

48 Hours 591

Chapter 591 Behavioral Pattern

Zhang Heng sped forward in the X3. It was almost 11 p.m now, and few pedestrians and vehicles were on the road. Besides, this place was relatively rural as well. Otherwise, if Zhang Heng were here during the rush hour, he would be forced to be stuck in a traffic jam even if his driving skills were good.

As he drove on, Zhang Heng observed the Sphinx running behind the X3 through the rearview mirror. So far, about 200m separated the two parties, a relatively good distance to keep an eye on the Sphinx, yet ensure it would not get lost. This time, Rabbit could clearly feel the X3 going faster, then slowing down again, and Zhang Heng even made sharp turns from time to time.

Fortunately, Rabbit did not suffer from motion sickness or she would have vomited all over the windshield. Finally, when Zhang Heng turned to another road, Rabbit could not help but blurt, "Brother Simon, I know that you drive real good, but we don't have to keep drifting do we? Even if we're on a straight road now, I don't think it can catch up with us." "Oh, I'm just testing something out," replied Zhang Heng.

"What are you testing?"

"Have you read the story of the Sphinx?"

Rabbit nodded, "I believe I've heard of it in reading comprehension in junior high school. I read about it again online for this operation. Why do you ask?"

"Whether Egyptian or Greek mythology, they both agreed that the Sphinx was a highly intelligent species, and its intelligence far exceeded that of an average human. More precisely, they were comparable to a human genius."

"You are right." Rabbit thought for a while.

"But this Sphinx that appeared out of nowhere does not seem to be able to communicate with people. In the three previous attacks published on the forum, the Sphinx just asked the riddles, waited for the answers, and punished those who failed to solve the riddle. However, in the first and second attacks, both victims did try to communicate with the Sphinx. However, the Sphinx seemed to be unable to communicate with them."

"Exactly! Everything I said was regarded as an answer! It caused me to make two mistakes," lamented Rabbit as she recalled what happened earlier. "The Sphinx was completely immersed in its own world. It gave no response when Black Swan raised her tranquilizer gun to shoot it."

"Its behavioral pattern is fixed, and it looks programmed to perform only certain tasks. What did you think it was?"

"Uh... what?"

"AI." Zhang Heng said. Having learned to program when he was in the Whistleblower quest, he was very sensitive to issues like this. This Sphinx's current behavior was the result of high-level programming.

When Zhang Heng was waiting in the car earlier, he made a Baidu search for the three riddles concocted by the Sphinx. He found out that all those riddles came from a children's book called The Encyclopedia of Riddles.

"Do you think the Sphinx we came across... was actually an intelligent robot in disguise?" Rabbit was shocked.

"It's a low-level AI, but its combat effectiveness is decent," Zhang Heng said.

In fact, Zhang Heng had a similar conjecture after reading up information on the Sphinx on the forum. He could not confirm his speculation at that time, but this time, after Rabbit had taken a considerable risk, the opportunity to prove his theory had finally arrived. Before this, he had deliberately changed the X3's speed to test if the Sphinx had a fixed behavioral logic.

"No wonder you asked Xixi to prepare a stun gun. But is it effective against it?"

"Its external defense is indeed solid, but if this thing is really a robot, then its internals must contain a circuit board. It would be composed of copper foil. When a high-voltage stun gun hits it, it will produce a heavy discharge, and the electronic components within it can be destroyed easily," explained Zhang Heng explained.

But just as the two were talking, Zhang Heng noticed that the Sphinx had stopped chasing them.

It squatted in the middle of the road, quietly watching the X3 pulling away. Just when Zhang Heng hesitated whether or not to stop the car, the Sphinx suddenly spread out its wings, slowly taking into the skies.

Rabbit was shocked at the sight. "Didn't you say that its behavioral pattern is fixed?"

"It seems that since it could catch up with us, some hidden conditions must have been triggered. A new set of behavioral patterns must've kicked in." Zhang Heng did not deliberately slow down this time. No one on the forum had seen Sphinx flying before, and no one knew what sort of abilities it possessed at this stage. Since this was the Sphinx's trump card, Zhang Heng would definitely not underestimate it.

Zhang Heng did not care whether the Sphinx would fail to catch up with them, stepping on the gas even harder than it was designed to. Unfortunately, the increased speed of the X3 was unable to draw a wedge between the two. The flying Sphinx was now twice as fast as when it was on the ground, not to mention how it could bypass many obstructive buildings as well.

Zhang Heng then turned on the walkie-talkie and said to Shen Xixi, "Are you ready over there?"

"Only three minutes had passed. We are not done with the preparation yet. What's the matter?" Shen Xixi asked. "Then you'd better prepare within two minutes," Zhang Heng glanced at the watch on his waist, "because our opponent tonight has activated its flight mode."

Shen Xixi reacted quickly, "With the wings on its back?"

"That's right."

"Okay, please be careful too. And if possible, try to lower its altitude. If it flies too high, the stun gun won't reach it," exhorted Shen Xixi.

“I will try my best.”

After Zhang Heng and Shen Xixi had finished speaking, they noticed that the Sphinx was only less than a hundred meters away from them, which was faster than Zhang Heng expected.

Zhang Heng then said to Rabbit next to him, “Fasten your seat belt; the next section of the road may be very bumpy.”

Before Zhang Heng finished his sentence, he had already made a sharp turn and sped into the bushes by the roadside. Once the X3 came out from the bush, it abruptly switched to another road and drove into an underground tunnel.

After losing the speed advantage, the only way to gain the upper hand was by changing directions swiftly and abruptly. At the same time, he also needed to take advantage of the terrain. Before he went to rescue Rabbit, he had turned off the X3’s electronic stability system and switched the gear to manual mode.

While maneuvering the X3, he felt like he was back to the days of studying abroad in Tokyo.

He had pushed the X3 to its maximum speed, and the engine echoed its protest loudly in the tunnel.

“I hope there are speed traps in this tunnel.”

Chapter 592 Work of Art

The X3 went on a rampage, like a steel behemoth out of control.

Not only did Rabbit obediently fasten her seat belt, but she grabbed the handle until her knuckles became white and made sure to lean firmly on the seat. She felt as if she was riding a roller coaster in an amusement park.

As her surroundings continued to rotate, enlarge, then shrink in her field of vision, motion sickness began to swamp her. She had no idea how Zhang Heng managed to drive in this state, let alone handling the Sphinx in pursuit of them. Even though Zhang Heng employed every inch of skills he had, the Sphinx was closing up to the X3 little by little.

This was never a fair competition to boot. After the Sphinx entered flight mode, not only did its speed increase significantly, it now held the advantage of bypassing ground obstacles. Although Zhang Heng could rely on the nearby buildings to slow it down slightly, it still wasn’t an effective method to draw a reasonable distance between the creature and them.

Rabbit thought she could hear the sound of the Sphinx’s wings flapping.

Although Zhang Heng dodged its first attack by drifting the SUV, the monster accelerated laterally and landed on the window of the passenger’s side.

The Sphinx’s human face stuck to the glass; its beautiful but lifeless eyes stared right into Rabbit’s soul, making her wonder if she was in a horror movie. The Sphinx then raised its paw to the glass, and with a single tap, the tough laminated glass started to shatter.

Rabbit shrieked, fumbled with the seat belts, and fled to the rear compartment. Then, Zhang Heng's voice came into her ear.

"Do not move."

As he spoke, Zhang Heng pulled the car abruptly to the right, and the X3 was about to slam into a wall next to him. A second before car contacted wall, Zhang Heng pulled the car back towards the main road. At that moment, they were less than two centimeters from the wall.

The Sphinx, caught in the middle, flashed across the rearview mirror. Before it could smash the glass and attack Rabbit, it collided and was dragged along the wall. Sparks flew when its wings came in contact with the brick wall. Once again, this confirmed Zhang Heng's theory that the Sphinx was a robot.

When Rabbit saw the creature rolling on the ground, she finally let out a sigh of relief. "Did we kill it?" she asked Zhang Heng. "I don't think so," Zhang Heng replied, holding tightly to the steering wheel. At the same time, the Sphinx also reacted quickly. It started to wrap its body with its wings.

Zhang Heng figured that the Sphinx probably wasn't severely damaged from the collision earlier. Soon after that, Zhang Heng knew he was right when he saw the Sphinx getting up again from the rearview mirror. However, its left front leg was injured, and it had developed a limp. Unfortunately, that did not affect its ability to fly.

The Sphinx spread its wings again, catching up with the X3 in no time. After the collision, the passenger window was completely broken. A strong gust of wind hitting Rabbit's bangs made her nervous again. "What should we do?"

"Don't worry; hold on for a while. We will be there soon," replied Zhang Heng, glancing at his wristwatch. Although he was forced to reduce the preparation time from seven minutes to five, they still arrived at the rendezvous point 20 seconds before time.

Zhang Heng could only pray that Shen Xixi was ready to deal with the Sphinx. Not too long after it got back up, it flew and landed on the car's roof. To prevent the Sphinx from entering the vehicle through the broken window, Zhang Heng had to drive against the wall all the time. In the end, the Sphinx had to attempt to enter the car from the driver's window.

Zhang Heng reapplied the same technique and quickly steered the car against the wall. However, the Sphinx managed to escape thanks to the relatively large distance between the vehicle and the wall. In the end, the Sphinx attempted to breach the rear window. Now, interfering with its plan, was going to be a lot more complicated. Without any warning, Zhang Heng steered the X3 into the wall, crushing the Sphinx yet again.

Zhang Heng took advantage of this rare moment, stepped on the accelerator, and drove towards where Shen Xixi and others were without changing directions. At the same time, he turned on the intercom, "We are almost there. I hope you are ready."

"Roger that. Do you have a way to force the Sphinx to lower its flying height?" Shen Xixi asked.

"It's easy." Seeing that he had reached his destination, Zhang Heng stepped on the brakes and turned the steering wheel to park the X3 on the side of the road.

Then he saw a dark figure falling from the sky and leaped straight into the driver's window.

Zhang Heng's expression remained unchanged. He watched the Sphinx pounced at him, but before it broke the window, it was hit by something. At the same time, there was a blue electric current passing through his body. The high-pressure nitrogen in the magazine pushed out the two electrodes from the barrel and accurately hit the Sphinx's body.

Simultaneously, the battery in the gun barrel began to release high voltage electricity through the insulated copper wire. Everyone felt nervous, afraid that it would not work on the Sphinx. Fortunately, the stun gun worked on the Sphinx. The high-voltage electricity rendered the Sphinx paralyzed. As if the plug to its power source was pulled, it fell from the car window, motionless like a mannequin.

Shen Xixi was relieved when she saw that the Sphinx was defeated. Although Zhang Heng had not told her that the Sphinx could be a robot, Shen Xixi had already considered the possibility when he told her to use a stun gun.

Rabbit then got out of the car and watched 1810 and the others tie up the fainted Sphinx on the ground with an iron chain, thus declaring tonight's operation a victory.

"So the series of unfortunate events recently are not supernatural events?" Rabbit wondered.

"No," Shen Xixi shook her head. "Although it was programmed, it was not possible to invent such a robot that could perform such complicated actions with the current level of technology. "So, Xixi, think someone's behind it?" "That's for sure, but I don't know if it is a player or some other..."

Although the Sphinx had been apprehended, a frown still adorned Shen Xixi's brow.

"If you think about it carefully, this thing has not done anything except to make people solve its riddles at night."

"This is what I'm worried about the most. This thing is probably just a work of practice. We don't know if the person would come up with something more dangerous in the future."

Chapter 593 One More Time

"According to our agreement, this thing is now ours," 1810 said to Shen Xixi. "Be careful. Wherever it came from, it's packed with technology we don't understand. Its owner may be able to locate it somehow," Shen Xixi warned. "We're not kids; we don't need telling what to do." 1810 shot the man with the crossbow a look, who then helped carry the Sphinx into their van.

"It was good working with you. You have my number-call me when there's another job like this," said 1810.

After the other group left, Shen Xixi turned to Zhang Heng. "I don't know how to thank you. I never knew you were such an incredible driver. You did more than half the work tonight, and you should have a share, but I made a pact with 1810's team-as a reward for their participation in the operation, they get to keep the Sphinx. But I can make it up to you with 10 points, no, 15 points." Zhang Heng shook his head. "There's no need for that. Just pay for the traffic tickets we got tonight. Also, better remind those guys that although high voltage electricity can destroy the circuit board components, I don't think it can

be done through a shell. The Sphinx may be only temporarily disabled, more like overload protection of sorts." "I'll send 1810 a text, but he never liked people telling his team what to do. Not to mention, they are very experienced guys. They should be able to handle it," said Shen Xixi. "Let's hope that's the case."

The dinged and badly scraped X3 was now considerably damaged and if highway patrol were to spot it, it would definitely be flagged down for inspection. To avoid that, Shen Xixi ordered another car. "I'll send Rabbit home first, then return to school. Want to come with us?"

"It's alright. I need to do something. Got to go."

Zhang Heng looked at his watch. It was almost midnight.

He did not want to be sitting in a car when time stopped; he would have to return to the vehicle when the Time Stop ended, so he would instead figure out another way to get home.

Before he left, Rabbit gave him a hug, "Brother Simon, when are we going to do this again?"

"Didn't you almost throw up?"

"Well, now that it's all over, I think it was really cool. It was the most exciting ride of my life! When mum drives me to school, it feels like an old lady trying to cross the road."

"That is the right way to drive... Study hard for your college entrance examinations. If you pass, I'll drive you around a car park," said Zhang Heng. "That's a promise," Rabbit beamed.

In the van's co-drivers seat, 1810 had already gotten out of his protective suit and was lighting up a cigarette. His team members all looked pleased with the sight of the object chained up in the trunk. Their goal was simple: they joined the union to earn some extra money. Unfortunately, not long after, the union collapsed.

1810 supported Shen Xixi because the partnership system she devised to monitor unusual activities around the city coincided with their interests. Meanwhile, Shen Xixi and her team valued the problem-solving aspect more than the benefits. The two parties were different, but they were perfectly symbiotic, which was why 1810 regretted the union's dissolution. Nonetheless, it wasn't something a team as small as his should be worrying about.

The driver, who went by the name Mole, turned on the stereo and played an upbeat song. He looked at the rearview mirror. "Hey Black Swan, you should probably have enough points to buy that game item you wanted, eh?"

"Don't ever mention it again. It's infuriating. Another player bought the bracelet two days ago," answered Black Swan. The girl with the choker pulled a cigarette out of the box.

The guy next to her, who called himself Little Duck, immediately took out a lighter and eagerly lit her cigarette. "What grade do you think this item is?"

"This thing is not as tough as it looks. When the tranquilizer and captain's knife didn't work, I thought it would be challenging to beat. Then, it turned out to be just a machine. I'm guessing probably only F-grade, E-grade at the most," Black Swan went on.

“Ah, then if that’s the case, there’s not much point to it then,” said Yogurt, a girl who had been resting her eyes since they got on the van.

“At least we get to earn a little something this year...” Little Duck was the kind of person who was easily contended. “We rarely get jobs that aren’t risky.”

1810’s phone vibrated. He took one look at the screen and put it back into his pocket.

“Wife? Lover?” guessed Black Swan. “No, Wonder Woman. I thought that only older women nag, but it seems women of all ages do the same. She’s reminding me to be careful of that machine at the back and that it may only be in a temporary... what’s that word... overload protection.”

“No wonder she hasn’t had a boyfriend until now,” Yogurt joked.

The whole car dissolved into laughter. With the job done, the group was in a merry mood. They planned to head to a safe house about 30 kilometers away, where they would pick the machine apart and find the game item concealed within it.

Only 1810 wasn’t laughing. He turned to Black Swan. “But she does have a point. Just to be safe, turn on the signal inhibitors.”

“Alright, whatever you say.” Black Swan shrugged and turned on the jammer. Immediately, everyone in the van lost their mobile signals.

“Is the chain fastened?” 1810 asked Mole again.

“One hundred percent. Its limbs and wings are chained to the trunk so it can’t fly.”

1810 turned to Little Duck, taking out a TASER. It crackled and popped with a menacing sizzle. “If there are any unusual movements, I will make sure it returns to overload protection.”

“Very good. We have to be extra careful when we deal with supernatural events.”

As soon as 1810 finished talking, Black Swan chortled. “Why? Is there a problem?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you criticized other people for being garrulous, but you are even more long-winded. As you said, we are not children anymore. We have completed more than ten quests—so trust us. We have enough experience and skills to do our jobs well.” “You’re better off worrying about your daughter’s junior high school entrance examination.” Black Swan blew a smoke ring, giggling

Chapter 594 Being Serious

After dealing with the Sphinx, Zhang Heng called for a taxi to head back to campus. Things could get awkward if time stopped while he was on the subway. The feeling of being locked in the carriage was the worst. It happened that his Polo was not with him during that time, and it seemed that his only choice of mobility was this carbon-neutral, environmentally-friendly means of transportation. It was a modest effort from him in an attempt to lower urban pollution.

It was the early hours of the morning, and vehicles and pedestrians on the streets were sparse. Due to the time stop, the whole road looked like a stage play waiting to happen, exacerbated by the street lights projecting a beam on the spot. When Zhang Heng shuttled through it, he felt like an actor,

performing on a different stage. In fact, he had been living like an actor recently. Because of his time bug, his gaming duration was often several times that of others. Each round was more like a whole lifetime for him from a nameless desert island to the remote Caribbean Sea, to gloomy 19th century London and a chaotic Kyoto at the end of the shogunate. He would usually play different roles in different quests.

To this day, all the game time he accumulated exceeded even his age. Sometimes, Zhang Heng would experience a momentary trance when he opened his eyes in bed, not knowing where he was and where his next journey would take him.

He became a NASA astronaut, was a pirate king of Nassau, a geek in the future world, and even a rookie wondering ancient Kyoto... Miss Bartender once said that experience and lessons were things that made us who we were today. Although it had been less than a year since he joined this magical and mysterious game, he was now completely different from who he was a year ago. These changes were not just about a series of high-level skills to display on his skill bar or even those strange and useful game items. His soul had also grown a lot-every choice he made in every round of game had drawn him closer to his true self.

However, this 'true self' was making Zhang Heng feel more and more alien. His bicycle was parked in front of a stationery store, and he looked at his reflection on the glass door. A few months ago, he had noticed the changes on his face. Although it seemed no different from before, he suddenly realized that he looked grumpy all the time. Previously, it wasn't that obvious. It wasn't until his observation ability had reached a new level after the Deductive Reasoning quest that he could finally see where that grumpiness came from.

His skin, features, eyebrows, and hair were all the same as before, except for one thing that was slowly fading away-his feelings.

Zhang Heng and Shen Xixi once briefly talked about it before. As the players progressed more profound into the game, they would begin to go through a process of awakening. And when life itself hung on the very balance, they would thus free themselves from the shackles civilized society tied them in; primal instinct would be released, gradually revealing the bottom of their hearts. However, all Zhang Heng could see was mist, a mist of nothingness.

And there seemed to be something waiting for him behind the mist, calling out for him.

It was like the end of all stories.

Zhang Heng's mind told him that he should stop moving forward. However, he did not sense any threat from the being behind the fog. On the contrary, he felt an inexplicable sense of intimacy, as if he was going home.

At that time, Zhang Heng knew that a trip to Greenland had to be on his plan as soon as possible.

After returning to school, Zhang Heng first took a cold shower, then headed to the gym for his daily training. After the break, he read a book in the library for a while until time began to flow again. Heading to the parking lot, he sorted out his game items in the trunk and drove to Miss Bartender.

"These belonged to Arc of Light's guys. I still remember this flashlight. I just identified it not long ago. It seemed you had a good yield that night."

"How many points are these items worth?"

"There is a C-level item among it, which is very valuable. If you put it up for auction, it can go for 2,000 to 3,000 game points. However, if you mortgage it, you'll probably get 1,600 points. The other game items can be sold for around seven to eight hundred game points each."

Zhang Heng now had 1,000 game points with him. Besides, he had killed a small team of players because of Han Lu's affairs. The items that he got from them were placed at Fan Meinan's place temporarily, and it should be enough if he added the value of those.

"I guess I have to wait a while before I earn those final seven hundred game points," Zhang Heng said.

"No problem. Anyway, it takes almost a month to cast the blade. You can pay the balance after it is done." It was rare that the bartender actually said something right. It was probably because she was not the one earning that money.

"Thank you," Zhang Heng said. When he was about to leave the game checkpoint, the bartender smiled and said, "Since you are here, have a drink first."

After finishing talking, she made a glass of Martini as quickly as possible for Zhang Heng. This time, he did not mess around.

Zhang Heng sat down in front of the bar, "You look happy. Did something good happen to you recently?"

"Hmm, you are right," the bartender smiled slyly. "Have I told you that I've been waiting for someone? Recently, I received news that that person is coming back soon."

"Who? Is this person your fiancé?" Zhang Heng took a sip of Martini and asked.

"He is much more important than my fiancé!"

This was Zhang Heng's first time seeing the bartender so excited. She looked like one of those female fans obsessed with their internet idols. She was basically worshipping the person. "He is my master, my belief, and the meaning of my existence!"

"Sounds like a powerful man... Is he the master behind this game?" Zhang Heng guessed.

"No, he doesn't have much interest in games or anything. He is the real thing. That's why I admire him so much," the bartender gushed.

"That must be a pretty cool guy," Zhang Heng figured that the man that the bartender was waiting for was not a human being. The person was at least on the same level as the old man in the Tang suit and the Einstein that he met. Since the bartender refused to elaborate on the matter, Zhang Heng didn't pursue the matter. He then drank down the Martini in one gulp, wiped his mouth, and put the empty glass on the table, "In that case, I wish you good luck."

“Good luck to you too,” replied the bartender. “I got news that the proxy war will start in at most half a month. Your showtime is coming.”

Chapter 595 Chewing Tobacco and Horseshoe

Zhang Heng only took a day off before returning to the game checkpoint. Although the proxy war would not start until half a month later, he still had to complete a quest before that.

At the same time and seat, Zhang Heng laid on the sofa and put the alarm clock on his chest.

(Verifying player identity.)

[Verification completed, the eighth game is being drawn randomly for player 07958...]

[Drawing completed-Current quest is Chewing Tobacco and Horseshoe]

“Unimaginable wealth is buried in the west. Here, you can get 160 acres of land for only \$10. No matter where you come from and what past you have, you can start a new life here. However, this wealth is accompanied by countless threats. Remember, only the toughest and strongest can survive on this land and be nurtured by it...”

[Task objective: settle in Lincoln County and find the lucky horseshoe]

[Mode: Single]

[Time flow rate: 480) (1 hour in the real world is equivalent to 20 days in this game. The player will be sent back to the real world after 40 days)

Friendly reminder, the game will officially start in five seconds. Please be prepared.

When he saw the quest’s name, Zhang Heng knew where he would be sent to this time. The background information of this round proved his guess was right. If he remembered correctly, the stipulation of “\$10 for 160 acres of land” came from the Homestead Act, signed by the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, during the Civil War. It managed to bring the already soaring westward movement to a climax again.

Countless American citizens who yearned for wealth had flocked to the west, where they worked the land and built their homes. Simultaneously, many villains, thugs, gamblers, murderers, and the people who lost their land and wealth during the American Civil War also headed to the west, far away from the prosperous and stable East Coast and the legal system. The west had become a paradise for desperadoes.

The massacre and exile of Indians accompanying the Westward Movement aggravated contradictions and hatred between the Native Americans and the pioneers. It turned the west into land infested with unimaginable peril. When Zhang Heng opened his eyes, he found himself standing in a desert. Red rock cliffs were everywhere, and sparse bushes and cacti were probably the only colors in the Gobi Desert. This time, the situation was similar to that of the Soviet-Finnish war. He was still wearing his short-sleeved shirt, shorts, and sneakers from the real world. Other than that, his mobile phone and keys were also in his pocket. Since the Pestilence Bone Bow was too conspicuous, he did not bring it into the game. Instead, it was replaced by the Pestilence’s White Horse Crown and other game items he put in his backpack. Zhang Heng then went and checked his character panel briefly.

Name: Zhang Heng

Sex: Male

Age: 20

Player Number: 07958

Number of the game completed: 7

Current game points: 23

Items in possession: Infinite Building Block (B), White Horse Crown (C), Filter Lens (D), Paris's Arrow (D), Shadow Key (E), Lucky Rabbit Foot (E), Betty's Shell (E), Hunter's Blessing (F), Melting Metal (F), Oath Ring (F).

Skills: Swordsmanship Lv.4, Sailing Lv.3, Language proficiency Lv.2 (eight languages have reached a daily communication level), Lego assembly Lv.2, Archery Lv.2, Field survival Lv.2, Driving skills Lv.2, Modification and Repair Lv.2, Shooting Lv.2, Aerospace Lv.2, Hacking Lv.2, Criminal investigation Lv.2, Make-up Lv.2, Piano Lv.1, Skiing Lv.1, Rock climbing Lv.1.

Evaluation: The player possesses incredible swordsmanship. As an opponent, you don't want him to lay his hand on any bladed weapon. At the same time, he is also a Lego master, with an excellent criminal investigation and disguise ability. He has slightly better luck of encountering enemies than ordinary people. Other than that, he is also sheltered by shadows and storms. The white horse is his mount. The player has excellent sailing experience. As for other weapons, he is good at using bows and arrows, firearms. He can drive cars, fly airplanes and spacecraft, and other vehicles when it comes to transportation. He can quickly adapt to a wild environment. For combat, he is resourceful and possesses strong combat power. He is also the kind of player that sticks to his oath, which is rare among players.

To recast that "Ordinary Tachi," Zhang Heng practically invested all the game points he accumulated so far, leaving only 23 game points for an emergency.

In terms of game items, there was little change from the previous round of the game. Except for the replacement of [White Horse Crown] and [Pestilence Bone Bow], Zhang Heng had used up the [Wall of Evil Thoughts] during his previous battle with Arc of Light. It was now officially resting in peace. Besides that, Zhang Heng also acquired the Shadow Necklace, which was part of the Shadow Set, but he did not bring it with him this time.

In terms of skills, Zhang Hengxin acquired two skills after he completed the Deductive Reasoning quest. The two skills were Criminal Investigation and Makeup, both of which had reached Lv.2. (Lvo Art Appreciation was not displayed) Also, his most significant change was, of course, the Lv.4 swordsmanship. This was the highest level of skills that he had so far. And it was probably also the limit of human beings. In the latest evaluation, the system emphasized his swordsmanship above everything else.

Other than that, Zhang Heng also noticed that his combat power had changed from excellent to powerful, and his final overall evaluation has also escalated from eye-catching to rare.

Zhang Heng did not spend too much time reading the evaluation. Though time was an issue for him since he had extra 24 hours every day, the scorching sun above him would definitely not allow him to stay here for too long

Zhang Heng knew that he needed to do something about it as soon as possible. He had no clue about the main task asking him to find the Lucky Horseshoe for the time being. He knew that in some Western legends, horseshoes and rabbit feet are regarded as lucky objects. However, the horseshoe he was supposed to find was considered very special. Although he stayed in the United States for some time during his sixth game, the Apollo Training Camp, he wasn't very familiar with Lincoln County. And he did learn a lot about the states in America. As for counties, unless they are very famous. He would not know the specific details of each county. It seemed like Lincoln County was established not long after the Westward Movement.

And his guess was correct. Lincoln County was located in New Mexico. It was initially a small village inhabited by Mexicans. In memory of the assassinated Abraham Lincoln, the village was renamed Lincoln. But whether it's Lincoln County or Lucky Horseshoes, it was something that Zhang Heng needed to study later. Right now, his top priority was to find a place with people. Zhang Heng first figured out the direction with the shadow observation method. However, even if he managed to distinguish south, east, west, and north, he would not know which direction to choose. Since the system put him here, it was impossible not to provide him with any hints. He was not supposed to rely just on luck.

Zhang Heng then climbed a relatively high red rock nearby and spotted something.

– A section of railway. The first railroad in the United States was built around 1826. It was only used to transport granite. However, with the Westward Movement's vigorous development, the United States has more than 410,000 kilometers of railroad sprawled across the United States. It was more than the sum of some other countries in the world. Later, they had to remove almost half of it because some were not being used.

Whenever there was a railway, it often meant that there would be towns along the way.

Zhang Heng climbed down from the rock wall and walked towards the railway.

Chapter 596 My Friend

It was the hottest time of the day. Temperatures on the Gobi had already exceeded forty degrees. Zhang Heng put his backpack on his head to block the sunlight, but this action proved pointless. After trudging along the railway tracks for a while, the skin exposed to the sun became tan, and his vision started to become blurry.

Finding a rock wall that offered some shade, he sat down to rest for a while, waiting for the scorching sun to go down a little before taking off again. He had a whiptail lizard for company, hiding in the same spot as him to escape the tremendous heat.

In the Apollo program training camp, Zhang Heng underwent an exercise to test how well he could survive a desert. The only difference was that he was given a supply package. NASA had done an excellent job providing proper training to their future astronauts, having accounted for every emergency that could happen and provided contingencies for them. The trainees were even given anti-inflammatory drugs. This time, it was different. Zhang Heng was being thrown into the Gobi by the game

system. From his clothes to personal effects, he was sorely unprepared to survive the rigors of the desert.

Since he had found the railroad, Zhang Heng originally planned to walk along with it for a while until the train came, intending to hop onto it and get off at the next settlement. Unfortunately, it seemed like he was not in luck today. Two hours had passed, and he still had not seen a train pass. So, he could only carry on the journey with his legs.

After walking for almost four hours, water in his body was evaporating quickly. Not only did the corners of his mouth become dry and cracked, but the exposed calves and arms were also a little red and swollen, an indication that he was experiencing sunburn. Fortunately, he spotted a small town from far.

He was relieved. Like most of the small towns in the west in this era, the unknown town he spotted was built along the railroad. The railroad tracks went through the town center, with residential houses on one side and taverns, brothels, and casinos on the other side. Drunkards tend to make a lot of trouble. So, it was necessary to keep them on the other side.

When Zhang Heng got closer, he realized that something was not right with this town. It looked entirely deserted; and through the open doors of a few houses, there wasn't a single living soul to be seen in them. Not to mention how they were devoid of furniture as well. Zhang Heng randomly walked into one and found the ground filled with dust. It seemed the owner had not stayed here for a long time. The other residential buildings of the town were no better than this one. The only one that showed the slightest difference was the bar in the town. Eight horses were hitched outside the bar. Considering that this was probably the only place with humans in the entire town, Zhang Heng did not hesitate to open the door and enter the bar.

Unlike the empty town outside, the atmosphere in the bar was vivacious. Four men gathered around a table playing poker while cursing at each other loudly. There was also a guy who was already drunk lying on a table by the window; he had a booming snore. Meanwhile, the lame barkeeper was counting the bottles of liquor on the alcohol rack. On the other table, two young men were sitting there quietly. One was cleaning his rifle, and the other played with a dagger.

The moment Zhang Heng strolled in, the racket of a bar fell into a hushed silence. Of course, such behavior was completely understandable. His 21st-century attire looked a little too trendy, not to mention the eye-catching skin color he had.

Since he was not here on a date, he didn't really care what people thought of him. Glancing around, he walked to the bar and put down his backpack.

"Excuse me, give me a glass of water... beer is fine too."

The lame boss did not turn around when he heard Zhang Heng's request, seeming as if he heard nothing, and continued to sort out the alcohol rack. Zhang Heng frowned. The United States had a very complicated immigration composition. The English and Scottish weren't the only ones that emigrated here, and though relatively rare, the possibility that the boss spoke no English couldn't be ruled out completely. So Zhang Heng asked him again in French and Spanish.

Yet, there was no response from the boss.

Instead, a bearded man put down the cards in his hand and walked over. Though coming off as rugged and weathered, he was unexpectedly polite. "Mind if I sit next to you?"

"Please," replied Zhang Heng after a pause. "Since you are a patron, perhaps you could answer my next question. Is the owner of this bar deaf?"

"Hahaha!"

The man laughed when he heard Zhang Heng's question. Instead of answering directly, he posed another question. "Where do you come from, my friend? I don't see your horse outside the bar."

"It's in... another town."

"Well, as far as I know, there are no towns within a hundred miles."

"So, as you can see, I've walked a long way," replied Zhang Heng. He looked toward the table where the man was sitting and pointed to the bottle of whiskey on it. "Can you give me a glass of whiskey? I have not taken a sip of water for some time."

"Of course! As the saying goes, good whiskey is meant to be shared among friends."

The bear-like man smiled, but he did not get up. He then looked at Zhang Heng and blinked. "You are a Chinese man, right? You look stronger than most Chinese guys, and you are wearing some weird clothes. Also, you don't have that thing behind your head..."

The bear-like man made a braid gesture. "Don't be nervous. I had two Chinese friends who owned a grocery store in the town. I truly liked them. I did visit their grocery store frequently... you know, they were like tireless bees flying beside your ears every day. Buzz... Buzz... Buzz... Ah... forgive me; I'm not well educated. That might have been an inappropriate analogy... One day, our friendship came into a little hiccup..."

The bear-like man suddenly looked very troubled. "You be the judge. That morning, I went to their store as usual and took honey, candles, and two wine bottles. Before leaving, they stopped me and asked me to settle my debts. Their actions hurt me deeply. Considering our friendship, I never thought money could be used as a measure. So I put down the honey, candle, and the bacon in my hand. I opened one of the wine bottles and took two big sips from it. "And as that happened, my two friends kept chattering, and chattering in my ears... So I drew my revolvers from my waist and shot-off their cute little heads! Suddenly, all problems between us have been resolved!"

The bear-like man grinned widely.

"Now, let me answer your previous question. No, one-leg Randall ain't deaf. Considering his age, this old bastard hears sharper than a dog. He clearly heard every word you said. It's just that... he doesn't give a f*ck about you."

Chapter 597 Here's to You

"I think I get what you mean," Zhang Heng nodded.

Trekking under the scorching sun for more than five hours, his body was weak, and he still had no idea where he or Lincoln County was. Having finally found his own kind in the vast, unforgiving Gobi desert, Zhang Heng vowed to be as friendly as he could be when he walked into the bar.

But so far, it looked as if his plan was about to fail.

Historians repeatedly emphasized the devastation brought on by the vigorous westward expansion into Native Indian territory. In a mere century, about a million Indians were slaughtered (during the westward expansion), and the rest were forced to move to reservations. However, the sacrifices that the Chinese made were rarely mentioned.

After the Civil War, the United States outlawed slavery. Around the same time, westward expansion saw Europeans rapidly developing uncultivated lands. Laying railways required a lot of cheap labor, so businessmen turned their sights to Southeast Asia. During the Qing Dynasty, China experienced a population boom and was under threat from the Taiping Rebellion. Insurgencies sprouted like mushrooms after the rain. As a result, large numbers of the poorer class fled to Hong Kong and Macau. Later, many were tricked into sailing to the Americas to become coolies, hard laborers who were paid meager salaries could bear hardships, subservient, and willing to do all sorts of dangerous work. The Transcontinental Railroad, dubbed one of the Seven Wonders of the Industrial World, spanned over 3,000 kilometers and ran through the entire North American subcontinent. Almost all of the most challenging and dangerous sections of the railroad were completed by Chinese workers. In later years, there was a popular saying that described it-There is a Chinese worker's skeleton under each sleeper of the Transcontinental Railroad.

However, the influx of these cheap laborers, who did more work than they ate and almost never slept, severely affected the United States' labor market. Discrimination against Chinese workers also reached its peak at that time, especially when the railway was nearing completion. Worried that Chinese labor unions would flock to nearby cities and towns and snatch jobs away from the locals, miners attacked the Chinese laborers. The men barged into their camps at night with knives and guns, forcing the frightened Chinese laborers to flee.

During this period, discrimination against Chinese workers was nothing new, and it was not just verbal abuse that the immigrant workers had to endure. So, while Zhang Heng could not ascertain if the story the bear-like man told was right, he had read somewhere that such things really did take place. During the nineteenth century, in the West, someone shot and killed a black cowboy simply because he did not like black people. The criminal fled before the sheriff arrived and escaped incognito to another town to drink some more. There, at the bar, he saw another colored man. Unable to control his overwhelming urge, he drew his gun and killed the innocent man. Fortunately, he was quickly surrounded and shot dead by the bailiff.

Countless other similar occurrences as such had happened in the West.

This was a place where bullets took precedence over reasoning. Every person was their own walking constitution. The faster your shots were, the more effective your law became.

Zhang Heng was not mad. In fact, he understood their way of thinking. He came to the bar by himself, thirsty and tired, and unarmed. Forget guns; he did not so much as have a knife on him. The seven

strong men in the bar, on the other hand, were armed to their teeth. They were drunk, and it would be a challenge to stop them from seeking some fun at a moment like this.

Zhang Heng had to admit that he had taken the wrong route—there was no point being friendly with hoodlums in a place like this. But it did not matter since dealing with thugs and villains had always been his strength. Perhaps it had been far too long since the Black Sail quest that he had almost forgotten the standard method of dealing with a situation like this.

Zhang Heng picked up an empty beer bottle from the bar and raised it. He looked at the bear-like man and said, “Here’s to you for helping me recall those nostalgic times.” While the man was still wondering why Zhang Heng employed an empty bottle to make a toast, the bottle suddenly appeared right in front of him. Zhang Heng pressed the beer bottle upon the man’s face and then punched the glass’s bottom.

There was a loud crack—the sickly sound of the man’s nose breaking.

The few people in the bar were confounded. They were enjoying themselves a moment ago, then out of nowhere, one of their companions was struck. Was this Chinese man blind? Did he not see where he was? Wouldn’t most people just leave the bar with their tails between their legs in a situation like this? Why would anyone strike first?

The six men in the bar reacted almost instantly. The guy toying with a rifle immediately raised his gun, but Zhang Heng was too fast for him. As the bear-like man stumbled backward after getting hit by the glass bottle, Zhang Heng grabbed the man’s revolver on his belt.

Both weapons were raised at almost the same time, but Zhang Heng was half a second faster. He pulled the trigger, and a spray of red exploded from the other guy’s head. The poor soul fell face down on a table, motionless.

Immediately after, Zhang Heng pointed the revolver’s barrel at the poker table, prompting the man wearing a thick mustache and the skinny man at the table to pull out their weapons. Zhang Heng ignored the skinny man and shot the mustached man in the chest. The skinny man also pulled the trigger, but perhaps it was because he was too nervous that the bullet missed Zhang Heng and hit the alcohol rack behind him.

Zhang Heng did not even so much as blink. He pulled the trigger again and finished off the guy next to the skinny one. Just then, the one playing with the dagger stormed towards Zhang Heng, the dagger aiming squarely at his chest. The skinny guy also had a precise aim at Zhang Heng. Yet at a time like this, despite knowing where he was going to end up regardless of who he went for, Zhang Heng remained calm. In the end, he chose the guy with the dagger. As soon as he pulled the trigger, he lunged towards the dagger.

Then when the blade was just inches away from him, the bullet tore through the man with the dagger and killed him, his falling body blocking the barrel of the skinny man’s gun.

Zhang Heng fired again and hit the skinny man in between the brow. The sound of gunfire woke the drunk man snoring away in the corner of the room. When he opened his eyes and found his companions lying lifelessly around him, his mouth fell open, looking as if he had seen a ghost. Fortunately for him, the shock only lasted for a brief moment because Zhang Heng saved the last bullet for him.

All of this happened in a matter of seconds. Unless you saw it with your own eyes, you probably would not believe that seven armed men would be wiped out in such a short time.

Zhang Heng tossed the empty revolver aside, picked up the lever action on the ground, then fired a shot at the bar's owner.

The latter's body was thrown back, slamming into the racks of liquor. A look of shock filled the man's eyes. He was reaching for the revolver when Zhang Heng shot him. The man did not stand a chance.

Zhang Heng sighed aloud. "Well, now that this has happened, I might as well go all the way. Why should I have to try and blend in?"

Pity, the bar owner was not alive to hear it.

Zhang Heng picked a clean glass from the bar, walked to the poker table, and poured himself a whiskey glass. He finished it in one gulp, finally rehydrating his body. After that, he picked up a stool and brought it to where the bear-like man with the broken nose was sitting

The way the man looked at Zhang Heng had changed completely. Having witnessed his companions killed before his eyes, that big, muscular body was now curled into a ball, sitting on the ground trembling and ignoring his bleeding. He asked in a terrified voice, "You...who are you?"

Zhang Heng sat down on the stool.

"Why don't we leave this question for the last, and you can answer a few of mine. How does that sound?"

Chapter 598 Zhang Heng's Trouble

The bear-like man called himself Rich.

Zhang Heng got both good news and bad news from Rich.

The good news was that he finally knew where Lincoln County was. The bad news was that the place was quite a distance from where he was currently. He had to go all the way south through the Gobi, and according to Rich, it would take at least two days to get to Lincoln Country on horseback, and the journey was perilous.

As for the train...

"The train hasn't come here for a while. There was a copper mine in this place, and this small town was built at that time. The miners and their families inhabited the town, but the copper mine was exhausted after some time... I'm not too sure about that. Maybe there is still some copper left. However, one has to dig at least 200 feet before they can find any copper. It is almost an impossible task. As you can see, everyone has moved away."

"Then why are you still here?" Zhang Heng poured himself another glass of whiskey.

"We are not from this town... We are just doing business nearby." Rich's eyes flickered.

"What kind of business?"

“Fur business, but the fur business is not doing well these years. Beaver skins aren’t as valuable as they used to be, and those little things are getting harder and harder to find,” Rich complained.

“So this place is your stronghold?”

“Yes, we took over this place after the miners moved away. No, it’s just this bar.”

“How many people do you have in total?”

“Seven people, you have seen, uh, I am the only one left now...” Rich’s eyes showed pleading. “Sorry, sir, I apologize most sincerely for what happened before. I made up stories about my Chinese friends. I drank too much just now, and I started to spout out nonsense...”

“Hmph.” Zhang Heng harrumphed and took another sip of whiskey. “But why did I spot eight horses in front of the bar? Don’t tell me one of them belongs to the owner. Considering his physical condition, I don’t think he can still ride a horse.”

“Um... We had eight people before, I’m sorry, nine. Unfortunately, we encountered some trouble and lost two of our companions, but one of the dead companion’s horse is still there. Please, sir. I have already told you everything I know. I know that you are a good, upright, and respectable person. We made a terrible mistake today, and we were punished for it. For God’s sake, can you just let us off the hook this once? I... I have 15 dollars in my pocket, and I can give it to you,” Rich begged.

Zhang Heng handed over half a glass of whiskey to Rich. The creases eased on Rich’s face, and he relaxed. It was a symbol of peace. He then gulped it down in one go. However, when he looked at Zhang Heng again, he saw a gun pointing at him.

Zhang Heng picked up the rifle, leaning against his feet. “No, you don’t know who I am. By the way, your answer just now was filled with lies.”

Before Rich could answer, Zhang Heng pulled the trigger.

After the gunshot, the whiskey glass fell to the ground, and the bar was finally quiet again.

Zhang Heng removed the (Oath Ring) from Rich’s body and put it back in his backpack. Although the Oath Ring was only a Grade F game item, it was unexpectedly useful, especially during an interrogation.

[The other party can perceive an oath violation]

It was basically a portable polygraph.

Zhang Heng spent some time looting the small bar, managing to find some food and a few buckets of drinking water in the storage room. After that, he made himself dinner, his first meal since entering this dungeon.

He carried a plate of bacon and potatoes, sat outside the bar, and watched the sunset as he ate. After knowing how far Lincoln County was, Zhang Heng was in no rush to get there, deciding to put up in the town for the night. After eating, he picked a rifle and inspected the nearby area thoroughly.

Rich did not lie about the town. It had been abandoned for quite a while, and apart from him and his accomplices, no one usually came around here.

sour

There are many similar towns to this one in the wild west. Most were built upon nodes of natural resources. Miners, ranchers, and gold diggers would gather at these places, bringing along their families with them. As they engaged in production, they still needed to live their lives and have entertainment. However, as resources depleted, most would naturally move to somewhere new in search of more loot. Hence, the entire city would be abandoned and reclaimed by nature.

This was now a ghost town.

Zhang Heng scouted the place quickly and found a relatively clean house on the opposite street to spend the night. When he returned to the bar the next morning, the first order of the day was a change of clothes. His complexion would bring him a lot of unnecessary attention, but his modern garments were even more of an eye-catcher. Though the short-sleeved shirt and shorts were cooling, they were not going to protect him from the sunlight. If he wanted to travel a long distance, and equipment upgrade was in store.

Cowhide boots, shirts, leather trousers, denim scarf... these were all things given to Zhang Heng by Rich and his companions. Zhang Heng found a guy of similar size to him and put on his clothes. Other than that, he grabbed two Colt revolvers and tucked them in the holster around his waist.

As for the more powerful Winchester rifle, Zhang Heng did not take them because he wanted to settle down in Lincoln County without looking for trouble. The two revolvers were enough for him to defend himself.

Ammunition, food, and water were all necessary consumables. Hence, Zhang Heng stuffed some of them into his backpack.

Besides, Zhang Heng also got the 15 dollars that Rich had promised him. Unfortunately, these guys weren't wealthy by any means. The total sum he looted from eight people amounted to less than 50 dollars. Fortunately, it should be enough for him to live for a while.

Before leaving, Zhang Heng opened another barrel of whiskey, sprinkled it on the dead bodies and the floor, and lit up the place with a matchstick.

Soon, everything was engulfed by the fire.

After he did what he wanted to do, Zhang Heng walked out of the bar.

However, this was the beginning of his troubles.

The distance from here to Lincoln County was great. Not only would it take an insurmountable time to get there on foot, but the journey would be unpleasant as well. And it was impossible to count on the abandoned trains here. So in this era, Zhang Heng had only one option left.

He looked at the eight horses chained outside the bar. After having his dinner last night, he brought a few haystacks to the eight horses and observed them from far. The darkest black horse looked the strongest. So, Zhang Heng crossed it out. The other horses were also very vigilant when he approached them. They were constantly kicking the ground with their hoofs or shaking their heads. They did not look like they could be Zhang Heng's friendly partner.

Chapter 599 Lonesome Cowboy

Until today, Zhang Heng had only two horse-riding experiences—colt he rode in the park when he was young. These colts were usually led by experienced staff and walked around the area at speed close to ten miles per hour.

In other words, this was the first time he chose a horse as a means of transportation. He was looking forward to the scene of riding a horse. From a safety point of view, Zhang Heng decided to do it step by step.

So he picked the shortest and thinnest brown horse with a hair loss problem. Compared to the other horses, it looked relatively docile. When approached, the steed showed no resistance, and as it lowered its head to eat, Zhang Heng walked to its side.

He tried to stroke its back, to which it sneezed and shook its body twice. Seeing that Zhang Heng didn't intend to leave, it stopped moving around and continued its hay meal. Zhang Heng made up his mind. He knew that wasn't as good of a horse as the others. No matter how good the horses were, their potential could only be fully realized if they met the right owner. For Zhang Heng, there was no other horse more suitable for him than this tame brown horse.

Riding a slow horse came with its own advantages, including a lower risk of falling. After choosing his mount, Zhang Heng released the other horses, saving them from being roasted along with the bar. Instead of rushing to Lincoln County, he rode his new horse in the town for two laps to relive the feeling of riding a horse.

He still remembered a little bit of what he learned from the park. For example, he was not supposed to put his feet into the stirrups too much. This was to prevent the rider from being dragged like a rag doll when he fell. Zhang Heng also remembered the staff teaching him something about holding the reins right, but he could not remember it anymore. Other than that, he also could not remember the correct way of sitting on a horse as well. There was one thing he could recall, a little bit about starting and slowing down the horse. After spending some time practicing riding the horse, he managed to do it, but he was still not very skilled.

After all, he was just a novice who had to rely on himself to learn how to ride correctly. Thanks to his excellent balance and controllability, he did way better than most beginners. After practicing for a while, Zhang Heng felt good enough to embark on a journey. Putting on a felt hat, grabbed the reins, and set off in the direction of Lincoln County.

In the vast Gobi, a cowboy with two guns was riding his galloping horse under the scorching sun. It looked like a scene from a movie. However, it all depended on how one defined galloping. In fact, the horse was only moving a little faster than walking.

However, there was nothing much to complain about since Zhang Heng did not need to walk across the Gobi on his own legs. At the same time, he did not dare let the horse run free as well. The first reason was that he had to prioritize his safety, and the other was to prevent the horse from dying before it got him to his destination. If that happened, Zhang Heng would have to walk all the way to Lincoln County. A man and a horse had now officially embarked on a voyage to Lincoln County.

When the sun had reached its zenith, Zhang Heng managed to find a slightly cooler spot. He then got off his horse and filled himself up with some water and food. After making a rough estimation, he figured it would take him at least five days to reach Lincoln County at the current speed. There was more than enough food to get to the destination, save the water supply that was only enough to last him and the horse three days. One could survive without drinking water for a day or two.

According to the now-deceased Rich, there were other mining towns along the way to Lincoln County. To get there, however, some detours would have to be made. If he included the detour time, he might just arrive at Lincoln County seven days later.

Fortunately, Zhang Heng was not in a rush.

After lunch, Zhang Heng and his horse carried on the journey again. This time they traveled for another five hours. The scenery in the Gobi was magnificent. However, a little monotony would set in after looking at it for a long time.

Zhang Heng started to feel his muscles becoming sore after sitting on the saddle for so long. The saddle's friction didn't make things better, giving him significant discomfort on both of his thighs. And this was only his first day.

It was said that when the railway hadn't yet been constructed, cowboys would sometimes go on a trek for several months, leading their herds behind them. During this period, they had to look after thousands of cattle, guard themselves against wolves, vipers, and sometimes face ambushes from Native Indian tribes. Even after the railway network's initial construction was completed, the sale of live cattle still required the cowboys to travel a great distance.

Those who excelled in this job were the real warriors. It was no wonder cowboy culture gripped the hearts and minds of the United States for so many years.

Then, last night, Zhang Heng's lonesome trip to the west was interrupted. At that time, he had just set up a bonfire and finished cooking. As he finished up the last of his cornmeal, he heard the sound of a horse galloping.

Zhang Heng then quickly took out the Filter Lens. When the mysterious stranger entered the Filter Lens' effective range, he could clearly make out the uninvited guest's appearance. It was a middle-aged man with a mustache and appeared to have spent some time in the desert. He looked dusty and dirty, but it did not hide that he was a handsome lad.

However, the first thing Zhang Heng noticed was the badge on his left chest. Unfortunately, it wasn't a badge that would leave anybody relieved. The Wild West was lawless-one could never trust anyone except for the guns in their hands. Even a handful of sheriffs or bailiffs were working among grey areas. Such individuals were even more dangerous than real gangsters.

Zhang Heng did not say a word. Instead, he drew the Colt revolver from his waist.

The stranger's reaction was also rapid. He subconsciously took out his gun when he saw Zhang Heng drawing his revolver. However, the distance between the two was about 60 meters, and their surroundings were dark. With the help of the Filter Lens, however, Zhang Heng would shoot at him first.

He waited for him to pull out his gun before pulling the trigger. Considering that his opponent might be a good guy, the first shot only served as a warning. The bullet hit the gun in the man's hand accurately, forcing him to drop it.

"Oh-oh, relax, friend, I am a marshal, and I have no malicious intent towards you." The man pulled the rein and stopped his horse from moving forward. Zhang Heng was impressed by his equestrianism.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Marshal?" Zhang Heng was calm when he talked to him. However, he did not put away the gun in his hand.

The bailiff understood why Zhang Heng was so vigilant. He, too, would have drawn his gun before he talked. In this wilderness, one could never be too careful. Zhang Heng did nothing wrong there.

He raised both his hands and to tell Zhang Heng that he had no intention to hurt him. He then brought his horse closer to the bonfire. And he finally had a clear look at Zhang Heng's appearance. He was taken aback, "Are you an Indian?"

Chapter 600 Mysterious Oriental Man

The Chinese people of this era generally wore queues, and unlike later generations, were extremely skinny. On top of that, there were also yellow-skinned Native Americans, so it was not surprising that the bailiff failed to recognize Zhang Heng's ancestry.

But when the bailiff dismounted and approached the stranger, he could tell that Zhang Heng was not an Indian-which was a relief. With all the conflict between the colonists and the natives, he did not want to be standing at the end of the barrel of an Indian's gun in the no-man's-land of the Gobi.

The bailiff removed his other holster and hung it on the horse's back to reassure the Chinese man he meant no harm.

Seeing that the other party had expressed deference, Zhang Heng returned the favor by putting away his revolver.

"Alright. I never thought I'd come across a Chinese in this god-forsaken place." The bailiff offered Zhang Heng a hand. "I'm Morton."

Zhang Heng shook the hand and replied, "Zhang Heng. Anything is possible, Mr. Marshal." "Where are you heading, Mr. Zhang Heng?" the bailiff asked. "Lincoln county," Zhang Heng replied frankly. "Good place. I was there a month ago. Although there are no suitable lands to grow tobacco or anything like that, there are many grazing pastures. The dark beer at the bar downtown is pretty good as well. You won't want to miss it," Morton gushed, eyeing the cornmeal mush in the pot.

"Please, help yourself," Zhang Heng offered. He had planned to take a detour to replenish it at other towns anyway, and he did not mind giving away this half-bowl of polenta. "Thank you." Morton took out a metal canteen from the bag hanging next to the saddle-it was probably his lunch box. He scooped two spoonfuls of corn paste, and since it wasn't too hot, he scarfed it down, licking his lips as he finished it up. The bailiff felt that he should do something in return for having eaten Zhang Heng's food, so he offered some advice. "With all due respect, Mr. Zhang Heng, it is unwise to travel across the Gobi to Lincoln County alone."

“Why do you say that?”

“This is not a peaceful place. Murders and robberies are frequent here. I’m currently investigating a group of men whom I have pursued for over 20 days. They claim to be pelt traders, but they probably conduct shady deals behind closed doors. Not long ago, there was a bank robbery in Shining Silver town. A group of masked men killed the bank’s manager and a poor woman who had gone to deposit money there. They hauled forty kilograms of gold and escaped!

The local sheriff and a team of officers went after them, but the sheriff was shot and killed in the fight. Some of the masked men were also injured, but they were probably minor cuts and bruises.” The bailiff paused to catch his breath and continued, “Before the incident, someone saw the group of pelt traders in a town nearby, and they looked very suspicious.

Speaking of which, where did you come from? Did you see any suspicious people along the way?” Zhang Heng was surprised to learn about the background of the people he killed in the bar. The people that the bailiff described were consistent with the group of men he encountered in the bar. At that time, Zhang Heng had an inkling that those men were no straight arrows.

After all, no matter how you’d put it, pelt traders setting up a stronghold in an uninhabited town was something unheard of, and those guys sure didn’t look like nice people either. Nonetheless, Zhang Heng was so preoccupied with getting on with the main mission that he wasted no time prying into the business of those men.

After he had gotten the information he wanted, he terminated the last guy. But it turned out that the excellent habit cost him forty kilograms of gold. Later, when he searched the tavern and did not find any gold, he recalled what Rich said before he died. He thought Zhang Heng had accepted his offer of compromise, but Rich didn’t even get to give up the gold whereabouts in exchange for his own life.

“No. I’ve not seen anyone of that description, Mr. Marshall,” answered Zhang Heng, “but I will keep an eye out. If I come across any of them, I will alert you at once.”

Zhang Heng would never admit to having met those men. Apart from the fact that they were just suspects that hadn’t been actually convicted (and that he had killed them all), the most crucial piece of this puzzle was the whereabouts of 40 kilograms of gold. Even if he told the truth, that he hadn’t so much spotted a single nugget of gold, no one would believe him. What more, he was merely Chinese. Thus, Zhang Heng made a wise move by removing himself from this matter.

He even considered killing the bailiff. After all, the location where they met wasn’t very far from the abandoned little town. It may have taken Zhang Heng two days, but with the bailiff’s horse-riding expertise, it would only take the lawman one day to arrive at the town. Also, since there were not many people around, there was a good chance Zhang Heng would be named a suspect. But he eventually abandoned the idea. While the bailiff may be searching for Rich on his own, once he did find them, he probably wouldn’t have just come barging into the bar on his own.

He would have brought along some of his colleagues with him, and since Zhang Heng did not know where his companions were, and if he would cross paths with them, he could not possibly kill every single person he met. Morton looked at the eyes of the Chinese man before him, and he struggled to find anything unusual or odd-No-in fact, this man was unlike any other Chinese he had met before. Not

only was he traveling in the desert without a companion, but he also appeared unfrightened nor was he intimidated by the strange and unfamiliar environment he was in. In fact, he even drew a gun at a law enforcement officer.

To top it off, he seemed well-versed with the West's legal environment and even spoke standard fluent English as if he had spent some time in Europe. Morton even detected a hint of a London accent. So, there was this Chinese man, sitting on his own; seemingly a man of few words, but not silent to the point of being ignored. "Mysterious oriental man," Morton thought to himself. Then he chuckled, "However this investigation turns out, I will drop by Lincoln County again sometime later.

If you have any information, you can always go to the sheriff there and they'll send me a message. Remember, those men are dangerous. If you really do come across them, it's best you keep your distance." "Thank you for the heads up, Mr. Marshall, and I wish you success in all your endeavors." Zhang Heng nodded.

Since another human was a rare sight in the vast desert, the two kept each other company for one night, during which Zhang Heng asked the bailiff for some tips on horse-riding. Morton had witnessed Zhang Heng's outstanding marksmanship, one that bettered most cowboys, so it came as a surprise to see how Zhang Heng was actually a novice who knew nothing about riding, especially when he was on the horse. Even though the Asian man knew some of the basics, it still seemed as if it was his first time. Yet, this guy had the guts to ride on his own, all the way to Lincoln county. Morton did not know whether to praise Zhang Heng for his bravery or chastise him for stunning injudiciousness.