

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 11: Treatment - Read

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Chapter 11: Treatment

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Long Yuehong's lips quivered as he laughed self-deprecatingly. "I don't think I'm the chosen one, but the unlucky one."

He spoke very softly, nor did he repeat himself. Jiang Baimian tilted her head slightly and tried to make out what he was saying, but she failed to hear him clearly. Even so, Jiang Baimian did not ask Long Yuehong to raise his voice.

She smiled and said, "We will be doing all kinds of training, including but not limited to, shooting, combat, wilderness survival, and operating exoskeleton equipment and artificial intelligence bionic armor. If anyone performs badly and fails to meet the requirements, I will kick them out of the Old Task Force and let them change jobs."

Long Yuehong's eyes lit up, and his frustration vanished.

"However—" Jiang Baimian deliberately did not look at him and cast her gaze at Shang Jianyao. "If anyone deliberately drags us down during training and does not do their best, I will write this matter into their file. I believe all of you should be very clear about the consequences."

Once a company employee had a black mark in their file, it was almost certain that they wouldn't be assigned a good job subsequently. If they accumulated three black marks, they would be exiled to the Ashlands.

Shang Jianyao did not look at the change in Long Yuehong's expression and said seriously, "If we can't even pass training, how can we save the world?"

Bai Chen—who was sitting on the long sofa—couldn't help but look at this young man again, wondering if something was wrong with his brain.

Although Shang Jianyao's looks suited her aesthetics, she still deliberated and reminded Jiang Baimian, "Team Leader, after we complete the training course, it's best we do a thorough evaluation of everyone's physical and mental state. In the Ashlands, it's very easy for humans to break down for various reasons and show signs of mental abnormalities. This will bring a lot of trouble, so we have to eliminate such latent dangers in advance."

"Good suggestion." Jiang Baimian snapped her fingers. "The only problem is, can you speak louder? I almost didn't hear you clearly."

“Yes, Team Leader!” Bai Chen replied loudly in her hoarse voice.

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction and continued speaking. “In short, those who can complete all the training subjects and pass my inspection will still have a high chance of survival in the subsequent missions. For those whose abilities do not meet the requirements, I will not allow them to remain in the Old Task Force and face dangers they cannot face. To the company, every bit of labor is precious enough. Thus, it will not easily abandon you until all your value is drained.”

“Uh...” Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief. He no longer felt as terrified and depressed. He wanted to respond, but he felt that the team leader’s last sentence was a little strange, causing him to feel a little hurt deep down.

Bai Chen frowned slightly, wondering if the team leader was like Shang Jianyao—slightly mental. How could she be so straightforward with the truth?

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped enthusiastically. “Well said!”

Jiang Baimian’s smile stiffened, and she said, “Shang Jianyao, I find your performance a little different from the typical person. Could you be unsuited for the Old Task Force?”

“Isn’t that great? When everyone is depressed, negative, and in despair, there’s still one person who keeps smiling. He’s full of passion and uses all kinds of actions to entertain everyone.” Shang Jianyao smiled.

Jiang Baimian was slightly surprised. “That’s a pretty normal thing to say.”

“I’ve always been normal,” Shang Jianyao replied with a straight posture.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it and suddenly smiled. “Then, in what way can you entertain everyone?”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “Gold Coast hula dance.”

“...I’m looking forward to it,” said Jiang Baimian perfunctorily. “Oh right, where did you learn it from?”

“From the Entertainment Department’s end-of-year performance,” Shang Jianyao answered frankly. Nôv(él)B\jnn

“Ah, I didn’t see it!” Jiang Baimian clapped her hands lightly.

Bai Chen's heart palpitated as she listened to their conversation. She began to wonder if joining this group might be a mistake. She swept her gaze over and saw that Long Yuehong's expression was also filled with confusion and suspicion.

Other than me, the most normal person in this group is actually this stupid and timid guy? Bai Chen pulled her scarf as if she wanted to cover her entire face.

After chatting about the performances for last year's end-of-year performance, Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at the black electronic watch around her wrist. "It's a little late. There's still training later. I'll make it short."

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were all looking at the watch on her wrist, Jiang Baimian waved her hand and said, "I used two soybeans and beef canned food to exchange for this from a nomad in the wilderness. He had picked it up as well, and it was already broken. Thankfully, I know a supervisor in the Factory Zone. I spent some contribution points and found an electronic engineer to help me fix it.

"Heh heh, there's no need to be envious. You guys have a chance too. As long as you leave the company and enter the Ashlands, you'll have a chance to scavenge and pick up trash, right, Bai Chen? I remember you were a trash hunter back then?"

Team Leader, please don't use such unpleasant-sounding words... Bai Chen opened her mouth, only to let out a gentle sigh. "Ruin Hunter. Actually, I'm not really a Ruin Hunter. I rarely go deep into the city ruins in the wilderness. Those places are too dangerous. In the wilderness, I mostly pick up the scattered pieces of..."

Upon saying that, the petite lady paused for two seconds as though she was searching for a suitable term. However, she eventually gritted her teeth and said, "Trash! I also head to the city ruins that mostly have their dangers eliminated and are relatively close by. I look for things that the hunters don't fancy or didn't discover. Then, I'll drive to various settlements in the wilderness and exchange resources with them."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong nodded, expressing their comprehension of her description. In the basic textbooks they used, there was a focus on the Ashlands' general situation. One of them specifically introduced the Ruin Hunter occupation.

This was a vocation that gradually became popular after the Old World was destroyed. It was a vocation that sought the Old World's ruins to obtain items, books, technical information, corresponding documents, and various resources to survive.

The composition of Ruin Hunters was very complicated. There were antiquarians, historians, scientific researchers, and large-faction investigators. However, most of them made a living by searching for and selling relics. A large portion of them were 'part-time' wilderness bandits.

After years of chaos, in order to exchange information and supplies and prove each other's credibility, the Ruin Hunters established a loose organization called the Hunter's Guild.

Jiang Baimian praised her. "You were loud enough this time." She then smiled and said, "Actually, there are new electronic watches produced now, but they are in limited production. They can only be seen in the First City. Ah, I wonder when I'll have the chance to visit First City."

First City was both the name of a city and the name of a large faction. The former was said to be the first city built on a particular city ruin by humans after the Old World was destroyed. It was the latter's capital, and the latter was currently the most populous and influential force in the Ashlands.

When she heard the name 'First City,' Bai Chen's expression instantly became gloomy as if she recalled some unbearable past. She didn't interrupt Jiang Baimian and only shrunk her body towards the sofa's armrest.

Bam!

Jiang Baimian slapped her forehead. "Look at me, I was supposed to make it short, but I ended up spouting all this nonsense. Next is the main point. Compensation! Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, you will be assigned D1 ranks. Just like the other jobs, you will receive 1,800 points every month. However, you will receive an additional meal allowance.

"The meal allowance is as such: you have four days off every month. The rest are training days. On training days, you can eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the small canteen beside us. There will be two special servings of meat dishes every day, a total of half a pound. Each serving will only cost one contribution point. You can choose to finish it in one meal or split it into two meals.

"On your rest days, you will receive 25 contribution points every day, which is equivalent to half a pound of raw pork. You will receive a total of 100 contribution points. In other words, during the training phase, uh—when it doesn't include field training, you will receive 1,900 points a month.

"When you leave the company to train in the Ashlands, not only will your daily necessities be free, but you will also receive a fieldwork subsidy—an additional 30 points. If you are injured, all the treatment fees can be reimbursed. If you are disabled because of this, the company will provide you with free biomechanical limb transplant surgery."

Jiang Baimian glanced at Long Yuehong when she said that. "In the event of death, you will definitely receive a bereavement pension of 80 points a month. In short, under D7, our team is treated better than any other person of the same rank. When you complete

all your training and pass the assessment, you can immediately rise to D2. The other positions might take a year or two, perhaps even longer.”

Long Yuehong’s heart sank at first, but he soon felt a little happy. After all, his job sounded promising. If he could survive the first few Old Task Force operations, he might be able to reach D6. Then, he could then request to leave this position.

When that happened, he would most likely be the highest-ranking personnel among his peers with the highest income. As long as he did not live where the managers lived, he would be able to hold his head high, no matter where he went.

“As for you.” Jiang Baimian looked at Bai Chen. “As you are not an official employee yet, you will still receive the same treatment as before. However, you will also receive food and field allowances. When the training ends and you pass the assessment, you will become an official employee.”

Bai Chen’s expression had already eased up, and she nodded gently to indicate that she understood.

Jiang Baimian flexed the five fingers on her left hand. “This morning’s training is to identify firearms, dismantle, and load them.”

“Didn’t we learn this before?” Long Yuehong blurted out.

This was part of basic education. In university, there were also compulsory courses such as combat and shooting.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “You’ve only learned the company’s standard weapons. Next, I will, no—Bai Chen will introduce you to the various weapons produced by the different factions and those from different wildernesses and ruins.

“You must understand that it is very easy for us to lose our weapons or be unable to gather any effective supplies when we are out on missions. When the time comes, we will need to repair whatever firearms we pick up. We will also need to use the weapon corresponding to the bullet caliber¹ we pick up. Every additional bit of information we grasp raises our chances of survival.

“Alright.” She clapped her hands. “Let’s go to the changing room in the small bathhouse next door and change into our uniforms. We’ll then go to Room 15.”

She then pointed at the clothes on the coffee table.

Chapter 12: A Substantial Day

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

In Room 15 of the 647th floor, Shang Jianyao—who had changed into a gray uniform—pushed open the door and entered.

Long Yuehong followed closely behind him and looked around curiously.

All kinds of weapons were reflected in his eyes. Some were long, some were short, some were silvery-white, and some were iron-black. Some were placed on the table while some were hung up. There were all kinds of weapons as if the room was holding an expo of hot weapons.

Frankly speaking, Long Yuehong had only seen the term ‘expo’ in books and learned the general meaning from his teacher’s explanations. He had never seen one in real life.

The only event that made him feel like it was an expo was the ‘new experimental species exhibition’ in the Indoor Ecosystem Zone a few years ago. Now, he felt that the sight before him was what an expo should be like.

Jiang Baimian stood by the door and sized up Shang Jianyao before nodding in approval. “You flesh out the uniform in style!”

The Security Department’s uniform was well-designed and stylish. Shang Jianyao was tall and well-built. He looked thin in his clothes and had a masculine aura. He fleshed out the clothes’ handsomeness and coolness.

“This uniform isn’t too good,” Shang Jianyao replied with a frown.

“Why?” Bai Chen asked in surprise.

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian opened her mouth and muttered, “I think it’s better to ignore him...”

At the same time, Shang Jianyao’s mouth opened as he answered Bai Chen’s question with a smile. “There’s no way to dance the Gold Coast hula dance in it.”

Bai Chen: “...”

“...Sometimes, I really don’t know if you’re joking or if there’s something wrong with your brain.” Jiang Baimian laughed as she looked at Long Yuehong. “Stop daydreaming. Go over there. Class is beginning!”

She paused and swept her gaze from top to bottom before smiling. “You look pretty smart and much more handsome than before.”

Long Yuehong—who had been feeling a little down because the two ladies had been paying attention to Shang Jianyao and neglected him—straightened his back and said, “Yes, Team Leader!”

When he arrived at the long table that Jiang Baimian pointed at, Bai Chen picked up a silver-white body gun and held the black anti-slip pistol grip.

“This is a gun that many Ruin Hunters and bandits in the wilderness have a love and hate relationship with. See this? The barrel is very thick and long. It uses 11.18 mm bullets, so it’s very powerful. It can be used to kill larger types of beasts. There are a few guns that are similar right beside it. Some are called Pythons.

“Its recoil is very strong. Without a strong body, it’s impossible to control it. Yes, all of you should have received genetic enhancement. There shouldn’t be any problems. Its original form comes from the Old World’s city ruins. This is the latest product of United Industries. The model number is 202, but it has one disadvantage: it’s easier to get jammed than other types of pistols. You have to pay attention to this when using it...”

Bai Chen told Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong about the United 202 pistol’s general information, structure, and usage experience.

After teaching them about this, Bai Chen picked up a black pistol on another long table.

“This one uses 7.62 mm bullets. It’s more powerful, smaller, feels good to the touch, and has high precision. It’s easier to carry and maintain. It’s just that it’s not too friendly to those with larger hands. It’s absolutely fantastic for me...”

“The two commonly seen types in the wilderness are the Salvation Army-produced Ubei 6 and Ubei 7. One of their differences is that there’s a certain problem with the former’s design. Its stoppage rate is comparable to the United 202. Also...”

“...This one uses a 14.5 mm bullet. Its power is obvious. It comes from the ruins of Iron Mountain City, but the Orange Company has a replica. We all call it ‘Fatty’... However, it’s not the best among sniper rifles. I prefer Hawkeye and God’s Eye. Look, it’s over there...”

“...The best sniper rifles are actually gauss rifles and plasma rifles. However, there aren’t any here. Unless you encounter elite teams from First City or United Industries, you won’t encounter them in the wilderness.”

“...This is my favorite submachine gun, nicknamed Short Neck...”

Bai Chen introduced and explained each gun one by one. Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong listened attentively and familiarized themselves with them by holding them from time to time.

Jiang Baimian did not interrupt the lecture. When Bai Chen was thirsty, Jiang Baimian pointed at a thick steel tube on the table nearby and said, “Guess what weapon it is?”

Long Yuehong looked over and read the five Ashlands words from the tube: “Lin Nan Steel Tube Factory.”

“Haha.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “It’s actually a single-man combat rocket launcher. However, its main component comes from a seamless steel tube factory from the Salvation Army. Alright, you guys continue.”

...

At 6:20 p.m., Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong—who had showered and changed into their daily clothes—took their lunch boxes and found a seat in the No. 2 cafeteria on the 647th floor. The cafeteria in the Security Department opened at 6:10 p.m.—20 minutes earlier than the Residential Zone.

“My whole body hurts. Team Leader is too ruthless.” While Long Yue sat down, he touched the bruises on his body. It hurt so much that he gritted his teeth and couldn’t help but complain.

They had weapons lessons in the morning and combat training in the afternoon. Jiang Baimian did not hold back at all and trained them hard.

Comparatively speaking, Shang Jianyao could still last a little longer, but Long Yuehong was tragically defeated in less than 30 seconds each time.

“The effects of her genetic enhancement are definitely better than ours! Look, her strength, reaction speed, and coordination are crazy! She’s just like a monster! Ha, you’re also a monster, a little monster!” Today, Long Yuehong just realized that his good friend had not even used half of his strength in previous combat classes.

He actually managed to go a few rounds with such a monster! Even though he could only last for a short period of time, he still managed to throw in some blows.

Shang Jianyao smiled at Long Yuehong. “You can’t even defeat Bai Chen.”

Long Yue blushed and stammered. “She doesn’t play by the rules! Besides, didn’t you only defeat her a few times?”

He originally thought that he could easily win against a petite lady like Bai Chen with his size and strength. Who knew that he would lose again and again. After all, he had undergone genetic enhancement while still an embryo. Not only did he have a good physique and strength, but his reaction speed, coordination, and balance were also excellent. In addition, he also had many years of combat experience.

“There are no rules when fighting in the wilderness, only life and death,” Shang Jianyao calmly replied.

“That’s true. Her combat skills are very practical...” Long Yuehong said as he looked down at his lunch box.

On the potatoes dotted with white rice, the black dried preserved vegetables were spread out bit by bit. The gravy had already seeped into the rice. Above the dried preserved vegetables was a piece of meat that had more fat than lean meat, with layers and layers of alternating meat. This meat was dyed with the color of the gravy. It was thick, solid, and looked heavy.

This was the special meat dish that Long Yuehong exchanged for one contribution point—he had already enjoyed a plate of steamed pork in the afternoon.

“It smells so good...” Long Yuehong narrowed his eyes. “If I didn’t have to go out to the field, this job would be my dream job.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. “There’s still combat class tomorrow.”

There was no room for selection when it came to the special meat dishes. He also had steamed pork with preserved vegetables.

“...Stop talking. Eat quietly!” Long Yuehong’s face fell. He realized that he was getting more and more used to roaring after spending so much time with his team leader.

Shang Jianyao ignored him and buried his head to enjoy the potato braised rice and preserved vegetables steamed meat.

...

After dinner, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong took their lunch boxes and took the elevator back to the 495th floor’s Zone C.

The two of them had just entered the Rec Center when they saw a tall girl with good facial features and a clean temperament walking over in a simple dress.

“Feng Yunying, why are you looking for me?” Long Yuehong forgot Shang Jianyao as he strode forward with a smile on his face.

The girl was a little stunned. “You just finished your meal? I’m here to return a friend’s item.”

Long Yuehong smiled and said, “I ate in the small canteen.”

“Small canteen? Where are you assigned to?” asked Feng Yunying curiously.

It could not be an ordinary department if it had a small canteen. In the Entertainment Department she was in, only the radio station had one.

Long Yuehong realized that he had let his tongue slip and forced a smile onto his face. "Security Department."

Feng Yunying was stunned for a moment before she said politely, "Then you have to be careful."

As the two of them conversed, Shang Jianyao walked to the side, pulled over a stool, and sat beside Chen Xianyu, the PIC of the Rec Center.

Chen Xianyu looked at the items in front of him and casually asked, "How is it? Which team were you assigned to? Do you want me to get someone to take care of you?"

"It's a secret," Shang Jian Yao said concisely.

"Heh..." Chen Xianyu turned his head away. He didn't inquire further and patted Shang Jianyao's shoulder. "Be careful."

At this moment, one of Chen Xianyu's employees came back from the 'staff cafeteria' with his lunch box.

Shang Jianyao looked at Chen Xianyu holding the lunch box in one hand and his chopsticks clicking rapidly in the other as he suddenly said, "Grandpa Chen, you said you know everyone on this floor?"

Chen Xianyu answered vaguely, "I don't dare to say that I know everyone, but I know at least 95% of them."

Shang Jianyao was just about to weigh his words when he suddenly saw a familiar figure. It was Li, whom he had seen at Zone A, Room 35 this morning, a parishioner of Life Ritual.

"Do you know her?" Shang Jianyao pointed at the beautiful lady.

Chen Xianyu looked up. "Li Zhen. You should know her, right? You two used to be neighbors. However, you were young back then, so you might not remember. Sigh, she's also a pitiful person. She got married and had two children. Then, she was transferred to another job with her husband. She was infected and could no longer have children. Meanwhile, her two children died in an accident a few years ago..."

Shang Jianyao silently listened to Chen Xianyu without saying a word. After sitting in the Rec Center for a while, he returned to Zone B, Room 196. As usual, he lay on his bed in a half-lying and half-sitting pose and waited for the radio broadcast to begin.

Before long, the familiar sweet voice echoed in every floor's Residential Zone. "Good evening, everyone. I'm the news broadcaster, Hou Yi. It's 8 p.m. now..."

“...Due to the abnormal weather this year, monsters have already begun migrating in the Ashlands above...

“...There are traces of the Monks Conclave in the wilderness near the company...

“...

“...The animal diarrhea of Indoor Ecosystem Zone, Ranch 59 has been treated...

“...The Entertainment Department decided to hold a staff basketball match at the Rec Center this week on their rest day...”

Chapter 13: A Sense of Ritual

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

In the blink of an eye, two months passed.

In the elevator that led to the 647th floor, Long Yuehong—who was wearing a polyester shirt—looked at his reflection on the elevator’s metal wall and gestured at his chest. “This high-intensity training is really useful. I think I can defeat five of my just-graduated self. No, three.”

Furthermore, his figure had become rather good. He also let out a much stronger masculine vibe.

Shang Jianyao looked at the door’s crack and said, “Sigh, I’m only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. I’m not handsome either. My grades are only average...”

Long Yuehong was speechless, unsure what kind of expression he should use in response. He took a deep breath and exhaled heavily. “Seriously, I have been eating meat every day for the past two months. Why didn’t I grow by a centimeter?”

As they spoke, the two of them walked out of the elevator and familiarly turned into Room 14.

They still didn’t know what training was in store for them this morning, and they couldn’t determine if they were going to change into the Security Department’s uniform or wear clothes more suitable for combat. Therefore, they could only report to Jiang Baimian before heading to the changing room in the bathhouse.

Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen had already arrived. At this moment, they were gathered around the brownish-red desk that belonged to the former’s office and staring at something seriously.

“Good morning, Team Leader!” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were already used to yelling.

Jiang Baimian looked up and waved. “Come here, come here. I have something to tell you.”

Long Yuehong glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that even he didn’t seem to know what was going on.

The two of them walked over and saw a low-precision map on Jiang Baimian’s brownish-red-painted desk.

Jiang Baimian punched the map and smiled. “Today’s training program is: Field training!”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong exclaimed. He knew that field training would come sooner or later, but he never imagined that there would be no warning signs and that there would be no time for him to prepare!

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything, but the smile on his face couldn’t be concealed no matter what.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, “I originally planned on starting in two days. However, it just so happens that the higher-ups have given us a small mission. We need to go to a nomad settlement in the wilderness to deliver a water filter chip. We might as well set off today. Bai Chen, tell them our final destination and general route.”

Bai Chen—who was still wearing her gray scarf—held the edge of the table with one hand and rapped a spot on the map with the other. “This is Qifeng Town, about 300 kilometers from the company. If there are any repaired highways, there won’t be any danger in the middle. We can take turns driving and reach it in a day.

“Unfortunately, there are no intact roads in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. Perhaps there’s a small section of the road, originating from the Old World, that remains well-preserved along the way. It just has a lot of weeds growing on it. There are certain cracks in the road, but that’s just an exception.”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong knew that the Blackmarsh Wilderness referred to a dangerous area outside the company. It covered a large area. The northernmost area was connected to the icy plain. The northeast area bordered the Salvation Army’s territory. To the east was the White Knights’ sphere of influence. If one kept going southeast, one would enter First City.

As for the south... there was another stretch of wilderness and several mountain ranges.

Bai Chen continued explaining, “You should be able to tell that the Great Swamp is between Qifeng Town and us. Many places are labeled with high-risk symbols. According to my experience, these places either have no paths at all and are pure swamps, filled with mutated, terrifying monsters, or a monster horde settlement. Otherwise, they are the Old World’s ruins—the kind that spells no return.

“If we take away the heavily polluted areas, there aren’t many routes we can choose. Furthermore, we have to eliminate the ones that the company often uses due to the installation of two outposts. Otherwise, we won’t be able to achieve the goal of wilderness training.

“After combining the above conditions and the Great Swamp’s geographical situation, I’ve planned two routes. They both require us to traverse the Great Swamp back and forth. The travel time for both routes is about the same. It will take a week or even two weeks for us to reach Qifeng Town. The exact amount of time will still depend on the weather.

“Which route do you prefer? Or do you want to circle the Great Swamp from the periphery? That will take longer, and the danger level might not be much lower. Oh, I don’t know much about the Great Swamp. I’ve never been to many places. You can give me other suggestions.”

Before Jiang Baimian could speak, Shang Jianyao took a step forward and pointed at one of the paths. “This one is good.”

“Why?” Bai Chen subconsciously asked. Then, she deeply regretted asking.

“The lines are smooth, and the shape is beautiful.” Shang Jianyao had a sincere expression.

Bai Chen turned to look at her team leader, hoping that she could ‘do her justice.’

Jiang Baimian stroked her chin and said, “I agree with Shang Jianyao’s choice. Since there’s no qualitative difference between the two paths, I’ll definitely choose the better-looking one. It’s decided then!”

After saying that, she looked at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong and pointed at her electronic watch. “You have 15 minutes to prepare.”

“Just 15 minutes?” Long Yuehong’s face scrunched up.

“14 minutes 55 seconds,” Jiang Baimian looked at her electronic watch and replied without raising her head.

Long Yuehong immediately turned around and chased after Shang Jianyao’s back. “Hey, wait for me!”

The two of them quickly entered the nearby bathhouse's changing room and opened their lockers. As they were covered in sweat from training every day, they had placed many clothes here so that it was easier to change.

Within the company, due to the lack of sunlight and the cold temperatures at night, the employees were unable to dry their clothes. They were all taken away by the Training Safeguard Department for washing and drying before sending them back. (Small personal items could be hung above their sinks or have a basin placed below to collect the water droplets).

Shang Jianyao took out a standard Security Department camouflage backpack. He unzipped it and stuffed one of the uniforms inside. He then placed the yellowish soap he had been issued for combined washing of hair and body into a small plastic bag and threw it into his backpack.

After putting away his toothpaste, toothbrush, personal items, and other miscellaneous items, Shang Jianyao quickly took off his clothes and threw them into the locker.

While wearing only a pair of underpants, Shang Jianyao immediately took out the one remaining gray uniform and quickly put it on. After bending down to fasten the shoelaces of his leather boots, Shang Jianyao straightened his body, walked to the half-body mirror, and straightened his top.

In the mirror, his eyebrows were straight, and his brown eyes were bright. His black hair was neat, and his face was deeply contoured and stiff. Coupled with the well-designed Security Department uniform that helped him exude a soldier's bearing, Shang Jianyao looked sunny and strong.

While looking at his reflection, Shang Jianyao slowly took out a name tag from his pocket and wore it on his left chest. The name tag was red, and two golden Ashlands words were embossed on its surface: 'Pangu Biology.'

...

After leaving the changing room, Shang Jianyao waited for two minutes. When Long Yuehong was done, they returned to Room 14.

Long Yuehong glanced at Shang Jianyao, only to take a second glance. Finally, he couldn't help but say, "Don't you think there's anything different about me?"

Shang Jianyao glanced at him but didn't say anything.

Long Yuehong raised his arm and said, "I'm not nervous! Haven't you realized that I'm not nervous at all? In the past, I would definitely be scared and pessimistic. But I think I can handle it now since it's just field training. The past two months of training have really been useful."

Shang Jianyao slowed down and sized Long Yuehong up. Suddenly, he smiled. "Your legs are shaking."

"..." Long Yuehong's expression collapsed.

Shang Jianyao ignored him and walked towards Room 14.

Long Yuehong snapped back to reality and looked down at his legs. "I'm not shaking! I'm not shaking!" With this interlude, he found that he didn't feel nervous at all.

The two of them quickly returned to Room 14. Jiang Baimian's gaze swept past and landed on Shang Jianyao's left chest. She raised her eyebrows and said, "There's no need to wear a name tag. It's not a company-level operation. Furthermore, in a situation where there are very few people, name tags only bring danger.

"The bandits and nomads in the Ashlands don't care if we are from a large faction. Sometimes, if they can't plunder anything, it might mean death for them that very day. Thus, it's meaningless for them to consider the serious consequences of attacking a large faction's member."

Shang Jianyao nodded gently and said loudly, "It gives a sense of ritual!"

Jiang Baimian rubbed her temples. "...Take it off after we leave the company. Let's set off now."

Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong carried the same type of camouflage bags and followed her to the elevator area.

After entering the elevator, Jiang Baimian took out her electronic card and swiped it. She pressed the number '650.'

In just a few seconds, the elevator finished its ascent and opened the door to the concourse and hall.

The Pangu Biology underground building's 650th floor was the floor closest to the surface. There were almost no signs of people moving freely here. There were only silver-white metal walls, an aisle separated by heavy doors, and employees from the Security Department holding weapons.

Jiang Baimian swiped her electronic card again and again, opening the heavy metal doors one after another.

She led Shang Jianyao and the others through a long aisle and arrived at the other side of the 650th floor.

During this process, several doors would scan the cardholder's iris and body to determine that they weren't an imposter. For the final door, one was even required to input a password.

At the end of the corridor was a row of elevators. Jiang Baimian randomly chose an elevator and swiped her card before pressing the metal button for 'Surface.'

The elevator slowly went up. In front of Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and the others was a wide square with a metal dome and steel frame.

Jiang Baimian smiled and introduced them to the place. "The parking lot."

Not only were there all kinds of cars parked here, but there were also tanks and missile vehicles. They were neatly arranged in rows with no end in sight.

This deeply shocked Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong.

Jiang Baimian quickly found the car assigned to her—a grayish-green, four-seater jeep with high ground clearance and large wheels. It looked very imposing.

Jiang Baimian opened the trunk and pointed to the left. "This is the weapon for this field training session. It's the company's standard 9mm pistol. Its name is Ice Moss. It's a replica of First City's Red River. Such rounds are the most common and easiest to resupply."

The Ice Moss pistol was silvery-white in color, and its handle had an anti-slip pattern.

Jiang Baimian continued speaking. "Everyone will receive one. Also, everyone will receive one United 202. These two are assault rifles that you know about—the company's standard Berserker. They use 5.56 mm rounds... Nôv(el)B\\jnn

"This is an Orange Company assault rifle. It can be used as a sniper rifle if it's equipped with a scope... This is a grenade launcher, nicknamed Tyrant... These are all the weapons. The rounds are also here. Equip yourself with the pistols and carry a few cartridges on yourself."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were used to all kinds of weapons from their recent training and could not be more familiar with them. They calmly picked up an Ice Moss and United 202 each and hung them on their belts.

Jiang Baimian pointed at the cardboard box on the right. "Military canned food, energy bars, and compressed biscuits. These are our supplies. Heh heh, they definitely won't be able to last us until we reach Qifeng Town. The rest will need to be acquired in the wilderness. This is part of our training."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and the others were not surprised at all.

“Alright, get in the car.” Jiang Baimian waved her hand valiantly.

As Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not know how to drive yet, the two ladies sat in the front row and prepared to take turns driving. They planned on letting the two men learn how to drive in a more open area.

Amidst a simulated sound, Jiang Baimian drove the four-seater jeep, allowing it to pass through multiple checkpoints and segregation gates in the parking lot.

After a while, Jiang Baimian pointed ahead with her chin. “That’s the last door.”

It was a two-paned silver-white door. Along the way, nearly 20 Security Department employees guarded it.

After a last round of inspection, Jiang Baimian drove the jeep and rushed towards the metal door.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong couldn’t help but tense up and hold their breaths. This was the first time they were going to the surface since they were born.

As the jeep approached, the silver door opened backward bit by bit.

Golden rays of light suddenly shone in. It was not as white as the solar lamps or as yellow as the light from candles.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong shrunk their bodies at the same time and raised their right hands to cover their eyes.

The light was a little blinding.

Chapter 14: Blackmarsh Wilderness

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

It was not until the jeep completely drove past the silver-white door that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong adapted to the light outside. They lowered their right arms, widened their eyes, and looked out the window.

After getting over the initial, indescribable horror, they saw a clear blue sky dotted with white clouds of different shapes, a flock of birds that constantly changed formations, and a mountain wall that shimmered with a faint golden glow under the sun.

“Sun... Sun!” Long Yuehong shouted at the huge, orange-yellow fireball in the sky. He fixed his gaze on it. Even though his eyes stung and tears fell, he couldn’t bear to look away.

“Don’t look into the sun in such a state. It hurts your eyes! If you really want to look at it, here.” Jiang Baimian drove as she dug out a certain item from the armrest compartment and handed it to Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong—who was leaning against the glass window—turned around and saw a pair of black-tinted glasses.

“...Sunglasses!” He recalled the knowledge he had learned and found the corresponding name for it.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao turned around and said, “If you don’t want to wear it, I will.”

Long Yuehong looked over and saw that Shang Jianyao’s eyes were red as if tears would fall at any moment.

“Haha, you’re also staring at the sun?” Long Yuehong couldn’t help but laugh.

The next second, he saw Shang Jianyao snatch the sunglasses away and put them on the bridge of his nose.

“Hey...” Long Yuehong didn’t know whether to be angry or to reflect on his actions.

“There’s one more here.” Just as Long Yuehong was about to pounce on Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen—who was in the passenger seat—handed him another pair of sunglasses.

This pair of sunglasses was more exquisite than Jiang Baimian’s. They were like two ‘hearts’ that were strung together. The color of the lenses was not pure black but had a hint of red instead.

“Don’t break it. I spent a lot of money to exchange for it back then,” Bai Chen reminded him.

“Thank you,” Long Yuehong sincerely thanked her and put on the sunglasses.

With this ‘equipment,’ he could finally observe the sun carefully and compare its differences with the pictures he had seen on projector slides.

“This is the sun...” Long Yuehong sighed after an unknown period of time. He took off his sunglasses and returned them to Bai Chen.

Shang Jianyao also retracted his gaze and thoughtfully placed Jiang Baimian’s sunglasses back into the armrest compartment.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Long Yuehong glanced at his good friend.

Shang Jianyao replied solemnly, "I'm wondering where I can get sunglasses."

The people in the underground building didn't need such an object at all. Only a few project teams used it. Therefore, it had never appeared in the Supplies Allocation Market or the small bazaar on the 495th floor's Rec Center.

Jiang Baimian, who was driving, exhaled. "I knew you weren't paying attention."

Bai Chen smiled and said, "When we pass by the nomad settlements in the wilderness, we can go in and take a look. Perhaps a piece of compressed biscuit can be exchanged for a pair of good sunglasses."

"That's how I got mine!" Jiang Baimian echoed. "Why did you use so many things to exchange for yours?"

"I exchanged it from a female Ruin Hunter. Back then, she found it beautiful and wanted to use it herself. She didn't lack supplies." Bai Chen recalled the situation back then.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not listen carefully. They leaned against their respective windows and stared at the scene outside. Be it the large trees on either side, or the brown squirrels that occasionally ran past, they watched everything with relish as they exclaimed in amazement.

After an unknown period of time, Long Yuehong sat up and sighed with emotion. "This is different from the Ashlands environment I imagined..."

"What did you imagine it to be?" Jiang Baimian casually asked as she made the jeep jump on the bumpy road.

Long Yuehong tried his best to find an adjective. "It's... It's..."

Shang Jianyao turned his head and helped him with the description. "Dark, cold, damp, and depressing. A sky covered in dust and dark clouds that sunlight can't penetrate. Everything is gray."

"That's right! That's right!" Long Yuehong agreed with the description completely.

Their textbooks did not describe the Ashlands in detail. They only talked about the conditions, pollution, disease, and famine. This naturally made them form a terrible impression of the Ashlands' environment.

As for the employees who had been to the surface, they could not speak much due to confidentiality regulations. Even if they occasionally mentioned that the weather was sunny and the environment was good, the listening crowd would subconsciously ignore them.

Jiang Baimian held the steering wheel with her elbows and looked ahead. She chuckled and said, “Maybe it was like that when the Old World was first destroyed, but it quickly improved. Only some parts of it are still in such a state.”

Bai Chen added, “That also means danger. It means pollution, disease, and abnormalities.”

“Is that so...” Long Yuehong pushed his face against the window again and admired the beautiful scenery of the mountains and forests bathed in the sunlight.

Shang Jianyao was the same.

Jiang Baimian saw them through the rearview mirror and smiled to herself before pressing a certain button.

With a beep, the glass windows on the four car doors suddenly retracted.

Long Yuehong jumped in fright and straightened his body. “It... It... You can even retract it like that?”

“I want you to breathe the air outside.” Jiang Baimian pretended like she had not just pulled a prank.

Shang Jianyao’s posture did not change at all, as if he enjoyed the feeling of the glass window sliding past his face. He looked rather comical. He then narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“How is it?” Jiang Baimian asked with a smile.

Shang Jianyao looked outside in all seriousness. “It smells like fresh shit.”

“...” Jiang Baimian admitted that Shang Jianyao had a sharp sense of smell, but she didn’t want to agree with him.

Bai Chen—who had been watching Jiang Baimian roll down the car window—interrupted thoughtfully, “Team Leader, when were you born?”

“Year 23 of the New Calendar. Why?” Jiang Baimian casually replied.

“You’re three years younger than me...” Bai Chen was slightly shocked.

Long Yuehong was even more surprised. “Team Leader, you’re only two years older than us? You’re already a D6!”

“This is the benefit of working in the Security Department. It may be dangerous, but promotions happen really fast. After all, your superior, such as me, might die at any moment,” Jiang Baimian joked.

She paused and casually added, “Besides, I’ve previously made some contributions. Ah, I forgot to remind you that it’s important to observe the color of the air. You have to wear a gas mask in advance sometimes.”

In the next half-hour, the jeep stumbled through the forest. Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong remained like children, watching the scenery outside attentively. They were curious about everything.

Upon seeing the soil in front of them gradually turning black and the trees around him starting to thin out, making the road less rugged, Long Yuehong suddenly frowned and said, “I keep having the feeling that the environment outside isn’t right. There’s something missing...”

Shang Jianyao sat up straight and spoke in a deep but not low voice. “There’s no one.”

Nobody... Yes! Long Yuehong slapped his thigh and said, “Yeah, apart from a few outposts along the way, there are no humans at all!”

The people at the outpost were undoubtedly all employees of the company.

“The people nearby have either been recruited by the company, wandered to another place that has food, or...” Jiang Baimian changed the topic. “When we pass the outpost ahead and truly enter the Blackmarsh Wilderness, we will have a chance of encountering humans.”

Bai Chen didn’t turn around and added in a low voice, “But that might not be what you want...”

Jiang Baimian tilted her head and asked, “What did you say?”

“Team Leader, focus on driving!” Bai Chen restrained her emotions and shouted with a smile.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong fell silent. From time to time, they would look out the window at the increasingly open area.

After an unknown period of time, Long Yuehong suddenly asked, “Team Leader, I haven’t told my family that I’m going out for field training and that I won’t be returning home soon. What should I do?”

“The higher-ups will send someone to inform them.” Jiang Baimian looked at the road ahead and gently pulled the steering wheel.

Long Yuehong shut his mouth.

There was another long silence in the jeep.

After they passed by Pangu Biology's border sentry, the terrain ahead became increasingly flat.

The soil here was grayish-black and relatively soft. On the soil were clearly all kinds of intersecting marks. Some belonged to wheels, some came from animals, and some came from humans.

The trees around the road were sparser, allowing people to see the black swamp in the distance.

These trees' trunks were black in color, and their leaves were dark-green. Some of them were very tall, at least 20 to 30 meters tall. Some were very short, only about the height of a person. The thing they had in common was their warped and grotesque angles. They looked like dead monsters that appeared dark even under the sun.

"We don't have to be too careful at the edge of the swamp. Once we venture deeper, we have to slow down and pay attention to whether the road ahead has been swallowed by the swamp. If we really drive into a swamp, we have to abandon the car and retreat." Bai Chen took the opportunity to lecture the two men. "Team Leader, there's a clean water source over there."

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Alright, let's take a rest over there and get some of our water supplies replenished. Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, you guys will drive while the terrain is open and not too dangerous. I hope you can finish learning by today."

She turned the wheel and let the jeep drive into a sparse forest area in the wilderness.

An underground river burrowed out of the surface here, flowing for a few hundred meters before returning underground.

Jiang Baimian walked to the riverside with a solar charger board and a thermal kettle that had a large capacity. She said to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "There's usually no problem with such flowing underground water, but we still have to observe two things.

"First, we have to determine whether there are any clear abnormalities in the plants nearby. Second, we have to see if the creatures in the water appear strange compared to their own kind. Then, if the conditions permit, boil the water before filling up the waterskins. If not, put in Bio Cleansing Capsules."

After observing for a while, Jiang Baimian squatted by the river and filled the kettle with water. She then put the thermal kettle on the already charged solar charger and

plugged it in. During this process, she took out a milky-white plastic bottle, poured out a white capsule the size of a fingernail, and threw it into the water.

This was a Bio Cleansing Capsule, unique to Pangu Biology.

Long Yuehong excitedly watched from the side as if he wanted to try it himself. For him, who needed to go to the Supplies Allocation Market every day to get hot water, this was relatively new. He had quite a big family, and a child's energy quota was limited.

A kettle for hot water was not cheap either. Therefore, he could only take a thermos and go to the hot water room in the Supplies Allocation Market to get water.

After Jiang Baimian was done, she stood up and glanced at Long Yuehong before she jokingly scolded him. "At times like these, what you should do is draw your Ice Moss to prevent any creatures from attacking us or snatching our supplies. There's no need to mention Bai Chen. She's extremely experienced. Look, Shang Jianyao is also paying attention to his surroundings."

After drawing his Ice Moss pistol, Shang Jianyao—who was looking at the 'source' of the river—suddenly said, "Team Leader, there's a figure darting over there!"

Chapter 15: Overnight Stay

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Jiang Baimian turned around and looked over. At the same time, she quickly pulled out the Ice Moss gun that used 9mm rounds. Jiang Baimian observed for a while before asking, "Did you see what that figure looked like?"

While staying on-guard, Shang Jianyao replied, "His clothes are tattered, but he wears them thick like a groundhog."

Jiang Baimian was not nervous and blurted out in surprise, "How do you know what a groundhog is?"

If she didn't remember wrong, it was Shang Jianyao's first trip out of the company to the surface. The only place where groundhogs would appear in the company was the Research Zone, which didn't match Shang Jianyao's recently-graduated status.

The only reason she could think of was that there was a picture of a groundhog in the textbooks. Shang Jianyao had made a judgment based on this, but it was very difficult for people who had never seen the real thing to make such a connection.

Shang Jianyao pointed across the river with the unarmed hand. "There's one over there. It's very similar to the pictures in textbooks."

“...” Jiang Baimian traced Shang Jianyao’s finger and saw a highly nervous groundhog.

The groundhog yelped and burrowed back into the hole.

Jiang Baimian held it in for a long time before giving her evaluation. “You have sharp observation skills.”

Bai Chen looked up at the sky.

“He’s dressed so thickly during this season and at this hour. Furthermore, he’s alone. He must be a nomad in the wilderness. There’s no need to worry too much. We have the number and weapon advantage. He won’t dare come close. The only problem is that he might be related to some bandits and bring us some trouble. However, we won’t stay here for long. We’ll leave soon.”

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and smiled at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “If there really are bandits, it’s a perfect opportunity for the two of you to train!”

Long Yuehong’s heart palpitated. “Team Leader, aren’t you worried that the bandits will have more people and more firepower?”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “This place isn’t too far from the company. The Security Department often sends teams over for training and drills. If bandits with superior numbers and firepower really were here, they would have long been eliminated.

“Besides, many bandits in the Ashlands might be different from what you imagine. They might be closer to the state of tramps hugging each other for warmth in order to survive. They might not have too many guns or people because they won’t be able to gather sufficient supplies. Sometimes, the thin and weak ones in a band of bandits are the food reserves for others. Of course, those famous bandits are not easy to deal with. They have all found a way to ensure their extended survival.”

Food reserves... Long Yuehong was inexplicably terrified when he heard that. “Team Leader, how can you describe such a cruel thing in such a calm tone?”

“When you spend too much time in the Ashlands and see more, you’ll get used to it.” Jiang Baimian looked down at the thermal kettle on the solar charger.

Shang Jianyao remained vigilant of his surroundings, but this did not stop him from asking a question and gaining knowledge. “Why are the people in the settlements called wilderness nomads? That person just now was a real nomad of the wilderness.”

Bai Chen pulled the scarf around her neck and spoke with a slightly solemn expression. “Because settlements are never stable. The change in water source, the quality of land, the weather, and the migration of monsters all affect a place’s suitability as a settlement.

Once the environment changes, people will have to wander around again in search of a new settlement.

“Also, of all the factors, the one that has the greatest influence on them and makes them migrate more frequently is actually whether large factions have discovered them.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong asked curiously.

Bai Chen glanced at him. “In the Ashlands, the most notorious bandits are not the largest ones, but the slave captors from the First City. They often conquer settlements and capture people back to serve as slaves. In First City’s occupied mine and inside the building factories, countless slaves have turned to corpses.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and added, “Some bandits will do the same, especially those who own mines.”

“If it weren’t for the slave captors in First City that capture the bandits, I believe the most active industry in the Ashlands right now would be the slave trade.” Bai Chen seemed to recall something and changed the topic. “In addition, the production of many settlements is unable to provide for all the residents. They have to leave the settlements frequently and go into the wilderness to search for fruits, hunt beasts, and pick up all kinds of items to exchange for what they need. In that sense, they are still wilderness nomads.”

Long Yuehong thought of himself as he listened. Although he could only eat meat once a week for years and often woke up in the middle of the night because of his hunger, it was not a problem for him to have a basic meal. Compared to the nomads in the wilderness, he felt like he lived in heaven.

“How pitiful...” Long Yuehong sighed.

Bai Chen glanced at him. “It’s indeed pitiful, but it’s best not to be too soft-hearted when you encounter nomads in the wilderness. The only difference between bandits and them is the degree of their hunger, how good your weapon is, or how sufficiently prepared you are. When I roamed the wilderness, I was often attacked. I also often attacked others. In the eyes of the wilderness nomads, there are no good or bad people. There is only life and death.”

She did not speak too loudly, so it took Jiang Baimian a great deal of effort to barely hear her. The Pangu Biology D6 employee with a ponytail shook her head. “You can’t be so sure. I’ve encountered many wilderness nomads who know how to be grateful and are willing to respond with kindness.”

“For example?” asked Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian smiled brightly. “For example, Bai Chen!”

Bai Chen fell silent for a long time before saying, "Team Leader, the water is boiling!"

Jiang Baimian nodded and said to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "Go get all four waterskins from the car."

After replenishing their water supplies, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong started learning how to drive the jeep.

As the road was wide and there were no other cars, as well as zero need to park the vehicle in a fixed area, they mastered driving almost effortlessly. This was in part due to them being from the new generation that had been genetically enhanced. Their concentration, reaction speed, and coordination of their hands and feet were all considered excellent.

"It felt like I was flying." Long Yuehong reluctantly let Bai Chen take the driver's seat.

Shang Jianyao nodded in agreement. If not for the fact that the roads were relatively soft and that the swamp was getting closer and closer, making the situation complicated, he could have driven the vehicle into the air.

"It's getting dark. Be careful." After Long Yuehong sat back in the backseat, Bai Chen stepped on the accelerator and said, "There's an abandoned building complex ahead. It's said to be a rest stop beside an Old World highway. We'll camp there for the night."

Jiang Baimian took the opportunity to teach Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. "The reason we don't continue on our way after dark isn't that there might be more dangerous creatures appearing at night. Basically, we will encounter them during the day as well. The main reason is that there isn't enough light after dark, greatly reducing the area we can see clearly.

"This will make it difficult for us to discover the potholes and swamps ahead of time. Similarly, it will be very fatal if we can't sense the approach of dangerous creatures in advance. You should remember that most beasts and monsters aren't too difficult for humans, with sufficient firepower, to deal with as long as we can discover them in advance. Our most dangerous enemies are mostly our own kind and diseases."

Bai Chen, who was driving, interrupted Jiang Baimian. "I've encountered mutated mosquitoes before. Each of them was the size of a finger, and their numbers were incalculable. When they gathered together, they were like a large black cloud that swamped from the horizon, blocking out all the sunlight.

"Their bites released a terrifying poison that numbed the bodies of humans and animals and slowed their thinking. Back then, dozens of nomads were swarmed by them and had all their blood drained. Whether it was pistols, rifles, machine guns, or rocket launchers, they couldn't deal much damage to them. Fortunately, we picked up a few flamethrowers that were still usable. With them, a third of us survived."

Long Yuehong's scalp tingled when he heard this, and his fear of the wilderness increased.

Shang Jianyao's eyes flickered as if he was thinking of a way to deal with such a monster.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "In such a situation, the company's Herbicide rounds are a good choice."

As the four of them conversed, the jeep drove to a small ruin.

Most of the buildings that did not exceed the third floor had collapsed. Their surfaces were covered with creepers, and the original walls were virtually invisible. It was as though a green surge had drowned them.

In front of these buildings was a large open space with a pile of rocks of varying sizes. The ground had many cracks, and clumps of plants crept out of them.

After Bai Chen stopped the car, she scanned the area and said, "There are no new traces of human activity... We'll rest here for the night. There's a clean water source nearby."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong alighted from the car one after another. They followed Jiang Baimian's instructions to gather wood and set up a bonfire. They also used charging boards that had been under the sun for the entire day to recharge the jeep's high-performance batteries. Unless one knew the wilderness very well and knew which settlements or corresponding ruins could provide gasoline, fuel cars could only move about in their own sphere of influence unless one brought along a sufficient number of filled gas barrels. Pangu Biology was rather lacking in oil resources.

They did not prepare tents because they could sleep in the jeep—two of them would keep watch, and the other two would rest before taking turns.

The fire soon illuminated the gradually darkening environment. Jiang Baimian took out a few cans of military food and began to heat them.

Shang Jianyao, who had eaten an energy bar, carried the company's standard assault rifle, nicknamed Berserker, and patrolled the surroundings to prevent any accidents. He suddenly felt something and looked up at the collapsed building complex that had been swallowed by the creeper vines.

At the top of the buildings' edge, a black figure flashed past before it disappeared behind an obstacle.

Shang Jianyao was not afraid. He spoke to Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong as if nothing had happened. "Hurry up and eat."

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Shang Jianyao calmly said, “It seems like something is approaching.”

Chapter 16: Interlude

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Long Yuehong was shocked. He instinctively grabbed the Berserker assault rifle beside him and jumped up.

While he hesitated about throwing away the lunch box in his other hand, Jiang Baimian looked around calmly. “There’s nothing...”

She then smiled at Long Yuehong. “Don’t be nervous. It still hasn’t come close, right? Sit down, sit down. We can eat when the canned food is heated up.”

As she spoke, she patted the grenade launcher, nicknamed Tyrant, beside her.

On the other side of the bonfire, Bai Chen carefully observed their surroundings for a while before returning her attention to the food.

“But Team Leader, there’s something approaching us! Aren’t you worried that we might be ambushed?” Long Yuehong couldn’t understand Jiang Baimian’s attitude.

Jiang Baimian stared at the canned food that had been opened a long time ago and said, “Isn’t Shang Jianyao on guard against such a situation? If that thing doesn’t come close, will we not eat and wait here for it? If we keep waiting until we are really starving and exhausted, that will only affect our performance.”

She gradually smiled. “In short, as long as the sky hasn’t collapsed, it shouldn’t stop us from filling our stomachs.”

Long Yuehong sat down doubtfully. From time to time, he would look up at Shang Jianyao, afraid that he would make a mistake and not discover any enemies that had entered a dangerous range.

The liquid in the can melted as the flames flickered, and an indescribable fragrance constantly spread out.

This was the scent of pork, soybeans, salt, and spices mixed together in a complicated process. It made everyone present feel like a hand had stretched out from their stomachs and uncontrollably drilled through their throats before arriving at their mouths.

“It’s done.” Jiang Baimian smiled sincerely.

At that moment, from the top of the collapsed building—where green vines entangled—a black figure pounced over and went straight for Long Yuehong, who was by the bonfire.

As the flames flickered, Shang Jianyao and the rest finally saw the black figure's appearance clearly.

A female human. Her clothes were tattered, revealing her dirty skin that had thick hair growing. Her greasy hair hung down messily, congealed into many locks. Her nails were long and sharp as they shimmered with a cold light. Her eyes were bloodshot and turbid, like those of a wild beast's. Her body was arched, and she was extremely fast. She resembled an ape that swung over with a vine.

Bang!

Shang Jianyao had just raised the assault rifle in his hand when he heard a gunshot.

Bam!

The black shadow fell to the ground heavily. Her face was facing upwards, and there was an exaggerated, grotesque, bloody hole in her left chest that reached her shoulder. There was nothing intact in the middle.

After twitching twice, the female human lost her life.

Jiang Baimian retracted her United 202 and calmly said, "A Heartless."

Heartless... Long Yuehong curiously looked at the corpse in surprise. This was a term that no one could skip learning when studying the Ashlands' history. It was also something described in great detail in Pangu Biology's textbooks.

Heartless were also known as Lost Hearts. The term referred to humans who had Heartless disease. This disease was also known as the Bestial Transformation Disease or Atavism Disease. It meant that humans who had contracted the disease would lose all their rationality, thoughts, and feelings, turning into creatures that were no different from beasts. All that remained were their instinct to hunt, their survival instincts, and the instinct to use simple tools.

They were unable to communicate with each other and would take the initiative to attack normal humans, treating them as prey.

The earliest case of the Heartless disease appeared when the Old World was destroyed. In a short period of time, a large number of humans in each city became Heartless, and many more people, who were caught off-guard, died at the Heartless' hands.

As the Heartless needed to eat to survive, they were like real beasts. Therefore, after humanity's law and order collapsed, ushering in a great famine, they quickly lost a large portion of their city's 'food reserves.' Less than 1% of the original population remained.

According to the observations of many historians in the Ashlands, in addition to hunting humans, the Heartless also preyed on beasts, excavated roots, harvested fruits, and captured mutated and unmutated mice to eat. When they were most hungry, they would attack each other.

Such a 'diet' and living environment made it very rare for Heartless to live past the age of 30. However, they had the instinct to reproduce and had a large number of descendants.

Meanwhile, the Heartless from subsequent generations had a little more intelligence and were equipped with better hunting abilities.

Logically speaking, after humans restored a level of law and order and came into control of sufficient firepower, it shouldn't have been too difficult to deal with the Heartless—who were closer to beasts—but that wasn't the case in reality.

On the one hand, although the Heartless didn't know how to dismantle and maintain weapons, they knew how to use them. It was as if they had this instinct. This instinct became stronger with every generation of Heartless. Furthermore, the Heartless had the intrinsic qualities of humans. They could suffer corruption and mutate. This resulted in the painful deaths of a large number of Heartless, as well as the creation of a group of top hunters.

Of course, no matter how good the Heartless were at using weapons, they did not know how to conduct scientific research, nor did they know how to organize themselves to produce and maintain them. Even if they became top hunters, they could not cause too much trouble in the face of the firepower-rich human armies.

After all, humans had the technology to induce mutation and genetic modification. Even if they were not mature and had a low chance of success, they could still crush the Heartless, who depended on luck for food.

On the other hand, humans had never been able to figure out the Heartless disease's pathology and spreading nature. They didn't know how to prevent contracting such a disease. This resulted in soldiers not being willing to go to areas where the Heartless gathered, fearing that they would be infected.

Therefore, after the large factions eliminated the Heartless around them, they were unwilling to deal with the ones residing in the Old World's ruins. Until today, Heartless remained a shadow that loomed over humans.

This was because a person who lived perfectly fine in a settlement might lose their rationale and intelligence after a nap and become a 'beast,' even if they had never directly come into contact with a Heartless. Their family and friends would be completely fine with no signs of infection at all—this was the conclusion the humans came to after prolonged isolation.

Several years ago, a large faction's high-ranking member—who was extremely afraid of the Heartless disease—slept in a quarantine room. People had to wear a gas mask and a chem suit when they entered; likewise, he wore the same when out. Yet, he still became a Heartless one day.

Fortunately, the average rate of a Heartless disease outbreak wasn't too high since the beginning of the New Calendar; otherwise, humanity might have already collapsed.

The corpse's tragic state made Long Yuehong—who was looking at a corpse for the first time—feel a lump in his throat. He subconsciously turned his head away and didn't dare look again.

"Looks like she's a first generation." Bai Chen recalled what had happened and made her judgment.

"From the tattered state of her clothes, it hasn't been more than a year since her illness acted up." Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. "Do you need me to go through Heartless knowledge with you again?"

Shang Jianyao did not answer and suddenly said, "This isn't the figure I saw just now. The figure I saw was a little shorter."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "The two of you, search the corpse and see if there are any valuable items. Then, carry the corpse outside and bury it. Don't go beyond the area that's illuminated by the fire."

She thought for a moment, walked to the jeep, took out four black objects, and threw one to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong each. "Walkie-talkies. Effective range is two kilometers. It will have further range in open areas. Inform me immediately if anything happens. I believe you guys know how to use it, right?"

"I know how to repair it." Shang Jianyao didn't answer her question. He and Long Yuehong graduated from the university's electronics department.

Long Yuehong latched the walkie-talkie on and walked hesitantly to the Heartless corpse.

The smell of blood, mixed with an indescribable stench, rose, almost causing Long Yuehong—who was cowering and not daring to look at the corpse—to vomit.

Shang Jianyao walked over and took the initiative to search the area. Then, he stood at the head of the corpse, which was close to where the gun wound was.

“Shall I do the honors?” he asked Long Yuehong.

“Uh...” Long Yuehong wanted to say that it wasn’t nice for Shang Jianyao to carry the corpse on his back.

“I mean, do you need me to do the honors of carrying you?” Shang Jianyao explained expressionlessly.

Long Yuehong laughed dryly. “No, it’s fine.” He bent down and grabbed the corpse’s feet.

Shang Jianyao placed his arms under the Heartless’s armpit.

Blood dripped down bit by bit. The two of them carried the corpse out of the clearing and dug a pit at the edge of the bonfire’s illumination range to bury the corpse.

This affected Long Yuehong’s appetite, making him eat only one compressed biscuit and half a can of soybean pork.

The sky became darker and darker. Jiang Baimian was just about to schedule their night shifts when a roar suddenly sounded from the distance.

“Howl!” This roar echoed through the clouds, sounding hoarse and desolate like a nightmare at night.

As soon as the roar ended, howling sounds echoed endlessly from different parts of the swamp.

Long Yuehong felt a little apprehensive and couldn’t help but ask, “Is that a wolf pack?”

“Have you seen a wolf pack scattered across different areas?” Jiang Baimian chuckled.

“Is it common for wild beasts to howl all over such a large swamp?” Long Yuehong asked nervously.

Jiang Baimian shook her head with a smile. “Not at all.”

“W-what should we do?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Jiang Baimian looked at him in amusement. “This is indeed a little abnormal, indicating that something might have happened deep in the swamp. However, from the general area and direction, it doesn’t intersect our route or destination in any way. Therefore, ignore it.”

“Ignore it?” Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao beside him and realized that he wasn’t afraid at all.

Upon hearing this, Bai Chen—who was in charge of guarding the surroundings—calmly said, “An abnormality or accident happens every few days in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. How can we manage all of that? In such a large wilderness, the chances of these matters affecting you are very, very low.”

“But what if it affects us?” Long Yuehong asked.

Shang Jianyao stared at the bonfire and said, “That only means your name sucks.”

Long Yuehong gritted his teeth and nodded. “...That’s true. If I’m unlucky, I won’t be able to escape it no matter what. If I’m lucky, I won’t encounter it at all.”

Jiang Baimian could not understand their conversation and was embarrassed to ask. She could only smile. “We are far from the area where the roar originated, so we don’t know the exact situation. Therefore, we can’t make any preparations in advance. Under the premise that we don’t retreat to the company, the only choice is to circle around that place and go further away. And that’s how our route is supposed to be.”

“This sounds much more reasonable than how you previously put it...” Long Yuehong thought for a moment and realized that two expressions with the same meaning had different effects.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Therefore, you have to learn how to capture the essence of things. In this regard, Shang Jianyao is much better than you. Look, he has never been nervous.”

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly and said, “I’m just considering whether I should participate.”

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen wore looks of confusion.

Shang Jianyao opened his mouth and let out a sound.

“How!!”

Chapter 17: On the Way

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen stood there in a daze for a long time.

So your so-called participation is whether you want to 'sing' with those beasts... Long Yuehong wanted to say that after he gathered his thoughts, but he felt that whoever bothered with Shang Jianyao in such an atmosphere would be on the losing end.

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian laughed. "Bai Chen, you forgot to guard your surroundings! Shang Jianyao, even if dozens of wilderness bandits come, they might not be able to defeat us. However, you single-handedly broke down the defense system from the inside!"

Shang Jianyao nodded solemnly. "Which is why I was considering it. Besides, I'm guarding against any unforeseen circumstances."

"I was indeed a little surprised, but I didn't let down my guard of the surroundings." Bai Chen forced an explanation out of her mouth. She was a little ashamed of her loss of composure and her unprofessionalism.

As a human who had wandered the wilderness for many years, she had plenty of experience. It was not like she had never encountered nomads who had mental breakdowns and were in abnormal states. Furthermore, she had her fair share of them. Those people's words and actions were much more exaggerated than Shang Jianyao's. However, the problem was that Shang Jianyao acted mostly normal—normal to the point that Bai Chen wondered if he was occasionally joking or pulling a prank.

She never imagined that he would be so 'creative.'

"Good. Stay alert at all times." Jiang Baimian did not expose Bai Chen. She tilted her head slightly and smiled at Shang Jianyao. "When this training ends, it is indeed necessary to do a mental evaluation of all members."

Shang Jianyao clapped lightly. "I wish you a perfect score!"

Bai Chen didn't expect Jiang Baimian to be so straightforward in mentioning the psychiatric evaluation because it would obviously agitate Shang Jianyao severely. Although she had suggested it before, Shang Jianyao's behavior back then wasn't too exaggerated. It was barely within the normal limits. At most, he liked to joke, so the suggestion wasn't very pointed.

Bai Chen similarly did not expect Shang Jianyao not to mind at all as if it were really just an exaggerated prank. Perhaps, he has long recognized his condition and accepted himself as such? He does not have an inferiority complex, nor is he sensitive about the issue?

Bai Chen shook her head and reminded herself that no matter what, she had to do her job well and not be affected.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian looked down at the electronic watch on her wrist. "Alright, let's take turns resting. Normally, I should be in the same team as Bai Chen while Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong will be in the same team as we take turns to rest. However, the two of you are inexperienced, and it is very easy for you to ignore some signs.

"Furthermore, when you are out on missions, there are many dangers and limited conditions. There is no need to make it a point to distinguish between men and women. The most important thing is to be honest with each other and trust each other. Therefore, Shang Jianyao and I will be in the same team, and Bai Chen and Long Yuehong will be in the same team."

Jiang Baimian smiled when she said that. "Actually, the conditions are very good this time. With a jeep, one will sleep in the front seat and the other in the back seat. It won't disturb the other party at all."

Bai Chen nodded and said, "I used to sleep in the same tent with two men, two women, a pig, and two chickens."

Jiang Baimian immediately stood up. "Alright, you guys get some rest. Shang Jianyao and I will begin our night duty."

She looked down at her watch again. "You have six hours."

"Team Leader, won't this be too long?" Bai Chen was a little worried. They would be on duty for six hours from that very moment. It happened to be the period when humans were most exhausted and sleepy due to their biological clocks. It was very easy for them to ignore any abnormal activity around them.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "The three of us are people who have undergone genetic enhancement. One thing we have in common is that we have plenty of energy. In this regard, I should be stronger than them. I can maintain a high level of focus, even if I don't sleep for a day or two."

"Me too..." Long Yuehong muttered.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at him. "What did you say? Are you badmouthing me behind my back?"

"He didn't!" Shang Jianyao interrupted. "He said it in front of you!"

Long Yuehong choked and coughed.

Jiang Baimian waved her hand and said to Shang Jianyao, "You're already pretty normal at times like this."

She eventually said to Bai Chen and Long Yuehong, "Alright, the two of you should quickly get some sleep."

Nothing unexpected happened that night. When the sun rose from the horizon and dyed the clouds golden red, the four Old Task Force members were already gathered around the bonfire, drinking warm water and eating energy bars.

"How beautiful and spectacular..." Long Yuehong looked in the direction of the sunrise and realized that his vocabulary was limited.

The magnificent scene, the scene that contained infinite vitality, made Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao—who had come to the surface for the first time—feel as if their bodies and minds had been cleansed. They felt an indescribable sense of beauty and hope.

"I was more embarrassing than the two of you back when I saw the sunrise for the first time." Jiang Baimian did not mock them.

Bai Chen also stared at the sunrise, but she said nothing. As a human who was born in the wilderness and grew up in the wilderness, she was already accustomed to the sunrise. However, she still felt inexplicably happy and excited every time she saw it.

Jiang Baimian stood up and spoke after she filled her water bag. "Alright, pack your things and get ready to leave. Long Yuehong, you and Bai Chen will sit in the back row. Have a nap. Shang Jianyao and I will take turns driving." Nôv(e)B\jnn

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong retracted his gaze and replied loudly.

After clearing the bonfire, he saw that the empty husks of the canned food they had eaten last night were casually thrown to the ground. "Team Leader, aren't we going to recycle them?"

Pangu Biology was located underground and lacked mineral resources. They had always lacked metal resources. They had to use the food they produced, genetic enhancement liquids, biological agents, underground brine, and salt extracted from rock surfaces to exchange for the corresponding resources with other large factions.

Jiang Baimian looked back and fell silent for two seconds. "There's no need. Takes up space."

With that, she opened the door and sat in the driver's seat.

Since Team Leader had said so, Long Yuehong resisted the urge to recycle. He quickly returned to the car with his gun.

A simulated engine sound sounded as the grayish-green four-door jeep left the clearing with a dense number of solar panels spanning open. They moved away from the small ruins.

After a few minutes, a black figure walked out from behind a half-collapsed building and crept closer to the extinguished bonfire.

'He' sometimes paused, using plants and broken walls as cover. Sometimes 'he' crawled, his elbows moving forward alternately. After 'he' confirmed that the four people had really left, 'he' suddenly jumped up, rushed to the bonfire, and picked up the empty metal cans.

'He' was wearing a black sackcloth and carrying a rifle. 'He' was about 1.6 meters tall, and his face had no skin or flesh, just silver-black metal. There were many cracks on the metal surface, vaguely revealing lines and components of different colors below. One of 'his' eyes was blinking red, and the other had long been 'extinguished.' His hands were like bones, made purely of silver-black metal.

This was an artificial intelligence robot.

"Acquired. Acquired..." It let out a monotonous voice without any fluctuations. It carried the empty cans and ran back to the rear of the ruins. After making many turns, it burrowed into a hole formed by steel columns and concrete that were randomly placed together.

In the hollow was a boy wrapped in a tattered cotton jacket and bundled in animal fur. The child was only 12 or 13 years old. His face was dirty, and the crevices between his hands were caked with black mud. Beside him was a tattered tricycle filled with all kinds of junk and trash.

He took the empty canned food and smiled uncontrollably. Then, as he divided the empty cans into three groups and placed them in different junk piles, he smiled at the robot. "Little Seven, this is almost full. I can exchange a new eye for you now. We still have to save up a little here for this pile. Winter is coming, so we will need to exchange for plenty of food and coal, as well as your batteries. I'll exchange this pile when I get back..."

As he spoke, the boy scratched his head and smiled in embarrassment. "There's almost nothing to eat. I've been eating a little too much lately..."

Little Seven nodded hard and said in the same monotonous voice, "Good arrangement."

"Get in the car quickly. Let's go back to the settlement." The boy sat in the driver's seat of the tricycle.

Amidst beeping sounds and a bumpy road, the boy drove the tricycle into the distance amidst the ruins and plants that could barely be considered a path.

As he cycled, he spoke to the robot behind him. "Little Seven, do you think Mommy and Daddy will come back after winter ends?"

...

The jeep maintained its speed as it continued moving through the Blackmarsh Wilderness.

When it was almost noon, Bai Chen—who was driving—suddenly frowned after turning a corner. "There's a group of people ahead..." Without waiting for Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong's response, she added in a deep voice, "They saw us."

Chapter 18: Transaction Failure

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

Upon hearing Bai Chen's reminder, Jiang Baimian—who was conversing with Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong—turned her gaze to the front.

On both sides of the squishy road were abnormally sparse woods. The left woods had the characteristics of a swamp. It was dark and muddy with many mosquitoes. On the right, weeds were everywhere. In the open was a black car dotted with mud.

With Jiang Baimian's knowledge, it was naturally not difficult for her to identify it as an SUV. Furthermore, it was obvious that it had been actively or passively modified multiple times. The colors and the feel it gave off in many areas could not be made uniform.

Three people were standing outside the SUV. Some wore old cotton jackets, some wore wrapped nitrified leather, and some were draped in a wrinkled, black coat that was obviously too short.

In their mouths were crude cigarettes that were directly bundled up with brown tobacco leaves. In their hands were different weapons. There were United 202 pistols, submachine guns nicknamed Storm, and rifles from the Old World.

Beside these three people were two heavy motorcycles. They were black with a red pattern painted on them, giving off a flamboyant feeling.

A man sat on each of the two motorcycles. The two men were still wearing helmets, and they each carried a mini submachine gun.

“What can you guys tell?” Jiang Baimian was not flustered at all. Instead, she seized the opportunity to quiz Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong.

Shang Jianyao—who had already rolled down the window and was looking ahead—replied, “Well-fed.”

“...” Long Yuehong stared out the windshield. He had wanted to share his opinion, but Shang Jianyao interrupted his train of thought and made him forget what he wanted to say.

Jiang Baimian did not criticize Shang Jianyao. Instead, she nodded. “Good eye.”

The five people had very rough facial skin, but they did not appear jaundiced or thin. This meant that they could at least ensure that they had adequate food and clothing. This was different from a typical wilderness nomad!

At this moment, Long Yuehong finally found his train of thought and quickly said, “Well-equipped!”

Be it the modified SUV, heavy motorcycles, or the clothes and weapons on their bodies, they indicated that these people were different from the typical wilderness nomads.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “We can make a preliminary judgment that they are a team of Ruin Hunters that are doing well or a band of wilderness bandits that are doing well. There are sometimes no differences between the two.”

Just as she said that, Bai Chen added, “The modification method of that SUV implies that it uses fuel. This means that those people are familiar with the area and know where they can get gasoline. That or they are confident they can get out of the wilderness before the car runs dry.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else when she saw that both parties were getting closer and closer. She picked up the grenade launcher and said, “Lift the Berserker up to the window and let them see it.”

Long Yuehong was a little nervous. “Team Leader, will there be a fight?”

“Who knows?” Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “Ah yes, remember this. In the wilderness, showing your muscles is a sign of friendliness. Justice, fairness, and communication only exist at the tip of a gun.”

Bai Chen echoed, “We call this ‘respect is only between the strong.’ Many nomads in the wilderness have once hoped that there would be a mighty person who’s benevolent, kind, and filled with love—one that would pity the weak and be willing to help them. Unfortunately, it’s nothing more than a fantasy. Perhaps there are such people, but

there definitely aren't many of them. It's very difficult to encounter them. It's more useful to rely on yourself than to anticipate them."

"The Salvation Army in the past could really be counted as one. Now..." Jiang Baimian's voice gradually softened.

"They'll only show their friendliness if we show that we're hard to deal with..." Long Yuehong nodded thoughtfully and understood his team leader and Bai Chen. He then had new doubts. "Why should I do the same? They can only see Shang Jianyao's side."

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, Shang Jianyao laughed. "Do you know how to play hide and seek? Does not finding anything mean that there's really no one hiding there?"

Jiang Baimian laughed as well. "That's an incongruous analogy. Long Yuehong, lift up the Berserker and get ready. It's to shock and awe the enemies that might be hiding in the swamps and protect Bai Chen, who is focused on driving.

"Also, they might think that the people on this vehicle lack the necessary experience and are prey that can be attacked if you don't do that, even if there really aren't any enemies hiding in the swamps."

Long Yuehong came to a realization. "I get it!" He immediately picked up the assault rifle and placed it by the window that had not been completely rolled up.

On the other side, Shang Jianyao had already prepared the Berserker and eagerly asked, "Team Leader, can I fire at will?"

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "How bold. The people in front are clearly not easy to deal with. Yes... You can shoot under three conditions. Either I give the order, or they continue approaching us despite our efforts to stop them. That or they show signs of aiming."

As she spoke, the linear distance between the grayish-green, four-door Jeep, and the black SUV and the heavy motorcycles was already less than ten meters.

Out of the five people there, the three with crude cigarettes in their mouths had already raised the firearms in their hands. The other two leaned over the heavy motorcycles, gripping the accelerator with one hand and a submachine gun with the other.

If it weren't for the fact that the grenade launchers' and assault rifles' muzzles were sticking out of this side of the car windows, they might have already switched positions and launched an attack.

As the black SUV and heavy motorcycle were not parked on the 'main road,' but in an open area of the sparse woods, there was no danger of colliding with each other despite the fact that the two sides got closer and closer.

During this process, Bai Chen reduced the speed of the car and made the jeep move bit by bit, preventing the other party from overreacting.

Jiang Baimian suddenly shouted, “Do you know what anomaly happened deep in the swamp last night?”

A muscular man in his thirties—wearing a wrinkled black coat and holding a Storm submachine gun—spat out the crude cigar in his mouth and replied loudly, “It was too far away. We aren’t sure!”

Jiang Baimian shouted again, “What are you guys doing here?”

“Winter is almost here. We have to hunt more beasts to prepare for it!” The man’s eyebrows were messy, and there was an old scar at the corner of his right eye. He had a ferocious aura, like a brown bear that had donned human clothes.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian to shout again, the man asked, “What are you guys doing here?”

Jiang Baimian replied, “We are Ruin Hunters!”

“Ruin Hunters...” The muscular man muttered before suddenly laughing. “A few months ago, there was news from the swamp’s depths that an unrecorded city ruin had been discovered. Ah, perhaps the anomaly in the swamp’s depths last night was related to this matter! Although the two matters are several months apart, who can be sure? Hunters, do you want to know the city ruin’s general location? You can exchange it for food!”

He roared so loudly that everyone in the jeep could hear him loud and clear.

Shang Jianyao stared outside attentively as if he would fire at any moment. Suddenly, he asked, “Team Leader, he shouted too loudly, causing damage to our ears. Do we need to fire at him?”

“...There’s no need.” Jiang Baimian replied to Shang Jianyao before raising her voice. “We have military canned food, energy bars, and compressed biscuits. Name a price!”

The man’s eyes flickered slightly. “Sixty cans of military food!”

“Forget it then!” Jiang Baimian seemed to have no intention of bargaining at all and had only asked perfunctorily.

At this moment, the jeep had already driven past the black SUV’s location. The distance between the two parties gradually increased.

The man didn't insist and replied loudly, "I hope there's a chance to make a deal next time!" With that said, he maintained his vigilant posture and watched the jeep drive further and further away from his firing range.

At this moment, a thin young man in an old cotton-padded jacket, with a simple cigar in his hand, anxiously asked, "Boss, why aren't we shooting?"

"That's right. Even though they have somewhat considerable firepower, we have that thing!" The man lying on a heavy motorcycle with a scraggly beard straightened his body and pointed at the black SUV's trunk. "They must have a lot of supplies!"

The man shook his head. "No matter what, our losses won't be small. It's not worth it. Not worth it at all."

The young man in an old cotton coat, who was holding the United 202 pistol, said in confusion,

"Boss, humans die for wealth while birds die for food! Besides, isn't it all about who's most ruthless and fiercest in the wilderness? In any case, we might die for no reason tomorrow. Why don't we take a gamble today!?"

The man glanced at him coldly. "In the wilderness, those who are ruthless and fierce don't live long. There isn't much pure prey here. Most of them are hunters and prey at the same time. If we continue being fearless of harm, we will quickly become prey for others.

"Look at those beasts. When they are full, they won't launch an attack on beasts that are similarly as strong as them. They know that they might become someone else's prey once they are injured, so they reduce the need for unnecessary hunting. Are you guys worse than beasts?"

Another man—wrapped in animal hide and carrying an Old World rifle with a simple cigar in his mouth—added, "Boss is right. Besides, didn't you notice? The food that those people had just now only included military canned food, energy bars, and compressed biscuits! Don't you know what that means?"

"An ordinary Ruin Hunter will only be in such a state when they first set off from a certain city or border town of a large faction. However, there doesn't seem to be any large faction towns or cities that we know of nearby."

The man sitting on the other motorcycle mumbled, "Maybe they just found an Old World's military warehouse?"

The man in the lead exhaled and said, "Alright, everyone, stop fighting."

He then smiled. "Didn't you notice that it's very likely that they will pass by that spot? There aren't many routes in this area for vehicles to pass through. Not many know of the anomaly there either. Get in the car. The distance is about right. We'll follow them secretly. When they encounter the trouble and are at the end of their ropes, we'll wipe them all out!"

The other men immediately revealed looks of surprise. "Yes, Boss!"

They enthusiastically got into the SUV and started the heavy motorcycles.

Chapter 19: Gunshot

Translator: virtual group Editor: virtual group

In the jeep, Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and chuckled. "Did you guys notice anything?"

"Those wilderness bandits were quite calm and cultured." Long Yuehong recalled the various adjectives he had learned from books, hoping to find the most appropriate description of the men.

Shang Jianyao retracted his Berserker assault rifle from the window. "Apart from the leader and the other one, the rest had a strong urge to attack. They are the kind that might fire at any moment."

"Not bad!" Jiang Baimian felt rather surprised. "A person who hasn't experienced many battles and various dangers can actually acutely sense hostility, aggression, and other relatively abstract things."

"Talent." Shang Jianyao had a serious expression.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "It's normal for there to be some mutations during genetic enhancement." She then smiled and said, "Then, what do you think your observations imply?"

Shang Jianyao turned to look at Long Yuehong and urged him with a smile. "She's testing you!"

"It means, it means that they, they..." Long Yuehong felt vaguely inspired. However, he felt a little pressured and relatively nervous because this question was raised by someone else and he needed to answer it. Therefore, he couldn't grasp his fleeting thoughts.

"It means that they have a strong inclination for suicide!" Shang Jianyao helped him answer.

Long Yuehong couldn't help but ask, "Are you joking?" He then made the connection and grasped the crux of the matter. "I understand! After we revealed our considerable firepower and showed them a friendly attitude, their strong desire to attack means they have high confidence in finishing us off. This cannot be seen from their numbers, weapons, or other equipment.

"Could they have a secret weapon in their car? Maybe one of them has terrifying strength that can't be seen on the surface. For example, one may have survived genetic modification experiments? Or they might have many accomplices hiding nearby?"

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his answer. "Don't give them time to prepare the next time we meet them."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong replied in unison.

The jeep continued forward, circling around swaths of dark, muddy ground. It drove into the distance amidst the sparse trees and large patches of weeds that grew abnormally.

Shang Jianyao—who was sitting on the right side of the backseat—suddenly straightened his body and took off the Ice Moss hanging from his belt. This pistol was silver-white in color, and the handle had an anti-slip pattern. It shimmered with a metallic luster under the sun, looking exquisite like a work of art.

Shang Jianyao held the gun with both hands and began to dismantle it skillfully, examining every detail. Amidst the orderly and sweet sound of colliding metal, Shang Jianyao pressed the last yellow round into the magazine and completed the restructuring of the Ice Moss.

After loading the magazine, he latched the Ice Moss back onto his belt and drew his United 202. The body of this firearm was also silver-white, but the grip was embedded with black anti-slip material. Compared to an Ice Moss, its barrel was thicker, and the details of its various parts were more rugged.

After Shang Jianyao repeated his set of actions, he began working on the black Berserker assault rifle. As a weapon produced by Pangu Biology, this gun had a designed air to it. It was filled with futuristic and industrial styles.

After the inspection, Shang Jianyao placed the pure black weapon that shimmered with a metallic luster onto the car window. He lowered his body and aimed at different targets outside.

Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine as he watched from the side. When Shang Jianyao finally 'quietened down,' he quickly asked, "What are you doing?"

Shang Jianyao replied without turning his head. "Getting ready, as well as doing drills."

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief. "I thought you discovered something... Don't make everyone so nervous."

"If I really discovered anything, I'll warn all of you." Shang Jianyao retracted his assault rifle and sat up straight.

"Team Leader, look..." Long Yuehong hoped to get some reason.

Jiang Baimian touched the metal device in her left ear and replied with a smile, "What did you say? I didn't hear you clearly!"

Without waiting for Long Yuehong to repeat himself, she tersely said. "I forgot to remind you that we always have to maintain adequate vigilance in the wilderness. However, there's no need to be overly vigilant. Being too nervous will quickly bring fatigue. Alright, let's have lunch. Compressed biscuits, energy bars, and water. There's no need to stop the car."

Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao didn't say anything else. They each took out their food and ate a meal with their waterskins.

Long Yuehong then replaced Bai Chen and let her eat.

After driving for an hour, Bai Chen—who was sitting on the back row's left side—looked out of the window for a long time before suddenly saying, "There's something wrong with this area."

Startled, Long Yuehong almost stepped on the brakes. He looked around and realized that this place was no different from the places he had passed previously. The only difference was that the swamp on the left was much more swampy. The deformed trees seemed to be growing from a black quagmire.

"There's nothing..." he replied in confusion.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "It's too quiet."

Shang Jianyao thoughtfully looked out of the window upon hearing that. "I haven't seen any animals in a while."

Long Yuehong realized something. "Yes! There's really a problem."

It was very normal not to see humans in the Blackmarsh Wilderness for hours, or even a day or two. However, this was a paradise for wild creatures. From time to time, they would see some normal or abnormal animals. For example, squirrels busy stocking up winter food, birds that passed through the sparse forest, or lone wolves that hid in relatively obscure spots and observed the jeep.

Bai Chen retracted her gaze and said to Jiang Baimian, “Team Leader, let me drive. I’m afraid something might happen in this area.”

“Alright, you know this place better than any of us. Make the right choice the moment we encounter an accident.” Jiang Baimian immediately signaled for Long Yuehong to stop the car.

After swapping seats, Bai Chen accelerated as if she wanted to pass through this place that seemed a little off.

In this area, the trees on both sides remained sparse. The black quagmire reflected a weak aqueous glow under the sun, and clumps of weeds grew wantonly in an opening.

All of this seemed normal, but it had lost all signs of activity, making it akin to a large oil painting.

Long Yuehong—who felt that even the wind had stopped blowing—felt his heart pound. He nervously asked, “Why is it getting worse? Why don’t we drive back and change paths?”

Bai Chen did not mock Long Yuehong and nodded seriously. “Drive for two more minutes. If there’s still no change, head back.” As she spoke, she glanced at Jiang Baimian to seek her team leader’s opinion.

“Okay.” Jiang Baimian agreed. As she spoke, the jeep passed a shadowy area.

This was because the trees on both sides had suddenly grown tall. Their branches and leaves stretched out and intertwined, hiding most of the sky above the main path.

At that moment, Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen saw a thick black shadow looming from the sky. It swung over and smashed into the jeep’s windshield.

The black figure had a hideous head covered in pitch-black scales. Its two eyes were dark yellow and cold. Its mouth was wide open, revealing a few sharp teeth that were stained with rotten flesh. It flicked out an extremely red tongue.

It was a gigantic python that exceeded everyone’s imaginations!

Bai Chen’s expression changed slightly. Unfazed, she calmly pressed down on the accelerator to its limits.

The grayish-green jeep immediately shot out like an arrow, brushing past the python’s head.

The distance between the two parties increased instantly. Shang Jianyao came to his senses, picked up the Berserker assault rifle, twisted his body, and placed it by the window. Then, he saw the python clearly.

The sudden attacker was at least two normal buckets thick. Its body was clearly more than ten meters long, and its tail wrapped around a tree several times. Its body was covered in thick, pitch-black scales that shimmered with a metallic luster under the sunlight that filtered through the gaps in the leaves.

At this moment, Bai Chen turned the steering wheel to the right and made the jeep tilt a little.

This way, Shang Jianyao—who was sitting on the right side in the back—could aim at the gigantic python.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao pulled the trigger and fired a long burst.

The bullets struck the python's skin, producing exaggerated sparks. However, they failed to penetrate the thick black scales. All it did was cause cracks to appear on the surface.

The Berserker assault rifle was unable to harm this terrifying python!

The python seemed to sense pain and hissed. It opened its mouth and exhaled a yellow-green gas. This gas rapidly spread, clouding the surroundings with a thin yellowish-green fog.

A cluster of weeds rapidly withered and turned yellow in the fog before collapsing to the ground.

“Wind down the windows!” Jiang Baimian calmly ordered. She then added, “It’s a Blackmarsh Iron Snake!”

Long Yuehong—who had just recovered from his shock—broke out into a cold sweat when he heard this. During his training, he and Shang Jianyao had heard Bai Chen mention the monsters with higher danger levels in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. This included the Blackmarsh Iron Snake.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake was a type of python that had been infected during the Old World's destruction, producing abnormal but stable heredity traits. Their most prominent characteristic was that their bodies were covered in layers of slippery scales that looked like black iron, leaving most firearms useless. In addition, they had poison sacs that could allow them to release highly corrosive venom. These pythons could also create a terrifying poisonous fog that was harmful to plants and animals.

When these two factors were combined, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake became a nightmarish creature. Even with a certain number of troops, it was difficult to defend against it without using heavy weapons or special weapons.

Furthermore, Blackmarsh Iron Snakes seemed to have the ability to sense danger timely. In other words, when someone hid in the distance and aimed at its weak eyes with a sniper rifle in an attempt to blow up its head, it could react in advance and take evasive maneuvers.

It was precisely because of this that Blackmarsh Iron Snakes were called monsters, not beasts.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake that had appeared in front of Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and the others was much larger than the ones Bai Chen had described.

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In the distance, the group of people quietly following behind the jeep heard gunshots coming from ahead. They looked at each other and revealed joyous expressions.

"It's begun," their leader said with a smile.

Chapter 20: "Racing"

In the black SUV's front seat, the young man in an old cotton coat turned his head and anxiously asked, "Boss, should we rush over now?"

The muscular man with a ferocious aura and an old scar at the corner of his right eye smiled and shook his head. "There's no rush. With their firepower and the experience they show, they should be able to last a little longer. Besides, with the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's size, its linear speed is definitely not comparable to a jeep.

"If we arrive too early, we might end up getting attacked by both parties. That would be too dangerous. Besides, we still have to take this opportunity to make some preparations. Ji Shun, stop the car!"

"Yes, Boss." The driver was the older man donning animal hide.

The black SUV then stopped.

The muscular man with the Storm submachine gun pushed open the door and got out of the car before walking to the trunk. He then took off his wrinkled black coat and handed it, along with his weapon, to his companion on the heavy motorcycle to the left.

After doing this, the muscular man lifted the trunk's cover, bent down, and stretched out his hands to grab something. His face flushed red, and the veins on his forehead popped. His knees bent even more, a testament to the strength he was using.

He retreated step by step and pulled out a derelict wooden box that was large enough to fit a person.

With a heavy thud, the wooden box was placed on the ground.

As it was opened, the contents were revealed.

Inside was an iron-black item that appeared to be armor with a metallic skeletal structure.

"Ah Yu, Ji Shun, help me." The man turned his head and spoke to the young man in the old cotton-padded jacket and the middle-aged man, who was in charge of driving.

Ah Yu and Ji Shun came over, each taking a side. They lifted the object in the wooden box without much effort.

With the effects of gravity, this item quickly unfolded, revealing its complete form. It looked very humanoid. It had a metal helmet with crystal goggles. Under the helmet were several pieces of armor that were connected together, protecting important pipes and wires.

Under this portion of armor was a large, iron-black pack that was abnormally strong. Surrounding this power pack were all kinds of metal bones that resembled cervical spines, thoracic spines, radius bones, humerus, ulna, scaphoid bones, femurs, patella bones, tibia, and fibula bones. They also had joints with metal buckles and dense arrays of sensors.

Among these bones, thick armor was attached to the thoracic spine. A grenade launcher and an electromagnetic weapon were also embedded in each of the arms.

This was a military exoskeleton device. Its production capacity had always been lacking. Even among large factions, only the best of the best could be equipped with the device. It was a true killing machine.

It could silkily execute a human's actions through a complicated and sophisticated sensor system, allowing the wearer to exceed a human's strength, speed, and balance limits. Not only that, but it was also equipped with a hot-weapon system, a precision aiming system, auxiliary combat system, a comprehensive warning system, an anti-poisoning filter system, and bulletproof armor in key areas.

In addition, just as the invention of firearms reduced humans' physical requirements for combat, exoskeleton equipment greatly reduced the user's energy depletion, allowing them to engage in prolonged fights.

As long as one wore such equipment, it was definitely not a dream for one person to fight a team equipped with only light weapons.

With inhuman speed and comprehensive warning systems, it was not easy to hit the wearer's body parts that were not protected by bulletproof armor.

The man—who was in his prime—walked over and put on the military exoskeleton with Ah Yu's and Ji Shun's help. One by one, metal clasps were latched on. Finally, he adjusted the crystal goggles on his metal helmet and booted up the equipment.

After the integration system's self-checks passed, the man laughed. "There's only 30% battery left. It can still be used for two hours... That's enough."

As he spoke, his hands—which were covered in iron-black auxiliary bones—easily took back his Storm submachine gun as if it were only a toy without any weight.

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"W-what should we do?" Long Yuehong almost suffocated when he heard the term 'Blackmarsh Iron Snake.' In such a situation, he—who was inexperienced in such situations—could only seek answers from Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen.

He had clearly seen that Shang Jianyao's assault rifle's long burst had failed to cause any damage to the python. All it did was cause some damage to its outer scales.

Coupled with the knowledge he had previously learned, he suspected that a large caliber pistol like the United 202 and Bai Chen's Orange rifle—which could be used as a sniper rifle—were similarly unable to penetrate the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's thick scales unless the bullets could hit unprotected vital spots.

As for whether the grenade launcher was effective, Long Yuehong couldn't be sure. However, he felt that it wasn't going to be useful. After all, the grenade's main source of damage was the explosion and the scattering shrapnel. It wasn't armor-piercing.

Jiang Baimian glanced at it through the rearview mirror. "Let's have a race first. This fellow isn't good at such things. Besides, it will tire. The jeep won't. As long as the high-performance batteries, engine, and tires can hold on, it won't be a problem for us to race it until tomorrow morning."

As Jiang Baimian spoke, Bai Chen did not slow down the car too much. She only stopped putting it in overdrive to prevent any of the jeep's parts from malfunctioning.

She clearly agreed with the option of 'racing' the Blackmarsh Iron Snake. She did not want to fight it head-on.

The jeep sped along at high speed. From time to time, it would bump into rocks or tree stumps. Just a bump would give people the feeling that they were about to lift off.

If not for Bai Chen's relatively good driving skills and a certain level of racing experience in the wilderness, allowing her to react in time and respond correctly, the jeep might have already flipped over and rolled several times before becoming totaled.

The enormous Blackmarsh Iron Snake seemed to have been angered. It used the sparse trees and overgrown weeds to occasionally chase after Shang Jianyao and the others from the sky or the ground, unwilling to give up.

The python was definitely not as fast as the jeep at full speed. However, due to the terrain, Bai Chen could not keep the jeep moving at maximum speed. She had to reduce the vehicle's speed from time to time to avoid obstacles or swampy areas. Therefore, although the gap between the two parties grew larger and larger, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake was not shaken off.

During this process, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake opened its mouth twice, spewing out venom and toxic gas. However, it failed to affect the grayish-green jeep due to the distance between them.

After two attempts, the gigantic python seemed to have learned its lesson. It stopped attempting long-range attacks and desperately chased after the jeep instead.

Bai Chen suddenly stepped on the brakes a few minutes later and jerked the steering wheel.

With a creak, the gray-green jeep came to a stop, overturned on its side.

Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao had consciously buckled their seatbelts while driving at high speed, so they weren't thrown out. However, they were pulled back by the strong inertia.

Before they could return to their senses, Bai Chen said in a deep voice, "The terrain ahead has changed!"

Jiang Baimian also realized this problem.

In front of them was a swath of darkness with no end in sight. The deformed trees grew sparsely, and there was no path for vehicles to pass through at all. It was like a large swamp had expanded at some point in time, swallowing up the original route.

Whether they looked left or right, they couldn't find the boundary. They didn't know how long it would take to circle around it, nor did they know if the large swamp had surrounded the area. They could only escape by retracing their original route.

Just as Bai Chen wondered if she should suggest continuing the 'race' and add 'loops' to the extravaganza, Jiang Baimian shouted, "Shang Jianyao, get me a metal rod from the trunk. Bai Chen, use the jeep's hood as a support point. Be prepared to snipe the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's eye."

No one questioned her. In this split second, everyone chose to trust their team leader and listen to her orders.

Shang Jianyao immediately unbuckled his seatbelt, leaned back, grabbed a metal pole, and handed it to Jiang Baimian, who had already alighted from the jeep.

They had seen this 'weapon' before and had always been a little confused. Why did their team leader not bring a tent but something so strange?

Bai Chen carried the Orange rifle to the hood of the overturned jeep. She mounted the weapon and brought her eye to the scope.

Jiang Baimian gripped the metal rod with her left hand and began stretching her body.

The python that was covered in layers of black scales rapidly slithered forward, getting closer and closer.

The surrounding winds seemed to be tainted with a putrid smell.

Upon seeing that the terrifying Blackmarsh Iron Snake was about to enter the poisonous gas-spewing range, Jiang Baimian held the metal rod in her left hand and suddenly ran two steps forward.

Her body suddenly froze as she used the momentum to throw the metal pole at the Blackmarsh Iron Snake.

At the same time, a bright, dazzling, and thick electric arc appeared between her left palm and the metal rod! The electric arc lengthened and wrapped around the metal pole, producing sizzling sounds.

In an instant, the metal rod turned into a thick, silvery-white bolt of lightning. It tore through the sky and landed on the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's body as if it was a punishment from the heavens.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake sensed danger, but such an attack was not fatal. Therefore, it only bent its body and avoided having its head struck.

Clang! Nôv(el)B\\jnn

The metal rod with countless silver-white electric arcs lingering around it struck the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's long and thick torso.

Without a doubt, with Jiang Baimian's strength, it was impossible for the metal rod to pierce through the target's thick layer of scales. However, it came with a terrifying electric arc!

With a sizzling sound, the silver-white light illuminated the grayish-black soil around them. Countless electric currents instantly spread to every corner of the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's body at a speed that could not be stopped.

The gigantic and strange python suddenly froze, paralyzed on the spot.

Although the prepared Bai Chen didn't anticipate this, she didn't hesitate. After adjusting the muzzle's direction slightly, she firmly pulled the Orange rifle's trigger.

Bang!

A glistening yellow bullet shot out, heading straight for the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's cold, dark-yellow left eye.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake sensed fatal danger approaching it in advance, but it could only watch helplessly in its paralyzed, electrified state. It failed to make any attempt at dodging.

With a dull sound, the bullet sank into its cold, vertical pupil. It drilled into its brain and began spinning wantonly.

The electric bolts quickly subsided. The Blackmarsh Iron Snake's gaping maw let out an indescribable, snake-like cry. Its body suddenly collapsed as it tumbled around crazily, crashing into and felling several trees.

Before long, the gigantic python stopped moving.

Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at the confused Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. She smiled and rubbed her left arm with her right hand. "Electric eel-like biomechanical limb because you're worth it."

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Not far away from Shang Jianyao and the others, the man in the military exoskeleton suit and his companions heard gunshots and cries. They sensed the slight quakes in the ground and heard the sound of trees collapsing.

The man's expression lit up. "They've reached the most intense and tragic stage. Now is the time. Charge!"