

Wow 961

Chapter 961 - Gong Yan

Xing Zhuo followed closely behind Bai E, feeling incredibly conflicted as he watched them about to sign a contract with outsiders.

"The conditions they offer, we can provide as well. Sir, why go through so much trouble for something so far away?"

"Moreover, ever since the new helm took over, Golden Swallow's dealing style has become extremely peculiar; cooperating with them is definitely not a good thing."

"Why not consider us instead? I could try to apply for more favorable conditions for you."

During the pursuit, Xing Zhuo saw a group wearing Golden Swallow insignia quickly approaching from the spaceship outside.

The one leading appeared in a hurry, and was the new helm of Golden Swallow whom he had met once before. Seeing her rush like this, was she valuing this transaction highly?

Is it necessary for such a large company to be so concerned about some remote, broken planet?

Or perhaps they received some intelligence and came entirely for Bai E himself?

With these thoughts, Xing Zhuo seized the last opportunity to attempt dissuasion, "Mr. Bai E..."

Before his words were finished, he saw the helm of Golden Swallow taking a stride forward upon clearly seeing someone's face, "Master!"

An unexpected voice filled with joy, like a wanderer finding an elder at home.

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Everyone present almost simultaneously had question marks hovering above their heads.

Xing Zhuo was especially surprised; was this really the helm of Golden Swallow he knew?

Though he had only seen her once, her reputation over these two years had been thunderous.

Being a trading expert herself, this helm of Golden Swallow was someone whom even the Thousand Stars Commerce Alliance dared not offend easily.

And now such a figure actually called Bai E "Master"?

Could she be mistaken?

Bai E also looked at her with curious eyes, seeing a familiar shadow in her, "Gong Yan?"

"It's me! Master!" Gong Yan smiled joyfully, "I've finally found you, Master!"

"Are you really Gong Yan?" Now it was Bai E's turn to be surprised.

The spacecraft was directly involved in a mishap in High-dimensional Space, causing all passengers including players to scatter and disappear, their fate unknown.

He had tried searching, but evidently, it was not easy.

Unexpectedly, after deciding to develop his force alone, he encountered Xu Ruoguang and Gong Yan in succession.

And more importantly, how could this person be Gong Yan?

According to Catherine, Gong Yan, the new helm of Golden Swallow Trading Company, had been in charge for at least two years. But since the spacecraft mishap, how much time had actually passed?

By careful calculation, it's not even a month. Isn't this time discrepancy too large?

Is there some secret unknown to him?

But anyway, Gong Yan is Gong Yan; these players seem... not to have any ill intentions?

This is truly rare.

"What about the contract..." Catherine hadn't forgotten her business.

She looked at Bai E's profile, filled with astonishment inside.

Never in her wildest dreams did she expect even the helm of Golden Swallow Trading Company was once Bai E's subordinate.

How impressive was his past truly?

And for her to inadvertently pick up such a great figure, she must have stumbled upon good luck through several lifetimes?

After the initial joy, Gong Yan quickly returned to her senses, ordering the woman behind her with a calm face, "The previous contract remains the same, but the betting agreement is canceled, and resources are maximally supplied."

The woman's face was filled with conflict, contemplating how her lady had suddenly recognized a master, but more importantly, now had to supply the other party unconditionally.

One must know the lady's helm position was not handed down from the skies.

The company is a company, capable of bringing benefits; even if actions are slightly out of line, other higher-ups in the company must hold back their opinions.

But if the foundation of the company is shaken, then the lady's helm position likely wouldn't remain stable.

"Lady, without an agreement, it will be difficult to account to the company..." the assistant cautiously reminded.

"If it's hard to account, then don't declare it!" Gong Yan waved dismissively, uninterested in arguing with those old folks in the company, "I'm not for them to point fingers; if they have issues, let them come find me."

"This..."

While the assistant hesitated, Bai E suddenly spoke up, "Will there be trouble?"

Facing Bai E's gentle voice, Gong Yan lowered her head slightly, glancing to the side, "There'll be some... but it's okay, I can handle it."

"It's fine, let's add the agreement; that way, some people won't have excuses." Bai E was quite understanding, "And since I promised to sign this contract, I naturally have confidence to fulfill the conditions in your agreement. Adding the agreement will make your work easier."

Gong Yan bit her lip, hesitating before finally nodding, "Okay."

After confirming the general direction, Bai E turned to Catherine, "Leave the rest to you. I have some things to discuss with Gong Yan. Also, get Xu Ruoguang over."

Then he looked at Gong Yan, "Come, let's chat somewhere else."

"Alright."

...

Following Bai E, Gong Yan curiously glanced up and down, "It seems the conditions here are not very good; would Master like to change locations?"

"No need, it's not easy to acquire the status of a sovereign state; attempting to revive the nation now is easier. But conditions must be to revive as the core part of the former sovereign state. Otherwise, we won't have a chance."

"Is Master planning to bring everyone from the planet here?"

"Yes..." Bai E sighed.

The time spent on the planet wasn't long, but now it's all he cares about in this world.

Moreover, that planet is within the influence range of a massive black hole, with spatial coefficients different from a flat universe, becoming more dangerous over time.

"What about your companions?" Bai E shifted the topic, asking his most concerned question.

Xu Ruoguang had shallow interactions with other players, but Gong Yan, Kuang Xin, and a few others were inseparable.

He wondered if they maintained contact after being scattered.

"Companions?" Gong Yan shook her head in confusion, looking perplexed, "I don't know..."

She even couldn't clarify who she really was now.

Is it the self living in a modern society playing a game that's real, or is her current identity now real?

When the spacecraft had a mishap in High-dimensional Space, she was swept into turbulence, almost instantly "dying."

Then she was kicked out of the game.

According to the game's opening statement, she needed to wait for three days before she could log into the game again.

She indeed did so, meeting Kuang Xin and the others during this wait... that was their last meeting.

Chapter 962 - Dislocated Space-Time

During that meeting, no one felt that their future days would change significantly.

The game was still the same, just that perhaps they needed to switch accounts.

Everyone ate, drank, and laughed together, imagining whether the upcoming cosmic chapter of the game would be more intense and interesting.

Later, they went to sing at KTV, joined the buzz at a bar, and then returned to their respective homes.

Within those three days, they also heard about the game launched by the newly appointed federal governor being particularly popular.

After all, it was the government encouraging everyone to play games, its influence was certainly remarkable.

The game was called "Thunderbolt," a pure aerial combat shooting game.

Players needed to control a fighter and continuously deal with an endless stream of enemies.

Occasionally, they'd encounter special enemy planes that, once defeated, provided parts to enhance their own fighter.

But essentially it was still a shooting game, testing the players' grasp of spatial opportunities.

Taking advantage of the three days, Gong Yan played for a long time, even reaching the final level... yet she couldn't get past it.

That level seemed to have a bug, the entire map was blurry, players could only see their own position and couldn't even see where the opponent's bullets came from.

In such a scenario, let alone players, even the game designers might not be able to get through.

If you can't beat it, don't play it; after fiercely cursing the game designer with other players, Gong Yan returned to the world of Star River.

The three days had passed, and the Dragon King returned!

But strangely enough...

Upon logging back in, she found the starting scenario wholly different from the first time she entered the game—

She was born directly in the cosmos this time.

And her initial identity seemed to have its own significance.

She was the granddaughter of a large cross-Star Domain company chairman, who mysteriously fell into a coma five years ago, and then woke up two years ago... which was also the time she reconnected to the game.

Gong Yan woke up inside the new body, greeted by a start completely different from the first time.

The only hassle was the option to leave the game had disappeared.

So can a place entered after going into an alternate world and never to escape still be called a game?

What is the truth of the world? Where did she come from?

Why did she not feel any strangeness upon waking up inside the new body, instead, it felt like she was meant to be this way?

What about the "real world" she was in before? What is that place?

Two years ago, upon waking, Gong Yan felt bewildered.

She began to ponder the reasons.

Why did it become like this?

Was it because the ship malfunctioned in high-dimensional space?

Or was it because she left the planet and entered the cosmos?

But it definitely wasn't because of death... although this was her first death in the game, she left spare bodies on the planet.

Most players left spare bodies when leaving the planet to prevent death.

After all, dying in this game meant starting over, leaving all they had fought for was something all players found hard to accept.

Fortunately, by the later stages, players could avoid death through spare bodies, but...

This approach failed when she "died" in the high-dimensional space!

During the three days out of the game, Gong Yan also pondered whether it was a game bug?

Or perhaps the high-dimensional space was a special game map, where dying was final, and consciousness or rather the soul wouldn't return to the player's spare body... this was her initial thought.

And regardless of the notion, who is the most important character in this entire process?

The answer is evident—

Bai E!

The Dawn leader they first connected with!

He's also the absolute leader ruling the entire planet!

It was he who led humanity's counterattack against high-dimensional space, and he who led them to build starships and fly to space.

If she wanted to find the ultimate reason for all the changes happening to her, she might need to find answers from this leader.

So Gong Yan started searching...

To facilitate her search, she strived to climb up with her new identity.

Eventually, as the chief helmsman of a cross-Star Domain super-large universe company, even after rummaging everywhere within her sphere of influence, Gong Yan had never heard a single word related to Bai E.

Whether Bai E or Dawn...

Or perhaps that planet hidden in some corner of the universe... she even once doubted whether the current place and the previous game content still shared the same game world view.

For this, she consulted numerous materials—

This universe also had beastmen, but they were mostly suppressed on certain planets.

On their planet, humans couldn't defeat them, but fortunately, those green-skinned Orcs didn't heavily think of expanding outward.

Even when Gong Yan personally witnessed those beastmen assembling into the sky and even into the universe using junk they picked up from who knows where, these beastmen never thought of leaving their planet to contend with humans in the universe.

Their daily life was basking in the sun, squabbling and clowning around, happily like a group of oafs.

There also existed High-dimensional Demon Gods... but those gods didn't seem to be very active, even though believers prayed to them, they could only receive weak power.

It's not on the same level as humans' tension towards high-dimensional space during their past time on the planet.

But no more bugs!

The most formidable and troublesome enemy humans had!

The background is ambiguous, where did something go wrong?

Gong Yan was confused, searching, and in the blink of an eye, over two years had passed.

During these two years, she never gave up, even expanded territories just for the sake of someday finding the past planet.

She planned to form a large cosmic exploration team after accumulating enough personal strength, to search for everything she wanted.

But little did she expect... the reason she had never found the leader Bai E nor Dawn, including the former planet, was because she arrived two years earlier?

Upon hearing Gong Yan's narrative, Xu Ruoguang widened his eyes, full of disbelief, "Your consciousness was here more than two years ago?!"

Gong Yan was equally stunned, "You mean it has been less than a month since our spaceship had an accident in high-dimensional space? How is this possible?!"

Gong Yan held her head, somewhat self-doubting, "But my over two years of time, it surely was real! Memory, all the details are recallable..."

"But just like you, we've been here for less than a month; we certainly are real too..." Xu Ruoguang was logical.

"Perhaps, you are all real." Bai E contemplated.

Two similarly bewildered faces instantly looked at Bai E, "Lord, this..."

Chapter 963 The Army Approaches the Border

"Just now, you mentioned that you all are 'players'?" This was the first showdown between the players and Bai E.

Unlike Xu Ruoguang, Gong Yan's description of her identity background was extremely clear and firm.

She was very certain of her player identity and was able to clearly perceive and describe everything that had happened in the past.

This meant that the words spoken from her mouth were most likely true.

"Yes." Facing Bai E's inquiry, Gong Yan nodded in confirmation.

This was the most unique NPC in this world, and perhaps this person was also the core reason for the present situation.

To understand what was happening to her, she needed to start with him.

"Perhaps sir hasn't heard, like this world was originally a game, and we..."

"I know." Bai E interrupted softly.

"Ah?" Gong Yan was slightly stunned.

"I already knew you were players the first time we met." Bai E looked at her and calmly stated this fact.

This time, the always indifferent Gong Yan felt a genuine shock for the first time.

Setting aside Xu Ruoguang, who was always indifferent to her player identity, Gong Yan now began thoroughly doubting the reality of this world.

The NPCs here could even accept the setting that she might be in a game world?

Is this correct?

No, this is wrong!

Faced with her stunned surprise, Bai E chuckled lightly and threw out another explosive fact, "Actually, I also had a system... in the past."

Both of their pupils shook tremendously, "Sir, you..."

"But it has already disappeared, on the day of the spacecraft accident." Bai E shook his head and asked, "What about yours? It must have disappeared too, right?"

Gong Yan fell into a slight silence, then nodded, "Yes, since I logged in with a new identity this time, it was already gone."

The system vanished along with the option to leave the game!

Now, without the game system, she also couldn't leave this world... to her, now this world was truly real.

Had she "traveled through time?"

"Perhaps because your systems, including mine, were originally fake."

Bai E recalled the voice of the Evil God he heard at the moment of the spacecraft accident.

The information revealed in that voice once made his faith collapse, thinking he was only a puppet of some mysterious existence.

But later, he discovered that after losing the system, what was lost was the restrictions...

"The system was a disguise, a surface concealment of our original powers." Bai E looked at Gong Yan and Xu Ruoguang, "Now you all are without systems, but your former strength, isn't it still quite good?"

Speaking of this, both nodded in agreement.

Xu Ruoguang was fine, while Gong Yan directly changed to a new identity.

"According to the former game theory, my 'death' this time would typically mean starting over, but from the moment I woke up, I found everything I had mastered was still there."

And more acute, more instinctive.

"So, why is this? And our time..." After listening to Bai E, Gong Yan couldn't help but feel even more confused.

"Perhaps we are all part of a scheme..."

The culprit who used the system disguise to wrap their own abilities, the High-dimensional Evil God who emerged at the time of the spacecraft accident to confuse people, perhaps planned all of this today...

Then what about the players' 'awakening,' including herself?

Judging by the current attitude of herself and the other players towards the High-dimensional Evil God, they have largely deviated from his original plan.

Is it because his plan originally had flaws, or behind themselves and the players, another invisible hand is pushing everything forward as the Evil God's "opponents?"

Is it helping us to counter the Evil God?

As for time...

"Did you forget? High-dimensional space is originally a place of time chaos."

Now, past, and future coexist in high-dimensional space.

Could someone be using this feature of high-dimensional space to enable these players to "time travel?"

From the moment of the spacecraft accident, the mysterious hand behind has been combating the Evil God while sending the players who, like Gong Yan, "died" to different "times."

The purpose behind it might be only one... to completely shatter the swirling High-dimensional Evil Gods.

To stabilize internally before confronting external threats.

Despite the difficulty posed by external Bug Races and Beastmen, those High-dimensional Evil Gods who can directly incite and manipulate minds are the greatest enemies humans need to be wary of.

"So what should we do now?"

"It's simple, develop oneself, and always move forward."

Realizing the problem wasn't critical, what's more crucial is the need for the strength to break the impasse.

"I've also doubted myself..." Bai E's eyes became slightly distant, as if seeing once more himself fallen from high-dimensional space after the spacecraft incident.

The self that was in cosmic interstellar, with everything around a strange environment.

The self whose beliefs collapsed, thinking he lost all abilities.

The self that curled up in a lonely corner, feeling the world collapse and rebuild countless times, eventually deciding to stand up and move forward...

No one knew how that lonely figure spent those few hours at the starport.

Perhaps he himself had forgotten how many times his world had been destroyed during that short time.

But fortunately, he stood up again and decided to continue forward.

"No matter where you are, no matter the current situation, move forward, always move forward."

Chapter 964 Army at the Gates (2)

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With the full support of resources controlled by Gong Yan through the Golden Swallow Trading Company, the basic appearance of the Mine Star changes almost three times a day.

The miners' original drafty shacks were reinforced and expanded, new residential areas began planning and construction, with basic partitions and privacy spaces.

The tunnel's lighting system was updated, the air filtration system stabilized, and the pungent dust and sulfur smell greatly reduced.

Centralized dining points and basic medical stations were also established, and miners with long-term cough received medication, while those suffering from occupational injuries and chronic diseases finally saw hope of recovery.

Especially in the initial basic mining area and the newly integrated Black Steel Mining Area, the embryonic forms of urban buildings began to appear.

Using the building materials brought in, miners, under the guidance of experts, began constructing more solid public buildings, such as material distribution centers, simple schools, and training grounds.

Although it cannot yet be called a "city," at least the concept of functional zoning and the embryonic form of a community center have emerged.

As basic survival needs were met, some simple cultural and entertainment activities began to spontaneously emerge.

During break time, miners would gather together to listen to literate elders telling stories they had heard in the past or have craftsmen teach children simple literacy and arithmetic.

Victor organized several collective celebrations, simple though they were, songs and laughter filled the once oppressive mining area for the first time.

The self-defense team's training also became a collective activity, attracting many miners to voluntarily participate in their spare time.

These changes, though just beginning and far from reaching the standards of a "civilized society," were already monumental for miners long struggling in despair.

The thought of "following this leader seems to really have a future" turned from initial skepticism and observation into a firm belief in the hearts of more and more people.

Seeing the status of the Mine Star improve daily, Catherine had a glow on her face all day, and even though she was busy, her feet never touched the ground; she was full of genuine joy.

And just as everything was prospering, a mysterious fleet suddenly appeared in the deep space not far from the planet without any forewarning.

Right from the start, this fleet headed towards the Mine Star, unfolding in a manner filled with hostility and oppression, intending to encircle the entire mine.

As the standing guard of the Mine Star, the Seventh Legion, led by Xu Ruoguang, discovered this mysterious foreign fleet almost immediately.

"What on earth are their intentions?"

Xu Ruoguang immediately sent the former leader of the Blood Claw Pirate Group to negotiate, but Blood Claw returned with a grave shake of his head.

"I don't know; they refuse to communicate. Even my request to board the ship for a meeting was rejected."

Black Beast looked at Xu Ruoguang, "Guang, what should we do? Have you reported to the leader?"

"I'm going to report now," Xu Ruoguang said with furrowed brows.

He initially planned to clarify the other party's intentions before reporting, after all, when reporting, it can't just be simply saying someone showed up.

But now, the other fleet's strength seems to surpass his own, displaying a stance of complete refusal to communicate and hostility.

If he doesn't report to the leader soon, there might be big trouble.

"My lord, the fleet is not small, at least two medium-sized battleships and over six escort ships. They refuse all communication and are unfolding into an encirclement formation."

Xu Ruoguang's voice carried weight in the communication, "Blood Claw went to negotiate and was directly refused boarding."

Bai E was in the new command center, looking through the observation screen at the distant space where those gradually approaching steel giants emerged.

Catherine stood by his side, face serious, "The visitors are not friendly. This formation... is unlike pirates or ordinary forces."

All core members of this newly established force were gathered in the command center, each wearing a grave expression as they watched those steel silhouettes.

Amidst this tense atmosphere, the public communication channel of the Mine Star was forcefully cut into.

A cold, arrogant voice rang out:

"Illegal armed forces on the Mine Star, this is the Huowali United States' Second Border Patrol Fleet. According to a formal report from our citizen, you have illegally occupied the legally operated Gray Ridge Mine, coercing signatures on unequal agreements with violent means, thus severely violating our citizens' property rights and national dignity."

"You are now ordered to: immediately disarm all weapons, release the detained mining staff, surrender the main culprit, Bai E, and related accomplices for our judicial investigation. You have 30 minutes to

provide a clear response. If you fail to respond or refuse to comply, we will take all necessary measures, including but not limited to military clearance, to maintain our citizens' legal rights and national authority."

The communication was cut off, leaving only the hiss of static.

The command center fell into silence.

"The Huowali United States..." Catherine gritted her teeth, "That bastard Tu Ge went back to bring reinforcements after all!"

Bai E's eyes remained calm.

He had anticipated that Tu Ge would not let things be, just didn't expect such a quick move, bringing in state-level force.

"They don't actually want a 'judicial investigation,'" Gong Yan coldly analyzed, "If they just wanted to arrest someone, there would be no need to set up such a comprehensive encirclement. What they want is the entire Mine Star, or rather... they want to force us to submit, join them."

Just like Xing Zhuo's previous recruitment... for a "wild" powerhouse like the boss, these major forces always try to assimilate first, rather than cooperate equally.

If assimilation fails, they suppress or even eradicate.

The Huowali United States clearly had the same mindset.

After Tu Ge returned, he must have embellished the report on the situation of the Mine Star and Bai E's strength.

For that country, an uncontrolled powerful figure establishing a force in a nearby Star Domain is both a potential threat and a tempting prize—

If they can recruit him, he would be a formidable force; if not, he must be killed before he grows too powerful.

"What should we do now?" Xu Ruoguang's voice came through the communication, "The Seventh Legion has only three main ships acquired from heritage, plus some small escort ships modified from pirates; direct confrontation... prospects are not good."

Catherine quickly analyzed, "They're stalling for time. The so-called 'thirty minutes' both applies pressure and completes a more thorough encirclement and tactical deployment. Once time is up, whether we respond or not, they will attack. Moreover... they probably have already notified the Peak Alliance about the 'enforcement action,' dressing it in legitimacy."

Bai E moved to the observation window, gazing at the dark silhouettes of battleships in the starry sky.

"Reply to them," he said, "request a direct dialogue with the fleet commander. Just say... there are some matters regarding Tu Ge and certain 'special arrangements' within the Peak Alliance involving the Huowali United States that need face-to-face confirmation. If they don't want this information publicized within the Alliance, they'd better send someone with decision-making authority to talk."

This was both a delay tactic and a probe.

He wanted to see how resolved the other party was and whether there were deeper intentions behind it.

After the message was sent, the other side was silent for nearly ten minutes.

Just as the thirty-minute deadline was about to be reached, the communication connected again.

This time, the voice was different, more stable, carrying the authority of long-standing power:

"I am Admiral Glen, Naval Commander of the Huowali United States' Second Border Patrol Fleet. Mr. Bai E, I have heard of your name and know some of your... deeds. Our country values talent. Tu Ge's issue can be discussed, and even the Gray Ridge Mine can be discussed. But the premise is that you must show a willingness to cooperate."

Admiral Glen paused, his tone carrying a clear hint of recruitment:

"The Huowali United States is an influential country within the Stellar District. We can provide a platform and resources far better than this barren Mine Star. Join us, and you will directly receive the rank of admiral."

Chapter 965 The Solution

Sure, here's the translated text:

"You can continue to lead your fleet, and we will add more warships and soldiers to it. The Mine Star can also become your fief, managed by you, but you must accept our stationed troops and oversight, and pay taxes on time."

"This is the greatest sincerity our country can offer," Glen's voice turned cold and hard, "Otherwise, with your current armed forces, you should clearly understand the outcome of resistance. I am not threatening, merely stating facts. You have ten minutes to consider."

The communication was cut off again.

Catherine looked at Bai E, her eyes complex.

The other's conditions sounded quite good, providing considerable autonomy and status. But everyone understood that the so-called "fief," "troops," "oversight," and "taxes" meant that the Mine Star would completely become a vassal of the Huowali United States, and Bai E would change from an independent leader to a commander under orders.

Moreover, with the style of such great nations, once you join, it's as difficult as reaching heaven to leave.

The so-called "sincerity" is nothing more than annexation wrapped in sugar.

"They are betting that we dare not fight, and cannot win either," Catherine murmured.

Bai E did not answer immediately. He walked to the console and brought up the current defense deployment map of the Mine Star.

Three main battleships of the Seventh Legion were deployed at three key nodes in the orbital path of the Mine Star, forming a triangular defensive formation.

Those modified small escort ships served as mobile forces.

On ground defense, it mainly relied on several orbital defense cannons seized and repaired from pirates, and the air defense array under construction—

These were progressing rapidly with the material support of the Golden Swallow Trading Company, but were not yet fully formed.

Confronting a full-scale national border fleet head-on, indeed the odds were slim.

Yet...

Bai E's gaze swept over the screen, marking the locations of miner residences, newly built schools, medical stations, training grounds.

He remembered the hope reignited in the miners' eyes, how their spines began to straighten, and the simple yet vibrant song.

He recalled his promise to Catherine, his promise to the miners.

To return to her a complete Bauhinia.

To give them a true homeland.

"Reply to Admiral Glen." Bai E's voice was calm and firm, resonating clearly in the command center:

"The Mine Star is an inseparable territory of the Bauhinia Republic. As its successor and Guardian, I have no authority to cede or vassalize it to any nation. If the Huowali United States disputes the property of the Gray Ridge Mine, it can submit a formal claim through the Arbitration Court of the Peak Alliance, and we will cooperate with the investigation according to the Alliance's laws."

"But any act of entering Bauhinia's airspace by force without Alliance authorization, attempting to seize our territory, or coercing our citizens is naked aggression. The Bauhinia People will defend their homeland to the end."

"As for myself..." Bai E paused, "My fate is only decided by myself and the people on this land. Don't trouble your country with it."

The message was sent.

In the command center, everyone held their breath, waiting for the opponent's reaction.

In the starry sky, the fleet of the Huowali United States remained silent, like a beast poised to strike.

"Will they attack?"

"No idea."

The command center buzzed with whispers, no one knew what kind of situation awaited the Mine Star.

If a battle indeed started, the few achievements the Mine Star painstakingly developed might instantly turn to dust.

Under the firepower of a complete sovereign nation's main fleet, the entire planet might be engulfed in flames.

"If they fight, then we fight, and we may not necessarily lose!" Victor huffed with anger.

"True, if a fight starts, who knows who might suffer. They may be large and prosperous, but might not dare to lose too many soldiers here."

"No matter what, prepare for battle," Bai E ordered.

However, the expected thunderous strike did not come.

Ten minutes... Twenty minutes passed.

Besides maintaining their surrounding formation and blocking all routes to and from the Mine Star, the black fleet in the sky made no further moves.

There was no firing and no further communication.

They just remained like a heavy black iron, firmly welded in the cosmic space surrounding the Mine Star.

"What are they waiting for?" Catherine frowned, staring at the ship silhouettes on the monitoring screen like sculptures.

"Waiting for us to collapse, or waiting for a more 'appropriate' excuse to act," Bai E squinted.

Time passed by.

The fleet of the Huowali United States neither retreated nor attacked, only maintaining their intense blockade.

This stance of surrounding without attacking brought more pressure than engaging in direct warfare.

Everyone on the Mine Star knew a sword hung over their heads, ready to fall at any moment, but did not know when it would happen.

The more direct effect was—a blockade.

No spaceship could enter or leave the Mine Star's orbit.

This meant the Golden Swallow Trading Company's transport fleet was kept out, with all crucial materials sustaining the basic transformation and future development of the Mine Star—

Food, medicine, filters, construction materials, equipment parts, were all cut off from sources.

"Sir, the Golden Swallow has sent an emergency communication," Xu Ruoguang reported, looking grim, "Their three transport fleets have arrived in the neighboring airspace but were warned and driven away by the Huowali Fleet. The other side claimed military control and anti-smuggling inspections are being conducted in this airspace, and any unauthorized ships entering will be considered hostile. Gong Yan says they are after all a trading company and cannot forcibly break through a sovereign nation's military blockade; it would lead to incalculable diplomatic and commercial consequences. She can at most order a forced breakthrough once, but going forward the situation will spiral out of control, and she may very likely lose power in the company. For long-term consideration, short-term supplies... cannot be sent in for now."

Chapter 966 - Solution (2)

The atmosphere in the command center was heavy.

The development that had just gotten on track was abruptly cut off.

The output of the Mine Star itself was limited, relying on the transfusion from Golden Swallow to quickly improve livelihoods and build infrastructure.

Now that the transfusion has stopped, the reserves are visibly depleting, many construction projects are forced to pause, and the flames of hope that had just ignited feel as if they've been doused with cold water.

"We can't keep wasting time like this," Catherine bit her lip, "Our reserves won't last long. And if this high-pressure environment continues, morale will disperse."

Under the oppression of the spaceship overhead, some miners who had just joined have begun to show signs of anxiety and wavering.

They fear that the hard-won "good days" are just a temporary illusion, worrying that eventually the Mine Star would become a sacrificial pawn in the power struggle of major nations.

"What about taking the initiative?" Victor looked at Bai E, "Catch them off guard and focus our strength to raid their flagship? If we can capture or heavily damage their commander..."

"The risks are too high," Catherine shook her head and analyzed, "The opposing fleet is a complete border patrol fleet, well-trained, and their vigilance won't be low. We only have three main ships, and their performance may not even match the opposing standard warships. If the stealth attack fails and they catch us, not only could we suffer a miserable defeat militarily, but we would also completely lose the media high ground — from 'defending our homeland' to 'actively attacking another country's military as thugs.' At that time, Huowali could rightfully launch a full-scale offensive, even sanctioning us with other nations in the alliance."

Proactively attacking holds little chance of success and will lose the high moral ground.

"Then what do we do? Just wait around?" Victor was a bit frustrated.

The silent Black Beast suddenly spoke: "Perhaps... we can find some 'external aid'."

Everyone's gaze turned to her.

Black Beast crossed her arms, leaning against the wall, with a sharp and wild intelligence unique to those who live in the gray areas: "Regular army against regular army, we can't fight, nor can we afford to. But the universe is huge, and it's not just national fleets out there. There are some jobs, some people who are better at this, and... they don't care much about 'status'."

"You're suggesting... pirates?" Catherine's eyes flickered.

Given Black Beast's background, her words inevitably led people to connect her to her past profession.

"No, mercenaries. Or more precisely, interstellar security companies, or 'private military contractors,'" Black Beast nodded, "I know a reliable one. They take on a wide range of jobs, from escort, transportation, planetary defense to... some 'special operations' not convenient for official intervention. Their reputation is good, as long as the payment is sufficient, or the terms are agreed upon, they dare to take on jobs and complete them. When I was a pirate, I often ran into them; if they took action, our jobs were hard to accomplish."

"Which one?" Bai E asked.

"'Dusk,' have you heard of them?" Black Beast mentioned a name.

Catherine pondered slightly: "I have some impression. Known for their significant presence in the border Star Domain and pirate-infested areas, supposedly complex background, but with a high mission completion rate and quite expensive fees. Would they... take on a job clearly opposing a country's regular military?"

"Under normal circumstances, they might not; the risks are too high, potentially causing a mess," Black Beast shrugged, "But now, circumstances are 'abnormal.' Huowali Fleet is surrounded here without proper reason or grounds, perhaps even feeling insecure themselves. I suspect their backing might be... whether certain factions within Huowali, or people like Tu Ge, specifically targeting times when the alliance is overwhelmed and too busy to focus on this area to pressure and seize the advantage."

"That's right," Catherine nodded with a solemn expression, "I've also heard some rumors from previous channels... the Bug Race fleet seems to have some new movements recently. They're not staying put but moving toward nearby human-inhabited planets. Although this message is under wraps, those who should know definitely know. What does this imply? That the alliance, and countries like Huowali, their attention and main fleets are likely drawn or even lured away by the Bug Race! The fleet blockading us now might very well be their limit and possibly acting privately!"

This analysis revitalized the spirits within the command center.

If this is true, the Huowali Fleet itself is also under immense pressure.

They don't dare to truly start a full-scale war, fearing losses, post-conflict accountability from the alliance, and most of all, fear the Bug Race stealing their homeland.

They only wish to use minimal cost — blockade and intimidation — to compel Bai E to comply.

"So, if we can muster a sufficiently substantial mercenary force to break or disrupt their blockade, letting them see that forcibly seizing us incurs a cost far exceeding expectations, they will likely choose to relent or seek other dignified solutions," Catherine elaborated further.

"Yes," Black Beast nodded, "Whether 'Dusk' dares to take the job depending on if we can convince them of two points: First, we possess or have potential to pay; second, the Huowali Fleet doesn't dare or can't afford indiscriminate fighting. This requires negotiation."

Everyone's gaze focused again on Bai E.

Bai E pondered for a moment.

Black Beast's analysis made sense.

The behavior of the Huowali Fleet was inherently suspicious; encircling but not attacking, more akin to some extreme pressure blackmail.

The opponent has concerns, which is a flaw that can be exploited.

"Contact them," Bai E decided, "Black Beast, this task is yours to complete. Request any support you need directly. Catherine, cooperate with her, we need to show them our 'potential' — the trade contracts of Golden Swallow, our preliminary integration of the Mine Star, future development plans, and even... the Bauhinia Republic's possible legal position in the Star Alliance, can all be used as bargaining chips."

He looked at Xu Ruoguang: "The Seventh Legion maintains maximum alert, defensive formations must not be disordered. Meanwhile, have the people below strengthen appeasement and propaganda to the miners, assuring them that the blockade is temporary, we have ways to resolve it, and to stay calm."

"Yes!" Everyone responded in unison.

Black Beast took the order and immediately began preparations to contact "Dusk."

This required secret communication channels and reliable intermediaries, fortunately, she had mingled in the pirate and gray zone circles for years, and had her own connections.

Meanwhile, in the distant starry sky, within the flagship "Iron Curtain Judge" of Huowali United States' second border patrol fleet, the atmosphere was equally tense.

Admiral Glen stood with his hands behind his back, staring at the tactical screen firmly locking on Mine Star, without a hint of relaxation on his face.

The lieutenant beside him quietly reported: "General, the transport ships of Golden Swallow Trading Company have been driven away. The external passage to the target planet has been completely cut off. Based on our monitoring, their internal reserves are estimated to last for three to four weeks maximum. Additionally, we've intercepted some of their internal encrypted communication fragments, decoded ones show they are trying to seek external help, possibly... mercenaries."

"Mercenaries?" Glen frowned, "Which company dares to intervene in disputes between sovereign nations?"

"Still unclear, the communication is very secret. But... if it's one of those top-tier, they might dare," the lieutenant spoke cautiously, "After all, our current mission... has not received formal authorization from the alliance."

This was Glen's current biggest concern.

Tu Ge returned to Huowali with the "injustice" claim from Gray Ridge Mine and the report on Bai E as an unstable factor, indeed attracting interest from certain factions within the country — especially the military and some expansionist forces.

Chapter 967 - Bug Race Progress

Bai E's display of personal strength and the mine star he occupied were both worth the effort.

However, they knew that, in essence, this was about seizing the opportunity ahead of other forces in the alliance, especially the Thousand Stars Commerce Alliance, to take control of the "former alliance country's" remaining assets and simultaneously take control of a dangerous individual.

Normally, the alliance might turn a blind eye, but the procedures had to be followed properly, and one couldn't act too brazenly.

But these were unusual times.

The appearance of the Bug Race fleet and that crushing defeat shook the entire leadership of the Peak Alliance, causing internal discord and diverting their strength.

Even worse, the latest intelligence indicated that those massive Bug Race bioships hadn't stayed put but instead started moving towards several populated planets on the alliance's edge, with unclear intentions!

What does that mean?

It means the Bug Race threat is no longer a distant "issue" that can be slowly discussed but is instead an imminent invasion that could cause billions of casualties!

Relying on technological research for now isn't feasible; the attention and elite fleets of all alliance member states must prioritize the Bug Race.

Who would care about the "property dispute" and "talent acquisition" happening on a remote mine star?

This was considered a "window of opportunity" by certain forces within Huowali.

They sent Glen leading a fleet intending to take advantage of the alliance's distraction, thus capturing the mine star and Bai E quickly and at a minimal cost.

If Bai E wisely surrendered, that would be ideal; if not, they would suppress him by force under the guise of "combating illegal armed forces and maintaining stability within the alliance territory," then fill out the necessary procedures afterward, making the situation irreversible.

The plan was good, but when it came to execution, they hit a hard snag.

Bai E's unexpectedly tough stance raised the event from an "internal dispute" to "national aggression" by invoking the Bauhinia Republic's sovereignty claim.

If Huowali acts by force under such a pretext, it would be hard to explain to the alliance later, especially once the Bug Race crisis subsides and the alliance refocuses on internal affairs.

Adding to Glen's pressure were messages from back home indicating increased panic due to the Bug Race fleet movements, with the alliance preparing to organize a larger joint fleet, requesting military contributions from each member state.

Huowali's main fleet was likely to be deployed away.

This border patrol fleet he led could be recalled or ordered to reinforce at any moment.

When that happens, what about the mission?

Abandon it halfway? The bigwigs back home pushing for this won't agree.

Continue the blockade? The longer it drags on, the more variables arise, such as... the opponent bringing in reckless mercenaries to mess things up.

"Continue the blockade and maintain high pressure." Glen finally ordered, his voice carrying a hint of fatigue, "Intensify surveillance on all incoming and outgoing routes, especially those involving unidentified vessels. Also... find a way to communicate further with home; we need more explicit authorization, or... a more flexible bottom line for handling the situation."

He looked out through the porthole at the gray-brown planet, his gaze complex.

This seemingly unimportant mine star had now turned into a hot potato.

Meanwhile, on the mine star, the Black Beast had contacted a "Dusk" liaison point nearby through multiple relays.

The communication connected, and a low, emotionless male voice came through: "State your purpose, assess the risk, and price."

The Black Beast took a deep breath and began to explain, following the agreed narrative with Bai E and Catherine:

"We need to break the blockade of a sovereign fleet over the planet. The opponent is the Huowali United States' second border patrol fleet, consisting of two battleships and six frigates. The goal isn't annihilation but to create enough chaos and deterrence to force them to lift the blockade or retreat."

"The target planet is a mining planet claiming independence, possessing some defensive power and future development potential. The employer is the planet's actual controller with a long-term trade contract with Golden Swallow Trading Company and... a possible legal path to restore national sovereignty in the Star Alliance. Payment methods can be pre-paid minerals, future trade splits, or assisting your side in obtaining certain 'special conveniences.'"

"As for risks: Huowali's fleet operation didn't gain full authorization from the alliance, which is currently focused primarily on the Bug Race. The chance of the other side escalating the conflict or starting a full-scale war with your side is assessed as moderately low by us. But there are subsequent political and diplomatic risks."

The other side fell silent for so long that the Black Beast thought they had hung up.

Finally, the male voice spoke again with a hint of interest: "Interesting. Send over information and preliminary proof of intent. We need to assess on-site. If feasible... the price will be high, potentially beyond what you can afford. But we accept diverse payments."

The communication ended.

The Black Beast exhaled and looked at Catherine and Bai E beside him: "They're interested. Next, it's about getting them to assess on-site and what price we can actually offer."

The opportunity to break the blockade seemed to have a glimmer of hope.

But how to seize it, how to deal with a group of war profiteers skirting the edge of the law without being backfired remained a huge test ahead.

...

Xing Zhuo had been keeping an eye on the mine star.

Upon learning of the Huowali United States fleet surrounding the mine star, he immediately realized this was an opportunity—

Chapter 968 - Bug Race Progression (2)

A chance to possibly persuade Bai E.

He understands better than anyone the severe test the Alliance is currently facing.

The Bug Race fleet that crushed the joint fleet did not remain in place.

And it's far more than what most Alliance member states understand—

They are not just a threat, but in a surprise action that caught everyone off guard, they brazenly devoured a colonial planet at the edge of an Alliance member state!

Billions of people, countless basic infrastructures, the efforts of several generations, turned into cosmic dust in just a few days.

The news has been temporarily suppressed by the top levels of the Alliance, not fully disclosed to avoid triggering panic and chaos throughout the Stellar District.

But all senior officials who know the inside story are already anxious.

Panic spreads like a plague in the shadow of the highest council.

Those council members who still held some illusion about the "Divine Fragment" weapon development have had their confidence shattered by the cruel reality—

Development is far off, and the Bug Race has already violently embedded its bloody fangs into human territory.

The representative of the member state whose colony star was devoured almost wanted to overturn the table at the informal closed-door meeting, were it not for several lead council members suppressing him with the promise that the Alliance would definitely provide an explanation and organize a larger-scale counterattack to keep the news from leaking out.

The situation is dire to the extreme.

The threat of the Bug Race is no longer just the cold numbers of casualties on a report but a butcher's knife hovering over every member state's head, ready to fall at any moment.

Under such enormous pressure, the Alliance must re-examine all possible response plans.

The name "Bai E," the only expert who successfully executed a decapitation operation inside the Bug Race fleet and was strongly emphasized in Xing Zhuo's report, was once again brought to the forefront.

Despite the fact that within the Alliance, especially the three giants and many proud officers, there is not much hope placed on this, thinking it absurd to rely on an individual, but in a dead-end situation, any straw might be grasped.

Xing Zhuo knows this is his opportunity and also a task he must complete.

He knows more clearly that once Bai E indeed achieves success in the fight against the Bug Race, even partial success, his prestige within the Alliance will be unmatched.

By then, even if the three giants want to suppress and block him like before, those Alliance member states overshadowed by the Bug Race, fearing their land might be next, will unite to push Bai E to a high position in exchange for his protection.

Bai E and the Bauhinia Republic will truly gain unstoppable development space.

With this complex and urgent mood, Xing Zhuo's spacecraft quietly arrived at the outskirts of Mine Star.

He avoided the tightest surveillance areas of the Huowali Fleet and sent a landing request through a pre-established secret communication channel with Bai E.

Mine Star Command Center.

"Xing Zhuo requests landing." Catherine looked at the communication, her expression subtle, "He's coming at this time..."

"Let him come down," Bai E said calmly.

He vaguely guessed Xing Zhuo's intentions.

Soon, Xing Zhuo's shuttle landed on a hastily built simple landing platform in the mining area.

Compared to the once spirited Xing Zhuo at the Thousand Stars Commerce Alliance port, he now seemed weathered, with anxiety and fatigue lurking deep in his eyes.

But in front of Bai E, that seriousness and earnestness were more evident than ever before.

Without pleasantries, Xing Zhuo didn't even acknowledge Catherine and Victor, who were watching him cautiously, and said directly to Bai E: "We need to talk alone, the situation... is very serious."

In a room temporarily cleared out, only Bai E and Xing Zhuo were present.

"Huowali's people are surrounding you, but I know they don't dare to really move, at least not now," Xing Zhuo said directly, his voice heavy, "because they themselves aren't clean, and moreover... the Alliance is too occupied to care about such 'small matters' now."

He looked at Bai E, his gaze sharp and weighted: "The Bug Race fleet made a move, they've devoured an edge colony star of the 'Lorraine Unity,' billions of people, gone. The news is suppressed, but those who should know, know. The parliament is a mess now, with fear more than anger. The weapon development of the 'Divine Fragment'... slow progress, unreliable."

"So they thought of me again?" Bai E's tone was flat, revealing no emotion.

"I thought of you, and reality forced them to consider all possibilities."

Xing Zhuo didn't deny, he leaned slightly forward, his tone carrying unprecedented earnestness, even a trace of pleading, "Mr. Bai Er, I know you're committed to rebuilding the Bauhinia and have your plans, refusing to be controlled by others. But the current situation... is different now. The threat of the Bug Race is tangible and destructive, they won't stop. If they continue devouring human planets, it's not just the Bauhinia, the entire Alliance, even human civilization in this Stellar District may face an existential crisis!"

"I refused you last time, and as a result, your joint fleet was defeated," Bai E reminded.

"Exactly because of that!" Xing Zhuo's voice suddenly rose, filled with suppressed pain and defeat, "We were wrong! Terribly wrong! Those officers, those council members, they are still living in the arrogance of the past, thinking that large ships and cannons can solve everything! But the Bug Race... they are a different level of threat. We need different thinking, need people who understand them, need... you."

He took a deep breath, almost exerting all his strength to say, "I represent... at least represent those in the Alliance who realize the seriousness of the problem, officially requesting you to act. Not recruitment, not employment, it's cooperation, it's asking you to fight for humanity's living space. As long as you're willing, I can go persuade the parliament, mobilize all resources to support you, provide fleets, intelligence, logistics for your battle with the Bug Race... even if it's just as a platform."

"What's the condition?" Bai E asked.

"There are no rigid conditions." Xing Zhuo shook his head, "Or rather, the condition is—please fight against the Bug Race. As for what degree you can achieve, the Alliance will give corresponding rewards. If you can achieve results again... your prestige will be unmatched, the support you wish for the Bauhinia's recovery will be unimaginable. Those countries threatened by the Bug Race will see you as hope, they will become your natural allies, by then, even the three of our giants... won't be able to suppress you."

This is the greatest sincerity Xing Zhuo gives, and also the most unvarnished analysis based on reality.

He no longer mentions recruitment and conditions but lays out the tremendous political capital Bai E might gain—

Returning as a savior, he will gain support from those countries in fear, which will be a more solid foundation than any promise from the giants.

Bai E was silent for a moment. The news Xing Zhuo brought confirmed some of his suspicions, the threat of the Bug Race is escalating, and his identity as the "Insect Race Killer" is destined not to remain uninvolved.

More importantly, the prospect depicted by Xing Zhuo... indeed offered him a shortcut to rapidly develop and break the current impasse.

Gaining support from many Alliance member states, even just moral and support, can greatly alleviate the external pressure on Bauhinia's rebuilding.

"Huowali's fleet is still surrounding outside," Bai E said.

"I'll go talk to them," Xing Zhuo immediately said, "Give me authorization, I'll see their commander. Huowali domestically is also in chaos now, the Bug Race's movements have frightened them, this fleet might soon be redeployed. I'll apply pressure, make them lift the blockade, at least not act rashly."

"Can you do that?"

"We'll see. As the chief of the Thousand Stars Commerce Alliance, and... as an envoy from the Alliance." A gleam flashed in Xing Zhuo's eyes, "Their actions this time aren't compliant, now the Bug Race's threat is looming, any internal conflict is foolish. I can use this to pressure them."

"Alright." Bai E nodded, "Go talk. But I want to make something clear: I'm going to deal with the Bug Race not for the Alliance, not for anyone. I'm just going to... kill them."

Chapter 969 Conflict

"Furthermore, I don't require the command of the alliance fleet. All I need is intelligence, supply channels, and a certain level of military support when necessary. The specific action plan will be decided by me."

"Agreed!" Xing Zhuo responded without hesitation, "I can negotiate all of this!"

Xing Zhuo's shuttle ascended once again; this time, he flew directly towards the Huowali Fleet flagship "Iron Curtain Judge".

In the heavily guarded bridge meeting room, Xing Zhuo met Admiral Glen.

He came straight to the point and stated his identity and purpose directly.

"Admiral Glen, I am Xing Zhuo of the Thousand Stars Commerce Alliance. I am also entrusted by the Alliance Emergency Affairs Committee to handle matters related to the Mine Star. You must have heard my name."

Xing Zhuo's tone carried an undeniable official authority, "The military actions taken by Huowali United States this time were not fully reported to the alliance. Imposing a blockade on a political entity claiming sovereignty is already a violation of the basic guidelines of the alliance, articles seven and sixteen. Especially at the critical moment when the Bug Race threat is escalating, and the alliance demands all

member nations concentrate their forces to combat a common enemy, such behavior is an extremely irresponsible internal friction!"

Admiral Glen's face turned ugly: "Committee member Xing Zhuo, we received legitimate reports from our citizens..."

"Citizen reports should go through arbitration procedures, not deploy fleets for a quasi-war-level blockade!" Xing Zhuo interrupted him, his tone even harsher, "The news of Lorin Colony Star being devoured has surely reached your nation's leadership. The Bug Race's blade is already against each of our throats! The alliance is organizing a new round of united action; all member states' military forces should prioritize compliance with the alliance's overall strategy! I demand that Huowali's second border patrol fleet immediately lift the blockade on the Mine Star and return to domestic airspace or accept unified command by the alliance. Otherwise, I will formally propose interrogations and sanction motions to the Supreme Council under the name of hindering the alliance's collective defense!"

Cold sweat appeared on Admiral Glen's forehead.

Xing Zhuo invoked the alliance's righteousness and the Bug Race threat to directly point out the illegality and timing errors of their actions.

Moreover, domestic news indeed called for them to "exercise restraint" and "await further instructions." Clearly, the higher-ups were also wary of the alliance's reactions and the unpredictability posed by the Bug Race.

"Committee member Xing Zhuo, this matter involves significant rights of our citizens..." Glen struggled.

"Citizen rights can be resolved later through the Arbitration Court of the alliance." Xing Zhuo pressed further, "But if your blockade results in hindering the alliance's critical action against the Bug Race or exacerbates internal conflicts, can you or even your nation bear this responsibility? Think of the devoured Lorin Colony Star!"

This final statement hit Admiral Glen's psychological defense like a heavy blow.

His face changed, and finally, he gritted his teeth and said, "I need to consult with domestic authorities."

"Please do so. But my demands won't change, and time... stands with no one who delays." Xing Zhuo said coldly.

Admiral Glen's consultation did not receive immediate feedback from the domestic side.

In the agony of waiting, Xing Zhuo's final result was a polite but firm refusal from the other party.

"Committee member Xing Zhuo." Upon meeting again, Glen's face was even more somber than before, clearly under significant pressure from domestic hardliners or forces behind Tu Ge, "Our nation's leadership has concluded that this action is a necessary measure to safeguard our citizens' legitimate rights and stabilize the alliance's Edge Star Domain. The Bug Race threat is indeed severe, but the alliance has not officially issued a mandatory directive for all member state fleets to follow unified command. Before the Arbitration Court of the alliance makes a final ruling on the Gray Ridge Mine property, our fleet will continue to execute 'alert and Order maintenance' tasks in the relevant airspace to prevent the situation from escalating due to the presence of illegal armed forces."

He paused and added: "Of course, we are not unreasonable. As long as the Mine Star is willing to show sincerity, like allowing our observers to settle in and temporarily setting aside its unlawful 'sovereign claim', everything can be negotiated. The blockade... can also be relaxed depending on the circumstances."

This was effectively asking the Mine Star to accept supervision and the de facto transfer of sovereignty, without any substantial difference from the previous demands, only changed in wording.

Xing Zhuo's expression instantly turned extremely ugly.

He knew that certain forces within Huowali were determined to seize this opportunity, and the external pressure from the Bug Race made them more eager to quickly solve "internal issues" and gain practical benefits.

"Admiral Glen, you're playing with fire!" Xing Zhuo suppressed his anger.

"Duty calls." Glen diverted his gaze, saying no more.

"You..."

When Xing Zhuo met Bai E, his face was filled with defeat and apology.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bai E. I... couldn't persuade them. The people of Huowali are adamant, and there seems to be a significant force in their country determined to leverage the pressure from the Bug Race to achieve 'results' here as soon as possible."

He worried that Bai E might refuse to intervene against the Bug Race due to his "incompetence," which would be disastrous.

However, Bai E's reaction surprised him.

"No worries." Bai E's tone remained calm, without much disappointment, "I never placed all my hopes on your negotiations anyway."

He looked at Xing Zhuo, his gaze deep: "The news about the Bug Race devouring the Colony Star is enough for me. This isn't for the alliance, nor for anyone's request. Those bugs... are my enemies by nature, and I have a responsibility to eliminate them."

Chapter 970 Conflict (Part 2)

From bearing the title of "Insect Race Killer" to perceiving the psychic pull of the Bug Race because of him, Bai E knew that there was an indelible connection between himself and this race.

Escape is not an option; only by facing it, and even eliminating the source of the threat, can true peace be achieved.

Xing Zhuo was stunned; he hadn't expected Bai E to say such a thing.

It wasn't based on an exchange of interests, nor was it forced by circumstances.

Rather, it was a near-instinctual assumption of responsibility by the strong.

Previous statements might have been intended to persuade him to mediate more earnestly, but now, after his failure to persuade, he still willing to take responsibility — that was the true intention.

This sense of responsibility made Xing Zhuo feel not only ashamed but also deeply respected.

"Then you..." Xing Zhuo began but stopped.

"The Bug Race, I will handle it," Bai E gave a definitive answer, "But how to handle it and when to handle it is for me to decide. What you need to do is to provide me with the latest detailed intelligence on the movements of the Bug Race fleet as much as possible, and... when I need it, coordinate a safe supply and passage route for me. As for the Huowali Fleet..."

A cold glint flashed in his eyes: "If they want to encircle, let them encircle first."

While Xing Zhuo was negotiating, two unmarked, dimly painted ships, shaped unobtrusively like asteroids, quietly appeared in the shadow of the asteroid belt at the far edge of Mine Star.

They evaded the main surveillance direction of the Huowali fleet, approaching with an almost perfect stealth posture.

"They've arrived." Black Beast, having received the encrypted signal early, said to Bai E and Catherine, "The expedition team from 'Dusk'. They request to first see the 'goods'— namely, our Mine Star and its development potential, before deciding whether to take the order and at what price."

Bai E nodded: "Let them land, we'll go meet them."

...

Outside the basic mining area.

The spaceship's hatch opened.

The first to step out were not fully armed warriors, but several people dressed in dark gray uniforms, with a sharp demeanor akin to engineers or analysts.

Their eyes were sharp, quickly scanning the surroundings like a scanner: a rudimentary but reinforcing residential area, a preliminarily planned functional area, a miner self-defense team under training, and defensive works faintly visible in the distance in the mining area.

Leading them was a middle-aged man with a stern face and a thin scar at the corner of his eye, who introduced himself as "Gray Falcon", the leader of this 'Dusk' expedition.

Black Beast accompanied them, introducing the general situation of Mine Star.

The assessment was fast and straightforward.

Gray Falcon and his team primarily inspected the production of the mining area, examined several main ships seized from pirates and currently being refitted, and gained a general understanding of the current predicament of Mine Star—

The blockade by the Huowali Fleet, and Bai E's identity and potential as the "Bauhinia Inheritor."

"The potential is not bad." In a temporarily arranged meeting room, Gray Falcon gave an initial evaluation, his voice calm and unemotional.

"Though the location is remote, it holds a certain strategic depth value. The leader... has courage and strength. But the problem is, you are very poor right now, extremely poor. You can't afford our conventional commissions."

He paused and raised two fingers: "We at 'Dusk' can offer two cooperation models. First, a war commission. We will deploy a task force sufficient to break the current blockade and exert sustained harassment pressure on the Huowali Fleet, ensuring the smooth flow of your supply line and forcing the other party to reconsider the cost of besiegement. The quote... is this number."

He entered a number on the data pad and pushed it over.

It was an astronomical figure enough to bankrupt a small country; even if converted to minerals, it would take Mine Star decades to mine.

The expressions of Black Beast and Catherine, who accompanied him, changed.

"The second option." Gray Falcon continued as if not seeing their expressions, "Technical equity. We can invest in building a medium-small 'arsenal' and accompanying defense system on your planet. We provide technology, core equipment, some senior technicians and security forces; you provide land, basic labor force, some raw materials, and enjoy a portion of the future factory's output. Meanwhile, as the investor, we will be responsible for resolving your current blockade issue—this is a necessary measure to protect our assets."

"What's the cost?" Catherine asked.

"The decision-making and control rights of the factory belong to us." Gray Falcon bluntly stated, "You will enjoy dividends and priority procurement rights for some products, but what to produce, technical core, and sales channels will be decided by us. This is equivalent to... you ceding part of your sovereignty and future military industry autonomy in exchange for our protection and initial development assistance."

These two options, one absurdly expensive and the other involving ceding core interests.

The atmosphere in the meeting room was somewhat grave.

Just then, a commotion and clashing metal sounds came from outside.

A soldier from the Seventh Legion hurried in to report: "My lord! The escorts from 'Dusk' got into a conflict with our people in the outer training ground! It seems because their people were pointing fingers at our training methods and... and mocking our equipment as junk!"

Gray Falcon frowned slightly, looking at Catherine: "I'll handle it."

"Let's go together." Catherine stood up.

At the edge of the training ground, two groups were confronting each other.

On one side were several guards dressed in 'Dusk' standard light battle armor, with defiant eyes.

The other side was led by Victor, comprising a dozen veterans from the Seventh Legion and key members of the miner self-defense team, all flushed and clearly angry.

Several pieces of training equipment lay scattered on the ground.

"What's going on?" Gray Falcon asked coldly.

A 'Dusk' guard shrugged: "Boss, we were just watching their training, said 'this outdated formation and equipment might work against pirates, but against a regular army, it's suicidal', and these guys got agitated, even wanted to fight."

Victor retorted angrily: "Nonsense! What do you know? This was developed from actual combat experience! What gives you the right to criticize?"

"Actual combat? Against pirates?" another 'Dusk' guard sneered, "Frog in a well, if you don't like it, let's fight instead of flapping your jaws here."

"Fight it is, who's afraid of you?!"

Gray Falcon frowned, "Old Sang, restrain yourself."

Though he said that, he didn't make any further moves, as if a bit indulgent.

Catherine observed him from the side, feeling this conflict didn't seem accidental...

Are they doing it on purpose? Wanting to show their strength?

Thinking this, she instinctively turned to look at Black Beast.

They were people she brought in, perhaps she knew better.

Yet when she met Black Beast's gaze, it was filled with the same worry.

"They always act tough... although they do have the qualifications to be tough," Black Beast muttered softly.

'It seems so,' Catherine thought tensely.

She actually wanted Victor to teach the other side a lesson, but the current situation was likely more advantageous to the other party.

The scene was momentarily stagnant, but the tension between Victor and the opposing guards was growing, appearing ready to explode at any moment.

Yet a calm voice somehow appeared in the scene, instantly suppressing the almost full-blown fighting intent.

"What are you all doing here?"

An invisible, mountain-heavy Spiritual Energy pressure quietly descended, precisely enveloping those 'Dusk' guards and the most agitated Victor and others in the center of the conflict.

Instantly, everyone felt as though they were frozen, unable to move a finger, unable to utter a sound from their open mouths, their eyes only revealing an expression of extreme shock and fear.

They felt as though thrown into the deep sea, surrounded by boundless pressure, even their thoughts growing sluggish.