before warmly guiding him to the sofa.

His eagerness suggested he'd found a long-lost son rather than a subordinate.

Zhu Yunque, witnessing such rare warmth from Zhu Zheng, thought privately: *What's this? People might think he's your secret lovechild!*

She reluctantly took a seat nearby.

"Commander Zhu, what's this about? Just tell me directly so I can stop wondering."

Zhu Zheng sighed dramatically, slapping his thigh.

"Ah! We've hit quite the predicament!"

At these words, Zhang Yi immediately stood to leave.

"Just remembered my laundry—"

"Wait wait wait! Hear me out first!" Zhu Zheng hastily pulled him back.

Zhang Yi eyed him suspiciously. "Commander, I've contributed significantly to Blizzard City. You can't keep shearing the same sheep."

Zhu Zheng rubbed his hands. "It's not targeting you—but you're uniquely qualified for this mission."

Zhang Yi sipped his coffee, signaling him to continue.

Zhu Zheng explained the situation:

Some 3,700 kilometers from Tianhai City lay Rockflow Island, where overseas Huaxu Kingdom citizens had been stranded for over half a year.

Now facing food shortages and marauding gangs, they'd sent distress signals to the Jiangnan Region.

"We can't abandon them—they must be evacuated," Zhu Zheng declared solemnly.

"Incidentally, Tianhai City needs population—perfect for resettling them there."

Chapter 785: Divine Source

Zhang Yi immediately raised his doubts upon hearing this.

"Over 3,700 kilometers? You're sending people to rescue them from that distance?"

His face was full of amusement. "This sounds too unbelievable to me!"

After the Ice Age descended, the global population had drastically decreased.

Within the Huaxu Kingdom alone, over 90% of people had died.

The current population was probably only around 100 million.

That Zhu Zheng was concerned about overseas citizens over 3,000 kilometers away naturally made Zhang Yi suspicious.

Zhu Zheng lowered his voice and said to him, "There's a big secret involved here."

Zhang Yi immediately listened attentively, while Zhu Yunque nearby also pricked up her ears, afraid to miss a single word.

But Zhu Zheng glanced at her and said, "Yunque, step outside for now. I'll call you back later."

Zhu Yunque looked disappointed but obediently left the office.

After she left, Zhu Zheng told Zhang Yi, "The person who contacted us hinted they might have discovered something extraordinary. That thing is of great significance to us—no, to all major powers worldwide!"

"If we can obtain it, it could elevate the Jiangnan Region's strength by an entire level. It would be tremendously beneficial for the entire Huaxu Kingdom!"

Zhang Yi looked at Zhu Zheng in surprise, finding it hard to believe.

"That exaggerated? What exactly is this thing?"

Zhu Zheng stared at him and said, "Possibly... the [Divine Source]."

"What's that?" Zhang Yi asked.

Zhu Zheng began explaining the story of the Divine Source.

Back then, Shengjing had obtained a portion of Divine Source in the Qinling Mountains, which allowed them to produce Huaxu Kingdom's first Epsilon-level superhuman.

"It's a miraculous substance. No one knows when or how it appeared."

"The Shengjing Region has kept its existence tightly under wraps. We've only obtained fragments of intelligence—it can evolve human genes to reach new levels."

Zhu Zheng leaned back on the sofa, his gaze somewhat nostalgic.

"I've seen photos of it, very similar to what the Rockflow Island citizens sent. And the descriptions match remarkably well."

Zhang Yi lowered his head in thought, finding it all sounded like mythology.

Seeing Zhang Yi remain silent, Zhu Zheng asked, "You don't believe me?"

Zhang Yi looked up and answered frankly, "It sounds like a fairy tale."

Zhu Zheng chuckled.

"There are too many things in this world beyond our understanding."

"Did you know most great scientists turned to theology in their later years? This shows human knowledge is insignificant compared to the vast universe." $\mathbb{R} \dot{A} N \Theta \beta \xi S$

He composed himself and said seriously, "Perhaps there really is a Creator in this world!"

As if worried about sounding superstitious, he quickly clarified, "Of course, I don't mean anthropomorphic deities from feudal superstitions. This is part of science!"

Zhang Yi crossed his arms, half-convinced by Zhu Zheng's words.

But if there truly existed a substance that could evolve superhumans, he was indeed interested.

"Divine Source... sounds intriguing," Zhang Yi remarked casually.

Zhu Zheng's smile deepened.

"This is a rare opportunity we absolutely cannot miss."

"First we need to verify whether what those citizens possess is genuine."

"If the intelligence is confirmed and we truly find the Divine Source—Zhang Yi, you'll undoubtedly become our top candidate for cultivation!"

Though aware Zhu Zheng was painting rosy prospects, Zhang Yi had to admit he was tempted.

Moreover, if it was just an evacuation mission, the risks seemed manageable.

"But is this level of task really necessary for me?" Zhang Yi asked.

After all, he was now at least captain-level—strictly speaking, beyond captain-level.

According to Baili Changqing, with his superhuman ability index at 9,600 points, Zhang Yi was theoretically the strongest in the entire Jiangnan Region.

Though in actual combat, many unpredictable factors existed.

Zhu Zheng interlaced his fingers and said seriously, "It's a long ocean voyage. No one can predict what dangers lurk in the deep sea."

"If we dispatch warships and too many experts, it would attract attention from other nations and regions. Exposing news about the Divine Source would be problematic."

"As you know, our current naval projection mainly covers areas near Huaxu Kingdom's coastline."

Zhang Yi said meaningfully, "And if we truly mobilize naval forces, we'd have to coordinate with the East Sea Region. Meaning... sharing some benefits."

Zhu Zheng grinned. "You catch on quick."

Zhang Yi nibbled his finger, weighing the mission's risks versus rewards.

If it was purely an evacuation mission, that meant no direct confrontation with powerful enemies. Most risks would come from mutated creatures in the deep sea.

While dangerous, this wasn't insurmountable.

Chaoyu Harbor had plenty of experienced sailors—bringing them along could mitigate most risks.

The potential reward? Possibly obtaining the so-called [Divine Source] to advance his power further.

Currently, simply absorbing other superhumans' essence could barely improve Zhang Yi anymore.

But he could clearly feel he wasn't far from the Epsilon level.

He could either progress steadily—perhaps reaching Epsilon in three to five years.

Or accept Zhu Zheng's mission for a shot at faster advancement.

He looked at Zhu Zheng again. "Is it really just an evacuation mission?"

"Don't think it's simple," Zhu Zheng said seriously.

"A 3,700-kilometer voyage with increased energy consumption due to extreme weather, no resupply points along the way—just this alone would be suicidal for anyone else."

"Only someone with spatial abilities like yours, capable of storing massive supplies, could pull this off!"

Zhang Yi understood—this was likely the main reason Zhu Zheng wanted him for this South Seas mission.

After Zhu Zheng's persuasion and his own cost-benefit analysis, Zhang Yi decided to accept.

After all, if he refused, others would take the mission.

If someone else seized this chance to reach Epsilon level, that would be bad news for him.

Damn it!

Even in the apocalypse, the rat race continues.

Zhu Zheng outlined the mission conditions:

First, the Region wouldn't send many powerful superhumans. As an Outer City superhuman, Zhang Yi's identity was easier to conceal—an advantage.

Second, no warships to avoid attracting attention.

Considering these, Zhang Yi told Zhu Zheng directly they didn't need to provide personnel or vessels—Tianhai City could prepare their own.

But the Region must supply sufficient fuel and weaponry.

Chapter 786: The Tagalong

Zhu Zheng agreed to Zhang Yi's request.

"We will provide all the resources you need. Additionally, I'll assign you an excellent assistant to help with this mission."

A meaningful smile appeared on his face, like a cunning old fox.

Zhang Yi had a bad premonition.

But he couldn't refuse since Blizzard City would definitely send someone to monitor this operation.

Zhu Zheng needed to keep everything under his control.

Suddenly realizing something, Zhang Yi asked, "It's not that young lady from earlier, is it?"

He emphasized the word "young lady" slightly.

Zhu Zheng coughed lightly, "Ahem, generally it's better to address her as 'madam.' 'Young lady' can be... ambiguous."

Zhang Yi widened his eyes, "So it really is her?"

This was troublesome. Zhang Yi didn't particularly like her personality.

The thought of bringing her along on a long sea voyage was quite unappealing.

Zhu Zheng said with a smile, "She's my niece. You've met her—what do you think?"

Zhang Yi: "..."

You've already said she's your niece—what else can I say?

What exactly do you want me to say?

"Madam Zhu Yunque appears to be well-educated, reasonable, and highly capable."

Zhu Zheng laughed contentedly, "Hahaha, it seems you two hit it off well. That puts my mind at ease!"

Since Zhu Yunque was indeed Zhu Zheng's biological niece, Zhang Yi couldn't refuse this arrangement.

He requested authorization to collect supplies and temporarily left Zhu Zheng's office.

Outside, he saw Zhu Yunque leaning against the wall with a pensive expression, her furrowed brows indicating displeasure.

Noticing Zhang Yi's approach, she raised an eyebrow in his direction.

Zhang Yi pursed his lips, gave her a slight nod as greeting, then left the command center.

Zhu Yunque watched Zhang Yi's retreating figure with stubborn resentment before turning to enter the office.

"Uncle, why do you want me to get close to that man?"

"I don't like him—he doesn't seem gentlemanly at all. I prefer Deng Shentong much more."

She sat on the sofa with crossed legs and arms, visibly upset.

Zhu Zheng sipped his coffee calmly, "Currently, Zhang Yi is more valuable to me than Deng Shentong."

"I've specifically arranged for you two to spend several months together at sea."

"Use this time to win him over. Then we can naturally arrange your marriage."

A faint smile appeared on Zhu Zheng's lips.

With Zhang Yi as his nephew-in-law, their relationship would be solidified.

Zhu Yunque looked uncomfortable, "You want me to seduce him?"

As the princess of the Zhu family, she had lived a privileged life under her uncle's protection.

She was always the one being pursued, never the pursuer.

When had she ever needed to chase after someone?

She wasn't some vocational school graduate who'd fawn over a man for his rap skills.

"Women pursuing men is easy as lifting a veil. I believe you can succeed if you try."

Zhu Zheng gave her a meaningful look.

"With this much time, others might already be pregnant."

"You're not Linghu Feixue from the Rose Squad. If you won't endure life's hardships, you must pay another price to maintain your privileged life."

Zhu Yunque frowned slightly, displeased.

She disliked being a marriage pawn, but in her family, some choices weren't hers to make.

Freedom wasn't easily obtained, especially after decades of luxury.

Zhu Zheng continued calmly, "This trip will also serve as training for you."

"You've never experienced the apocalypse's cruelty—that's detrimental to your future work and development. It's good for you to see the outside world."

Zhu Yunque was Zhu Zheng's beloved niece.

Smart, beautiful, she had earned an MIT Sloan bachelor's degree young through family resources.

She would become a valuable asset under Zhu Zheng.

But first, she needed to witness the apocalypse's brutality to mature quickly.

This low-risk mission with Zhang Yi as her protector killed two birds with one stone—cultivating their relationship while ensuring her safety.

Zhu Yunque smoothed her hair dismissively, "Uncle, I know how cruel the apocalypse is."

"No, you don't!"

Zhu Zheng refuted bluntly, "You've lived too comfortably, retaining naive ideas. Everyone around you treats you kindly—you've never suffered like ordinary people in the apocalypse. You only know it verbally, not physically."

"You must go on this mission!"

"If you fail, you'll work as a Blizzard City clerk handling documents and calls. The Zhu family doesn't support idlers!"

Zhu Yunque felt desolate—her doting uncle now saw her as a political tool.

She nearly cried, forgetting that without Zhu Zheng, she might not have survived the apocalypse.

"Fine, I'll marry him!" she said, sniffing as if making a huge sacrifice.

"Don't worry, I'll complete this task successfully."

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Zhang Yi collected necessary supplies at the quartermaster's.

Including shipboard weapons and fuel.

Though Tianhai City didn't lack fuel, Zhang Yi never refused free resources—these were his rightful rewards.

Zhu Yunque approached Zhang Yi. Despite her reservations, she forced a smile remembering Zhu Zheng's orders.

"Zhang Yi—"

"Use my codename during work," Zhang Yi said coldly.

Zhu Yunque stiffened, "Must you be so serious?"

"Habits are dangerous things," Zhang Yi glanced at her.

"This voyage requires absolute anonymity. No one can know I'm Zhang Yi. You can't even use my codename—call me Mr. Zhang, and I'll call you Miss Zhu."

Remembering Zhu Zheng's interpretation of "miss," Zhang Yi smirked.

Zhu Yunque smoothed her long hair, exposing her fair neck.

"Fine, whatever you say!"

As Zhang Yi checked supplies with the quartermaster, she leaned in, "Anything else I should know? Let's discuss it properly sometime, okay?"

After confirming the inventory, Zhang Yi said flatly, "I'll email you later."

His coldness angered Zhu Yunque.

"Hey! Just because I said your handshake was impolite doesn't mean you have to be so cold!"

"We're mission partners! Must you act this way? Will you stay this distant for months?"

Zhang Yi glanced at her amusedly, "You know we're just mission partners, so let's stick to our roles. No need to pretend closeness."

Different circles shouldn't force integration.

Zhang Yi's current status even commanded Zhu Zheng's respect—why should he cater to some Zhu family princess?

Remembering her initial attitude, Zhu Yunque felt regret.

She should have been nicer earlier.

Zhang Yi said, "We'll depart from Tianhai City's harbor. I'm not bringing Blizzard City crew—just Tianhai sailors."

Zhu Yunque nodded, "Then I'll go with you!"

Chapter 787: The Dread of Comparison

Zhu Yunque served as Zhu Zheng's eyes and ears.

At least that's how Zhang Yi saw it.

Therefore, while he didn't refuse to bring her along, he made no special effort to please her either.

After all, their mission was simply to evacuate overseas citizens, requiring minimal interaction between them.

Zhang Yi left Blizzard City with Zhu Yunque, boarding a special train back to Tianhai City.

Zhu Yunque lugged an oversized suitcase packed with her personal belongings.

Zhang Yi showed no intention of storing her luggage in his Dimensional Space. He simply closed his eyes and rested silently during the journey.

A true Sigma male never falls into a woman's trap.

Upon arriving in Tianhai City, Zhang Yi retrieved a snow vehicle from his Dimensional Space. "Let's go," he said to Zhu Yunque. "We're heading to my place first."

Zhu Yunque's heart skipped a beat. "Your place?"

She scrutinized Zhang Yi suspiciously. "What exactly are you planning, taking a girl like me to your home?"

Zhang Yi was utterly speechless.

"Are you coming or not?"

"I... I'll go."

Zhu Yunque felt uneasy, secretly wondering if Zhang Yi had discerned Zhu Zheng's intentions and planned to take advantage of the situation.

Though that was her objective too, she expected things to progress more gradually.

There should have been some buildup first.

Like Zhang Yi becoming captivated by her, falling hopelessly in love, before naturally progressing to intimacy.

Yet here Zhang Yi was, clearly in control.

With these nervous thoughts, she entered Zhang Yi's vehicle.

"Get out. Sit in the back."

Seeing her in the passenger seat, Zhang Yi bluntly ordered her out.

Zhu Yunque gritted her teeth. "Must you be like this?"

"The front seat is reserved for my woman," Zhang Yi declared firmly.

He sensed Zhu Yunque's arrogance and knew he needed to deflate it before their mission began.

Otherwise, she'd undoubtedly become a liability.

Zhu Yunque quickly grasped the implication. "You have a girlfriend?"

"Obviously," Zhang Yi replied coolly. "Do you really think someone as handsome and capable as me would be single?"

Zhu Yunque's eyes widened. Her uncle actually wanted her to pursue a taken man?

Considering her uncle's ruthlessly pragmatic ways, she reluctantly accepted reality.

I can still steal him away, she thought confidently.

Zhu Yunque prided herself on being a sexy, educated, and wealthy socialite.

She had every reason to be self-assured.

Nevertheless, she obediently moved to the backseat.

As they traveled across the snow-covered landscape, she gradually calmed down.

She began reflecting on whether her approach had been wrong.

Being with Zhang Yi was merely an assignment from her uncle.

To Zhu Yunque, Zhang Yi was a flawed but dependable man when considering his overall qualities.

Marrying him would guarantee a privileged life as the admired wife of an investigation team leader.

A pragmatic opportunist, she was willing to use her charms if necessary.

She'd already decided that while Zhang Yi currently exhibited petty bourgeois habits beneath her aristocratic standards,

she could reshape him after marriage to her liking.

During the thirty-minute ride, Zhu Yunque meticulously planned their future together.

Zhang Yi drove up to the shelter's entrance.

Surveying the massive luxury villa, Zhu Yunque nodded approvingly.

"Quite spacious. Maintaining this place in such condition during this snowpocalypse must have required considerable effort!"

She critically examined the shelter before adding,

"Though I still prefer Blizzard City. This place feels too isolated."

Zhang Yi shot her a glance. "No one's making you stay."

Zhu Yunque frowned. "I was just commenting on your house. Must you be so sarcastic?"

Ignoring her, Zhang Yi proceeded to open the shelter's door.

After iris scanning, the massive alloy doors slowly parted.

Inside, the luxurious and cozy interior finally elicited genuine admiration from Zhu Yunque.

She'd assumed everywhere outside Blizzard City was desolate and decrepit,

with any surviving humans living in squalor.

But the shelter's opulence left her utterly stunned!

Warmth and extravagance surrounded her. Her discerning eye recognized top-tier furnishings everywhere.

Even the floor carpets were handmade imports from Rome - a few square meters costing thousands of Columbus dollars!

That converted to 200,000 Hua coins!

Not just the carpets - sofas, ceilings, cabinets, chairs... all bore the most exclusive brand labels.

Post-apocalypse, this surpassed not only her Blizzard City villa but even Zhu Zheng's living standards.

"Where did you get all this?" Zhu Yunque asked, struggling to maintain composure.

"When cities froze over, even Blizzard City could only transport essentials. Luxury became irrelevant."

"Yet you've amassed so many high-end items here?"

Zhang Yi shrugged. "After the collapse, these were just lying around in abandoned malls. Easy pickings."

Much of the shelter's furnishings had indeed been scavenged by him.

His casual explanation belied the near-impossible effort required -

not everyone could excavate supplies from dozens of meters beneath snow and transport them safely.

"Oh? We have a guest!"

Just as Zhu Yunque stood amazed, a melodious voice interrupted.

Turning, she found herself unable to look away.

Before her stood a tall, beautiful woman in a blue dress.

Her flawless makeup highlighted porcelain skin, while the form-fitting dress accentuated her perfect proportions -

a truly golden figure, toned without being overly thin.

Instinctively, Zhu Yunque touched her own arm.

Suddenly she felt uncomfortable in her own skin.

Though herself elegant and attractive, standing beside this woman evoked intense inadequacy.

Zhou Ke'er smiled warmly while assessing Zhu Yunque.

After a glance, her expression relaxed noticeably.

Chapter 788: Zhu Yunque's Discomfort

Zhang Yi said to Zhou Ke'er, "This is Zhu Yunque, assigned by headquarters to accompany me on this mission. Please make her feel welcome!"

A peculiar glint flashed in Zhou Ke'er's eyes.

"Another mission? Where to? Is it far?"

Zhang Yi removed his heavy coat as he replied, "Classified. This is a confidential operation—I can't bring too many people along."

Zhou Ke'er politely greeted Zhu Yunque.

"Would you like something to drink? Coffee or tea?"

Zhu Yunque bit her lip. "Just plain water, thank you."

As Zhou Ke'er went to fetch the water, she continued chatting with Zhang Yi.

"Do you need help preparing anything? If it's a long journey, you should take me along. Having a doctor around is always useful."

Zhang Yi sprawled on the sofa, deep in thought.

"No rush. I still have other matters to handle first."

While they were talking, Yang Siya and Zhou Haimei emerged upon hearing the commotion.

Zhu Yunque gasped in recognition. "Aren't you Yang Siya and Zhou Haimei?"

The two had been A-list celebrities before the apocalypse, so of course she knew them.

After learning Zhu Yunque's identity, they exchanged polite greetings with her.

An odd feeling began stirring within Zhu Yunque regarding Zhang Yi.

Through subtle probing, she discovered both Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er were closely associated with him.

This displeased her.

In her world, capable men always had women flocking around them—but Zhang Yi was already marked as her prey in her mind. How dare he play the field?

Her mood soured again almost instantly.

One by one, the other household members were summoned to greet the guest.

Zhu Yunque's composure began cracking.

Besides Zhou Ke'er's trio, there were several other stunning young women in this household.

Yang Xinxin's beauty rivaled Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siya's, with the added advantage of being only eighteen—youthful and vivacious.

Lu Keran and Liang Yue were equally striking, but what stood out was their distinctive aura—not the superficial charm of trophies, but the poise of independent women.

This veritable garden of beauties made Zhu Yunque increasingly agitated.

"Ahem, Mr. Zhang, when are we departing?"

She hesitated before adding, "Perhaps it's not my place to say, but since this is a confidential mission, it might be best not to bring... irrelevant personnel."

Zhang Yi studied Zhu Yunque intently.

After several seconds of silence, he finally told Yang Siya, "Prepare a room for Miss Zhu to rest."

Zhu Yunque immediately understood—Zhang Yi wanted to speak privately with his inner circle without outsiders present.

With aristocratic grace, she rose and followed Yang Siya out.

Yang Siya returned shortly, smiling. "She seems quite pleased with her accommodations."

Settling beside Zhang Yi, she asked, "Who is she really? Some elite superhuman from an investigation team?"

Initially, everyone in the shelter had regarded Zhu Yunque with wary respect, assuming only an extraordinarily capable operative would be assigned by Zhu Zheng to accompany Zhang Yi.

Zhang Yi replied indifferently, "Just a privileged connection. She's Zhu Zheng's niece. Probably tagging along to pad her resume for future promotions."

Yang Xinxin eyed Zhang Yi with playful scrutiny, tilting her head. "But why do I sense something... peculiar about her attitude toward you?"

Zhang Yi scoffed, crossing his arms. "Typical highborn behavior—used to looking down on people."

Yang Xinxin exchanged meaningful glances with Zhou Ke'er and the others before smiling cryptically. "Big brother, you don't understand women. I think... she might have designs on you."

Zhang Yi blinked, then pointed at himself incredulously. "Designs? On me?"

Zhou Ke'er nodded in agreement.

"I sensed it too. She seemed... unsettled around us."

"Her eyes betrayed jealousy."

Zhang Yi couldn't help laughing.

"Well, what can I say? My charm's just too potent. Love at first sight, huh?"

He said it jokingly—Zhu Yunque had started picking at him from their very first meeting, hardly a positive impression.

"Perhaps Commander Zhu wants to secure you through marriage?"

Yang Xinxin pierced straight to the heart of the matter.

"Brother, you're currently the most sought-after asset in Blizzard City."

"Every faction is currying favor with you. The Deng Family provided technical support and specialized training for your friends."

"It's hardly surprising Zhu Zheng would use marital ties to bind you."

Hearing this, Zhang Yi realized the situation's implications—though he remained unfazed.

"That old Zhu must be going senile."

Zhang Yi had zero interest in arrogant noble ladies—though taming one did hold some appeal.

Unfortunately, Zhu Yunque's personality utterly failed to tempt him.

He was a refined egoist, not some lust-driven fool.

Romance could spice up life, but shouldn't dominate it.

Even Zhou Ke'er only became part of his circle because of her medical expertise.

"Don't mind her. Once the mission's over, our paths won't cross again."

He understood Zhu Zheng's intentions, but the commander couldn't force him to marry Zhu Yunque.

Ultimately, the decision rested with Zhang Yi.

Zhou Ke'er grasped his hand worriedly.

"But you'll be traveling together for this mission, won't you? As the saying goes, familiarity breeds affection. Who's to say you won't... cross lines?"

Zhang Yi chuckled, patting her hand reassuringly.

"Don't worry—no matter how delicious, I won't touch poisoned food."

A no-strings-attached woman would be one thing, but Zhu Yunque came with Zhu Zheng's political baggage. Getting entangled meant endless trouble—and Zhang Yi wasn't that stupid.

Old You asked concernedly, "Zhang Yi, is this mission high-risk?"

Since Zhang Yi hadn't disclosed specifics, everyone understood he wouldn't bring many companions.

Zhang Yi smiled. "Hard to say. Probably not extremely dangerous, but in these times, who knows?"

"Still, no need to worry about me. I can handle myself."

He'd already considered—even if their ship sank at sea, his abilities guaranteed survival.

"Just hold down the fort here as usual."

Chapter 789: Preparations for Departure [Bonus 4]

For this voyage, Zhang Yi planned to only bring Zhou Ke'er along.

Given the several-month-long journey, illnesses among the crew would be inevitable, making having a ship doctor absolutely crucial.

After settling household matters, Zhang Yi contacted Chen Jingguan to arrange for an icebreaker ship and crew.

"Send me the most experienced sailors with open-sea experience."

Chen Jingguan naturally didn't dare voice any objections and promptly made the arrangements.

Due to the urgency of the mission, Zhang Yi headed to Chaoyu Harbor that very afternoon to inspect the ship and personnel.

Following Zhang Yi's request, Chaoyu Harbor provided their most advanced icebreaker, the Golden Edge.

The harbor naturally had warships available, but given the mission's confidentiality, those were outright dismissed.

Zhang Yi boarded the massive icebreaker.

The Golden Edge measured 106 meters in length with a full-load displacement of 16,000 tons and could carry 2,000 tons of fuel.

In this ice age, it was undoubtedly the best choice for open-sea voyages.

Chen Jingguan assigned Zhang Yi the most seasoned sailors, including Old Tian, who had previously captained for Zhang Yi, along with twelve other crew members.

Each had at least seven years of sailing experience, all veterans of long-distance voyages.

Zhang Yi gathered everyone and emphasized the mission's importance.

"This voyage is to retrieve overseas Chinese citizens. It's my first open-sea journey, so I'll need your full cooperation."

He raised a finger. "Most importantly—keep your mouths shut. No communication with outsiders, and no discussions with the returnees once we pick them up."

"You may address me as Captain or Mr. Zhang. Do not reveal my name."

"Understood?!"

His stern tone made the sailors quickly respond in unison, "Yes, sir!"

Zhang Yi nodded and ordered Chen Jingguan to confiscate all their weapons, which he would redistribute later.

He then inquired about outfitting the icebreaker with weapons.

Chen Jingguan replied, "That would require modifying the hull. It might take some time."

Icebreakers weren't designed with gun placements.

Zhang Yi sighed. "If necessary, we'll go old-school—mounting land artillery on the ship."

He had considered this carefully—using a warship would draw attention, but sailing unarmed meant relying solely on himself if trouble arose, which could expose his identity.

After much deliberation, he decided to improvise artillery if combat became unavoidable.

He also stockpiled naval mines—not just for submarines, but more likely against mutated sea creatures.

By that evening, Chen Jingguan had the ship and basic supplies ready.

Early the next morning, Zhang Yi set off for Chaoyu Harbor with Zhu Yunque and Zhou Ke'er.

Zhu Yunque seemed surprised Zhou Ke'er was joining.

She pulled Zhang Yi aside privately.

"Zhang Yi, I'm not being petty, but this mission is critical. Bringing your girlfriend along seems... inappropriate."

Zhang Yi arched a brow. "Ke'er is a doctor. Months at sea without one—how do you think that would go?"

Even a minor cold could turn fatal.

Zhu Yunque insisted, "Surely there are other doctors? The crew are all men. Having one beautiful woman—me—is enough. Bringing another seems improper."

Zhang Yi smirked. "Relax. I only brought one beautiful woman."

Zhu Yunque froze, then flushed—he'd implied she wasn't as attractive as Zhou Ke'er.

Stamping her foot, she snapped, "Take this mission seriously!"

Zhang Yi's expression darkened—his first sharp tone with her.

"Miss Zhu! Remember—I lead this mission. You're just tagging along. Don't question my decisions!"

"To be blunt, if not for Commander Zhu, I wouldn't bother bringing you at all."

"So mind your place when speaking to me. Clear?"

"One more tantrum, and I'll send you back."

His fury cowed her instantly.

A veteran of bloodshed, his aura alone terrified this sheltered noblewoman.

She shrunk back, stammering incoherently.

Zhang Yi left without another glance, heading to Zhou Ke'er.

Yet after he departed, Zhu Yunque stared after him, her gaze shifting oddly.

No man had ever dared yell at her before.

Strangely... she found his dominance intriguing.

Zhang Yi found Zhou Ke'er packing in her cabin—over a dozen suitcases of clothes and personal items.

With his spatial storage, quantity wasn't an issue.

Leaning against the doorway, he admired her figure as she bent over her luggage.

"Open-sea voyages are harsh," he remarked. "Two to three months of rough waves—nowhere near as comfortable as home. Sure about this?"

Zhou Ke'er straightened, stretching to reveal her slender waist.

She beamed. "Of course! When else would I get months alone with you?"

She hugged his arm, pressing close.

"Let me be useful!"

Her fox-like eyes gleamed mischievously. "Besides, you said yourself—two to three months at sea. Without me, you'd struggle, wouldn't you?"

"Hmph! I'm not giving that woman any chances."

Zhu Zheng's motives for sending Zhu Yunque were transparent—hoping for a romantic development.

But in this uncertain apocalypse, aligning with any faction was unwise.

Yet months alone at sea, with no other women aboard—could Zhang Yi resist temptation?

Even he couldn't guarantee it.

Sighing, he pulled her close. "You've thought this through. Don't worry—if danger arises, I'll keep you safe."

With his Skywalker and spatial traversal abilities, even a shipwreck wouldn't endanger her.

He'd already studied every island and reef along their route.

Chapter 790: Sea Mines

Ignoring Zhu Yunque's objections, Zhang Yi took Zhou Ke'er along for the sea voyage. As for the others, especially the women at home, they had quite a few complaints. Yang Xinxin, in particular, gazed at Zhang Yi with pitiful, longing eyes—clearly wanting to join him on the trip. Lu Keran also offered to come aboard as a mechanic to assist with repairs. However, Zhang Yi firmly rejected all these requests.

This wasn't a pleasure cruise—it was a mission of critical importance. Even he couldn't guarantee whether dangers lurked in the open sea. If something went wrong, he wouldn't be able to protect so many people out on the water. Nevertheless, the shelter residents still saw them off at Chaoyu Harbor.

From the harbor, they traveled another dozen kilometers by snow vehicle to reach the anchored fleet. The waters here were deeper and hadn't completely frozen over yet. The Golden Edge icebreaker, pulled out by Chen Jinguan's men, stood ready, its deck crowded with sailors prepared for departure.

Zhang Yi bid farewell to his household one by one, instructing them to stay vigilant in his absence and contact him or Zhu Zheng immediately if any danger arose. After settling these matters, he boarded the ship with Zhou Ke'er and Zhu Yunque.

Zhang Yi and Zhou Ke'er traveled light, carrying nothing—everything they needed was stored in his Dimensional Space. Zhu Yunque, however, didn't enjoy the same convenience. Though she had minimized her luggage, she still had two massive suitcases in tow. Zhang Yi made no move to help, but kind-hearted Old You loaded them onto the vehicle. At the harbor, sailors naturally carried them aboard.

Once on deck, Zhu Yunque deliberately took out her communicator in front of Zhang Yi and announced, "Uncle, we've boarded. We can set sail today!" Zhang Yi smirked inwardly—this was clearly a power play, reminding him that Zhu Zheng stood behind her. Unfazed, he signaled Old Tian to depart.

The crew returned to their stations as Old Tian expertly commanded the anchor's retrieval. The massive icebreaker slowly moved, crushing the thin surrounding ice before heading out to sea. Zhang Yi, meanwhile, took Zhou Ke'er to their cabin. Below deck, the boilers roared, providing ample warmth—a requirement Zhang Yi had insisted on. Even on a long voyage, he refused to compromise on basic comforts like heating and food, all of which he had stockpiled in his Dimensional Space (courtesy of Zhu Zheng's resources—no reason to spend his own funds on official business).

The days that followed were monotonous. Old Tian and the crew, seasoned sailors with post-apocalyptic experience under Wei Dinghai, knew which waters posed risks. Before departure, Zhang Yi had instructed them to prioritize safety over speed, avoiding pirate-infested routes and steering clear of Japan's coastal waters—home to many ronin who doubled as pirates and bandits. They also had to watch for sea beasts. With no shortage of supplies, they could afford a leisurely, cautious journey.

The crew was thrilled. Having one of Jiangnan Region's top superhumans—a spatial ability user, no less—onboard filled them with confidence and pride. This would be a tale to tell their future children: the time they sailed on a mission with Zhang Yi himself.

For the first two weeks, the voyage proceeded smoothly. They stayed within Huaxu Kingdom's territorial waters, only needing to coordinate with the East Sea Region's patrols. But once they left national waters, troubles began mounting.

On the seventeenth day, as the Golden Edge entered Japanese waters, Old Tian consulted Zhang Yi about notifying local authorities to avoid misunderstandings. Zhang Yi, reading a copy of *1Q84*, closed the book. "No need. Proceed as planned. We'll deal with any interceptors if they appear."

His reasoning was sound. The apocalypse had devastated global populations and military strength. Even Huaxu Kingdom couldn't fully control its maritime borders, leaving the oceans increasingly lawless. Japan itself was fractured into two factions, its navy unstable. Their Maritime Self-Defense Force lacked substantial patrol capabilities, making formal contact unnecessary—and potentially suspicious. If issues arose, Zhu Zheng could handle the diplomacy.

Old Tian relayed the orders. Hours later, Japanese forces issued a warning. Zhang Yi had them identify as a civilian rescue vessel while Zhu Zheng's office intervened. Though displeased, Japan—lacking the means to enforce maritime control—let them pass.

Back in his cabin, Zhang Yi resumed reading. But just after exiting Japanese waters, violent explosions rocked the ship. The hull trembled, startling Zhou Ke'er. "Stay calm," Zhang Yi reassured her, patting her shoulder. "I'll handle this." In a flash, he appeared in the icebreaker's command center.

The crew, armed and furious, cursed at the radar blips swarming the screen. "What's happening?" Zhang Yi asked, noting the red dots. His presence immediately steadied them. "Sir, this area's mined! Pirates must've laid them!" Old Tian growled around his pipe. "Those damned Japanese—they waved us off, then tipped off nearby pirates!"

A cold smile curled Zhang Yi's lips. "Ship status?" "Minor damage. We're sturdy. But these mines are just the prelude—pirate ships are closing in!" Old Tian pointed to approaching blips. "Keep the ship steady," Zhang Yi ordered. "I'll deal with the rest." He vanished mid-sentence. While the crew knew he'd handle the threat, half still grabbed guns and rushed to the deck, unwilling to sit idle.