

Embers Ad Infinitum

#Chapter 1: Central Assignment - Read Embers Ad Infinitum Chapter 1: Central Assignment

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Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

The outer walls of the 495th floor's Zone C were grayish-green. Six or seven girls walked into the Rec Center that was covered with all kinds of graffiti. Their expressions were colored with excitement, anticipation, and nervousness.

Their clothes were simple, and their colors were nothing gaudy. They were mainly blue, black, white, and green in color, but that did not obscure their beautiful facial features. All of them were in the prime of their youth.

While looking at the only LCD screen on the entire floor, the girl right in front couldn't help but whisper, "I wonder what kind of husband the company will assign me."

Beside her, a girl in a green top and blue pants bit her lip and said, "The main question is what kind of person he is."

Brought up as second-generation youths when genetic enhancement drugs had widespread use, they were not worried about their future husbands' looks and height. They were definitely all above average.

The girl in the lead glanced at her companion. "Have you forgotten that besides those of our age, there are also those whose wives have already passed away? Some of them are already in their forties or fifties. They are highly defective due to the lack of genetic enhancement while they were embryos."

In order to ensure that there were enough newborns, the company they belonged to had a rule: "Anyone at the age of 20 or university graduates, who hasn't acquired a spouse by choice, will have a partner assigned to them by the company. Anyone in defiance of this regulation will be punished by the Order Supervisory Department. The first violation will have the said person's energy allocations and contribution points reduced. A second violation will result in said person's banishment from the company, and they will be left to fend for themselves in the Ashlands."

Similarly, those who had lost their spouses and had yet to have children were forced to participate in a central assignment of spouses three years after their loss if they had yet to turn 60.

Another girl joined in the discussion, making a joke. “Besides, ignoring this batch of people, don’t you have any hopes that your future husband will be from an M-rank family?”

The company was divided into three classes: D-rank employees, from D1 to D9; M-rank management, from directors at M1 to the corresponding board members and chief scientists at M3; and finally, a rank without an alphabetical code name. It only had one title: ‘Big Boss.’ It was held by an unusually mysterious lady.

The girl in the green top and blue trousers curled her lips and said, “When have people from normal levels ever been assigned spouses from Floors 346, 347, 348, and 349?”

Floors 346–349 were where the M-rank managers lived. They were given a generous energy supply quota, and the per capita housing area was more than ten times the average employee’s residential floor. Moreover, these four stories had their own independent elevators, potable water, ventilation, drainage, and education system. Their children normally didn’t make contact with the average employees.

The only exception was at the stage of advanced education because there was only one university in the entire company, which was situated on the 350th floor.

Children of ordinary employees needed to take exams to determine if they needed to start working or enter university. In contrast, children from M-rank families were exempt from taking the exams.

Within the company, there was nobody who didn’t want to join management, nor was there anyone who didn’t want to be associated with management.

As for ‘Big Boss,’ the ordinary employees didn’t even know what she looked like, much less had a chance to interact with her. Only at the end of the year, the beginning of the year, or when there was a major event, could they hear her voice through the radio. Therefore, it was rare for people to fantasize about catching the Big Boss’s eye and immediately getting promoted to management.

Of course, rare didn’t mean no chance. There just weren’t many such occurrences.

The girl in the lead smiled and said, “That’s why I’ve been encouraging you gals to date freely while in school. Look at Chen Bei. Her husband was earmarked by the Supply Management Department the moment he graduated. He must have some background!”

“Meng Xia, you have the cheek to say that? Why didn’t you follow what you preach?” the other girls mocked.

“It’s not like you don’t know me. I’m all talk.” Meng Xia wasn’t ashamed at all to admit that she didn’t have the courage.

After laughing for a while, the girl in a green top and blue pants curiously asked, “Meng Xia, do you know what rank the family of Chen Bei’s husband is? You two have always been close.”

Meng Xia looked around and said in a suppressed voice, “Rumor has it that he’s the chief inspector of the Security Department’s Operations Group.”

“Wow...” While the girls were exclaiming, a group of young men walked into the Rec Center.

The two groups of people sized each other up for a few seconds before they looked away shyly. After all, no one knew if their future husband or wife was just across them.

A man—about 1.75 meters tall with a refreshing crew cut—glanced at the few old tables, the benches, and the high-back chairs around them in the Rec Center. He then nervously spoke to his companion beside him. “Shang Jianyao, what kind of wife do you think the company will assign me?”

His companion was about 1.85 meters tall, with straight eyebrows and bright brown eyes. His face was deeply contoured, and his black hair was slightly messy, covering half of his forehead.

The young man named Shang Jianyao turned his head to glance at his companion and said, “First, you’ll have to be assigned before we can discuss what she’ll be like.” He was wearing a dark-blue, two-piece suit. The muscles on his arms bulged, creasing the fabric ever so slightly. He looked masculine and strong.

“Ha, I won’t be that unlucky, will I? There are only two more men than women this time.” The 1.75-meter-tall man with average features laughed. His expression gradually turned solemn as he rambled. “Could it be that they won’t like me? I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. I’m not handsome either. My grades are only average...”

Shang Jianyao said solemnly, “That’s not the point. The point is your feminine name.”

“Feminine name? What’s wrong with the name Long Yuehong? My father’s surname is Long, and my mother’s name has the word ‘Hong’ in it. How meaningful is that?” Long Yuehong muttered to himself in confusion. “That’s true. The company’s assignment doesn’t care about how tall or good-looking I am. It’s said that it’s all random after any blood-related possibilities are eliminated... Ah, will they mistake me as a woman because of my name and assign me to a husband? What should I do if that happens?”

Shang Jianyao sized up Long Yuehong and said, “Organ transplant, neural reconstruction, artificial uterus. A perfect solution.”

Long Yuehong laughed awkwardly. “Haha, how is that possible? I mean, how can they get it wrong? Every document about me states that I’m male! What a strange train of thought you have. Shouldn’t a normal person be thinking of making a complaint?”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, he added, “So, why is my name the key?”

“A name represents a person’s destiny. A random assignment is all about one’s destiny,” Shang Jianyao replied seriously.

Long Yuehong’s expression froze for two seconds. “I knew you couldn’t give me any constructive ideas!” Just as he said that, he asked, “What kind of wife do you want?”

Shang Jianyao lifted his chin and said, “I don’t need one. The company has insufficient resources, and the humans above the Ashlands are in dire straits. The curse of famine, infection, mutation, and beastification still cloaks the entire world. How can I marry?”

“...” Long Yuehong laughed. “You’re getting better at joking.”

Shang Jianyao looked at him and said without a smile, “I’ve already applied to give up today’s central assignment.”

“Are you serious? That’s impossible. How could the company agree to your request!? Haha, I almost believed you!” Long Yuehong was shocked at first, but then he let out a sigh of relief.

As soon as he finished speaking, Chen Xianyu—the person-in-charge of the Rec Center on the 495th floor—left his seat. He walked to the LCD screen and began to adjust it.

This old man with white hair and staggering footsteps was once part of the Security Department. He was in charge of expedition members and had always been a D7 team leader. Later, he left the Security Department due to his age and was promoted to become a D8 manager, who was in charge of the Rec Center on this floor.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were very curious about the old man’s past. They had a penchant for coming to the Rec Center and asking all sorts of questions. However, Chen Xianyu strictly adhered to the confidentiality regulations and only selected things that everyone knew about for conversations. He was like an ordinary employee who was born, grew up, studied, worked, matured, and aged in the Inner Ecosystem. He had never left the underground building or seen the real sky.

“Alright, it’s about to begin.” Chen Xianyu held onto a remote control and pressed down heavily.

The display flickered a few times before emitting a faint light.

Long Yuehong, Meng Xia, and the others held their breaths as they waited for the assignment's results to be announced.

They were not worried that the names would scroll down too quickly, preventing them from reading it clearly. This was because the Rec Centers on each floor only showed the results related to the residents on the respective floor.

Chapter 2: Follow-up Review

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

After the second hand on the Rec Center's old, hanging clock creakingly spun three and a half rounds, lines of text finally appeared on the LCD screen.

Meng Xia and the others quickly searched for their names before they heaved a sigh of relief one after another.

Most of them weren't necessarily satisfied or excited, but they weren't unhappy either. To them, this was no different from participating in exams. It didn't matter as long as the results weren't too bad. After all, their parents and grandparents had been through the same.

The others were more confused because they didn't know who their marriage partner was, what floor they came from, or which department their parents belonged to. Even though they had all entered university and received higher education, the people they knew were still limited to their classmates and neighbors on the same floor.

Long Yuehong looked up and down the list carefully and seriously. Finally, he could not help but mutter to himself, "Why isn't my name on the list?"

"Because your name sucks." Shang Jianyao's expression didn't change.

"..." Long Yuehong wanted to refute, but sadly, he found himself agreeing with Shang Jianyao's conclusion.

Thousands of people had met the conditions and were forced to participate in the central assignment, but there were only two more men than women. If not for their ill fate, a sucky name, or bad luck, how could they have been one of the two unlucky fools?

Long Yuehong paused for a moment before indignantly saying, "Your name isn't on the list either!" He did not notice Shang Jianyao receiving any successful assignment of a female.

Shang Jianyao raised his right eyebrow and said, "Didn't I tell you? I've already applied to give up on this marriage assignment."

“Seriously? Why would the company agree...” Long Yuehong was stunned and confused. He felt like his world had been turned upside down. He had lived for 21 years. In the past, he had indeed heard of people who fit the criteria but did not participate in the marriage assignment. However, they had sufficient reason for doing so. The other party was either bedridden and could die at any moment or had participated in the Security Department’s expeditions. It was even a question if they could return.

Nobody who was healthy and fit in the company dared to violate the rules if they met the criteria. This was one of the core duties of a company employee.

Long Yuehong’s sadness was washed away by this matter. He looked at Shang Jianyao and asked, “Are you prepared to accept a reduction in energy rationing? That’s not too bad. The scariest thing is to have contribution points deducted. You won’t even have enough to eat when that happens! People like us—who are only at D1—only receive 1,800 points every month, affording us meat just once a week. Having one-third deducted at once speaks volumes!”

“The company has agreed to my request. There won’t be any deductions.” Shang Jianyao smiled.

“No, impossible, impossible...” Long Yuehong muttered to himself as he suddenly thought of something. If Shang Jianyao really applied to give up on this marriage assignment, it means that there should only be one more male than female participants. Just one more person...

I-I am the only unlucky bastard... Long Yuehong’s mouth fell wide open, and a deep sense of sorrow rose from his heart.

At this moment, the display began to flip the pages. It briefly introduced the basic information of the people who had successfully matched up with this floor’s residents so that they could find each other and register their marriage at the Order Supervisory Department’s various branches.

“Meng Xia, your husband is an outsider!” The crowd stared at the screen for a while when an exclamation came from the women’s side.

Meng Xia’s expression was slightly solemn. Her eyes darted about slightly as she muttered, “Zhang Lei; Male; Born: Wilderness nomad; Age: 25; Recruited by the company three years ago; Performance has always been good; There are no latent problems with his body; Residence: 622nd floor, Zone A, Room 192; Employee Level: D4; Electronic Card Number: 04311029189...”

“There really are outsiders...” Long Yuehong was also attracted by this matter and started discussing it with his companions.

They all knew that the company would periodically take in nomads from the wilderness to supplement the population and perfect their genes. However, residents of this floor had never worked with outsiders before, and nobody had ever married them, so everyone treated this matter as an interesting piece of news.

“Meng Xia, it’s actually not that bad. Although he used to be a nomad in the wilderness, he’s now a D4 employee. He’s only 25 years old. That’s very impressive!” The girl in the green top and blue pants consoled her friend.

D4 meant that he had gone from an ordinary employee to a senior, high-ranking employee. He could be the deputy of a small research project, a factory production line’s supervisor, an assistant team leader of the Security Department, or the Order supervisor of a certain floor’s zone. His monthly compensation was at least 2,000 points higher than D1 employees.

A young man beside Long Yuehong muttered, “However, the effect of genetic enhancement after adulthood isn’t that good...” At this moment, he saw the information of his betrothed.

“Zhou Qi; Female; Born: Internal employee; Age: 30 years old; Had a former husband who died five years ago, currently raising a child; voluntary application to participate in this marriage assignment; There are no latent problems with her body; Residence: 569th floor, Zone B, Room 27; Employee level: D4; Electronic Card Number: 01609052558...”

“Yang Zhenyuan, your wife is ten years older than you...” Long Yuehong also saw the information.

Yang Zhenyuan was the same as most of his peers in the company. His face was fair and clean, and his body was muscular. He looked good, but he had slightly androgynous features and appeared more introverted.

Yang Zhenyuan’s face flushed red when he heard Long Yuehong’s words. He wanted to say something but couldn’t say a word.

After a while, everyone finally memorized their partner’s corresponding information. They then left the Rec Center one after another, preparing to find their betrothed or return home to wait for the other party to come looking for them.

At this moment, a voice suddenly sounded in the hall when only five or six people were left. “Who is Yang Zhenyuan?”

“Me, what is it?” Yang Zhenyuan—who was chatting with Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao—subconsciously turned to look at the door.

A woman walked into the Rec Center. Her appearance was mature and charming. Although she wore simple and plain clothes, they could not hide her impressive figure. "I'm Zhou Qi."

The woman glanced at Yang Zhenyuan and nodded in satisfaction. "Shall we go to your house for a chat?"

Yang Zhenyuan was shocked at first, but he quickly nodded. "Sure, sure."

"Then let's go now?" Zhou Qi smiled like a blooming flower.

"Sure, sure," Yang Zhenyuan said as he walked over quickly.

Long Yuehong watched the couple leave the Rec Center and couldn't help but sigh. "What should I do next?"

Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at him in all seriousness. "A great cause awaits you."

"..." Long Yuehong's facial muscles twitched. "Speak human!"

Shang Jianyao smiled. "Wait for next year's marriage assignment."

"That's true." Long Yuehong sighed. "Sigh, forget it. I hope I can get assigned a good position in the company tomorrow. Also, I feel like you're becoming more and more abnormal. I'm referring to your brain." As he spoke, he pointed at his temple.

The most important thing for them next was to wait for the allocation of jobs. This would directly determine their future. Apart from those who had special talents in certain areas and were earmarked by corresponding departments, the rest of the graduates with higher education qualifications had to wait for the job allocation.

Before Shang Jianyao could reply, Long Yuehong saw Chen Xianyu, the PIC of the Rec Center, turn off the display. He held a cylindrical metal cup that had been excavated from the Old World's ruins as he slowly walked over.

Long Yuehong asked nervously, "Grandpa Chen, what department do you think we will be assigned to?"

Chen Xianyu coughed. "As far as I know, those who have just gotten married and are about to have children will be assigned to relatively safe internal positions. Those who have not been assigned a partner or won't have any need for children might get assigned to temporary positions that might be a little dangerous."

Long Yuehong's expression collapsed. "I-I have to go back and tell my father and mother regarding my marriage assignment's results." He didn't wait for Shang Jiyao's response. With a gloomy expression, he walked out of the Rec Center.

"Your dad and mom haven't gotten off work yet..." Shang Jianyao muttered to himself before leaving and entering the corridor outside.

This was the underground building's 495th floor. There was no sky, only a four-meter-high ceiling. Long light tubes were mounted on the ceiling, and relatively bright light shone down.

To the employees of the company, the switched-on lights represented day. When switched off, they represented night.

Shang Jianyao looked up at the street lamp in front of him before making a turn to enter another area in Zone C.

On both sides of the path, the rooms closely neighbored one another—about only two meters apart. They resembled beehives in textbooks that had been projected onto the same plane.

Compared to them, the Rec Center was as spacious as a square.

After walking down two 'streets,' a relatively open area appeared in front of Shang Jianyao, where 12 elevators were installed.

These were the elevators that led straight to the Research Zone.

In this underground building that originated from the Old World, the elevators that led to the Factory Zone, Research Zone, and the relatively small but special Indoor Ecosystem Zone from the Residential Zone were separated in order to prevent congestion and accidents. They were located in different zones of the building.

The Administrative Zone and Energy Zone were combined with the Research Zone. Authorized personnel could only reach them by swiping their electronic cards.

Shang Jianyao waited for a while before entering the elevator in the middle. He casually pressed the number '21.'

As it was working hours, the elevator did not stop midway. It steadily descended all the way.

During this process, Shang Jianyao suddenly took out an electronic card and swiped at the corresponding area. He then pressed the metal button representing the third floor.

The elevator continued to descend, only stopping after a while.

Shang Jianyao exited the elevator and made a left turn. He saw a large metal door that was tightly shut. There were four armed security guards wearing bionic armor, which made them look like lizards.

Shang Jianyao did not attempt to approach the metal door. He walked along the aisle outside the door and went right.

Several rooms were lined up at the end of the corridor, but none of them had door signs.

Under the ceiling lamps' illumination, Shang Jianyao knocked on the door in the corner.

"Please come in." A gentle female voice was heard.

Shang Jianyao turned the doorknob and pushed open the door. He saw a lady in a white coat.

The lady sat behind a mahogany table. She looked to be in her thirties and wore a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. Her hair was neatly bundled up, with only a few stray strands hanging down.

"Ah, it's you." The lady glanced at Shang Jianyao and smiled as she pointed at the chair opposite the table. "Have a seat."

Shang Jianyao sat down and smiled as if he was returning home. "Good afternoon, Dr. Lin."

"Good afternoon, Jianyao." Dr. Lin tucked her stray hair strands away and took a folder from the side before opening it. Then, she twirled the black fountain pen and casually asked, "How are you feeling lately?"

"My appetite has increased a little. My sleep has been normal, and I've been healthy." Shang Jianyao spoke as he made a move to highlight his biceps.

Dr. Lin nodded. "I've already applied for you to give up the marriage assignment. I guess you know of the outcome?"

"Yes, thank you." Shang Jianyao smiled and said, "Can I sing a song to thank you?"

"There's no need." Dr. Lin shook her head without hesitation. She then tapped her pen. "Actually, I'm curious. Why did you insist on giving up the central marriage assignment? Your condition isn't really serious."

Shang Jianyao's expression turned serious, and he said in a deep voice, "To save all of humanity."

“...” Dr. Lin picked up her pen and drew a circle on the document in front of her.

There was a line of words in the circle: “Moderate psychosis (suspected delusional disorder, awaiting observation).”

Chapter 3: Market

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After Dr. Lin finished circling, she raised her fountain pen and looked at Shang Jianyao. She chuckled and said, “This seems to be derived from the Salvation Army’s slogan?”

Shang Jianyao tersely agreed and said seriously, “Dr. Lin, I think you have some misunderstandings about my condition, treating normal things as evidence of an illness.”

Dr. Lin straightened her body, and a smile surfaced on her fair face. “What misunderstandings do you think exist?”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for two to three seconds as though he was organizing his words. “You can’t understand this kind of pure and noble sentiment or have any idea what it means to be a person who has broken away from vulgar interests.”

Dr. Lin pursed her lips tightly as if she was spending tons of effort to stop herself from laughing. She nudged her gold-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose, breathed in slightly, and slowly exhaled. “Indeed. In this era, there is no room for idealists. Even the Salvation Army has degenerated.”

The doctor paused and said, “I can try to understand you, but you have to tell me how you came up with such thoughts. What made you have such urges?”

“Nothing. This is what I believe.” Shang Jianyao sighed and smiled. “Dr. Lin, you’re the most gentle and elegant woman I’ve ever met. I have something to tell you.”

Dr. Lin’s eyebrows twitched slightly. “I have...”

Before she could finish her sentence, Shang Jianyao added, “I imagined that you could be my spiritual mother, but I’ve just realized that our ideas are in two completely different worlds. What a shame.”

Dr. Lin broke out into a fit of coughs as though she had choked on her saliva. She then picked up the porcelain cup beside her and drank two mouthfuls. She randomly brought up a topic and muttered to herself, “Sigh, I’ve finished all the allocated tea leaves this month.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to speak, she lowered her voice and asked mysteriously, "Have you recently heard any voices that no one else can hear? Or seen anything that no one else can see?"

Shang Jianyao shook his head firmly. "No."

Dr. Lin observed Shang Jianyao's expression for a few seconds before asking about something else.

After more than ten minutes, a sweet female voice sounded on all of the underground building's floor simultaneously. "Here is the announcement of the time. The time now is 6 p.m."

"The time has been broadcast." After the voice repeated the announcement three times and stopped, Dr. Lin rubbed her eyebrows and said, "Let's call it a day."

She thought for a moment and said, "Since there's nothing wrong with your sleep, and you haven't seen anything that others can't see, I won't prescribe any medicine. Come back for a follow-up next week."

"Alright, Dr. Lin." Shang Jianyao stood up and walked towards the door. After he opened the door, he suddenly turned around and said, "Thank you, Dr. Lin."

Dr. Lin replied with a smile, "You're welcome."

After Shang Jianyao left and carefully closed the door, Dr. Lin sighed and spoke to herself with a smile. "How polite."

As she sighed, she picked up the folder on the table and flipped through the records:

"Name: Shang Jianyao.

"Age: 21 years old.

"Birthdate: 8th September, Year 25 (New Calendar).

"Family situation: Father, Shang Shi'an, was a D7 level employee. He went missing with the entire 'Old Task Force' in Year 37 of the New Calendar. Mother, Zhang Ruxin, was a normal D3 employee—a primary school teacher. She passed away in October of Year 40 of the New Calendar. The cause of her illness is suspected to be excessive grief. From October 40 to September 43, Shang Jianyao grew up in an orphanage on the 495th floor before being admitted into the university's electronics department.

"Situation description: In May 46, Shang Jianyao voluntarily applied to become a confidential experiment volunteer and participated in the C-14 project. His reason for

doing this was his hope to obtain great strength and investigate the truth behind his father's disappearance.

“Experimental result: Failure. He didn't undergo any changes compared to the control group.

“Complications: Logic confusion that resulted in him jumping to conclusions to a certain extent. There are no other abnormalities.

“Additional matters: Genetic results are normal...

“Comprehensive judgment: Moderate psychosis (suspected delusional disorder, awaiting observation)...”

Dr. Lin read for a while before jotting down: “Outcome of review dated July 10, 46 (New Calendar): No symptomatic improvement, but no deterioration either. No violent tendencies or signs of aggression. He can be considered temporarily harmless.”

...

Six in the evening was the company's designated knock-off time. Apart from the specific project teams that needed to work overtime and some jobs that had 24-hour shifts, all the employees would leave the Administrative Zone on the 5th floor, the Research Zone between the 6th to 45th floors, the Factory Zone (and Maintenance Zone) between the 46th to 145th floor, the Indoor Ecosystem Zone between the 146th to 345th floor, and return to the Residential Zone on the 300th floor.

Due to the limited energy quota and the fact that both husband and wife—as well as the elders at home—might be working, many employees chose to eat at the Supplies Allocation Market on each floor.

This place was divided into two areas. One area was supplied with sweet potatoes, potatoes, rice, flour, meat, vegetables, and fruits from the Indoor Ecosystem Zone, as well as cloth, sugar, salt, and other supplies from the Factory Zone. The other area provided all kinds of cooked food, which was affectionately known as the ‘staff cafeteria.’

The cost of dining in the cafeteria was higher than the cost of cooking at home, and it didn't taste great. However, with the energy quota that everyone sorely lacked and the fatigue from a day's work, it seemed to be a better choice.

This was also promoted by the company's higher-ups—they hoped to reduce energy consumption by providing food in a centralized manner.

When Shang Jianyao returned to the 495th floor, there was still about 20 minutes before the cafeteria opened at 6:30 p.m. As certain jobs needed the employees to wash up, be

sterilized, or undergo other necessary things after work, the board of directors stipulated that the cafeteria would open half an hour after work to ensure fairness.

For the employees who returned to their respective floors before 6:15, the Rec Center next to the Supplies Allocation Market was the best place to while the excess time away. People could gather together and chat about life, work, and other things under the lamps. This also gave them a clear sense of superiority when compared to the people struggling to survive outside.

Some of the employees also seized the time to sell things that they no longer needed at home in exchange for more contribution points. Therefore, small bazaars would appear in Rec Center's hall every night from 6:00 to 6:30 and 7:00 to 8:30.

As soon as Shang Jianyao walked in, he saw the Rec Center's PIC, Chen Xianyu, sitting on a small stool that creaked from time to time. In front of him was a pile of strange items.

"What is this?" Shang Jianyao squatted down and picked up a rectangular object with a metal shell and a black screen.

"Who knows? It's quite sturdy and can be used to smash people or be used for bulletproofing." Chen Xianyu poked his chest.

"Where did it come from?" Shang Jianyao asked while fiddling with it.

Chen Xianyu cleared his throat and said, "From my comrade's youngest son. He's currently in the Security Department. He just came back from an Old World city ruin. Sigh, time really flies. I was there when he was born and watched him grow up..."

Chen Xianyu smiled and added, "Anyway, it was screened. The company doesn't need it, so he didn't have to turn it in. Thus, he got me to sell it on his behalf. As you know, I don't have to go to the cafeteria. Somebody will get me food."

He had many employees under him.

Shang Jianyao looked at the spider web-like cracks on the black screen and said after some thought, "How much?"

"It's not expensive at all, 500 points." Chen Xianyu casually offered a price.

Shang Jianyao slowly put down the item and mumbled, "That's ten pounds of meat."

The moment 'meat' was mentioned, he and Chen Xianyu gulped at the same time.

Shang Jianyao swept his gaze and picked up another item. "Is this a watch?"

“Yes, it’s a watch. It has a complicated mechanical structure. It can still be used even now. You just need to adjust it a little.” Chen Xianyu’s eyes lit up. “What do you think of it? Do you want to consider buying it? Its needle and time markings will glow at night. You don’t need to turn on a flashlight to see it clearly. I’m telling you, there are no more than 100 people in the entire company who have a good watch. If you have it, you don’t need to rely on the radio anymore or come here to look at the clock to determine the time. You will become the object of envy of all the residents on your floor. There might be young ladies who will take the initiative to date you...”

The silver watch in Shang Jianyao’s hand had many cracks on it and was covered in rust. On the emerald-green watch plate, the second hand was ticking with glass shards everywhere.

“How much?” Shang Jianyao asked calmly.

Chen Xianyu paused for a moment before saying, “Sixty thousand.”

Shang Jianyao quickly put down the watch as if it scalded him.

With a monthly salary of 1,800 points for D1 employees, it would take almost three years of not eating or drinking for one to save up that amount.

Chen Xianyu didn’t expect Shang Jianyao to buy it. He was only joking with the young man. He then pointed at the pile of cylindrical metal containers in the middle and said, “Do you want to buy this? It’s good stuff—military canned food!”

Shang Jianyao picked up a can and saw that the plastic film outside was already tattered. The labels were extremely blurry, and only the words ‘Braised Beef’ and ‘500g’ could be vaguely seen.

“How about it? Doesn’t it feel heavy? This means that it is filled with good stuff!” said Chen Xianyu, his saliva splattering everywhere. “Hear me out. This military canned food is extremely delicious. It is a delicacy that I will never forget in my life. It is much better than the shrunken canned food from the Salvation Army!”

“If it weren’t for the fact that my comrade’s child dug up an entire carton, you might never have a chance of eating it. As for the price, 60 contribution points each. Isn’t it very cheap? It will cost 50 points if you go to the Supplies Allocation Market to buy a pound of raw pork. Furthermore, it doesn’t contain any seasoning. Nobody will cook it for you, and you might not even be able to buy the meat! Also—ahem—after this can is finished, you can still give the metal shell to the Supply Management Department and get some contribution points in return. Isn’t it worth it?”

Shang Jianyao looked at the old man. When he finished speaking, he suddenly asked, “How long has it been since its expiry date?”

“Expiry date? How would I know? I don’t even know how to convert our years to the Old World’s years.” Old Chen’s eyes widened. “Anyway, the New Calendar is only at 46. It’s definitely edible.”

As he spoke, he revealed a reminiscing expression. “Back when I was in the Security Department, I went out on a mission and lost my supplies. I almost starved to death. Fortunately, I found a military warehouse and found canned food like these. Who knew how many years it had been since they expired. I still ate them, and they were fine. The taste was amazing.”

Chapter 4: Rumors

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Shang Jianyao held the piece of canned food but didn’t respond, nor did he put it down. After a few seconds, he asked, “Can it sing?”

“Huh?” Chen Xianyu had lived for so many years, but this was the first time he suspected that there was something wrong with his ears.

At this moment, Long Yuehong entered the Rec Center with two yellow plastic lunch boxes and saw Shang Jianyao. He greeted him with a beaming smile. “Let’s have dinner together later!”

“Are you treating me?” Shang Jianyao put down the canned food and stood up.

Long Yuehong shook his head without thinking. “No, I’m not. Don’t you still have a sizable allowance?”

Although Shang Jianyao’s parents did not leave behind an inheritance, the company gave him a certain amount of compensation. When he went to university, he had an additional monthly 1,200-points allowance—something every university student had.

This allowed Shang Jianyao to have adequate food and clothing, though barely. The allowance stopped one month after college students started their work assignments.

Shang Jianyao did not show any embarrassment from being rejected. He smiled and said, “Shouldn’t you share your happiness with your friends?”

“Are you trying to imply that treating you to a meal is the best way of sharing?” Long Yuehong had become more and more accustomed to Shang Jianyao’s train of thought over the past two months.

Chen Xianyu chuckled and interrupted them as he listened to their conversation. “That’s right, Yueyue. You were still upset this afternoon, but you’ve already cheered up at night. You must have encountered something good.”

“Don’t call me by my nickname...” Long Yuehong mumbled before he said with a smile, “My mom said that I don’t have to wait until next year to get married via assignment. She and my dad have a few colleagues whose daughters haven’t gone to university and have just started working. She’s planning to introduce us to each other to see if we can develop a relationship.”

Company employees only had one chance to get into university. If they failed, they would be centrally assigned a job (after they started working, they would be recommended to attend university if they performed well). Usually, they were only 18 years old and not at the age when they would be forced to participate in a central marriage assignment.

Young people at this stage all yearned for the freedom to love. After all, this was definitely better than a random allocation. It was not purely based on luck but based on feelings.

Of course, not many people could truly fall in love freely. This was because, after starting work, they would leave home at 7:30 in the morning and get off work at 6:00 in the evening without leaving their positions at work. In between, they only had a one-hour break for lunch and dinner time. At 9:00 pm, the Rec Center would close, and the street lamps would go off.

Everyone would have to return home and get ready to sleep. Therefore, there were very few chances for young people to come into contact with members of the opposite sex. The time they could come into contact with each other was also limited.

Relatively speaking, whether it was in a normal school or university, free relationships appeared more frequently.

As Long Yuehong spoke, he suddenly felt a little depressed. “I don’t know if they’ll like me. I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My looks are average, and my grades are only average. I wasn’t earmarked by any department...”

“There seems to be something going on over there...” Shang Jianyao interrupted Long Yuehong’s wallowing in self-pity and pointed at an old table a few meters away.

Quite a number of employees were gathered there as if they were discussing something.

Out of curiosity, Long Yuehong went over with Shang Jianyao. He scanned the area and saw an acquaintance. He then blurted out a question. “Auntie Ren, what are you guys talking about?”

Auntie Ren was a middle-aged woman in her forties. She wore a polyester shirt and had beautiful facial features. Her hair was tied into a simple bun. Her name was Ren Jie,

and she was Long Yuehong's neighbor. She was an employee of the company's Strategy Committee, and she was only a D3.

Ren Jie glanced at Long Yuehong and sighed. "We're talking about a recent rumor."

"What rumor?" Long Yuehong asked curiously.

At this moment, Chen Xianyu retracted his gaze and looked at the pile of military-grade canned food in front of him. He couldn't help but rub his stomach and gulp. He seemed to recall the feeling of eating military canned food back when he was starving.

"It really can sing... No, it makes my stomach and soul sing." Chen Xianyu made the connection and sighed with emotion.

Meanwhile, Ren Jie surveyed the area and whispered, "Apparently, the company wants to strip everyone of their right to give birth."

"Huh?" This topic exceeded Long Yuehong's expectations. He couldn't immediately understand what it meant.

Ren Jie looked at the smiling Shang Jianyao and continued, "The company might get couples who want children to submit their biological material under the guidance and help of doctors. They will then build a large 'fertility center' in the Research Zone, which will do in vitro fertilization, artificial uterus development, as well as baby growth support and intervention.

"In short, when you get your child back, they might be several years old. Sigh, they say they want to free women from pregnancy and relieve the company's lacking labor force."

When Ren Jie said that, a woman in her twenties couldn't help but say, "Isn't that a good thing?"

"How can that be a good thing?" said Ren Jie, her face darkening. "It's the gods, uh—the heavens that grant us the sacred right to give birth to new life. How can they pass this right to machines? How will you build a relationship with your own children then?"

"Yes, yes." A man sitting diagonally opposite her stroked his hair and said worriedly, "It's said that the Old World was destroyed because of a series of forbidden and unethical experiments."

Ren Jie nodded and turned to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. "Jianyao, Yuehong, what's your take in this? Do you guys also think that giving birth to life is the key to being human and that it's a sacred right bestowed by the heavens?"

Shang Jianyao nodded without hesitation. "Yeah."

When Long Yuehong saw Auntie Ren looking at him with bloodshot eyes, he hissed. "Yeah, yeah."

"At least the two of you are sensible." Ren Jie smiled.

At this moment, an employee smiled and said, "Aren't you guys too serious? It's just a rumor. My uncle works at an organization directly under the board of directors, but he has never heard of it before!"

Ren Jie replied very seriously, "I'm just reminding everyone. When the time comes, we must object if anyone comes to ask for our opinions."

Some remained silent, some nodded, and some people's imaginations went wild as they asked, "If this rule is really implemented, will marriage as well as central marriage assignment be canceled?"

The man, who had previously mentioned the rumor regarding the Old World, said with an accent, "No, it won't. Director Ji said before that a harmonious and healthy marriage is the key to maintaining employees' mental stability in the current environment."

Director Ji's name was Ji Ze. He was a member of the company's board of directors, a vice-president, and an M3 executive. He often spoke on the radio, and he would greet everyone through the Rec Center's display at the end of the year.

While everyone was discussing, a ringtone suddenly came from the area beside the Rec Center.

Ding Ring Ring!

Except for a few people, most people seemed to hear the bugle to charge and stood up at the same time.

This time, the ringing came from the Supplies Allocation Market, reminding everyone that there were only three minutes left before the cafeteria opened.

Upon seeing his neighbors start to move towards the 'staff cafeteria,' Long Yuehong glanced at Shang Jianyao beside him. "I can't believe you agreed with Auntie Ren."

Shang Jianyao looked ahead and said, "Try asking it in another way."

Long Yuehong frowned and thought for a while. "What do you think of the fertility center system that liberates women from pregnancy?"

Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation, "Isn't that a good thing?"

Long Yuehong was speechless.

As they spoke, the two of them arrived outside the Supplies Allocation Market.

There was no door here, so one could clearly see the situation inside with one look.

On the left was a market with long tables and counters. Many employees who did not want to eat in the canteen were picking and choosing items while calculating in silence. On the right was the staff cafeteria. There were doors and windows, and a fragrance was wafting out of it.

The cafeteria door opened not long after, and the employees on the 495th floor walked in orderly with their cutlery or empty hands.

Shang Jianyao did not bring a lunch box with him. After entering, he separated from Long Yuehong and went to the right to get two wooden bowls and a tray. He then carried the cutlery and followed the people in front of him to different counters according to a fixed route.

“Half a pound of sweet potato rice.”

“One serving of stewed cabbage.”

“Two mixed-grain buns.”

“A serving of boiled potato.”

After walking past the four counters, Shang Jianyao’s bowls were filled to the brim—stewed cabbage with boiled potatoes and two yellow steamed buns. The sweet potato rice filled up the other bowl that it appeared to be on the brink of cracking.

This cost him 14 contribution points: 5 points for half a pound of sweet potato rice, 2 points for the mixed-grain bun, 2 points for the boiled potatoes, and 3 points for the stewed cabbage with some oil droplets.

Finally, Shang Jianyao came to the counter that smelled the best. This was the counter for meat.

He looked from left to right, then right to left. He hesitated and said, “Give me a portion of braised pork. Give me more gravy.”

The woman in a grayish-blue uniform at the window counter held a spoon and scooped three thin pieces of red braised pork with alluring colors that were the length of fingers. She poured them into the bowl of sweet potato rice.

The gravy—the color of soy sauce—quickly spread out and moistened half the bowl of rice.

“It’s a good thing you came early. Any later and it would have been gone.” The woman lived in the same ‘block’ as Shang Jianyao. She was very amiable to him. “Thirty-two points.”

Shang Jianyao looked at the three pieces of braised pork and took out his electronic card before swiping it against the machine. He thanked her and took a bowl of free soup. After walking around the canteen for a while, he found Long Yuehong and sat opposite him.

“Wow, what a spread,” Long Yuehong exclaimed from the bottom of his heart when he saw his dinner.

Shang Jianyao ignored him. He first moved the portion of sweet potato rice that had been mixed with the gravy to the side, then picked up a piece of braised pork and took a small bite.

After taking in the sensation of the meat’s fragrance erupting in his mouth, Shang Jianyao quickly lowered his head and ate a mouthful of sweet potato rice that was not stained with the gravy.

He ate at an ever-increasing speed. By the time he finished the three pieces of braised pork, only half of the sweet potato rice and stewed cabbage remained. The boiled potatoes and mixed-grain buns were completely gone.

Finally, Shang Jianyao poured the stewed cabbage into his bowl and mixed it into the sweet potato rice and gravy. He finished it in one mouthful.

“How satisfying.” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong put down their cutlery and sighed.

After finishing the soup, Long Yuehong casually asked, “Are you going to the Rec Center?”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “I’m returning to listen to the radio broadcast and turning in early.”

Chapter 5: “Star Cluster”

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Long Yuehong opened his mouth, seemingly trying to persuade him. “...Fine then.”

Shang Jianyao sat for a while longer before he carried the tray to the exit and handed everything he had to the canteen staff on duty.

Outside the Supplies Allocation Market, rays of light fell from the ceiling in an orderly fashion, illuminating the paths leading to the other floors. Employees of different ages

and genders gathered in twos and threes, headed to the Rec Center, returned home in groups, or watched their children running around and having fun.

Shang Jianyao walked between them and quickly left Zone C. He passed through a street where there was a designated graffiti wall and entered Zone B, which had a dense concentration of rooms.

Most of this underground building's Residential Zone did not have the concept of a building. The employees lived in rooms, not houses. Many people who worked in the Indoor Ecosystem Zone and had seen real bee honeycombs often made comparisons.

However, the corridor between the rows of rooms was very spacious. It was paved with smooth, milky-white stone bricks, allowing at least five to six people to walk along it side by side.

This was made mandatory by the company. It was said that such an arrangement was to avoid congestion at critical moments in emergencies.

Shang Jianyao walked for a while before seeing his room. It was no different from the rooms that neighbored his room. The walls were pure black, with a certain degree of reflectivity. It looked surprisingly deep. The wooden door was brownish-red, and next to it was a small, four-paned window.

The only thing Shang Jianyao could use to identify the room as his was the white number on the door: 'Room 196.'

495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

Shang Jianyao reached into his pocket and took out a brass key. He inserted it into a lock of the same color and gently twisted it.

With a click, Shang Jianyao used his other hand to press on the door handle and pushed the door open.

The door opened halfway before it stopped because it was blocked by Shang Jianyao's stove.

This was a two by three-meter-wide room with a four-meter-high ceiling. A wooden bed that barely allowed Shang Jianyao to straighten his legs while sleeping was placed horizontally right inside. There was only a slight gap—less than ten centimeters—between the foot of the bed and the wall. Of course, there was no furniture here. However, burgeoning screws were embedded in the wall. Two sets of monotonous and plain clothes hung from them.

Beside them, separated by half a plastic film, was a sink. On the other side of the sink was a stove with an exhaust duct above it. The space below was used as a cabinet.

Shang Jianyao had always been satisfied with the existence of these two facilities because not all rooms had them.

This underground building had too many floors and too many people living in it. Whether it was the elevators, the ventilation system, the sewage system, or the power supply system, all of them faced grueling tests of nature.

Therefore, not only were there many elevators, but they were also divided into different zones and only reached certain floors. Furthermore, the ventilation system and the sewage system were also divided into subsystems. Every 15 floors or a specific number of floors shared a subsystem.

This way, even if there was a malfunction, it would only affect some parts of a zone and not cause a complete breakdown.

Among them, for the sewage system's stability, only a small number of the rooms that the company later built were connected to the pipes.

Many employees had to line up outside a public restroom in the 'block' to wash up. Furthermore, many of the living quarters were cold at night and early in the morning due to insufficient energy.

It was the dream of many employees to be able to wash up without heading out while wrapping themselves in blankets.

On the other side of the door, under the four-paned window, there was a sturdy red-painted wooden table. On the table were many books, a black fountain pen, and a bottle of black ink.

At that moment, the light from the 'street lamps' on the street's ceiling passed through the window and scattered on the table, barely making the words on the book's cover visible.

If it were not for the fact that the illumination wasn't great due to his room being in the middle of two lamps, Shang Jianyao could have used the street lamps to read without wasting any of his allocated energy.

The wooden table had its own cabinet, and behind it was a chair with brownish-red paint and mottled traces. Behind the chair were two stools that looked like they were about to fall apart. They seemed to make up a so-called 'living room.'

Behind this 'living room' was the wooden bed.

Shang Jianyao did not switch on the lights because he did not have much energy to spare. He had to be thrifty.

After pulling out the key and closing the door, Shang Jianyao passed through the area illuminated by the street lamps and walked to the bed in the dark.

He picked up the pillow that was stuffed with grains and placed it against the wall vertically. He then leaned against it, half-lying, half-sitting.

In such a position, Shang Jianyao could see the electric frying pan and rice cooker on the stove. Their surfaces were covered in rust as if they had been used for many, many years.

As far as Shang Jianyao could remember, they had been in his home. One of them was brought back from a city ruin in the Old World by his father when he participated in the Supplies Allocation Market's expedition. In order to obtain this item, he had given up the other spoils that the company had allocated.

The other was exchanged at a small bazaar after his father married his mother. It took them a long time to save up their contribution points. New items at the Supplies Allocation Market were relatively expensive, and supply could never keep up with demand.

This room was not the home in Shang Jianyao's memories. He remembered that his original home was this floor's Zone A, Room 28. There were two rooms, one big and one small. There was also a very cramped washroom.

This allowed Shang Jianyao to have the privilege of not needing to queue at the public toilet when he was young and not have to smell the pungent odors. However, after his father went missing and his mother passed away, the company had taken back the suite and redistributed it to a qualified employee. The current room was the new one he had been assigned to when he left the orphanage for university.

In order to conserve energy, these rooms were no longer equipped with electronic locks. Instead, they were equipped with ordinary locks that had been removed from the remains of the Old World's cities. In addition, some of the factories also manufactured locks.

Shang Jianyao's gaze casually shifted, looking towards the wooden table by the window.

He had heard from his mother that when she and his father were newlyweds, his father had scrimped and saved to buy wood from the Supplies Allocation Market and had made it himself.

This wooden table and the clothes that Shang Jianyao's mother sewed by herself, along with the two electric appliances, were returned to him after three years at the orphanage.

However, Shang Jianyao could no longer wear the clothes in the wardrobe.

Shang Jianyao closed his eyes and raised his right hand, pinching his temples. He then lowered his palm, maintained his current posture, and stopped moving.

The entire room became abnormally quiet, and the darkness seemed to grow heavier.

Shang Jianyao laid there as if he had entered a deep sleep.

...

Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and wasn't surprised to see a spacious hall. It was bigger than the entire Supplies Allocation Market.

The hall was surrounded by a black wall that shimmered with a metallic luster and gave off an icy feeling. Above his head was a swath of darkness, and he couldn't see the ceiling or figure out how high it was.

In this darkness, there were countless resplendent points of light. They slowly rotated as though they formed a dreamy river that was sprinkled with diamonds.

Shang Jianyao was once again shocked by this scene, unable to describe the situation in front of him with words.

He could only recall that his teacher had used a display screen to show everyone a picture of the cosmos when he first entered university. That was the first time he saw the cosmos.

Right now, he felt like he was in the middle of a star cluster.

In the middle of the hall, 'starlight' scattered and condensed into a blurry figure.

The figure's hands were spread out, maintaining a strict symmetry as if imitating a balance scale. His hollow voice echoed in the hall as though he was sharing the revelation given by the stars. "Three favors for one price."

"Three favors for one price..."

Chapter 6: Night Encounter

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

"Three favors for one price..."

Shang Jianyao glanced at the flowing figure before walking past 'him' and into the depths of the hall.

The 'figure' did not undergo any changes. It continued echoing "three favors for one price" endlessly.

A few minutes later, Shang Jianyao came to the hall's innermost part and saw a heavy, grayish-white stone door. It was embedded in the black metal wall and bathed in the stars' light, revealing three grooves on its surface.

The three grooves were located at a height of two meters. One was situated above the other two, seemingly forming a triangle.

Shang Jianyao quietly stared at it for a few seconds. Suddenly, a dazzling 'star cluster' was reflected in his eyes.

He then leaned forward and pressed his hands against the grayish-white stone door.

The grooves on the stone door's surface lit up one after another with a white glow as if 'stars' were falling from the sky and crashing into it.

Within the three 'stars,' illusory words rapidly appeared. However, they seemed to be rolling and changing as Shang Jianyao's thoughts jumped. They couldn't stay still.

The grayish-white stone door—which looked abnormally heavy—creaked but only barely opened a crack.

Shang Jianyao stopped and caught his breath. Then, he exerted his strength again and pushed forward.

The 'stars' in the door's three indentations dimmed when he stopped. They then bloomed with bright and pure light as he exerted force. The illusory characters in them tumbled and slowed down, but they did not stop.

The stone door shook slightly, but it did not budge at all.

Shang Jianyao pushed the stone door again and again. In the end, the blood vessels on his forehead popped out. His expression was warped and grotesque as if he had used all of his strength, but he still couldn't obtain a better result.

Phew. He exhaled, paused, and stood in front of the door. He watched the three 'stars' in the indentations rapidly dim and disappear. He quietly watched all of this without moving for a long time.

After a long while, Shang Jianyao revealed a smile. He pressed his right index and middle finger together and placed them between his eyebrows.

In the next second, he seemed to have become much more serene.

Next, Shang Jianyao placed his left hand in his pocket and stretched out his right palm, casually pressing on the gray-white stone door.

This time, despite clearly not exerting any strength, the 'star cluster' reflected in his eyes became clearer and brighter.

Above the grayish-white stone door, 'starlight' lit up in the three indentations, condensing into a white orb. The illusory words from before also appeared amidst their tumbling, but the variability gradually slowed down.

Finally, they settled.

From top to bottom and left to right, the words in the three orbs of white light were: 'Inference Clowning,"Corny Person,"Hands Immobility.'

The grayish-white stone door trembled slightly, and as a grinding sound echoed, it heavily retreated a little.

Behind the widening gap was a glimmer of light. A silver-white metal staircase also silently stood in the darkness.

Shang Jianyao tried to extend his hand through the door's crack but failed. He tried again, stuffing his feet in. Unsuccessful nonetheless.

He used his hands and feet, trying out all kinds of positions. From using the Tree Pose to doing a headstand, he did not achieve any good results.

After his experiments, he was certain that he could only squeeze the tip of his finger and the tip of his nose through the door's crack.

No matter how focused he was, the grayish-white stone door did not continue moving backwards.

After repeated attempts, Shang Jianyao's figure gradually became blurry.

He finally stopped moving as he watched his body grow fainter and fainter.

In Room 196 in the 495th floor's Zone B, Shang Jianyao—who was lying on the bed—opened his eyes.

He saw the street lamp's light shining in through the four-paned window, the wooden table that was bathed in dim light, the 'living room' that was gradually turning dark, the end of the long bench, and the edge of the old bed that laid deep in the darkness.

The surroundings were so quiet.

Suddenly, the loudspeakers hanging from the ceiling out on the street sounded at the same time, producing a sweet voice that sounded a little childlike. “Good evening, everyone. I’m the news broadcaster, Hou Yi. It’s 8 p.m. now...

“At 5:20 p.m., a small fire broke out in a factory on the 102th floor. One person died, and three people were injured. The fire has been put out, and the losses are still being calculated. The board of directors’s Director and Vice-president Ji Ze has once again emphasized: ‘Fire is merciless; alarm bells ring’...

“From tomorrow onwards, Energy Zone’s No. 2 reactor unit will be officially suspended for maintenance. The energy allocation of all employees will be reduced by a quarter. There are no estimates when things will be restored to normal...

“Sun Chuci, chief scientist of the Geothermal Research Institute, said that he’s already trying to build a better geothermal model. This can bring about a change in the temperature at night while maintaining the optimal environment for the Indoor Ecosystem...

“At 6:40 p.m., there was an argument in the staff cafeteria on the 577th floor. A certain employee accused the cafeteria’s food dispenser of being unfair. He had one-tenth less of the same meat dish. The floor’s Order Supervisory Team has begun investigations...

“Between 7:20 to 7:30 p.m., two male employees were found fighting in the Rec Center on the 414th floor. The floor’s Order Supervisory Team has already begun investigations. The exact reason remains unknown. According to the employees present, this matter is related to the results of the central marriage assignment...

“... ”

“...Having come to the end of the news, we shall play an acapella song like always. I hope everyone likes it. Thank you.

“... ”

Shang Jianyao laid on the bed, in a spot where the light from the street lamps could not reach. His expression was calm as he listened to the broadcast without moving. Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep.

By the time he woke up, the street lamps outside had already been switched off, and the surroundings were pitch black.

The cold night air filled the room. Shang Jianyao realized that he had taken off his clothes at some point in time and had bundled himself under the blanket. He even had the thick, dark-green cotton coat draped over the blanket.

He didn't have a clock or watch, so he didn't know what time it was. He could only be sure that it wasn't 6:30 in the morning because the street lamps weren't lit yet.

He estimated that he might have fallen asleep before 8:30 last night. He slept two hours earlier than normal, so it was natural to wake up earlier.

After feeling the bulge in his lower abdomen for a few seconds, Shang Jianyao reached to the side of his pillow for a thick flashlight with a black plastic shell. He pushed the switch forward.

A beam of condensed light shot out, reflecting the sink diagonally across the room.

"I forgot to wash my face, brush my teeth, and soak my feet..." Shang Jianyao muttered. He suddenly lifted the blanket and got off the bed.

Within the company, apart from those who were assigned individual bathrooms—the higher-ranking employees and managers—everyone else could only shower in the large bathhouse that was part of the Rec Center.

Other than the employees who needed to bathe every day due to their jobs, everyone else could only shower two times a week. There was no compensation for not using the quota, and it couldn't be brought forward.

After getting off the bed, Shang Jianyao didn't waste any time. He put on the thick, dark-green cotton coat and rushed out with the flashlight, heading straight for the public toilet at the end of the street.

The battery in the flashlight was part of his energy ration. He didn't dare waste it. Many employees prepared wooden barrels, spittoons, and other things at home so that they need not go out at night. Unfortunately, those things also required contribution points.

No one was in the public toilet so late at night. The sensor lights lit up in response to Shang Jianyao's footsteps albeit they were rather dim.

After relieving himself, Shang Jianyao walked out of the public toilet and prepared to go home.

It was at that moment when he saw a beam of light coming from a flashlight from the corner of the corridor.

A few seconds later, a man in a dark-green cotton coat of the same style as that of Shang Jianyao quickly walked past and turned in the opposite direction of the public toilet.

Shang Jianyao stared at the man for two seconds before turning off the flashlight. He silently jogged in the darkness towards the small blob of light created by the other party.

He soon approached the man and realized that it was a middle-aged employee from a nearby block. He was Shen Du, a person he had to call 'Uncle.'

"Hey!" Shang Jianyao suddenly jumped out of the darkness and patted Shen Du's shoulder.

Shen Du's hand trembled, almost throwing the flashlight to the ground. He looked at Shang Jianyao in horror before heaving a sigh of relief. "Jianyao, you scared me! It's late at night. Don't come over so suddenly to greet me!"

Shang Jianyao smiled. "Good evening, Uncle Shen. What time is it now?"

"It's not 6 a.m. yet," Shen Du replied subconsciously. Outside his house was a junction with a wall clock.

"Uncle Shen, where are you going?" Shang Jianyao looked around.

"I'm going... going to the bathroom..." Shen Du stopped mid-sentence. The direction he was heading in was directly opposite the public bathroom.

Under the flashlight's illumination, his gentlemanly expression turned mixed. It was unknown if it was because of the cold night air or something else.

After organizing his words, Shen Du forced a smile onto his face and said, "I'm going to the public toilet in Zone C. Sigh, I dropped something there when I was at the Rec Center last night. I only realized it when I woke up just now and wanted to look for it as soon as possible."

Shang Jianyao nodded, and his dark brown eyes seemed to be tainted with the same darkness around him. He then chuckled and said, "Uncle Shen, look. You're wearing a green coat, and so am I. You're a man, and so am I."

Shen Du was confused when he heard this. Then, he came to a realization. "So, we are fellow parishioners!" He immediately became enthusiastic. "Are you also going to listen to the Guide's sermon?"

"That's right." Shang Jianyao smiled in response.

Chapter 7: Sermon

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Shen Du smiled immediately. "Let's go together. Be careful to avoid..." He didn't finish his sentence. He looked up at the ceiling, indicating for Shang Jianyao to be careful.

Surveillance cameras were installed in every floor's Residential Zone, but there weren't many of them. They were only installed at key intersections and indoor public spaces.

In comparison, there were more surveillance cameras in both the Indoor Ecosystem Zone and the Factory Zone. However, their numbers paled in comparison compared to the Research Zone and Administrative Zone.

Shang Jianyao followed Shen Du's gaze and looked at the intersection ahead. He smiled and said, "Maybe it isn't even turned on."

"That's true." Shen Du agreed with Shang Jianyao.

This was because such situations were too common in the company. From time to time, it would be revealed that certain equipment had been damaged and could not be used. Usually, it was just placed there for show.

It was said that this had something to do with the chaos that happened when the Old World was destroyed while the survivors hastily retreated into the underground building.

Furthermore, it had been 46 years since the start of the New Calendar. It was very normal for some equipment to be damaged. The corresponding production line might not have been rebuilt due to a lack of resources, technological loss, or lack of information. Therefore, it was impossible to replace or repair them.

"However, we still have to be careful. The company has always been very strict about matters regarding religion." Shen Du reminded him and walked forward with the flashlight.

When he reached the intersection, he switched off the flashlight and used the careful method of sticking close to the wall to make a right turn.

Shang Jianyao followed behind him and looked at the surveillance camera on the intersection's ceiling.

A red dot was blinking slowly.

Shang Jianyao looked at the red dot and suddenly raised his hands. He pinched his cheeks and pulled up the corners of his mouth, making a face.

He then rubbed the muscles on his face that had been squashed by the flashlight. He mimicked Shen Du and moved against the wall.

After walking for a while, covering different turns and bends, Shen Du stopped in front of Zone A's Room 35. He then raised his left hand and knocked thrice.

“Newborns are likened unto the sun.” A voice that was deliberately kept deep came from the room.

Shen Du stretched his neck forward and replied in the same deep voice, “Life what’s most important.”

With a creaking sound, the door opened, and a faint yellow light flowed out.

“This is?” The woman who opened the door saw Shang Jianyao behind Shen Du. She was in her thirties and had obviously been genetically modified. Her eyebrows were black and straight, her nose was high, and the corners of her eyes were raised. She was both beautiful and unique.

Shang Jianyao stepped forward and said sincerely, “This is my first time participating. Uncle Shen brought me here.”

The woman’s frown gradually relaxed as she said thoughtfully, “So you’re a new parishioner.”

She looked around and stepped aside. “Come in quickly, don’t let anyone see you.”

After seeing that this lady had acknowledged Shang Jianyao’s identity, Shen Du no longer had any doubts. He strode into the room and switched off the flashlight.

Shang Jianyao followed behind and surveyed the surroundings, taking in the situation within the room.

This room was much bigger than the one he lived in. Furthermore, there was a door right inside, indicating that there was an inner bedroom, a bathroom, or a small kitchen.

This reminded Shang Jianyao of his previous home. This meant that the owners of this room were married and above D4 or one of them was a D7 team leader.

The room outside was about 2.5 meters by 5 meters wide. A closet and a cupboard were by the innermost wall. Separated by the two pieces of furniture was a large double bed. It was placed horizontally, and at the foot of the bed was an aisle leading to the inner bedroom.

Beyond the large bed was a small living room made up of chairs, stools, short stools, a coffee table, a desk, and a sofa.

At this moment, two candles were lit on the coffee table, creating a faint yellow glow. Many people were sitting around—men and women, young and old.

Shang Jianyao didn’t do a careful count, but from how packed it was, he felt that there were at least ten people.

“Jianyao, register first.” The woman who opened the door took out a soft-covered notebook from somewhere.

Shang Jianyao took the pen and wrote his name on the blank page as he wore a look of curiosity. “You know me?”

The woman smiled and said, “When your parents lived here, we were barely considered neighbors. However, you probably don’t remember me. You can call me Auntie Li.”

“Okay, Auntie Li.” Shang Jianyao didn’t stand on ceremony at all.

“Alright, quickly sit down. The Guide is about to begin the sermon.” Li pointed to an empty stool.

Shang Jianyao politely asked, “Where are you sitting?”

“I can sit by the bed,” Li replied with a smile.

Shang Jianyao didn’t ask any further. He took a few steps to the side and sat down.

After about two to three minutes, the door to the bedroom opened, and a figure walked out.

This figure was not unfamiliar to him at all. It was Auntie Ren, whom he had met at the Rec Center in the evening. She was a D3 employee who served the company’s Strategy Committee.

At this moment, Ren Jie was still wearing the same polyester shirt, but she had changed into a pair of gray pants. On her beautiful face, which had traces of age, her expression was holy and dignified.

She walked between the big bed, the closet, and the cupboard and scanned the room for everyone.

“Jianyao?” She immediately saw Shang Jianyao sitting upright, slipping effortlessly into addressing him by an affectionate diminutive.

Shang Jianyao stood up, took two steps forward, and greeted her. “Auntie Ren, I just registered. Uncle Shen brought me here.”

Ren Jie’s eyes flickered as if she were considering something. Then she smiled. “So that’s how it is. You’ve already passed the examination. Have a seat.”

When Shang Jianyao sat down again, she looked at everyone and said, “Since a new parishioner is participating, I’d better introduce our parish.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped enthusiastically.

Shen Du and the rest either turned their heads or turned to look at him with the same blank gaze.

Ren Jie had probably heard that Shang Jianyao was someone with a rather flippant personality. After being taken aback momentarily, she laughed. "You don't have to do that. This isn't a corporate convention."

She paused for two seconds. After Shang Jianyao stopped, she said in a deep voice, "All of us here have never actually left the company or stepped onto the surface. The information we have on the Ashlands comes only from the company's broadcast, the textbook's introduction, and the descriptions of the Security Department's employees. All of this information has been confidentially screened beforehand.

"We don't really know the true Ashlands, just like we've never really seen the sky." Her gaze swept around and landed on Shang Jianyao's face. "We know that after the destruction of the Old World, after a long period of chaos and disputes, humans finally managed to rebuild order in certain areas and started the New Calendar.

"We also know that shadows continue cloaking the Ashlands. The land of order is like an island amidst the sea, as spoken of in textbooks. It borders chaotic lands, no man's land, and various wildernesses and mountains. Pollution, mutation, and famine are like tidal waves that come wave after wave in a never-ending fashion.

"Most fatal of them all is the Heartless disease, which is the Bestial Transformation Disease taught in the textbooks. Until today, we still haven't grasped its pathology and spreading patterns. Perhaps, the people around us and we will degenerate to become real 'beasts' when we wake up one day, unable to communicate with each other, only having the instinct to hunt."

Ren Jie took a breath and continued. "This is what we know, so what do we not know? How did the Old World get destroyed? How was the new order rebuilt? On the Ashlands, there are many rumors spreading among humans: Some of the Old World's actions angered the gods, so they were destroyed by 'Them.' The survivors passed the test, so they were saved by 'Them.'

"This rumor is partly true and partly false. It's true that there is indeed a group of deities in this world. 'They' share control of time and manage different months. Therefore, 'They' are respectfully addressed as the 'Kalendarium.' Of course, there are also people who address 'Them' as 'Perfected Man,' 'God of Age,' 'Eon God,' 'Messiah,' 'Painter of the Past,' and 'Current Master.'

“What’s fake is that the Kalendarium didn’t destroy the Old World because they were angered. This is only an inevitable result of normal development. Life is lofty and sacred, but it will ultimately pass away. The world is no exception, just like how a year will eventually come to an end and prepare to start a new year.

“Our parish is called Life Ritual. We believe in the most special Kalendaria—Arbiter of Fate who helms December. ‘She’ marks the end but also symbolizes the arrival of a new year. ‘She’ is the terminator of the Old World and also the establisher of the New World.”

When Ren Jie said this, apart from Shang Jianyao, everyone else stretched out their arms, seemingly hugging and rocking a baby.

“The End will belong to the Arbiter of Fate.” Their deep and clear voices mixed together and echoed in the room.

Ren Jie looked at Shang Jianyao and continued. “The New World actually has not come. Now is the time when the deities test all living beings. Only the Arbiter of Fate’s devotees who have entrusted themselves to the Arbiter of Fate in the form of a sacrificial ritual can enter the New World and escape the cycle of time, obtaining eternal life with no more suffering.”

“Thy mercy be praised!” The congregation rocked their arms again and spoke in a low voice.

Shang Jianyao mimicked their actions and said, “Thy mercy be praised.”

Ren Jie nodded in satisfaction and said, “Alright, let’s officially begin the sermon. Our Life Ritual worships life and respects death. Therefore, we value new life and funerals the most. We will mainly be talking about new life today.”

Shang Jianyao sat with his back straight. Like the people around him, he listened very seriously.

Ren Jie’s voice gradually softened as her expression turned holy. “We should let a baby sleep on their back; we should let infants develop the habit of playing during the day and sleeping at night; we should hum a song when a baby sleeps; we should seriously distinguish a baby’s cries.

“Short but deep, sometimes high, sometimes low means hunger; intense crying means anger; suddenly being loud and shrill before a long pause that turns into a gentle, mournful whimper means pain...

“We should gently pat the baby’s back and let them expel the air in their stomach... We should hold the back of a baby’s head when we carry them... We should breastfeed...”

Shang Jianyao's eyes gradually glazed over. His mouth opened slightly, unable to close.

Chapter 8: Holy Communion

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

"We should carry a baby vertically for 20 to 30 minutes every time we finish feeding a baby; we should feed a baby before they become extremely hungry..."

"..."

Ren Jie's preaching voice gently echoed in the room. Shen Du and the rest listened very seriously. From time to time, they would take out paper and a pen that they had prepared and jot down what they thought was important.

Shang Jianyao maintained his initial posture and focused on Ren Jie, but his eyes seemed to have lost focus.

After twenty to thirty minutes, Ren Jie stopped and swept her gaze across everyone. "That shall be all for today. All of this is the teachings of God."

"Thy mercy be praised!" Before Shen Du and the rest could speak, Shang Jianyao had already stretched out his arms and started making the motions of rocking a baby. He appeared very enthusiastic.

"..." The rest of the parishioners were stunned for two seconds, but they still imitated Shang Jianyao in the end. They raised their arms, bent their elbows, and gently rocked. "Thy mercy be praised!"

Ren Jie's mouth dropped open, but she said nothing. She looked at the old electronic watch on her wrist and said, "It's getting late. We need to get back to our homes before the streetlights light up. Next is the last segment, Holy Communion."

With that said, she entered the innermost room with Li.

In less than a minute, they came out one after the other. One held a variety of utensils—small bowls, large bowls, plastic lunch boxes, and porcelain spoons. The other held a large cylindrical container filled with black objects.

A strong fragrance quickly inundated Shang Jianyao's nose, making him involuntarily raise his right hand and wipe the corner of his mouth.

It was the fragrance of sesame and sugar!

Similar items—including ordinary desserts—cost 60 contribution points per pound, making them more expensive than pork! As for the high-end goods, they cost about 720 points per pound. Shang Jianyao's daily breakfast only cost eight to ten points.

Soon, Li distributed the utensils to everyone. Ren Jie carried a translucent plastic container in one hand and a soup ladle in the other. She scooped the black food into the parishioners' bowls and lunch boxes. Each person received one spoonful.

For every person she gave food to, she would say, "This is today's Holy Communion, black sesame paste."

Those who received Holy Communion solemnly replied, "Thy mercy be praised!"

As a new member of the congregation, Shang Jianyao was the last one to receive it, excluding Ren Jie and Li. He received quite a spoonful that almost filled up the small bowl in his hands.

"This is today's Holy Communion, black sesame paste," Ren Jie said as usual.

Shang Jianyao replied sincerely, "Thy mercy be praised!"

Ren Jie—who distributed Holy Communion—was, to a certain extent, the embodiment of the Arbiter of Fate. Thus, the 'your' referred to the Arbiter of Fate, not Ren Jie.

Li observed Shang Jianyao's change in expression and asked with a smile, "Are you touched?"

"Yes!" Shang Jianyao lifted the bowl with one hand and wiped the corner of his mouth with the other.

Ren Jie and Li didn't say anything else. They returned to the bed and separated the remaining black sesame paste. They lowered their heads and said in a deep voice, "Thy mercy be praised."

Everyone echoed in response and began to enjoy Holy Communion.

Holy Communion seemed to have been prepared early. It was a little cold, but it did not affect its taste. It was rich, sweet, and had the unique taste of sesame.

After Shang Jianyao carefully took a bite, he paused for a moment, and then he swiftly and repeatedly moved the spoon into his mouth.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

He didn't even let the paste stuck to the walls of the bowl go to waste. He scraped them clean. After he finished eating, he looked around and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

After Holy Communion ended, everyone praised the Arbiter of Fate, who helmed December, and lined up to return the cutlery to Li and Ren Jie.

When it was Shang Jianyao's turn, Li asked with a smile, "Any thoughts on your first gathering?"

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "Delicious."

Li's expression froze as she asked, "What suggestions do you have for us? There's no need to hold back. Since you've joined the parish, we're all family. There's nothing that can't be said between family members."

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, "More for Holy Communion."

"... Anything else?" Li managed a smile.

Shang Jianyao's eyes flickered. "Brush your teeth in advance."

Li couldn't help but cough. "Everyone can leave now. Shang Jianyao, please stay behind. The Guide has something to say to him."

Shen Du and the rest left one after another. Li and her husband carried the utensils and entered the room inside.

Ren Jie walked to Shang Jianyao and said with a gentle smile, "You've just joined the parish, so you need to grasp the knowledge related to the prayers as soon as possible. Don't worry, this is all extremely simple. Our lady, Arbiter of Fate, is a true deity that controls time, so 'She' doesn't care about these things. There is no red tape."

Shang Jianyao nodded, indicating that he was listening.

Ren Jie slowed down and said, "We don't have a fixed prayer time, but we often choose the moment when we wake up in the morning. We thank the Arbiter of Fate for letting us remain alive. We value the birth of babies and the departure of the deceased the most. Therefore, our formal rites, or rather religious ones, are usually like sermons when a newborn is one month old or when the dead are buried. The time is not fixed.

"Well, there is a grand ceremony on the first day of December to welcome the arrival of our lady, the Arbiter of Fate. On the last day of December, there is also a grand ceremony to pray that our lady will open the door to a new world.

“You’ve already learned the salute. It’s to imitate the way you hold a baby and rock it gently. The corresponding language is mainly divided into three categories: When it comes to the topic of death and passing, say, ‘The End will belong to the Arbiter of Fate.’ When it comes to the loftiness of life or the grace of our lady, use ‘Thy mercy be praised.’ When it involves new life, say, ‘Newborns are likened unto the sun’ or ‘Life what’s most important.’

“Basically, that’s all. As for Holy Communion, it’s different every time. It might be black sesame paste. It could also be milk, fruit juice, soy milk, meat soup, vegetable soup, or yogurt. Heh heh, have you discovered anything in common?”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “They’re all delicious.”

“...” Ren Jie maintained her smile.” They are all liquid food or close to it. Liquid food is a staple for newborns and those who are about to die.” Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to speak, Ren Jie pointed to the door. “Alright, you can go back now.”

Shang Jianyao looked back and did not take a step forward. Instead, he asked, “Auntie Ren, how many Kalendarium are there in total?”

“After a normal person understands the definition of a Kalendaria, they will definitely think that there are 12, but that’s not the case,” Ren Jie said with a smile. “There are a total of 13 Kalendarium. One of them is the Kalendaria that represents the year of the leap month. Heh heh, when leap months aren’t applicable, ‘He’ represents the entire year.”

“‘His’ title is?” Shang Jianyao pressed.

Ren Jie shook her head. “I’m not sure either. We believe in the Arbiter of Fate. Therefore, we don’t have to understand the other Kalendarium.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t ask any more questions. He turned around to leave Zone A, Room 35.

With the help of the flashlight, he traversed the original route to return to Zone B, Room 196. Every time he approached an intersection, he followed Shen Du by turning off the flashlight and sticking to the wall.

When he returned home, Shang Jianyao walked to the sink and picked up the toothpaste that was so thin that it seemed to be only a thin layer. After a great deal of effort, he finally squeezed out a bit of toothpaste onto the toothbrush that had sparse bristles.

After brushing his teeth and washing his face seriously, Shang Jianyao saw that the ceiling was still dark, so he sat in front of the wooden table, leaned against the back of the chair, and closed his eyes.

He raised his hand and massaged his temples before putting it down again.

...

Shang Jianyao's figure appeared in the wide hall that was filled with stars.

He first looked at the cold, pitch-black metal wall nearby before raising his head and looking up into the sky.

The countless resplendent points of light were like the stars described in textbooks. They formed one star system after another, and multiple star systems formed many galaxies.

There were boundaries between these 'galaxies,' but they were not that distinct.

Shang Jianyao had already counted how many 'Milky Ways' there were here. Now, he began to count again:

"One, two, three... eleven, twelve, thirteen.

"Thirteen..." He fell silent as his figure gradually faded, disappearing into the hall that seemed to contain stars.

...

After waiting for a while, Shang Jianyao saw the area outside of the window instantly brighten.

The street lights lit up at the same time. Daybreak had been ushered into this underground building.

Still wearing the thick, dark-green cotton coat, Shang Jianyao picked up his plastic lunch box, walked out of the room, and headed to Zone C.

His destination: Supplies Allocation Market.

On the way there, Shang Jianyao ran into Long Yuehong, who lived nearby. It was obvious that Long Yuehong had woken up early and didn't need to line up to use the public toilet.

"The job allocation results are going to be released today..." Long Yuehong deliberately waited on this path to meet Shang Jianyao so that someone could share in his anxiety.

"That's right." Shang Jianyao looked ahead and saw a woman at the door of the room, making a fuss about a baby.

His expression changed instantly. He seemed to be thinking about something, but there was also a hint of confusion.

Long Yuehong glanced at him and asked as they walked, "What's wrong with you? Did you have a nightmare last night?"

Shang Jianyao fell silent for two seconds before saying, "I'm doubting life."

Chapter 9: Job

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Long Yuehong couldn't understand Shang Jianyao's answer, so he couldn't be bothered.

The two of them casually chatted as they headed to the Supplies Allocation Market together. When the staff cafeteria opened, they each spent eight contribution points on a hard-boiled egg, two mixed-grain buns, and a plate of pickled vegetables.

After breakfast, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong brought their lunch boxes into the Rec Center. They sat in a corner of the hall and waited for the release of the job allocation results.

The Rec Center was empty at that moment, apart from the employees working there—who were busy scrubbing, cleaning, and moving objects around under Chen Xianyu's supervision.

The elders who were training and chatting in the morning were no longer around. They were either sending the young ones to school or heading directly to their jobs.

The company stipulated that those who were 60 years old could be transferred to a more relaxed position or have their workload halved. Only when they were 75 years old did they not need to work. They could then receive monthly pensions based on their employee rank.

However, not many retired employees could come to the Rec Center at their leisure when they reached the age of 75. As genetic enhancement wasn't widespread for the earlier generations, few people could live to the age of 75 without sufficient resources and nutrition.

Long Yuehong took a deep breath and tried to make conversation. "I met the daughter of my mother's colleague yesterday. She just turned 18. She works at the radio station under the Entertainment Department. She's about 1.7 meters tall and is very pretty.

“Do you think it’s possible for her to like me? Sigh, I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My looks are average, and my grades are only average. I wasn’t earmarked by any department....”

Shang Jianyao’s right eyebrow twitched slightly. “What’s her name?”

“Feng Yunying. Heh heh, she doesn’t know Hou Yi. They aren’t in the same team.” Long Yuehong thought that Shang Jianyao wanted to ask about Hou Yi’s situation. After all, many of the company’s employees were loyal listeners of this broadcaster.

Shang Jianyao didn’t appear disappointed and continued to ask, “Which floor and zone does she live in? What’s her unit number?”

“Why are you asking this?” Long Yuehong was shocked and confused.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “I’ll go ask her if it’s possible that she likes you.”

“...” No matter how inexperienced Long Yuehong was, he knew that this would only serve to mess things up. “Haha, stop joking.”

He didn’t dare continue the topic. “What department do you wish to enter?”

“Security Department,” Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation.

Long Yuehong almost lost control of his voice. “Are you crazy? That’s very dangerous! Don’t think that having a meal allowance is a good thing! Haha, you’re joking again.”

The Security Department was the least safe amongst all the departments in the company. The annual staff mortality rate was several times higher than the other departments combined. This was because they were responsible for many expeditions.

Their duties involved escorting large amounts of supplies through the wilderness, fighting with people or monsters who had invaded their sphere of influence, guarding the outposts other than the underground building, venturing deep into the wilderness to search for Old World ruins, and protecting the scientific team to complete their corresponding projects. However, their duties weren’t limited to just these things.

This often resulted in Security Department employees having to face pollution, disease, monsters, Heartless disease, and bullets. Some were injured, infected, had abnormalities, or even died. It was inevitable.

While Long Yuehong was shocked by Shang Jianyao’s answer, Meng Xia and the others entered the Rec Center one after another. They then sat down in different areas according to their familiarity with the area.

Yang Zhenyuan had a good relationship with Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. They lived on the same floor, had gotten into the same university, and also majored in the same field. Therefore, he walked towards the two of them after looking around.

“Eh, why do you look so deflated? Did you not eat breakfast?” Long Yuehong asked with concern as he saw Yang Zhenyuan walk over.

Yang Zhenyuan’s face turned red. “I’ve eaten. I’m just a little tired.”

“Why are you tired?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Yang Zhenyuan didn’t know how to explain. He turned to Shang Jianyao and sighed. “I never knew marriage is such a tiring thing. However, it’s still pretty good. You guys have to find a partner as soon as possible.” As he spoke, he unconsciously revealed a smile.

Long Yuehong felt that he understood what he was getting at and didn’t ask any further. He continued the topic from before. “Yang Zhenyuan, Shang Jianyao just joked about how he wants to join the Security Department!”

Yang Zhenyuan thought about it seriously. “If I can restrict myself to serving internally, I would like to work there too. The treatment is really good.”

Security Department employees’ salary was no different from that of other departments’ employees. They all followed the company’s rules. However, since they required high-intensity training, they could eat meat every day. On training days and duty days, they would eat in the Security Department’s exclusive canteen. The price of the food was low, and the servings were plentiful. Usually, there would be meal allowances.

This was fatally attractive to many employees.

“Isn’t that obvious? If one can really restrict themselves to serve internally, everyone will want to work there. Well, except management and those researchers,” said Long Yuehong disdainfully. “Unfortunately, the Security Department’s internal and external posts are done on rotation unless one becomes Big Boss’s personal guard, part of an operation team directly under management, or an important project security detail.”

Shang Jianyao, who had been silent all this while, suddenly said, “I want a field agent position.”

“...” Long Yuehong waved his hand in front of Shang Jianyao. “Is there really something wrong with your brain? Don’t you know how dangerous it is outside?”

There were many employees in the Security Department, so everyone knew someone from it to some extent. They knew the Ashlands’ situation, so they knew that there was more chaos than order outside.

The company's interior was comparatively peaceful and orderly. Its capability of providing basic supplies made it like heaven.

It was precisely because of this that not many people really wanted to be part of the department, even though the Security Department had the corresponding allowances for field agents and the choice to bring items from the Ashlands back home without them handing over or destroying them.

In order to encourage everyone to join the Security Department, the board of directors was very generous with the promotion of the corresponding staff. Many people, in their ordinary jobs, might only reach D3 their entire lives, unable to become senior employees. However, the staff of the Security Department could reach D4 in a year or even six months. At the same time, all those who retired from the Security Department and transferred into normal positions would be promoted by one rank.

Yang Zhenyuan could not understand Shang Jianyao, but he did not retort and only pointed out some facts. "Security Department employees are basically selected from married people with children. It's very rare to find someone who was just matched or yet to be married."

"That's right." Long Yuehong smiled and nodded. He then looked at Shang Jianyao and said, "Why do you want to be a field agent?"

"To save all of humanity," said Shang Jianyao without changing his expression.

Long Yuehong and Yang Zhenyuan choked on their own saliva at the same time.

At that moment, two people in black uniforms came in from outside and handed a sealed paper envelope to Chen Xianyu, the Rec Center's PIC.

Long Yuehong, Yang Zhenyuan, and Meng Xia stood up at the same time and held their breaths.

The paper envelope contained the job allocation results.

Compared to the central marriage assignment's need for a public announcement, the job allocation results were given, in the form of a letter, to the corresponding person because of confidentiality clauses. Nobody else knew of the results during the entire process.

After confirming that the paper envelope wasn't damaged, the two board staff signed and handed over the results. They then retreated to Chen Xianyu's side to supervise the distribution process.

"That was fast. It seems like we are the first batch... I wonder what kind of job I'll get..." Long Yuehong couldn't help but speak in his nervousness.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him and said, "First, assume that you've entered the Security Department. That way, no matter what the outcome is, it won't be worse."

"That makes sense!" Long Yuehong had no other choice but to follow Shang Jianyao's suggestion.

After Chen Xianyu showed the paper envelope to everyone, he unsealed it and took out a stack of envelopes. Then, he read the name on each letter. "Zhong Xiaomin."

A girl went up, took the letter, and quickly walked to the side to open the envelope.

"Yang Zhenyuan."

...

"Meng Xia."

...

"Long Yuehong."

...

"Shang Jianyao."

...

The names were read out one by one. One by one, people walked up and received the envelope that would decide their fate.

They didn't try hiding their results from others. Instead, they directly opened the envelope in the Rec Center and took out the letter inside.

Long Yuehong stood not far away from Chen Xianyu. His hands trembled as he unfolded the paper. "Long Yuehong, Electronic Card Number 02511013768: Please report to Room 14 on the 647th floor before noon."

647th floor... Long Yuehong's mind buzzed, and the letter in his hand fell to the ground. He quickly picked it up again and read it a few more times, hoping that he had read it wrongly.

Unfortunately, he hadn't.

"I'm doomed. I'm doomed..." he muttered to himself, his face ashen.

This underground building had a total of 650 floors. The five floors closest to the surface came under the Security Department. Therefore, reporting to the 647th floor meant joining the Security Department.

Slap!

Shang Jianyao patted Long Yuehong's shoulder.

Long Yuehong slowly turned around, his eyes dull. "I'm doomed. I'm doomed..."
Nôv(e)B\jnn

With a bright smile, Shang Jianyao said, "I've been assigned to the Security Department."

"Huh?" Long Yuehong snapped out of his nightmare and grabbed Shang Jianyao's letter. He quickly scanned it and read the contents. "Shang Jianyao. Electronic Card Number 02509083626: Please report to Room 14 on the 647th floor before noon."

"We will be in the same place?" Long Yuehong calmed down a little.

Shang Jianyao smiled and replied, "Looks like it."

"Why are we so unlucky?" Long Yuehong was no longer disappointed and depressed after learning that he had company.

Shang Jianyao tilted his head and said, "I applied for it."

"..." Long Yuehong was speechless.

At this moment, Meng Xia, Yang Zhenyuan, Zhong Xiaomin, and the others all saw their assignments. Some were excited, some were happy, some felt down, and some were sad. However, none of them reacted as strongly as Long Yuehong.

"Where are you assigned to? I'm going to the research institute on the 36th floor." Yang Zhenyuan came over with his letter.

With a beaming smile, Shang Jianyao replied, "Security Department."

In the blink of an eye, the Rec Center's hall became extremely quiet. The sad and depressed people were first surprised before they felt that their assignment wasn't too bad.

Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong did not want to stay any longer. He pulled Shang Jianyao aside and spoke in a low voice. "Let's head over to report. Sigh, that's all we can do now."

This result could not be resisted unless he wanted his entire family to be banished from the company.

Even if one had some connections that could soothe things over with relations, they had to report first before attempting to make a transfer. However, those with such connections would have long taken the 'earmarked' route.

Shang Jianyao waved at Yang Zhenyuan, took his lunch box, and walked to the other side of Zone C with Long Yuehong.

There was an elevator that led to the top five floors.

Long Yuehong followed Shang Jianyao in silence for a while. Suddenly, he pursed his lips and softly said, "At least I can see the real sky..."

Chapter 10: "Chosen One"

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Long Yuehong imagined that Shang Jianyao would say a few words to comfort him, but to his surprise, he didn't say anything. Instead, Shang Jianyao walked straight ahead as if he didn't hear him.

Long Yuehong opened his mouth, wanting to repeat himself, but he didn't manage to say anything in the end. Instead, he sighed silently.

After walking in silence for a while, they arrived at the fourth elevator area in a corner of Zone C.

As they waited for the elevator to arrive, Long Yuehong found time passing very slowly. Every second was torturous; it was suffocating.

Finally, the doors to the elevator on the left opened.

After entering, Shang Jianyao swiped his electronic card and pressed the '647' button.

The door closed, and the elevator started to move up.

As he watched the numbers change, Shang Jianyao suddenly spoke in a deep voice. "Everyone has their own calling."

Long Yuehong was stunned for two seconds before he smiled bitterly. "I just want to stay in the company, find a good wife, have two cute children—a boy and a girl—and strive to allow them to have meat three times a week..."

His voice gradually softened as if he had already come to the realization that such a goal could not be accomplished.

Shang Jianyao didn't say anything else. Long Yuehong didn't know what to say either. The two of them kept their mouths shut and stood in their spots. Time in the elevator seemed to come to a standstill.

After an unknown period of time, the elevator stopped at the 647th floor.

As Long Yuehong walked out, he lowered his head and asked, "Shang Jianyao, a penny for your thoughts? I was thinking about how good it is for me to have a younger brother and sister."

"I was just in a daze." Shang Jianyao stared ahead.

"...You sure have a good attitude." Long Yuehong couldn't help but sigh.

"After all, I applied for the position myself." Shang Jianyao looked to the right and checked the door number.

"..." Long Yuehong was speechless and started searching for Room 14.

Unlike the 495th floor, the 647th floor was not divided into several streets. The rooms also weren't two to three meters apart. This place was centered around the 'training grounds.' Several large rooms surrounded the training grounds.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong soon arrived outside Room 14.

There was no nameplate on the door, so the two of them had no way of guessing which Security Department team it came under.

Long Yuehong opened his mouth and took a deep breath in a bid to adjust his mindset and face his fate.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao did not hesitate at all. He bent his finger and knocked on the door.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

This sound was a little sudden, interrupting Long Yuehong's deep breathing. He was just about to complain when a slightly hoarse female voice sounded from inside.

"Please come in."

Shang Jianyao turned the handle and pushed open the door.

Long Yuehong immediately glanced inside, his gaze sweeping across the room.

This room was at least three times larger than his home. At the very end were a desk—painted brown and red—and two large bookshelves. On the left side of the wall were three tables. They were black in color and looked rather old.

The middle and the right section played the role of a ‘living room.’ There was a battered cloth sofa set, a coffee table, four recliners, two benches, and four low stools.

At this moment, a woman stood up from the sofa and looked towards the door.

She was in her twenties and nearly 1.8 meters tall. Her body’s ratio—head, body, and legs—were very proportionate. Her skin had a malt color, and her black hair was tied into a ponytail behind her head.

Unlike the girls commonly seen in the Residential Zone, she wore a uniform that signified her employment to the Safety Department. It was gray with a certain camouflage pattern, making her look valiant.

Her facial features were also very suitable for this kind of attire. Her eyebrows were thick, her eyes were large, and she looked very heroic.

“Are you guys the new team members?” The woman smiled brightly, but her voice sounded a little loud.

“Yes, yes.” Long Yuehong felt a little awkward when he saw the extraordinary beauty.

The woman frowned slightly and said, “Louder.”

An indescribable clarity was in her voice, and it was clear that she was not the person who had said, “Please come in.”

Long Yuehong was startled, thinking that he had somehow offended his superior.

Shang Jianyao stepped forward and shouted, “Yes!” His voice echoed in the room and reached the corridor.

The woman smiled again and pointed at her ear. “There’s no need to be so loud. I’m just hard of hearing, not deaf.”

Long Yuehong followed her finger and saw a silver metallic object in her ear.

“A cochlear implant,” the woman said frankly. She immediately wiped away her smile and spoke in a voice that was much louder than an ordinary person’s. “Let me introduce myself. I’m your team leader, Jiang Baimian. Despite calling myself a team leader, I’m not yet a D7. I’m presently only a D6.”

“Yes, Team Leader,” Long Yuehong replied loudly.

“Greetings, Team Leader!” Shang Jianyao seemed very happy.

Jiang Baimian pointed at the sofa. “She’s the other member, Bai Chen.”

Bai Chen was only about 1.6 meters tall. Although she also wore a gray camouflage uniform, she was clearly much more petite than Jiang Baimian. She had a gray, old-fashioned scarf wrapped around her neck. Her black hair went just past her ears, and her facial features were still considered exquisite. Her skin was rather rough, as though the elements had hardened her. Unlike Jiang Baimian’s dark-brown eyes, her eyes were closer to yellowish-brown.

“Hello.” Bai Chen greeted them in a slightly hoarse voice.

“Hello.” Long Yuehong was still a little reserved.

“Hello!” Shang Jianyao’s voice remained very loud.

Jiang Baimian pointed at the coffee table and loudly said, “Take a seat. Ah yes, introduce yourself first.”

“Shang Jianyao!” Jiang Baimian had just finished speaking when Shang Jianyao shouted out his name. Then, he casually closed the door before walking over to sit on a chair with his lunchbox in hand.

“I’m Long Yuehong. My father’s surname is Long, and my mother’s name has the word ‘Hong’ in it.” Long Yuehong subconsciously explained the origin of his name. He then sat on the chair next to Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian sat down and looked around before saying with a smile, “Since everyone is here, let me briefly explain our team’s situation.”

“Everyone is here?” Long Yuehong blurted out. There are only four of us? A Security Department team should have at least 20 people, right?

Jiang Baimian was stunned. “What did you say?”

“He said there are too few people!” Shang Jianyao helped translate.

Jiang Baimian’s brows relaxed as she smiled. “We’re not a combat unit.”

Not a combat unit? Long Yuehong was delighted.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and said, “Our team’s full name is the Investigation Unit for the Cause of the Old World’s Destruction. It’s also known as the

Old Task Force. However, we aren't the only Old Task Force. Be it the Security Department or the Board, there are other Old Task Forces. They just aren't aware of each other's exact situation.

"Remember! This is key. It's a confidential matter! Uh, there's no need to worry about having investigations repeated. Although we don't know what other Old Task Forces there are and their progress, the higher-ups will share the latest and most valuable clues with us."

At this point, Jiang Baimian paused, and her expression turned serious. "Compared to an ordinary combat unit, the Investigation Unit for the Cause of the Old World's Destruction might face greater danger. Why are there so many small teams that take on the same mission? It's because there was only one Old Task Force in the past with many members. Then, during an investigation, they disappeared completely. No one returned. The losses were tragic and difficult to make up for."

Long Yuehong's face turned pale. "I-It's so dangerous..."

"What did you say?" Jiang Baimian only saw Long Yuehong's mouth moving and barely heard anything.

Long Yuehong subconsciously looked at Shang Jianyao and saw that his expression was serious. Shang Jianyao remained silent and had no intention of translating for him.

Long Yuehong took a deep breath and shouted, "It's so dangerous?" After yelling like that, he realized that his emotions had actually eased a lot.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "An Old Task Force might venture deep into the wilderness to investigate some city ruins, or they might head to other factions' territories to search for clues. We might face all kinds of situations and encounter all kinds of enemies. You could say that even senior employees in the Security Department aren't too willing to join the Old Task Force."

Long Yuehong's face turned even paler. "Why are we so unlucky?"

After muttering to himself, he roared, "Why are we so unlucky?"

Jiang Baimian looked around in confusion. "I'm not unlucky... I wasn't assigned here. Our Old Task Force was actually formed because of my application." She smiled and added, "I've always believed we need to figure out the cause of the Old World's destruction. It's the only way we can avoid making the same mistake. It's the only way we can find the root cause of the Heartless disease and shake off this fear for all humans.

"And you've all heard the rumors that the gateway to the New World lies in the depths of a city ruins, somewhere above the Ashlands. If we never explore it, we'll never be able

to enter the New World. We'll always be accompanied by famine, infection, mutation, and monsters.

"This is my dream, so I took the initiative to apply to the Security Department's higher-ups, hoping to establish a new Old Task Force. Heh heh, I also like to dig up history from city ruins. I like to observe other factions' social situation and interact with people and things in different states."

Bai Chen—who was quietly sitting on the sofa—suddenly said, "I've heard someone mention you. He says you're a sociologist and his goddess."

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Ah, what did you say? I didn't hear the last thing you said. Forget it, forget it. Tell me about yourself."

Bai Chen looked at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong and said with a slightly hoarse voice, "I volunteered. You may be able to tell that I'm not a member of the company. I was once a nomad in the wilderness and was later recruited by the company."

"At present, I don't have the qualifications to be an official employee. The Old Task Force can help me achieve this goal as soon as possible and raise my employee level quickly. When the time comes, I will be qualified to apply for genetic modification."

Jiang Baimian tilted her head as if she did not hear Bai Chen's words clearly. She smiled and asked, "Is she badmouthing me behind my back? Heh heh, we will definitely have plenty of action in the wilderness. We need a guide who is familiar with the wilderness and has interacted with many factions and settlements. Don't be fooled by her young age. She has a lot of experience."

After saying that, Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao. "I've read your file. I can probably guess why you applied to join the Old Task Force. Other than that, is there any other reason?"

"To save all of humanity!" Shang Jianyao shouted.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before she touched her ear. "Ah, what did you say? Heh heh, there's no need to repeat yourself. Long Yuehong, why did you join us?"

"I was assigned here... I just graduated this year, and I'm not married yet..." Long Yuehong said as he sobbed. With that, he reacted and repeated it loudly.

Jiang Baimian blinked. "Out of so many people, you are the only one who didn't get assigned a spouse? Of all the graduates, you're probably the only one assigned to the Security Department, and to the Old Task Force at that?"

Long Yuehong nodded solemnly.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and smiled gently. "People like you are generally what we call the chosen one."