

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 111: Preparation - Read

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Chapter 111: Preparation

“One to four months...” Long Yuehong repeated the numbers in a daze.

Jiang Baimian sized him up a few times. “You don’t look scared? Is there anything troubling you? Let’s discuss it. Maybe there’s a solution?”

Before Long Yuehong could speak, Shang Jianyao answered for him. “He has recently been living a good life thanks to his mechanical watches, candy desserts, and bottled beverages. He walks with a bounce even in his steps. How can he bear to leave the company?”

“No I don’t?” Long Yuehong subconsciously retorted.

Shang Jianyao immediately asked, “Then, how much of the compensation do you have left, ignoring the contribution points you used to change your parents’ room?”

This question hit the nail on the head. Long Yuehong stammered and didn’t dare answer.

After receiving the compensation, he indeed led a carefree life. He often ate ordinary desserts worth 60 contribution points per pound. Occasionally, he would exchange for high-end goods worth 720 contribution points per pound.

As for sweets, pumpkins, and bottled beverages, they were par for the course.

This made Long Yuehong a hero in his siblings’ hearts and an object of envy for his friends. It also seemed much easier to get along with his female target.

Long Yuehong—who was too embarrassed to reveal his balance—could only take the initiative to say, “My mother introduced me to a girl recently. We met a few times, and we have fond feelings for each other. If our trip is going to take a month or two, I think it will be over between us.”

Jiang Baimian nodded in agreement. “That’s true. You and that girl are, at best, considered acquaintances right now. You can barely be considered friends. It’s impossible for her to wait for you after not hearing from you for two to three months.”

“Team Leader, is there a way to resolve this?” Long Yuehong asked eagerly, holding onto his last strand of hope. He knew that he couldn’t refuse the missions assigned by the brass. He only hoped that his team leader could teach him some practical skills so that he could confirm their relationship as soon as possible.

In any case, his team leader was a young woman. She should be able to grasp the mindsets of her own kind very well. Furthermore, she was smart.

Jiang Baimian thought about it seriously. “No. Even if I find a way to match the two of you together now, I’m afraid you will be more hurt when you return two to three months later when there’s no solid emotional foundation between the two of you.”

“Sigh...” Long Yuehong sighed.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian casually consoled him. “This might not be a bad thing.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little expectant, unsure what his team leader would say.

Upon seeing how serious Long Yuehong was, Jiang Baimian could only laugh dryly. “The next one might be better.”

At this moment, Bai Chen didn’t give Long Yuehong a chance to be sad and asked, “Team Leader, why are we going to Weed City?”

“To visit the Monks Conclave’s Glazed Pure Lands,” Shang Jianyao replied quickly.

The color in Long Yuehong’s face drained.

“What are you talking about?” Jiang Baimian explained angrily, “So this is the situation...”

She recounted the disappearance of an Old Task Force in Weed City and explained their mission.

“Isn’t this very dangerous?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question. “We have to pass by the Monk Wastelands, and we are dealing with an incident that caused an entire Old Task Force to disappear...”

He had deep reservations about the mechanical monk, Zen Master Jingfa. Long Yuehong was worried that he would become the fated one the next time he encountered Jingfa.

Furthermore, every mechanical monk had their own quirks and craziness. What if he encountered one that killed their target once they heard a sucky name?

The Monk Wastelands was rumored to be the place where the Monks Conclave’s Glazed Pure Lands was hidden. It gained its name because mechanical monks often roamed that area.

Upon hearing the Monk Wastelands being mentioned, Shang Jianyao's thoughts jumped. "I wonder if Zen Master Jingfa has explained the Buddhist Dharma to Qiao Chu..."

Jiang Baimian was amused. "Such a sinful man should be made a mechanical monk. Think about it. An eagle, a pack of hyenas, and a bunch of beasts surround a metal robot and try their best to get close and hump it. However, the robot doesn't mind at all. It sits on a rock and seriously chants the sutras in an electronic voice, preaching the Buddhist Dharma. Tsk, tsk..."

After fantasizing about it, Jiang Baimian retracted her thoughts in time and consoled Long Yuehong. "There's no need to worry. We will plan a route to bypass the Monk Wastelands and enter Weed City from another side. Although it will be a much longer journey, it's safer.

"When we reach Weed City, we will have the company's intelligence personnel working with us and a certain amount of resources to mobilize. It won't actually be that dangerous. Besides..."

Upon saying the word 'besides,' Jiang Baimian smiled. "This is an occasion that best suits Shang Jianyao's performance. His abilities are limited in a gunfight. In a relatively peaceful environment where people often interact with each other, he is almost invincible."

With that said, Jiang Baimian patted Shang Jianyao's shoulder. "Make plenty of friends when the time comes!"

Bai Chen listened attentively and subconsciously thought of the scene of Shang Jianyao crazily 'making friends' after entering Weed City.

This made her shiver for some reason.

Bai Chen was very worried about the appearance of an organization named Shang Jianyao Brotherhood in Weed City.

At this point, Bai Chen instinctively turned her head to look at Shang Jianyao and noticed that the fellow's eyes were bright and filled with spirit. Shang Jianyao also seemed eager to give it a try.

"Team Leader, let's set off today," Shang Jianyao suggested.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him. "Don't think about it. You still have to cooperate with the investigations for the next three days."

"Investigations?" Long Yuehong was a little confused.

Jiang Baimian then mentioned the Life Ritual parish and emphasized Shang Jianyao's contribution.

"Uncle Shen's Heartless disease was actually a result of this..." Long Yuehong finally realized that undercurrents were surging under the seemingly calm water surface during this period of time.

As he muttered to himself, he suddenly looked at Shang Jianyao. "When did you join a cult?"

"July," Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

"Why did you join them?" Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

Shang Jianyao raised his eyebrows. "It's fun. At the same time, I can leave clues for a future report."

"Then, why did you participate so many times? Wouldn't it have been fine if you reported it earlier?" Long Yuehong felt that something was amiss.

Shang Jianyao's expression turned solemn. "Because the food was delicious. Holy Communion was especially delicious."

There probably wouldn't be any free Holy Communion in the future.

"..." Long Yuehong's only reaction to this answer was a blank expression.

Jiang Baimian 'comforted' Shang Jianyao. "There must be many parishes in Weed City—some public and some secret. When the time comes, you can join as many as you want. You can freeload on as many Holy Communion instances as you want. I believe this won't be too difficult for you, right?"

"Team Leader, let's set off today," Shang Jianyao suggested again with abnormal sincerity.

Jiang Baimian couldn't be bothered to answer him. She turned her head and said to Bai Chen, "After reading the information, help me plan a few routes to Weed City."

She then said to Long Yuehong, "In the next few days, apart from enjoying yourself as much as possible and spending more time with your family, you have to be mentally and physically prepared."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong and Bai Chen loudly replied at the same time.

"Not bad; very spirited." Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction and said, "The special training will continue as usual. When we leave the company, the environment won't be

as nice as before. Oh, the order will also be changed. Those who perform well don't need to participate. For example, Bai Chen."

As she spoke, she looked at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao nodded solemnly.

Jiang Baimian's eyes darted around as if she were considering something. "I have to make more preparations for myself..."

Without giving Long Yuehong a chance to ask, she clapped her hands and said, "Alright, start reading the information."

...

At 9 p.m. the next day, in the dark Old Task Force room.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao—whose silhouette she couldn't even distinguish—and asked in concern, "How was it? Did anything go wrong with the investigation's questioning?"

"No." Shang Jianyao was very confident.

Jiang Baimian asked worriedly, "What did they say?"

"They said I was pleasant with my words," Shang Jianyao relayed.

"What else?" Jiang Baimian frowned slightly.

Shang Jianyao replied without stuttering, "They praised me for being spirited."

"T-this doesn't sound like anything good..." Jiang Baimian said doubtfully.

Shang Jianyao recalled and said, "At their request, I showed them my doctor's certificate. After that, they said that there's no problem. They also said that they would talk to me again if there's anything they need to know more about."

Jiang Baimian imagined the scene back then. "I'm glad that there's no problem." She exhaled helplessly.

She then stood up and said to Shang Jianyao, "I'm going next door."

She smiled and added, "This time, I might leave quietly, or I might not."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao didn't stop her.

In the darkness, Jiang Baimian easily walked to the door. She then turned around and deliberated over her words. "I wanted to say that people can ultimately only rely on themselves, but to say such words at a time like this... Heh heh, talk is cheap."

She fell silent for a moment. In an environment where she couldn't see her fingers or the other party, she gently and slowly said, "Actually, no one can survive on their own. When we were young, we mostly relied on our parents. When we grow up, we might rely on our relatives, spouses, friends, and children."

"The four of us can be considered companions who have experienced life and death together several times. In most cases, I believe we can be trusted. We can protect each other's sides and backs and charge forward together."

"It's not shameful to rely on others. You are also letting others rely on you. You are also protecting your companions. A fledgling bird will eventually leave its parents and soar into the blue sky with its companions."

Shang Jianyao couldn't see Jiang Baimian, but he could hear her words. He fell silent as his thoughts raced.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. "Haha, I accidentally ended up being too artistic with my words. In short, I just wanted to tell you: You have companions. Under no circumstances will you proceed alone."

The darkness became silent again, but Jiang Baimian quickly broke the silence. "Stop, don't speak. I'm afraid you'll spoil the mood."

She then smiled and said, "If you're scared, remember to shout for me. However, I might not be around."

Her voice trailed off, and she disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter 112: Setting Off Once Again

The Old Task Force's Room 14 returned to a frozen silence. Only the sound of Shang Jianyao's breathing could be heard.

Shang Jianyao had already experienced such a situation last time. However, Jiang Baimian had said that she would stay next door and not leave.

In the impenetrable darkness, Shang Jianyao seemed to have adapted quite a bit. He surprisingly didn't feel any fear.

He thought for a moment and left his seat. He circled around the corner of the table based on his memories and came to the relatively empty sofa area. He then slowly sat down, sat on the cold ground, and crossed his legs.

In the frozen darkness, Shang Jianyao maintained this posture. He raised his right hand and massaged his temples.

He quickly lowered his head and fell asleep sitting down.

Unable to maintain his balance, Shang Jianyao's body tilted to the side bit by bit until he leaned against the sofa, his head leaning against the armrest.

...

In the illusory sea that shimmered with light, Shang Jianyao saw the grotesque, dark-brown island again.

As long as he couldn't persist and awakened from his fear, his next entry definitely wouldn't be on the island but in the Sea of Origins to the side.

Shang Jianyao was already accustomed to his current environment. He quickly lowered his head and looked at his blurry reflection in the illusory waves.

He spoke in a deep voice. "The island is very dark, as is Room 14. There's no sound on the island other than mine, nor is there any sound in Room 14 other than mine. So?"

Shang Jianyao paused and answered his question. "Therefore, the island is Room 14."

Just as he said that, his eyes remained dark as he grabbed the edge of the island and flipped over.

As expected, his vision became pitch-black again. He also lost the detection of any sound in his ears.

Shang Jianyao sat down without hesitation. He sat on the cold ground and crossed his legs. This was the exact same posture he had held before he fell asleep.

The darkness and silent environment around him immediately felt familiar. He seemed capable of pointing out the single-seater to his right, as well as the coffee table, the recliner, the bench, and the short stools diagonally across him.

Two doors away, Jiang Baimian was waiting for Shang Jianyao to shout for help.

Shang Jianyao's mood instantly calmed down. Like the previous two nights, he thought about the various things he had recently encountered and guessed what kind of Holy Communion the other parishes had to offer.

This made him raise his right hand from time to time and wipe the corner of his mouth. He only shook his head in regret when he recalled that the Monks Conclave's Holy Communion had a high chance of being engine oil and batteries.

Time passed quickly.

Several times, Shang Jianyao wanted to stand up, sing loudly, or ask if there was anyone. However, he controlled himself. After all, Jiang Baimian was just two doors away.

After he controlled himself again and again without any other accidents happening, Shang Jianyao began to think nothing of the darkness and silence. They couldn't destroy him at all.

He even sang softly, appearing pleased and content with himself.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao genuinely felt sleepy. Therefore, he closed his eyes indifferently and conserved his energy.

He really fell asleep.

A beam of pure light suddenly shone, illuminating the area in front of Shang Jianyao a fiery red.

Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and saw the darkness around him quickly disperse. He heard the illusory sea's soft splashing sounds.

Large patches of dark-brown soil and jagged rocks appeared on the island.

The light then stabbed into his eyes, so piercing that he subconsciously raised his right hand to block them.

After closing his eyes and opening them again, Shang Jianyao saw the dazzling sunlight and the grayish-white ceiling. He then realized that he was leaning against the armchair's armrest and that he had been sleeping in a messy pose.

As Room 14 was illuminated and no longer met the preset conditions, his Inference Clowning failed.

Shang Jianyao then flipped his wrist and looked at his watch.

The needle hands showed that it was 6:30 a.m—this was the time when power to the street lamps was restored.

Shang Jianyao closed his eyes again. It was a mystery as to what he was trying to sense.

He then propped himself up on the armrest and turned to look at the door.

In just a few seconds, light footsteps approached. Jiang Baimian's clothes were wrinkled when she appeared at the door. As she rubbed her eyes, she looked at Shang Jianyao on the ground and curiously asked in amusement, "What are you doing?"

"Maintaining a uniform posture both in and out." Shang Jianyao spoke a truth that most people wouldn't understand.

Jiang Baimian was taken aback at first before she came to a realization. "Are you trying to face the fear in the Sea of Origins again? Did you defeat it?"

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and answered, "I guess so. Although it didn't admit defeat, it didn't appear again."

Jiang Baimian immediately became excited. "Then, what changes are there to your abilities?"

With that said, she quickly added, "You don't have to answer if it's inconvenient."

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, "There seems to be only a change in range this time. It's a little better than before, but not by much. When you were 12 to 13 meters away, I could discover your existence. I also felt like I could make your hands immobile."

"Hands Immobility... How wide was the range previously?" Jiang Baimian asked.

"Ten meters." Shang Jianyao didn't hide the truth.

"Then, it increased by about 30%... This is the first fear. When you defeat more fears and find your true self, your abilities might double, triple, or even quadruple in effectiveness." Jiang Baimian smiled thoughtfully. "So your perception range is the range of your abilities."

"It's based on the ability with the greatest range." Shang Jianyao pointed out the imprecision in Jiang Baimian's words.

Jiang Baimian asked curiously, "The other abilities' effective ranges are less than ten meters?"

"Inference Cloning was originally three meters, while Corny Person was five meters," replied Shang Jianyao seriously.

Jiang Baimian immediately felt a little embarrassed. "Stop, stop, stop. This is your secret. You can't tell me about them in such detail."

Shang Jianyao glanced at her and said in a deep but not low voice, "The four of us can be considered companions who have experienced life and death together several times."

In most cases, I believe we can trust each other. We can protect each other's flanks and backs and charge together.

"Stop, you broken record!" Jiang Baimian couldn't help but scold him jokingly.

These were the words she used to resolve Shang Jianyao's fear last night.

Without giving him a chance to think, Jiang Baimian quickly asked, "Since you've already defeated your fears, why aren't you getting up? Is it comfortable sitting cross-legged on the ground?"

Shang Jianyao sincerely replied, "Because my legs are numb."

"..." Jiang Baimian laughed. "Do you need my help?"

"No," Shang Jianyao replied casually.

Jiang Baimian was just about to say that he shouldn't put on a brave front when she saw Shang Jianyao exert strength with his hands, flip his body, and do a handstand.

He stood upside down...

Shang Jianyao then walked to the door with his hands as his feet.

"..." Jiang Baimian was speechless.

...

Another day passed.

Pangu Biology's parking lot on the surface, 9 a.m.

"Still the same old partner." Jiang Baimian pointed at the grayish-green jeep that had plenty of space. "It's already been repaired."

She swept her gaze across the excited Shang Jianyao, the quiet Bai Chen, and the depressed Long Yuehong and asked, "Have you read the mission plan? Any other questions about our route?"

"No!" Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen replied loudly. The latter was much less reserved than when she first joined the Old Task Force.

"No." Today, Long Yuehong lacked the usual gusto he usually had.

Jiang Baimian ignored him. She opened the trunk and pointed at the items inside. "We still have the same weapons as before. Ice Moss, United 202, Orange rifle, Berserker

assault rifle, and Tyrant grenade launcher. Yes, in order to make up for the lack of heavy firepower, I applied for a shoulder-bearing rocket launcher that's anti-armor. Its nickname is 'Death.'

"There's plenty of corresponding ammunition. In addition, there are also some commonly seen bullets.

"There's more food than we previously prepared. After we go to Moat Town, we have to rush to Weed City as soon as possible. It's best not to waste any time on the way. Although intelligence agents are constantly investigating the area, and it won't be a problem for them even without us, we still have to do our best. The urgency needed to save others is akin to the urgency needed to fight fire.

"Besides, it's almost winter. It's very difficult to find sufficient food in the wilderness..."

After briefing them about all kinds of matters, Jiang Baimian asked, "Any further questions?"

As Bai Chen and Long Yuehong shook their heads, Shang Jianyao took a step forward and asked, "When are we setting off?"

"...Now." Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth.

Just like before, they entered the jeep from their respective doors, and Jiang Baimian did the driving. After layers of inspection, they exited the heavy metal door and entered the Ashlands.

Unlike before, they had put on their sunglasses in advance, preventing them from being stung by the morning sunlight.

As her team members admired the surrounding scenery, Jiang Baimian quietly drove.

After leaving the company's territory, she suddenly turned the steering wheel and changed her route.

"Team Leader, are you going the wrong way?" Long Yuehong looked at the sun and confirmed the direction.

"No," Jiang Baimian replied with a smile.

Long Yuehong curiously stated, "But this is different from the mission plan."

Jiang Baimian smiled smugly. "That was to deceive the deputy minister and the others."

"Why?" Long Yuehong was becoming increasingly confused.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao through the rearview mirror. “The Life Ritual parish definitely has other members in the Ashlands. After all, they infiltrated the company. I’m worried that the believers lurking in the company will secretly obtain our mission plan and think of a way to inform their companions on the surface to set up an ambush and attack us.

“Therefore, I never planned on taking the route stated in the mission plan. Heh heh, my inquiries were to make it appear more realistic.”

In the passenger seat, Bai Chen fell into thought. “Team Leader, you’re actually still worried that the Life Ritual parish has members in the brass and that this mission is a trap?”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “There’s no harm in being prepared. It’s better to be prepared than not.”

Long Yuehong unconsciously looked at his team leader’s back in admiration. Shang Jianyao hummed a song as if he didn’t mind at all.

Under the bright sunlight, the jeep took another bend and continued driving through the wilderness.

...

Pangu Biology, in an empty room.

Wearing a cap, Yue Qifan—who had the Memory Snippet Erasure ability—quietly opened the door and entered.

There were no lights here, but it was not dark. This was because there were small LCD screens on the surrounding walls. They were connected and displayed the situation on different floors and areas.

As the colors changed, Yue Qifan looked down at the machine that occupied at least one-third of the space, bowed his head, and shouted, “Sir.”

An emotionless electronic voice sounded through the loudspeaker. “Tell the unexposed members not to do anything for the next three months.”

“Yes, Sir,” Yue Qifan replied without hesitation.

He then looked up. He suddenly saw the countless LCD screens on the surrounding walls jump, revealing his figure.

This included him in a cap; him making contact with Xiong Ming; him taking the elevator to the 495th floor; him facing Shang Jianyao; him humming a song and pretending to be normal; him fleeing in a hurry; him sneaking somewhere and making a call...

Yue Qifan's pupils suddenly dilated, and he tensed up as if he was about to explode. He actually forgot to retort.

A few seconds later, many images of Shang Jianyao appeared on the LCD screens.

The images included Shang Jianyao experimenting with his abilities, him making faces at the camera, him using a flashlight to illuminate the area above, him chatting with Xiong Ming in a corner, him making indecent gestures, and him walking in the corridor upside down...

"Sir..." Yue Qifan's scalp tingled as he shouted for the Doctor of the Church.

The emotionless, cold voice sounded again and echoed in the room. "I told you; I've always been watching you."

(End of Volume—Unfinished)

Chapter 113: Ashlands Ecosystem

The wilderness looked more dead compared to the time when the Old Task Force had just returned from Qifeng Town. It was as if winter had arrived overnight, replacing late autumn.

"Is it going to snow soon?" Long Yuehong looked at the leaden sky outside the window and guessed in anticipation. He had only seen snow in textbooks and slides.

As she drove, Jiang Baimian casually replied, "It should have snowed by this time in past years."

In the passenger seat, Bai Chen glanced at the rearview mirror and said, "It might have snowed several times north of the swamp."

The northernmost part of the Blackmarsh Wilderness was connected to an icy plain. It was a world that was freezing cold.

Since the Blackmarsh Wilderness was large, the weather in the area south of the swamp was not as extreme. It was the type that had four distinct seasons.

Long Yuehong retracted his gaze and sighed with emotion. "I really want to see what it means to be covered in white."

Shang Jianyao—who was sitting upright—immediately replied, "That's not auspicious."

What can you expect from a hog but a grunt? Although Long Yuehong knew this very well, he couldn't help but ask, "Why?"

He was very sensitive to topics like auspicious, bad luck, and fate.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. "Think about it. How can it be auspicious when everything on the ground is covered in snow and only a white expanse remains?"

"That's true..." Long Yuehong had to admit that Shang Jianyao made sense.

Upon hearing their conversation, Jiang Baimian added, "Every winter, countless wilderness nomads freeze to death. Snow is a disaster for them, right, Bai Chen?"

"Yes." Bai Chen tugged at the gray scarf around her neck. "Many settlements have been in disrepair for years. It's easy for collapses to happen when the snow gets heavy. Many people don't have enough clothes, much less be able to keep warm."

Long Yuehong fell silent for a while before sighing. "The company is still the best."

In any case, the employees had winter clothes and real hot water bags.

At a higher rank, one would have a higher energy allocation quota. From time to time, one could also turn on a heater for an hour or two—if they could buy it or trade for it.

At the mention of Pangu Biology, Long Yuehong suddenly thought of something and asked in fear, "Team Leader, do you think the Life Ritual cultists on the surface will ambush us in Moat Town if our mission plan was really leaked and seen by the Life Ritual parish spies?"

The route could be changed, but their destination could not be changed!

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, Shang Jianyao's smile had already become dazzling. "We can send bait over to test out the situation in such events."

He patted Long Yuehong on the shoulder and said, "I'll leave this glorious mission to you."

"Why me?" Although Long Yuehong was unwilling to admit it, he knew that he was the weakest in the team. He couldn't shoulder the responsibility of being bait.

On the one hand, it was really dangerous, and he was very scared. On the other hand, he felt that his mental fortitude was not at his team leader and Bai Chen's level. It was very easy for him to screw up the mission of being bait.

Long Yuehong categorized the mental fortitudes of the Old Task Force members into four grades. He was in the lowest grade—the fourth grade. The grade above him was

empty. Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen simultaneously occupied the second grade. Shang Jianyao enjoyed a grade by himself.

Shang Jianyao 'solemnly' explained, "Because you look like obvious bait."

"..." Long Yuehong was momentarily at a loss for words.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian—who was driving—scolded Shang Jianyao jokingly. "Don't scare him!"

She then said to Long Yuehong, "I'll ask you a question: Does the company know where Moat Town is?"

"No," Long Yuehong subconsciously replied before coming to a realization. "I see..."

Only then did he remember that one of the main reasons Moat Town had been able to survive relatively peacefully since the Old World was destroyed was that its location was hidden, making it difficult for outsiders to find it.

When Jiang Baimian reported this matter, she consciously concealed Moat Town's exact situation and only said that she had encountered their hunting team in the wilderness.

After figuring it out, Long Yuehong blushed with shame. "I actually forgot about that."

"You are mainly prone to panic when you encounter a situation that might bring danger. Remember to keep calm and think more about things in the future." Jiang Baimian lectured him before consoling him. "However, it's already pretty good for you to think that the Life Ritual parishioners outside the company might ambush us at our designated destination."

Long Yuehong's confidence increased after being praised. His train of thought changed as he excitedly said, "Therefore, the possible danger isn't in Moat Town but Weed City?"

The Old Task Force's two designated destinations were Moat Town and Weed City.

Compared to Moat Town, Weed City was considered a relatively famous city between the territories of Pangu Biology, First City, and the White Knights. It was well known by many Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads, so there was no problem finding it.

Before Jiang Baimian could speak, Shang Jianyao also excitedly said to Long Yuehong, "You're in good shape. Keep it up!"

I'm in good shape... Wait, why am I excited? This is such a serious and dangerous matter! Long Yuehong suddenly wanted to slap himself in the face.

“Why are you so excited?” Jiang Baimian reprimanded Shang Jianyao again before saying to Long Yuehong, “Not bad, not bad. It’s good that you can react so quickly. For the rest of the journey, we have to think about how we can enter Weed City without exposing ourselves. How can we determine if there’s anything wrong with the company’s intelligence personnel there? Heh heh, there’s no rush. It’s still early. Let’s settle Moat Town first.”

“Yes, Team Leader,” Long Yuehong replied loudly. He felt like he was slowly transforming into a trustworthy team member.

After driving for a while, Bai Chen looked outside for a long time and frowned. “There are many traces of animal migration.”

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong realized that many footprints were concentrated in an area on the gray, yellow, and withered wilderness. It was as if they had trampled a path that led north and south.

“The weather this year is abnormal. Many monsters are migrating, and so are the animals.” Jiang Baimian recalled the information and news she had seen and heard. Her expression showed signs of emotion. “For many wilderness nomads, this winter will be a tough one.”

Just as she said that, a flock of strange birds flew across the sky. They were much larger than crows, and their bodies were covered in black feathers. Their skulls were exposed and stained with filth.

The flock of birds flew lower and lower before quickly landing in a nearby swamp. During this process, they didn’t make a sound. They were so quiet that it felt like they didn’t exist.

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen sighed and said, “Harbingers of Death... It seems like there are many corpses over there.”

“Harbingers of Death? Is that a kind of crow?” Long Yuehong inquired curiously. He remembered that the textbooks had mentioned that many places in the Old World viewed crows as ominous and called them Harbingers of Death.

Bai Chen retracted her gaze and explained, “This is a type of mutated creature. We call them Harbingers of Death or Bone Crows. They only eat corpses. Death will definitely exist wherever they gather.”

The driving Jiang Baimian nodded and added, “Such mutated crows are very magical. They can actually live perfectly fine despite having their skulls exposed. They aren’t aggressive toward living creatures, but you have to be careful if you encounter them. They have a proboscis that extends out of their mouths like that of a fly, which can spit

out digestive fluids. These digestive fluids are very dangerous. It can quickly melt a corpse to aid the Bone Crows' feeding.

"Since this digestive liquid can melt corpses, I believe the effects won't be too different when used on living people."

Long Yuehong imagined the scene and gasped.

"Then, here's the problem," Shang Jianyao said excitedly. "How's the quality of this crow meat? What does it taste like when roasted?"

Jiang Baimian turned her head and glared at him. "This kind of crow has mutated. Coupled with the food they eat and their living environment, I wonder how many toxins and pathogens they carry."

After she said that, Bai Chen suddenly said, "The meat is very good."

Jiang Baimian held the steering wheel with one hand and touched her ear with the other. "You've eaten them before?"

"Yes, it was during a winter like this one. There wasn't enough food. Compared to humans, I think it's more acceptable to eat Bone Crows..." Bai Chen spoke in a tone of reminiscence. "The meat was surprisingly good. Their eggs were the best eggs I've ever eaten..."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong raised their hands at the same time and wiped the corners of their mouths.

After doing this, Long Yuehong came to a realization and felt ashamed.

Shang Jianyao turned his head and said to him seriously, "I controlled you with Inference Clowning, so you did the same thing as me."

"Really?" Long Yuehong was enlightened and horrified.

"No," Shang Jianyao replied with a smile.

Jiang Baimian ignored their conversation and asked Bai Chen curiously, "Were you not poisoned or infected with a disease?"

"The poisoning might not have been obvious, but it was still fine." Bai Chen subconsciously looked out the window. "However, more than ten to twenty of us were sick, and almost half of us died. Their corpses also raised more Bone Crows..."

The corners of her mouth curled up slightly with a hint of mockery that was directed at an unknown entity.

“In the Ashlands, sometimes we can only choose the lesser of two evils.” Jiang Baimian sighed sincerely.

During this exchange, the grayish-green jeep sped through the wilderness. Before the sky turned dark, it burrowed into the swamp and arrived at Moat Town after making many turns.

As they already knew and had made transactions with each other, they were trustworthy people. Therefore, after Bai Chen appeared, the guards directly let them into the town and got them to stop the car in its usual spot—outside a wooden shed near the corner of the perimeter walls.

Jiang Baimian had just alighted when she saw a familiar face.

“Dog.” She smiled and greeted him.

The town guard—whose nickname was Dog—blushed and muttered, “I-I’m Ding Ce...”

Bai Chen didn’t give Dog a chance to continue and directly asked, “Where’s Mayor Tian?”

Ding Ce’s expression immediately became sad. “T-the mayor has fallen ill. H-he’s not going to make it.”

Chapter 114: Biological Agent

Upon hearing Ding Ce’s reply, Bai Chen felt like she had been struck by a stick. Her body leaned back slightly, and her head buzzed. After a few seconds, she came to her senses and anxiously asked, “What disease is it?”

Ding Ce answered with a disconsolate look. “The doctor said that it’s an old problem with his lungs. There’s also a trachea problem. Winter has always been a problem.”

At this moment, Bai Chen felt the cold night wind blow at her face, stinging her with needle-like pain. She quickly turned her head to look at Jiang Baimian and shouted emotionally, “Team Leader...”

Sensing Bai Chen’s plea, Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said to Ding Ce, “Can you bring us to Mayor Tian? We have some medicine that might be useful.”

Under normal circumstances, Ding Ce definitely wouldn’t agree directly. But at this juncture, nothing could be worse than not doing a thing. There might still be some hope if they tried something.

“Alright.” He nodded hard.

Jiang Baimian didn't waste her breath. She walked to the back of the jeep and picked up a milky-white box with a red cross labeled on it.

This was the Old Task Force's first-aid kit.

It was an official mission this time, not a field training session. Therefore, they did not only bring along the usual drugs, cleansing tablets, and mosquito repellent like last time.

Clunk!

Jiang Baimian closed the trunk and turned to Ding Ce. "Let's go."

Upon seeing the professionalism of this beautiful woman, Ding Ce became a little more confident and quickly led the way.

The five of them first passed through the mud huts, brick houses, and the haphazardly pitched tents. Under watchful, numb, envious, curious, and ambiguous gazes, they arrived near the flag-raising platform.

Upon seeing that the surroundings had finally quietened down, Bai Chen rushed to Ding Ce's side and asked in concern, "When did Mayor Tian fall ill?"

Under the darkening sky, Ding Ce quickly walked forward and replied after some recalling. "It's been more than ten days. In the past, the mayor would fall ill once or twice in the winter, but nothing serious happened. Who knew that it would worsen so badly this time?"

"The doctor prescribed him medicine and gave him an injection, but it was useless. He has been in a coma for the past few days, and he rarely wakes up. T-the doctor said that he might not survive the night..."

As he spoke, the 1.7-meter-tall young man—who was considered tall among wilderness nomads—began to sob.

He raised his left arm and roughly wiped his eyes with his elbow area before saying, "Actually, a few days ago, the doctor said that the mayor might not make it, but he still managed to survive until now. T-the doctor said that his will to live is very, very strong..."

Ding Ce sniffed and couldn't continue.

Bai Chen pursed her lips tightly, and her eyes were slightly moist.

As they spoke, they arrived at the deepest part of Moat Town and turned into the building on the left.

In the dim corridor, Jiang Baimian deliberately found a topic to lighten the mood. “You have a doctor here?”

This was a ‘luxury good’ in a wilderness nomad settlement.

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian’s question, Ding Ce replied in detail, “We’ve always had one. The mayor said that there were several doctors in the beginning. Later, when the children began studying, they would choose the ones with the best grades and learn medicine from them. This is our tradition.”

At this point, Ding Ce was a little sad. “But we didn’t have any medicine. The mayor said that it was fine in the early years as we could search the city ruins. Although those medicines were long past their expiry dates and had limited efficacy, it was better than nothing. Now, we can only obtain them from transactions. Only large factions can produce these.

“Yes... The doctors also found some books from the city ruins. According to them, they gathered different parts of plants and animals from the wilderness. They then combined them to make herbal concoctions. Some of them are quite effective!”

By this moment, the five of them had already arrived at the room at the end of the second floor.

Two town guards were guarding the door.

Ding Ce didn’t even introduce them and directly said, “They have medicine!”

“Bai Chen...” One of the town guards recognized Bai Chen and quickly opened the door. “Go in. Go on in.”

He then added, “When the mayor was in a coma these few days, he would occasionally call out for Bai.”

Bai Chen’s eyes reddened as she rushed in first.

Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes to control himself and not have a brain spasm. Then, she followed Bai Chen into the room.

The first thing she saw was a dim yellow light bulb hanging from the ceiling. It illuminated the area quite brightly.

In the innermost part of the room was a rather old, dark-red wooden bed. Tian Erhe lay on it, covered by a thick blanket and a military-green coat. His eyes were tightly shut.

His face was thin, looking as if he was only skin and bones. His grizzled hair was sparse and messy.

At this moment, Tian Erhe's breathing sounded like it was blocked by thick phlegm. It seemed strenuous for him to breathe. This made him look like he would stop breathing the very next moment.

Beside Tian Erhe was an iron-black stove that emitted warmth.

Perhaps it was because of Tian Erhe's worsening condition, the people with authority in town had already gathered here in the room.

They were mainly men in their thirties. A few capable young men and a few elders in their fifties and sixties filled the room.

Among them, there were only three women—two elderly and one middle-aged.

"Boss, they said they have medicine," Ding Ce eagerly said to a 35-year-old man.

This man was the captain of Moat Town's town guard, and he was also the next person in line for town mayor—personally chosen by Tian Erhe after he fell ill. He had ordinary looks and wore a glum expression. He wore a gray cotton coat, and his skin was very rough.

"Li Zhengfei." The man took two steps forward and stretched out his hand toward Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian gently shook his hand and briefly introduced herself and the Old Task Force members.

"What medicine do you have?" Li Zhengfei questioned bluntly without any small talk.

Jiang Baimian frankly said, "We don't have any special medicine to treat lung and tracheal diseases, but we brought some biological agents with us that can allow Mayor Tian to survive this hurdle and regain consciousness. As long as he can last two more days, there's hope for treatment."

Li Zhengfei could vaguely guess what Jiang Baimian's last sentence meant. He quickly turned his head to look at an old woman with short, neat, and white hair.

She was the best doctor in town.

The old woman nodded, indicating that she could give it a try. She was already out of options.

"Please give it a try." Li Zhengfei immediately made a decision. In this regard, he was far bolder than his appearance.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and walked to Tian Erhe's bed with the first-aid kit. She sat down, opened the box, and took out a syringe, a needle, and a brown, thumb-sized glass bottle. She then skillfully completed the assembly and drew the liquid inside the small bottle into the syringe.

After expelling the gases, Jiang Baimian got Bai Chen to come over and help Tian Erhe roll up his sleeves.

Jiang Baimian quickly found the corresponding vein and cleanly inserted the needle.

After pushing the tube of liquid in bit by bit, Jiang Baimian disinfected the needle and packed the first-aid kit. She instructed Bai Chen to help Tian Erhe up and sit up on the bed.

During this process, Bai Chen did not forget to stuff Tian Erhe's pillow behind his waist.

Strangely enough, Tian Erhe's heart-wrenching breathing gradually calmed down.

He quickly coughed. With Bai Chen's help, he turned his body and spat into the spittoon beside him.

After a while, Tian Erhe finally opened his eyes.

His gaze gradually focused as he saw who was in front of him.

"Bai, lass..." Tian Erhe weakly shouted.

Bai Chen quickly replied, "It's me."

Tian Erhe slowly smiled and seemed to relax. "You're finally back."

Bai Chen burst into tears, unable to hold it in any longer. She wanted to say something, but her voice was choking from grief.

Tian Erhe regained his senses, and he swept his gaze over Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Li Zhengfei. He then nodded at the guests before patting the edge of the bed. "Zhengfei, come over and sit here."

Li Zhengfei circled around Jiang Baimian like an obedient child and walked to Tian Erhe's side.

The wrinkles on Tian Erhe's face smoothed out bit by bit. "I still remember that you were the naughtiest and most mischievous child in your group. Who knew that I would now entrust M-Moat Town to you?"

"Mayor..." Li Zhengfei—who was almost middle-aged—sniffled.

Tian Erhe scolded jokingly, "Why are you crying? I'm already in my seventies. I've lived long enough. My wife and children are waiting for me down below."

He took a deep breath and continued, "The matter I previously told you about seems to have an answer."

As he spoke, Tian Erhe looked at Jiang Baimian and asked in anticipation, "How was it?"

Jiang Baimian deliberated over her words and first introduced herself. "We are from Pangu Biology."

"Pangu Biology?" Li Zhengfei repeated, losing his composure a little.

The expressions of the men and women around them changed to a certain extent. Some were shocked, some were alarmed, some were fearful, some were terrified, and some were apprehensive.

Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. "In the Ashlands, our company does have a bad reputation, but please believe that all of our experimental volunteers do so willingly. We prefer to tempt them with benefits, not force them. You can think about it. Recall the number of large factions you know which are more trustworthy than our company?"

After a moment of silence, someone behind them muttered, "Some people say that Pangu Biology is the true culprit behind the Old World's destruction..."

Jiang Baimian's expression slightly stiffened as she quickly replied, "Then, shouldn't you be more obedient towards us? Isn't a faction that can destroy the Old World worth joining?"

After another bout of silence, Tian Erhe coughed and said, "What do you propose?"

Jiang Baimian smiled. "We plan on signing a friendly partnership with you."

Chapter 115: Trick to Negotiations

Tian Erhe was not confused by the fancy name as he asked weakly, "What exactly does it entail?"

Jiang Baimian had already thought of the way to phrase it and answered fluently, "To put it simply, you have to provide the company with the intelligence and books you have obtained. At the same time, some transactions that are inconvenient for the company to carry out will be relegated to you."

“In addition, you can’t refuse if a member of the company needs a place to stay or a certain level of help. What you can obtain is: Better weapons, more bullets, wider knowledge, high-production seeds, cheaper cotton, cloth, drugs, and salt...”

Upon hearing the latter part of the explanation, everyone in Moat Town—including Li Zhengfei—was moved.

For a settlement that could barely be self-sufficient, be it weapons, bullets, cotton, cloth, drugs, or salt, they were items they were lacking. They worried every day about where they could trade for such items.

In the past, they mainly relied on excavating city ruins to obtain them. However, after so many years, countless Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads had come and gone. They had long emptied the necessities in the relatively safer ruins.

This compelled Moat Town’s residents to explore more dangerous places or transact with other settlements. Moat Town was hidden, and only a few people they trusted knew how to reach it. The number of transactions they could complete was inevitably limited.

“Acceptable...” Tian Erhe—who was lying on the bed—looked at Jiang Baimian and nodded gently. “What else?”

Jiang Baimian said seriously, “The company will also send an armed team of more than 20 people to be stationed here to help you train the town guards and make them stronger.”

Moat Town residents’ expressions changed at the same time. Some were alarmed, some were solemn, and some were vigilant.

To them, providing intelligence, helping in transactions, or providing shelter didn’t affect their core interests. However, having a fully-armed team camp in Moat Town meant that they had lost their autonomy.

This was unacceptable to many people.

Before Li Zhengfei could say a word, Jiang Baimian smiled and added, “I’ve already submitted Moat Town’s location to the company.”

After dropping the ‘bomb,’ she scanned the faces of the other people in Moat Town one after another.

None of them dared to look her in the eye as they lowered their heads one after another.

They secretly looked at Bai Chen with resentment, blaming her for bringing Pangu Biology to Moat Town so easily. She had failed to live up to the mayor’s trust.

This resulted in them having no room for negotiation. An agreement was fine, but they would be forced to agree even if they didn't want to.

How could a large faction not be able to overrun a small settlement?

Long Yuehong—who was beside her—was a little confused because he remembered that his team leader had promised Bai Chen not to tell the company about Moat Town in advance. The report she had submitted had indeed been vague about this.

Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao and realized that his mouth was moving slightly as he silently uttered a word.

As a person who couldn't lip-read, Long Yuehong could only guess what Shang Jianyao was saying based on his own imagination.

Shang Jianyao was likely saying: "Liar."

Tian Erhe fell silent for a while before coughing violently. "It's not really unacceptable."

"Yeah..." Li Zhengfei slowly exhaled.

The others' expressions returned to normal one after another as they asked, "Where will they stay when the time comes? There aren't many rooms in these buildings. We can't make everyone empty their rooms, right?"

"Will they bring their own food, or do we have to provide them with food? Will we be compensated?"

...

Long Yuehong was surprised by these questions, and he was confounded by the current situation.

They were clearly discussing the town's survival, so why did they suddenly talk about such trivial and petty matters? Even if they were forced to agree and could only accept it, there were still many important questions that needed to be discussed and confirmed!

After the cacophony died down, Tian Erhe sighed and said, "In any case, I don't have long to live. When the time comes, empty this room, and it'll be the meeting room for Pangu Biology..."

"Mayor, you'll be fine. Pangu Biology has very good doctors." Bai Chen anxiously consoled Tian Erhe.

Tian Erhe smiled and said, "How can humans not die?"

“A mechanical monk can...” Shang Jianyao replied.

Jiang Baimian then glared at him, and Shang Jianyao silently shut his mouth.

Tian Erhe was unaffected as he looked at the Moat Town residents in the room. “What else do you guys have in mind?”

Since the mayor had already made a promise, and their own interests didn't seem to be affected, the others didn't harp on this question. They shook their heads one after another to indicate that they didn't.

Tian Erhe looked at Jiang Baimian and hesitated. “What's your company's attitude toward those people in the square?”

He was referring to the large number of residents in the middle and lower echelons of Moat Town. Most of them were 'outsiders.'

Jiang Baimian replied without hesitation, “To the company, everyone is a precious resource. They won't give them up easily.”

She saw many people in the room reveal looks of disdain and dissatisfaction, and she smiled. “The company will also allocate a few spots every year to reward those who have made great contributions or have outstanding talent. They will be made official employees of the company and receive the corresponding treatment. Just like us.”

Upon seeing these clean and glamorous outsiders, the residents of Moat Town present clearly reeled in excitement.

They felt that those spots were prepared for them.

How could ordinary townsfolk have the opportunity to make great contributions?

As for how good being an official employee of Pangu Biology was, they couldn't imagine it for the time being. They could only intuitively tell the difference by looking at Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and company.

“That's good, that's good...” Tian Erhe heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. His body seemed to deflate a little. “Is there anything else?”

“That's about it.” Jiang Baimian did not agitate the residents of Moat Town any further. “If you're willing, we can also send people to help you design a new management system to increase your labor efficiency and prevent anyone from being lazy.”

She deliberately focused the matter on how to manage the other townsfolk.

Upon seeing that no one had any objections, Tian Erhe said with some difficulty, "Then, it's settled. Zhengfei, what do you think?"

Li Zhengfei thought for a few seconds and replied, "No problem with me."

Upon hearing this and not wanting any delays to cause any hitches, Jiang Baimian immediately turned her head and said to Long Yuehong, "You and Shang Jianyao are to bring the radio transceiver over."

She did not directly instruct Shang Jianyao because she was worried that this certified mental patient would say something in response. That was clearly not suitable for such a situation.

"Alright." Long Yuehong was very enthusiastic when it came to him showcasing his usefulness.

After leaving the building with Shang Jianyao, he looked around and lowered his voice. "Team Leader said that she had already informed the company of their location. Was she lying to them?"

This allowed her to gain the upper hand in the negotiations!

"What else do you think it would be? To lie to you?" Shang Jianyao asked in response.

Long Yuehong knew that he had guessed correctly and happily retorted, "That's not impossible."

"You wouldn't have realized it if she wanted to lie to you." Shang Jianyao glanced at his companion.

"...That's true." Long Yuehong couldn't deny it.

...

In Tian Erhe's room, after watching Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong leave, Li Zhengfei probed, "Shall we gather everyone and announce this matter?"

Tian Erhe glanced at him and coughed. "There's no need. It's fine as long as you agree. It won't be too late to announce it when Pangu Biology's team arrives."

"That's right," Jiang Baimian echoed. She was worried that an accident would happen.

Although the conditions set by Pangu Biology wouldn't cause any real harm to the townsfolk in Moat Town's middle and lower echelons and would instead benefit them greatly, such promises would only lead to suspicion before they were fulfilled.

Furthermore, huge changes would definitely cause one's heart to waver and result in instability.

In such a situation, people were very sensitive and prone to irrational behavior. If a few more ambitious or more extreme people took the lead, the situation would often spiral out of control.

When Pangu Biology's team entered the city, everyone definitely wouldn't dare to have any temporary 'opinions' under the pressure of immense firepower. They would be able to witness the promises being fulfilled calmly. Lives would slowly improve, allowing them to accept the matter sincerely.

Tian Erhe and Jiang Baimian's words made many of the townsfolk in the room feel completely at ease. They felt that their status wouldn't be moved and that they wouldn't be on the same level as the people in the square.

Before long, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong brought the radio transceiver up.

Jiang Baimian then handwrote the telegram and showed it to everyone.

The content mainly indicated that Moat Town had already agreed to sign a friendly partnership and that the company could send people over.

At the end of the telegram, Jiang Baimian described Tian Erhe's condition and got the company to send a doctor with the corresponding drugs or equipment with them.

No one had any objections to this telegram.

When she codified the text, Jiang Baimian secretly added two lines. They were the entrance to Moat Town and the secret countersign they had agreed on.

After she was done, she quickly received a reply.

The reply was very simple. There were only two words: "Roger that."

Tian Erhe watched the entire process and instructed the townsfolk in the room, "Go back and rest. Leave Zhengfei here to accompany me."

After everyone left, Bai Chen said to Tian Erhe, "Mayor, do you want to eat something and have some sleep? The company's personnel might not arrive until tomorrow afternoon or evening."

Tian Erhe shook his head and smiled. "Not for the time being. The injection you gave me was really effective. I'm not sleepy at all. Lass, we've known each other for many years. How about calling me Grandpa?"

Without waiting for Bai Chen's response, he deliberately wore a pitiful look and coughed a few times. "Look, none of my grandchildren are left..."

Bai Chen pursed her lips and said softly, "Grandpa."

"Haha." Tian Erhe laughed and said to Bai Chen and the others, "Tell Zhengfei and me about Pangu Biology."

Chapter 116: Morning

Upon seeing that the room had been emptied again, Jiang Baimian walked to a wooden chair and smiled.

"From the name of our company, you can tell that our company does biotech research. Biology and medicine have always been closely related, so we are relatively strong in the corresponding field."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian had already picked up the wooden chair and walked to Tian Erhe's bed.

During this process, her gaze casually swept past Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, Li Zhengfei, the radio transceiver, and the window on the other side of the bed.

She had originally planned on letting Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong return to the jeep and guard the Old Task Force's most valuable assets, as well as the backup batteries and the large amount of food inside. However, she quickly gave up on the idea.

It is better not to separate the Old Task Force's members in this night that is likely to have turbulent undercurrents. In any case, the company will make up for the lost car and the stolen items...

The most important people now are Mayor Tian and Li Zhengfei. The most important item is this radio transceiver that maintains communications with the company. With them here, there's no need to send anyone to the jeep...

If anything really happens, it won't be easy to run. We'd be easily surrounded, and scaling the wall won't be easy... Behind this room is the perimeter wall. We can see the nearby fields. When the time comes, if we can't hold ground, it'll be easy for us to break out of the siege by jumping through the window...

It won't be difficult for us to last until the company's people rush over if we carry out guerrilla warfare there... Yes, the pistol and the corresponding bullets are with me... Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced, having already considered the worst-case scenario.

Jiang Baimian then placed the chair by the bed and sat down. She introduced Pangu Biology to Tian Erhe, Li Zhengfei, and the two town guards in the room. She focused on the treatment that official employees received and the other vassal forces' situations.

Of course, before Moat Town was officially accepted by Pangu Biology, there were certain things that couldn't be said—including the underground building's existence and the company's entrance.

Among them, Jiang Baimian deliberately skipped the topic of genetic enhancement and other topics. She knew that many people in the Ashlands hated technology that they believed seriously went against nature and only brought about disaster. Furthermore, she couldn't be sure if Tian Erhe and Li Zhengfei had such beliefs.

Although the name 'Pangu Biology' easily made people associate it with such matters, Jiang Baimian was not stupid enough to take the initiative to raise sensitive topics if the other party had no intentions of delving into the matter.

Tian Erhe's mental state was clearly not as good as he claimed. After listening for a while, he would rest his eyes by closing them or sleep for a while. Li Zhengfei and Bai Chen originally wanted everyone to leave this room and let the mayor have a good rest, but Tian Erhe would always wake up quickly and stop them.

As their chat continued intermittently, the sky outside the window gradually lit up with a faint glow.

Morning arrived.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that they had held through the most dangerous period.

She did not rest the entire night. She only left her chair from time to time to stretch her body. However, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen took turns sleeping to maintain their energy.

Jiang Baimian was just about to make her team members get breakfast when she suddenly heard the radio transmitter sound out.

"A telegram..." Jiang Baimian explained to Tian Erhe and Li Zhengfei before walking over.

Under everyone's expectant gazes, she quickly translated the content.

She raised her eyebrows and said, "The company personnel are at the swamp's entrance."

"That fast?" Long Yuehong questioned on behalf of everyone.

According to normal procedures, the company should have only just started deploying the manpower and preparing the medicine. This would take about an hour.

If nothing happened along the way and everything went smoothly, the team they sent should arrive in the evening or slightly earlier.

They were a full day early compared to their expectations.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "It's not rare for an army to fast march at night. Besides, the road conditions between the company and Moat Town are relatively good."

She didn't say that at least half the journey took place in the company's territory. Many combat teams in the Security Department had long figured out the situation in that area. They wouldn't fall into any pits, even with their eyes closed.

Of course, it was indeed easy for problems to arise when traveling at night. After all, one's vision would be limited. However, humans had no choice at times. The situation forced by the environment was definitely not empty words.

Due to this, the higher-ups of Pangu Biology's Security Department consciously added night training to the various combat platoons and companies.

This was the difference between a regular army and wilderness bandits.

Bai Chen voiced her guess when she saw that Tian Erhe and Li Zhengfei still looked surprised. "Could there be a team nearby?"

Jiang Baimian shook her head. "I emphasized that a doctor, drugs, and equipment are needed. The teams out in the field are unlikely to be equipped with that."

At this point, she smiled at Tian Erhe and Li Zhengfei. "I'll let you guess the distance between the company and here."

The distance was how long it took for a team to fast march at night.

"That's good too. I can be at ease the earlier they arrive." Tian Erhe abandoned his worries and exhaled with a smile. He couldn't help but cough a few more times.

Bai Chen patted his back worriedly.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and said, "Let me usher them in. The route into town is winding. People who come here for the first time will definitely get lost."

"Alright." Tian Erhe didn't find anything wrong with that.

Li Zhengfei thought for a moment and spoke to 'Dog' Ding Ce, who was guarding the room. "Ce, go with her."

As he spoke, his gaze was solemn, and his head nodded slightly.

Ding Ce immediately understood what his boss meant. If he discovered something amiss along the way, he had to inform the people in town, even if he had to risk his lives.

"Yes, Boss!" Ding Ce's blood boiled, and he puffed up his chest. He was a little scared, but he felt that it was worth it.

Jiang Baimian did not refuse and said to Long Yuehong, "You're with me."

Compared to ushering the company personnel, staying here was clearly more dangerous. Therefore, Jiang Baimian got Long Yuehong to follow her.

When the time came, Shang Jianyao—who was 'good at making friends'—and Bai Chen, who was familiar with the environment, had a higher chance of survival if the situation in town suddenly changed.

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong replied louder than Ding Ce. This was a habit.

After Jiang Baimian and the others left, Bai Chen said to Tian Erhe, "You should be at ease now, right? Sleep a little longer. They will take some time."

She sounded like she was comforting a child.

"How can I truly be at ease until they enter the town?" Tian Erhe shook his head stubbornly.

He looked at Bai Chen and coughed. "I always wanted to ask you about this scarf you keep wearing."

There was a stove in the room, so the temperature was not that low.

Bai Chen's expression slightly changed before she smiled bitterly. "Something bad..."

Tian Erhe didn't ask any further. He half-closed his eyes as if he couldn't hold on any longer and needed to rest.

Upon seeing this, Li Zhengfei cast his gaze at Shang Jianyao as if he wanted to make small talk to pass the time. This might allow him to obtain more information.

However, Shang Jianyao used his finger to zip his mouth and whimpered.

“Huh?” Li Zhengfei was confused.

Bai Chen tried to guess Shang Jianyao’s intentions and explained, “He means that it’s inconvenient for him to speak.”

He might be afraid that his brain will spasm and ruin this slightly sad and solemn atmosphere... Bai Chen finished the rest of her sentence inwardly.

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily, indicating that it was indeed so.

Upon seeing that her guess had been confirmed, Bai Chen’s gaze at Shang Jianyao softened significantly.

She didn’t expect that this teammate with a mental problem had silently worked so hard and made such a huge sacrifice.

However, Bai Chen inexplicably felt that Shang Jianyao’s situation seemed a little worse than before.

Li Zhengfei couldn’t understand why Shang Jianyao couldn’t speak. He could only think that this was a more tactful way of refusing to reveal more information. He had no choice but to turn to look at Bai Chen, but Bai Chen got busy.

She cleaned up the spittoon, opened the door for ventilation, and cleaned up the room.

After an unknown period of time, Tian Erhe woke up. He turned his head and listened for a while before weakly asking, “What’s that sound outside? Are they here?”

Bai Chen took a few steps to the corridor outside. She held the railing with both hands and looked toward Moat Town’s main entrance.

There were no outsiders there yet. Only the faint sounds of ‘one, two, three, four’ and ‘one, two, three, four’ could be heard.

“The sounds outside are ‘one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four.’” At this moment, Shang Jianyao mimicked what he had heard.

Tian Erhe’s expression quickly softened as his wrinkles unfolded one after another.

“The children are doing morning exercises...” he muttered to himself with a smile as his mental state seemed to improve.

...

Outside the swamp, Ding Ce saw the team sent by Pangu Biology with Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong.

The cars that shimmered with metal and glass lights, the grayish-green uniformed warriors, and the weapons that gave off a brand new feeling deeply shocked him.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and inwardly praised the person in charge of this matter.

The company is indeed very experienced... They know that such a takeover has to be done in a glamorous manner and subdue an enemy without a fight...

...

Moat Town, outside Tian Erhe's room.

Bai Chen didn't know how many times the mayor had urged her to go to the corridor to see if Jiang Baimian and the others had returned.

Finally, she saw the convoy slowly approaching the town and the familiar grayish-green jeep. Bai Chen quickly turned around and shouted into the room, "They're here! They're here!"

Tian Erhe instantly relaxed. He took a few breaths and turned to Li Zhengfei. "Arrange for people to maintain order. After we meet, gather everyone and announce this matter."

Li Zhengfei had already stood up and answered, "I'll do so right away."

Bai Chen remained in the corridor. She pressed her hands against the railing and kept turning her head to report the situation to Tian Erhe like an excited young lady.

"They are passing through the gates.

"They are alighting.

"They are lined up and crossing the square.

"Everyone's a little confused, but order is being quickly restored."

At this point, Bai Chen suddenly stopped. She felt that the room was terrifyingly quiet without any response.

Bai Chen turned around and saw Shang Jianyao standing closer to the door, staring at the bed with a solemn expression. It was unknown when Tian Erhe had slid down. He was lying down instead of sitting.

An ominous feeling instantly surfaced in her mind. Bai Chen's expression changed as she speedily ran in and squatted beside Tian Erhe.

She saw that the mayor's face was bluish-black without any luster.

She stretched out her trembling finger and brought it to Tian Erhe's nose.

After more than ten seconds, she suddenly retracted her hand and shouted, hoping to jolt something. "Mayor!"

This time, there was no response.

Bai Chen's vision blurred as her knees lost support, and she fell to the ground with a thud. She grabbed the side of the bed and shouted as if her voice was mostly choked, "Grandpa!"

...

Under the gazes of the townsfolk in messy and dirty clothes, Jiang Baimian led the people sent by Pangu Biology through the mud houses, brick houses, and tents that had been haphazardly built.

Just as she reached the flag-raising platform, she suddenly heard neat and young voices coming from the building in the deepest part of Moat Town.

"When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony.

"Thus, men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease so that they were all sufficiently maintained..."

Note 1: From The Book of Rites

Chapter 117: Approaching

"When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony..."

Long Yuehong sat on the left in the back and read a book in a low voice. After reading this, he looked up and looked ahead in confusion. "Team Leader, why doesn't the company teach ancient texts like this? Does nobody remember?"

The book in his hand was exchanged from Moat Town using food.

At this moment, the setting sun's strong rays were so blinding that Jiang Baimian had to wear her sunglasses.

She thought for a moment before casually saying, "I read it in extracurricular books when I was young. This means that many people still remember it. However, the company's higher-ups might not want everyone to learn this piece of ancient text. This is to prevent everyone from pursuing a Grand Union society, which is unfavorable to management."

"That can't be, right?" Long Yuehong expressed his thoughts. "Although the company hasn't achieved the rule of 'a public and common spirit' or 'chose men of talents, virtue, and ability for the good of the world,' it has at least secured competent provision for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. Uh, widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease are all sufficiently maintained."

He forgot his words mid-way and could only look down at the book again.

Jiang Baimian laughed. "There's a saying that goes: prevention is better than a cure."

"Look, an employee like you who hasn't been officially employed for long knows that the higher-ups often abuse their power for personal gain and practice cronyism. This means that everyone still has a scale in their hearts. They don't dare object to it on the surface, but they are secretly pointing their fingers and wagging their tongues."

"If generations of people have accepted ideas similar to that of a Grand Union society, how are they to maneuver? How is Big Boss to hand over power smoothly?"

Long Yuehong was a little convinced, but he didn't find things that serious. "I don't think anyone will directly revolt against the higher-ups, right? Everyone is rather satisfied with the current situation."

Compared to the many wilderness nomad settlements in the Ashlands, Pangu Biology was internally stable and peaceful. As long as everyone worked hard, they would receive a certain level of remuneration. There was no need to worry about starving to death.

"Not necessarily," said Jiang Baimian as she made the jeep turn and cruise along a small river.

Long Yuehong smiled and said, "How can there be people who are willing to make such a huge sacrifice to help everyone fight for power?"

After asking this question, he subconsciously looked at Shang Jianyao. Long Yuehong suddenly recalled that his good friend and colleague often talked about saving all of humanity.

"There are." Shang Jianyao looked at him with bright eyes.

“...” Long Yuehong felt that he couldn't argue with this fellow and questioned, “Weren't you sleeping?”

During this period of time, Shang Jianyao would sleep from time to time during the day as if he had entered an intermittent hibernation.

Long Yuehong was not surprised by this. They had been traveling every day for the past half a month, and they basically had nothing else to do. Apart from sleeping, chatting, and maintaining physical fitness, there was nothing else to do.

“I was a little tired. I woke up to rest for a while.” Shang Jianyao spoke the truth that sounded odd. He recently entered the Sea of Origins to travel and search for the second ‘island.’

“So you're not resting when you sleep?” Long Yuehong scolded jokingly. He suddenly had a thought and looked at Jiang Baimian's back again. “Team Leader, why does Moat Town teach this text? As you can see, their higher-ups have their own thoughts. They don't want the world to be fair, nor do they want equality...”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Perhaps they added this into the curriculum to prevent such a situation from happening. Different motives can result in two different choices.”

In the passenger seat, Bai Chen glanced at her team leader and said in a moderate voice, “Actually, it's not that complicated. When Moat Town was first established, they used whatever textbooks they had. No one thought too much about it before it became tradition.”

Jiang Baimian wanted to give Bai Chen a peeved glance, but her gaze was completely blocked by the sunglasses.

She laughed involuntarily. “You can't undermine me while I'm trying to make a point!”

Jiang Baimian was still in a good mood when she said this because Bai Chen had gotten over the loss rather well. She thought that Tian Erhe's death would leave Bai Chen unable to recover for a long time.

In the end, Bai Chen didn't appear problematic the day after the handover and left Moat Town. She was just a little depressed.

In the past few days, Bai Chen was no different from before.

Jiang Baimian understood this very well.

Which wilderness nomad wasn't accustomed to life and death?

As long as a wilderness nomad didn't directly break down or end up having psychological problems, they would quickly stop having such matters affect their daily lives. Of course, they might still feel a faint pain in their hearts when recalling it in the future.

After ending the conversation, the jeep fell silent again.

What else did they have to talk about after spending half a month together?

Long Yuehong then looked out the window and saw the low-hanging lead clouds, the yellow wilderness, the brown soil, and the distant mountains and trees.

Apart from these, there was nothing. Not to mention humans, even animals were unwilling to reveal themselves.

This was the Ashlands's winter.

After looking at such a scene for a long time, it really made one feel depressed and vexed.

In order to rush to Weed City as soon as possible and avoid any possible dangers, the Old Task Force had chosen a route that went through similar places the entire way. It had been more than half a month.

They took a long detour, not taking the usual route. They were also delayed for several days due to changes in environment and the harsh weather conditions.

"When can we meet people?" Long Yuehong slowly exhaled. Long Yuehong felt that he would one day go crazy if this continued.

"Then? Will you chat with them?" Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

"Uh..." Long Yuehong thought for a moment and felt that he shouldn't be so rash. "I just want to see someone else. Otherwise, I'll feel like there are only the four of us left in the entire Ashlands."

"Then, who will you choose? You have to make sacrifices for the sake of reproducing humanity." Shang Jianyao seemed to be imagining the scene in Long Yuehong's hypothesis.

Jiang Baimian was just about to stop him from continuing when Bai Chen suddenly said, "It's better not to encounter anyone in the wilderness during this season."

Long Yuehong had some experience and thoughtfully inquired, "Are nomads who enter the wilderness in such cold weather those without food?"

“Yes. And to be precise, they have a serious lack of food,” Jiang Baimian replied.

She then sighed. “When the time comes, it will be fine if they try to snatch from you. But if they kneel by the side of the road while carrying a child, begging bitterly, will you save them or not? If you choose to save them, how many days of food can you give them? How many people can you save along the way?”

“After saving them, how will you feel if they think that they won’t be able to survive the winter with what’s given and decide to take the opportunity to snatch from you? They might even kill you and turn you into food reserves.

“Even if they know how to be grateful and don’t do so, wouldn’t you blame yourself if they turned around and killed other people you saved for their food to tide through the winter?”

These rhetorical questions were like sharp arrows that accurately stabbed into Long Yuehong’s heart, making his lips tremble and him unable to answer.

“We can’t save any of them,” Bai Chen replied on his behalf. “Our food is only enough for us to reach Weed City, and it’s winter now.”

“Unless you’re willing to starve to death, it’s best to go by the mantra: What you don’t see can’t hurt you,” added Jiang Baimian.

She laughed self-deprecatingly. “Individual strength can’t save the Ashlands. Back then, the Salvation Army’s founders only decided to unite after experiencing such situations time and time again. They wanted to establish an organization that is equal from top to bottom in order to save all of humanity.

“They wanted to use a strong collective to rebuild the social order and production system as soon as possible. They then wanted to accommodate more nomads, produce more food and other supplies, and use the snowball effect to grow stronger. What a pity...”

She sighed because the Salvation Army—established by idealists—had ultimately fallen.

“There will always be others to take their place,” Shang Jianyao replied with a serious expression.

Jiang Baimian didn’t continue the topic. She pursed her lips and said seriously, “It’s time to consider what to eat for dinner.”

Long Yuehong’s expression collapsed when he heard that. Shang Jianyao didn’t raise his hand to wipe the corner of his mouth either.

They only had three choices: Energy bars, compressed biscuits, or military canned food.

Although there were different flavors, it ultimately came down to energy bars, compressed biscuits, and military canned food.

After repeatedly eating such food for more than half a month, they inevitably felt unhappy and even a little disgusted when they heard such a question.

“I definitely won’t want to eat canned food again when we return.” Long Yuehong sighed sincerely.

The canned food was indeed delicious, but who could stand eating it every day?

Upon seeing that there was no response, Jiang Baimian looked at the setting sun hanging over the horizon and turned to Bai Chen. “Are there any suitable wilderness nomad settlements nearby?”

Although the company’s map indicated the relatively famous settlements in the area, Jiang Baimian felt that asking Bai Chen was more direct and convenient.

“Apart from trading food, what other requests do you have?” Bai Chen asked directly. She was very sure that her team leader was not someone who would change their schedule just for a change in menu.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “We’ll reach Weed City in a day or two. We have to make some preparations in advance. We can’t just swagger into the city, right?”

“Even if the Life Ritual parish isn’t that extreme or powerful and doesn’t have any information on us heading to Weed City, we have to consider the factors that caused the other Old Task Force’s disappearance. Therefore, we should find a suitable wilderness nomad settlement and do some necessary disguises. For example, we can mix in with the caravans heading to Weed City for transactions.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped sincerely.

Long Yuehong also praised his team leader’s meticulousness from the bottom of his heart.

Bai Chen nodded gently. “Got it. Then, let’s go to the Rootless camp nearby. They should be here during winter.”

“Rootless?” Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

“Are they all eunuchs; they can’t spread their seed?” Shang Jianyao questioned.

Jiang Baimian also inquired with interest. “I’ve heard of Rootless, but I don’t know much about them. What’s the exact situation?”

Bai Chen smiled. “When you see them, you’ll know that they aren’t Subhumans or eunuchs. They are just a group of normal humans with unique customs and habits.”

“Yo, you’ve even learned to keep us in suspense,” Jiang Baimian teased. “Which way should I go?”

Bai Chen had long sat up straight and seriously pointed the way.

Chapter 118: Camp

Before the sky turned completely dark, the Old Task Force arrived at the Rootless camp.

From afar, the first thing they saw were large vehicles.

These vehicles were several-fold the size of jeeps. The carriages were long and tall, and their paint coating was different. Some were brown and white, some had black patches over a white background, and some had stripes that accentuated the silver-gray.

“Are these all RVs?” Jiang Baimian had long stopped wearing her sunglasses. She slowed down and seriously identified the vehicles for a few seconds.

“Yes.” Bai Chen nodded. “RVs are the Rootless’s home. Every vehicle represents a family.”

“Is that so...” When Jiang Baimian looked at the camp again, she saw more details.

Taking up the majority were at least dozens of RVs in the camp, perhaps even close to 100.

Among them, the largest RVs were parked at the edge, forming a steel wall. Only an opening for vehicles to pass through remained.

Through the gaps between the ‘walls,’ one could see that the cars inside were all neatly parked. At the core were a few vehicles that seemed to be even larger.

“What’s an RV?” Long Yuehong asked, perplexed.

Shang Jianyao took the initiative to explain, “It’s a vehicle that has living quarters installed in the trailer.”

“You’ve seen them before?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

Everyone had undergone the same education and had the same experience in the field. How had Shang Jianyao seen an RV but not him?

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “I’ve never seen them before. A guess.”

Jiang Baimian laughed. “There’s not much of a problem with what Shang Jianyao said. An RV turns the trailer into living quarters. It has a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, and even a living room and dining room.”

“How extravagant.” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong gave their evaluations simultaneously.

Such a room would only be assigned to Pangu Biology employees with a rank of D7 and above or a couple that had reached D4.

Bai Chen added, “It’s said that the original Rootless came from the Old World’s RV campsites. It’s a camp that specially allows people driving RVs to park.”

Although she didn’t understand why the Old World had to do this, she still repeated what she had heard back then.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao did not raise any objections.

Bai Chen looked at the setting sun’s rays that scattered over the car window and continued, “As you know, the Heartless disease breakouts mainly happened in the large cities back then. Places like the RV campsites were fine. Furthermore, there were no attacks on them.

“Therefore, they were lucky to survive the Old World’s destruction, but they couldn’t return to their hometowns. They might have tried, but I’m not sure. But from the results, they definitely failed.

“In the Chaotic Era after the Old World was destroyed, they felt that it was better for everyone to gather together. There was strength in numbers. After that, they also found a place to settle down and farm. However, they were repeatedly attacked by war, monster hordes, and large numbers of Heartless. They were chased out of their original settlement by the changing weather and environment.

“Later, they became completely accustomed to their lives in vehicles. They also became accustomed to the nomadic lifestyle as a large group. They no longer settled down and called themselves people without roots. Yes, we prefer to call them Rootless.”

Shang Jianyao raised a very serious question. “Then, what do they eat?”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Long Yuehong expressed his desire to ask the same question.

Not settling down meant that they could not farm and had no fixed harvests.

Bai Chen looked at the approaching camp entrance and spoke a little faster. “Their initial state was closer to that of Ruin Hunters. They obtained fuel, food, weapons, high-performance batteries, and various supplies from the city ruins after the Heartless died. Back then, every city ruin was a rich mine.

“After the Chaotic Era ended, the large factions were established one after another. Their large convoy quickly became an exploitable target. They also took the opportunity to change their identities and became armed caravans that came and went between the various factions, accepting commissions for cargo transport and sales.”

“Why don’t large factions do these businesses themselves?” Long Yuehong remembered that there were many large vehicles in the company’s parking lot—far more than in the Rootless camp.

Upon hearing his question, Jiang Baimian—who was driving—teased, “Where does the company get that much manpower? If a rookie like you can get sent to the Old Task Force, you can guess how short-handed we are. We aren’t Mechanical Paradise. We have neither the resources nor the technology to produce so many smart robots.”

Long Yuehong came to a realization.

Bai Chen casually added, “For many large factions, they don’t like to send their own people to escort supplies that aren’t especially important.

“There was once a relatively large settlement. It was sacked when the leader left the settlement mostly empty when sending a large number of guards out to deliver the goods. Besides, it’s more convenient for neutral caravans to pass through many sensitive areas.”

Upon seeing that Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao no longer had questions, she said, “As long as you have fuel, food, high-performance batteries, and various relatively intact vehicle parts, you can hire the Rootless and get them to deliver the goods for you.

“They claim to live off gas. When the weather turns cold and the volume of transactions decreases, the Rootless will migrate to a similar camp and use the food they previously stocked up to survive winter. At the same time, they will take on jobs pertaining to transportation and transactions in the camp’s vicinity.

“This is the largest group of Rootless. The reason they often choose this camp is because there’s a nearby waterworks that can still be used.”

As they spoke, the jeep had already arrived at the Rootless camp’s entrance.

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen quickly emphasized, "After you enter, you have to remember not to damage their vehicles. To the Rootless, vehicles are their most precious asset. A person who has no vehicle and has no other Rootless family to take them in will only be abandoned.

"Also, they were born and raised in vehicles for nearly three generations. They have unique feelings for vehicles and no longer treat them as objects but family. If you injure their family, they will definitely not treat you kindly."

Jiang Baimian was intrigued and slapped the steering wheel. "It's indeed a relatively unique culture and custom."

At this moment, the guards at the front of the two large RVs raised the muzzles of their assault rifles, indicating for the visitors to stop.

Bai Chen rolled down the window and stuck her head out. "We are here to make a trade."

The guard with a beard took a closer look, and his eyes lit up. "Looking good. Excellent figure too. This jeep is not bad! How much horsepower does it have?"

"It uses high-performance batteries," Bai Chen replied truthfully.

The bearded guard became increasingly interested. "Do you guys want to change wives and leave it here?"

"It's true love between us!" Shang Jianyao had popped his head out at some point in time and replied loudly.

The bearded guard gave him a thumbs up. "Good taste."

He then lowered the muzzle and pointed into the camp with his chin. "Go on in. Stop as instructed. Otherwise, you can't blame us for losing your wife."

When the jeep passed through the entrance, Long Yuehong muttered to himself in surprise, "It's that simple?"

There wasn't anyone familiar to testify for them, nor were their weapons confiscated. Yet, the Old Task Force entered the camp easily.

Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and smiled. "For the Rootless caravans with sufficient firepower and personnel, outsiders are the ones who fear entering. They might not be able to leave once they enter."

"That's true..." Long Yuehong thought for a moment and said, "Then, we have to be vigilant. We can't trust these people completely."

“Yes.” As Jiang Baimian followed the instructions and slowly drove down the path, she turned her head and said to Shang Jianyao, “You’re up next! Do a good job!”

“I’m not a car.” Shang Jianyao was ‘put on the spot.’

“That’s right. Our dear Bai Chen is such a beautiful lady, but they didn’t even look at her and only checked the jeep out,” Jiang Baimian teased.

Bai Chen wanted to say that she was older, but she silently gave up the idea after noticing Jiang Baimian’s height.

With the guide’s help, they quickly parked the car and alighted from the jeep.

With a glance, Jiang Baimian realized that the behemoths parked in the depths of the camp were dragging large silver-gray metallic tanks.

“An oil tank... No wonder it’s so tightly protected.” As she sighed, she heard the sound of an engine coming from a blue and white-painted RV beside her.

A middle-aged man in a baseball cap stood in front of the car. He touched the hood and listened to the sounds coming from the interior. After the engine’s roar came to a stop, he nodded thoughtfully.

At some point in time, Shang Jianyao had already jumped over and asked curiously, “What are you doing?”

The middle-aged man in the baseball cap was of average height. He had a muscular body, and his skin was slightly tanned. His clothes seemed to be stained with grease.

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao’s question, his slightly fierce expression relaxed. “Everyone has a temper. I have to hear what it’s unhappy about.”

Upon seeing the confused looks Long Yuehong and the others wore, the man touched the slightly old blue and white paint on the RV and smiled. “This big guy has been a member of our family since my grandfather’s days. Now that it’s older, its temper has worsened a little. We have to coax it a little more.

“Haha, you have elders back home, right? You have to coax them.”

Shang Jianyao took a step back and looked at the RV carefully. He pointed at the headlights and said, “Its eyes are beautiful.”

The middle-aged man seemed to have found a confidant and gushed, “It’s been fixed twice. It looked better when it was young...”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian whispered to Bai Chen and Long Yuehong, "Sometimes, I really think Shang Jianyao has the talent for making friends."

They chatted for a while before the driver—a young man in his twenties—came down with a toolbox. Together with the middle-aged man, they opened the hood and began repairing it skillfully.

Shang Jianyao then retreated and followed Jiang Baimian and the others through the RVs toward the most lively spot in the camp.

Bai Chen looked back at the spot and smiled very slightly. "If any of you have excellent car repairing skills, you can even marry a few wives here."

Chapter 119: Taste

A few wives? Long Yuehong—who was born and raised in an underground building—found it difficult to imagine such a thing.

Shang Jianyao began to discuss the matter seriously. "You'll definitely be too busy."

"Some places do have such customs, and some places allow a woman to marry several husbands." Jiang Baimian recalled what she had seen and heard.

Shang Jianyao was immediately a little curious. "If we put the people of these two places together, what will happen when the two customs are combined?"

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment. "Maybe it will end up with a scenario that my second wife's eldest husband's third wife's fourth husband is actually my son?"

Long Yuehong felt a headache coming on. He was momentarily unable to figure out the relationships.

As he swept his gaze across the area, he suddenly saw an RV a few meters away. A few people in cotton jackets and old down jackets were standing there, repeatedly bowing at two red candles.

The two candles flickered with light. In front of them were a piece of dried meat, a plucked chicken, steamed buns, cornbread, and other food.

"What are they doing?" Long Yuehong stood on his tip-toes, attempting to get a clearer view.

Bai Chen glanced in that direction. "They are paying their respects to the Bonnet God."

"Bonnet God?" Jiang Baimian asked excitedly.

Bai Chen organized her words and said, “To the Rootless, vehicles are their most precious property and an important member of the family. Many of their customs arise from the vehicles. They always worry about bumping into something or falling into a swamp while driving. They are also worried that they will overturn due to certain obstacles. Therefore, they created a Bonnet God to worship and pray for a safe and smooth journey without any problems.”

Shang Jianyao clicked his tongue. “It doesn’t come under any Kalendaria?”

“That’s right. They actually don’t worship a Kalendaria,” echoed Long Yuehong.

Bai Chen’s smile flashed. “The Kalendarium’s jurisdiction isn’t that broad. In many places, many people have only heard of this term.

“Yes... Many churches that believe in the Kalendarium have tried to integrate the Bonnet God into their religion to rope the Rootless community in as believers. The one doing the best now is the Crystal Consciousness Church. This is also a sect that worships January’s Kalendaria, Buddha Subhuti.

“Among the other Rootless groups, the Bonnet God has already changed his name to the Bonnet Bodhisattva.”

“The competition between deities is so intense,” Shang Jianyao commented seriously.

Long Yuehong looked at the Bonnet God’s consecration—as well as the dried meat, cooked chicken, steamed buns, and cornbread—and said, “Isn’t that too wasteful?”

Even for Pangu Biology’s employees, this was considered a feast. They rarely ate like this unless it was a festive season.

“It’s not like they will throw the food away,” explained Bai Chen. “After the prayers, this food will be carried back and shared with the entire family. In the Ashlands, there won’t be any food wastage except in a few places.”

At this point, her expression softened a little, and the corners of her mouth curled up slightly. “In many wilderness nomad settlements, what the children look forward to the most is when prayers to the gods are made. That means that the subsequent meal will be very sumptuous. There will only be one or two sumptuous meals a year.”

“Is that so...” Long Yuehong treated this as the annual festive season in Pangu Biology and immediately felt the same way.

As they spoke, the four of them arrived at the camp’s busiest region. However, they were also far away from the oil tank.

This place was relatively empty, with only three relatively long RVs parked here.

They loosely formed a square with one missing side. The side doors were opened completely, revealing the tables, chairs, kitchen counter, and cabinets inside.

In the area they surrounded, there were all kinds of tables and chairs placed in a circle. The middle portion was left completely empty.

On the top of the RV facing the gap, several balls constantly flickered with green, red, or purple colors, enveloping the entire area in an illusory light show.

On the other two RVs were speakers. They played very rhythmic music, making the people gathered in the empty area twist and gyrate involuntarily.

Jiang Baimian stared at them for a while before extending her hand to grab the eager Shang Jianyao. "Don't get involved. Let's go in first."

Shang Jianyao reluctantly retracted his gaze, fixed the tactical backpack that he was about to put down, and followed Jiang Baimian to the RV in the innermost area.

On the way, they encountered a young man who had shaved off his sideburns.

Jiang Baimian stopped him and asked with a smile, "Where's your leader?"

As she spoke, she smelled the relatively obvious scent of gasoline coming from the other party's body.

Under the winter night's cold winds, the young man didn't wear much. He wore a long-sleeved, red cotton T-shirt and a pair of baggy pants. There were a few droplets of sweat on his forehead as if he had just undergone an intense exercise.

"It's Caravan Leader," the young man emphasized.

"Yes, Caravan Leader." Shang Jianyao was always one to go with the flow.

The young man choked. "I mean, our leader is Caravan Leader. No, that's not his real name, nor is Leader his last name. He's the Caravan Leader of our caravan."

"Where's your Caravan Leader?" Jiang Baimian asked before Shang Jianyao could speak.

The young man pointed at the RV right inside. "The one peddling the wares."

After answering, he sized up Jiang Baimian and smiled. "Shall we dance?"

"No thanks." Jiang Baimian rejected him without hesitation.

When they conversed, they had to shout at the top of their lungs because of the loud and bombastic music.

Jiang Baimian felt like a fish in water.

The rejected young man didn't pester her. His body swayed with the rhythm as he made way.

As he looked at Jiang Baimian's back, he raised his right hand and sniffed his forearm. He muttered to himself in confusion, "She doesn't like the smell of this type of gasoline?"

Just as the Old Task Force was about to reach the target RV, an old lady suddenly jumped out of the shadows around them. She held a brown dustpan with many bottles and cans inside.

"Want some gasoline? Or do you want diesel?" The wrinkles on the granny's face were obvious, and she looked a little thin.

While Long Yuehong and the others were a little confused, Shang Jianyao asked a question, having adapted very well. "Is it delicious?"

"..." The old lady was momentarily speechless. "It can't be eaten."

She then said loudly, "By sprinkling some on you, you can become the camp's most popular person!"

She freed a hand and pointed at a small bottle. "This is Orange Company's Type 15 gasoline, the purest kind. Furthermore, the smell is perfectly mixed. Just a dash, and who knows how many ladies will be infatuated with you tonight!"

Jiang Baimian fell into thought and muttered to herself, "As many vehicles require gas, many people here also love the smell of gas? Maybe the fragrance of flowers is far less charming to them than the smell of gasoline or diesel."

"Ah, what did you say?" The old lady was a little hard of hearing, and the environment here was very noisy.

Jiang Baimian laughed involuntarily and said loudly, "We don't need it!"

As they watched the old lady return to the shadows in slight disappointment, the Old Task Force quartet boarded the RV deep inside.

The space inside was rather spacious. There were actually many tables and chairs. Opposite them was a milky-white platform that reached Shang Jianyao's chest.

There were a few high stools in front of the platform, and behind the platform was a wooden cabinet with all kinds of bottles and cans.

Between the wooden cabinet and the platform stood a man nearly 1.8 meters tall.

He looked to be in his forties or fifties. His hair was very short, and he had a large white beard that contoured his mouth. He wore a black leather coat that shimmered with a little grease.

“Want something to drink?” the middle-aged man asked with a smile.

Jiang Baimian pulled a high-stool over and sat down before asking in return, “Do you guys have alcohol?”

Long Yuehong felt somewhat surprised.

In a place with adequate food like Pangu Biology, alcohol-based beverages were considered restricted items. Very little was produced every year, and everyone only had a very tiny amount. In the Ashlands filled with famine, it was surprising to him that one could easily encounter an alcohol seller!

The middle-aged man—who was suspected to be the Rootless’s Caravan Leader—laughed and said, “Fruit wines from wild trees. I don’t know what fruit it is either. It grows here every summer, and it’s sour and astringent. No one will eat it, nor can it be preserved until winter. But when it’s brewed into wine, the fragrance is surprisingly good.”

After everyone in the Old Task Force sat down, Jiang Baimian joked, “I thought people who live in vehicles and drive their entire lives wouldn’t drink.”

The man immediately laughed and said, “That’s why we frequently drink every winter.”

He sighed and said, “My grandfather’s generation couldn’t return to their hometown because of the Old World’s destruction. To get over their mental problems, they often had to rely on alcohol to numb themselves. This resulted in many accidents, and they lost some vehicles.

“When it reached my father’s generation, we had a rule for the convoy. It’s a rule that everyone has to tattoo on their bodies.”

At this point, he turned around, pulled up his clothes, and revealed his back. On his bronze skin were two tattooed rows of striking words: “If you drink, don’t drive. If you drive, don’t drink.”

Chapter 120: 'Provocation'

Although the scene in front of them was normal in terms of logic, mood, and psychological expectations, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others couldn't help but find it strange.

The words 'If you drink, don't drive. If you drive, don't drink,' shouldn't appear in such an instance!

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao's applause was never absent. He then asked, "Isn't it problematic to see it if it's tattooed on your back? How does it constantly warn you?"

The bearded man—who had just lowered his shirt—had a stunned expression. He was momentarily at a loss for an answer. However, he had traveled extensively and had experienced many things. He quickly composed himself and asked with a smile, "Then, where do you think it should be tattooed?"

Shang Jianyao seemed to have really considered such a question. "On the backs of both hands, one sentence on each side. You can see it whenever you raise your hand to drink."

"..." The white-bearded man nodded and said, "Yes, it's a good idea. I'll add it to the choices in the future."

Jiang Baimian could tell that he was just casually brushing Shang Jianyao off, so she changed the topic and asked with a smile, "How should I address you?"

"Ferlin," replied the man with a large white beard. He didn't care about their names and repeated his previous question. "Want something to drink? This is a specialty that's brewed from the wild fruits here. You won't find it elsewhere if you miss it."

At this point, he stroked his short beard and chuckled. "We will take the time to come back here almost every summer to pick such wild fruits and use them to make wine."

Jiang Baimian looked around and asked with a smile, "What can be used to exchange for the wine?"

Ferlin laughed. "What's exchanged for the wine doesn't depend on what we want, but what you have. In the Ashlands, people who are obsessed with the only answer often get nothing."

"We have..." Amidst the rhythmic music coming from outside, Jiang Baimian seemed to be in a rather relaxed state. Her eyes darted around as she patted Long Yuehong on her right with a mischievous expression. "How about trading him? He knows how to

drive, has a gentle personality, and is not short. He can barely be considered proficient in combat and knows a little about car maintenance. He's suitable to be your son-in-law."

"Team Leader..." Long Yuehong felt a little uncomfortable, having never expected the topic to be about him suddenly.

Ferlin laughed. "I appreciate your kindness. My daughter has no lack of suitors. She's as good-looking as her mother, and her driving skills are almost comparable to mine. Although her skills at maintenance are a little lacking, she has a solid foundation and is still young.

"Besides, she has liked to watch and participate in my repairs since she was young. I don't know when it happened, but the smell of gasoline, diesel, and lubricant on her can't be washed away. Countless young lads in the convoy have always yearned for her."

Long Yuehong imagined the scene as he listened to Ferlin's description and subconsciously shrank back.

From the moment he boarded the RV, he could smell the faint smell of gasoline from Ferlin and the few customers beside him.

He was worried that the topic would come back to him again, so he looked at Jiang Baimian and pretended to complain. "Team Leader, why don't you recommend Shang Jianyao?"

Jiang Baimian laughed. "I'm just afraid that Shang Jianyao will be chased out in less than a day. Then, would we be considered as having paid?"

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao seem like he was about to answer the question, Jiang Baimian immediately cast her gaze at Ferlin. "How about we trade using military canned food? There's braised beef inside."

"How heavy?" Ferlin asked skillfully.

"500 grams." Jiang Baimian gave the number.

"Then, which type do you want?" Ferlin smiled and introduced the various assortments. "The first type is wine directly brewed from wild tree fruits. The alcohol content is very low and doesn't get you drunk, about the same as grape wine. You know about grape wine, right?"

"Yes." Jiang Baimian and the others nodded in unison.

Within Pangu Biology, one could still buy a little wine according to their quota during festive seasons.

As for Bai Chen, she had wandered countless places over the years and occasionally drank alcohol.

Ferlin continued, "For this, four glasses for a can.

"The other type is obtained from repeated distillation of this fruit wine. It has high alcohol content, so it's very easy to get drunk on the first drink. It costs three cans for four glasses. You can put this on a tab and pay when you leave camp."

Jiang Baimian naturally couldn't let her team members get drunk in such an unfamiliar environment. She directly said, "Let's drink the fruit wine with low alcohol content then."

Long Yuehong and the others naturally had no objections.

"Alright." Ferlin flipped out four glasses that were hanging upside down on the milky-white platform.

At this moment, a burly man—at a table by the window beside the Old Task Force—laughed. "It's indeed a team of women and children. They only dare to drink fruit wine that's no different from water!"

Shang Jianyao—who was sitting near them—turned his head and looked over.

The muscular man in black clothes flexed his arm, bulging his muscles. He looked at Shang Jianyao without backing down.

One second, two seconds... ten seconds... Shang Jianyao maintained his posture and didn't move.

Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong and Bai Chen and read the same meaning in their eyes:

Great. Shang Jianyao was now competing to see who would look away first or who would speak first. Of course, this was only a game that he unilaterally decided on.

After about ten seconds, the burly man finally couldn't control himself and abruptly stood up. "What's the meaning of this?"

"You lost." Shang Jianyao laughed.

"You're nuts!" The burly man cursed. "Are you still a child? Do you not have any hair growing down under?"

Ferlin—who was pouring the drinks—looked up and shouted, “Zhao Tie, stop fooling around! You forgot your name after drinking a few cups of horse piss?”

Zhao Tie didn’t dare disobey his leader and sat down while cursing under his breath.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly left the high stool and walked in front of Zhao Tie. He then began unbuckling his belt.

“W-what are you doing?” Zhao Tie and his companions were a little confused.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “Mine is definitely bigger than yours.”

At this moment, it was not only Zhao Tie. Even Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others suspected their ears.

When he reacted, a violent rage suddenly rushed from the bottom of Zhao Tie’s heart to his mind. Not only was this because he felt that the other party was humiliating him, but also because he didn’t know how to respond.

It was impossible for him to actually stand up and take off his pants in front of everyone to compete with the other party, right?

Shang Jianyao was shameless, but Zhao Tie still cared about his reputation.

Besides, it was fine if he won, but what if he lost? If that happened, Zhao Tie felt that he might not have the nerve to stay in the convoy.

No, I can’t let him lead me by the nose... Zhao Tie narrowed his eyes and pointed outside. “Not bad. Dare to spar?”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao buckled his belt and agreed readily.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly and felt that she couldn’t figure out what was happening. She was not worried that Shang Jianyao would lose. She was still very confident in her combat abilities, and Shang Jianyao was only second to her in the Old Task Force.

She just couldn’t figure out what Shang Jianyao wanted to do.

Jiang Baimian stopped Long Yuehong from saying anything, with the hope that conversations would be easier after Shang Jianyao displayed his strength during the fight.

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao’s companions didn’t mind, the Rootless merchants’ Caravan Leader, Ferlin, decided to watch the show. He raised his voice and shouted to the outside, “Cut the music! Someone wants to perform!”

The sound system on the two RVs quickly died down. The group of men and women gyrating in the empty area demarcated by tables and chairs retreated outside.

Zhao Tie aggressively jumped off the Caravan Leader's RV and entered the clearing that was constantly being illuminated with changing lights.

Shang Jianyao was in no rush to leave. He first took off his tactical backpack and took out his beloved small black speaker with a blue bottom.

It could be plugged in, and it could also use one of the Old World's long-lasting batteries. Currently, factions were also producing them.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian's thick and beautiful eyebrows twitched slightly.

Shang Jianyao then placed the small speaker at the door and pressed a button.

Amidst the sizzling sound of static, he entered the clearing.

The next second, a high-pitched female voice sounded from the small speaker.

"I'm looking above the moon[1]..."

Shang Jianyao's body swayed with the song. His feet constantly alternated from front to back, appearing very rhythmic. He then curled his finger at Zhao Tie. "Come on!"

"Forgetting yesterday dried out my pain..."

Amidst such singing and facing such an opponent, Zhao Tie suddenly felt like he would lose if he really attacked. It would make him appear as if someone had taken off his pants to streak him in public.

But at this point, he had no choice but to attack. He couldn't cower back, right?

Zhao Tie mentally steeled himself. He took a deep breath and strode over. During this process, he kept staring at Shang Jianyao's feet and shoulders.

This was because, of the few combat techniques he knew, footwork was relatively important. Furthermore, the condition of one's shoulders allowed him to determine which hand the other party would be using.

As a Rootless, he had undergone strict training since he was young. Back in First City, he had even been trained by a powerful boxer. He was not someone who relied on his size to bully others.

After adjusting his pace, Zhao Tie took a step forward.

Almost at the same time, Shang Jianyao took a step back.

Zhao Tie advanced again, and Shang Jianyao retreated again, maintaining a sufficient distance.

Suddenly, Shang Jianyao rushed forward by taking a step forward.

Zhao Tie reflexively dodged.

One retreated and the other advanced—this alternated as the two of them perfectly followed the song's invisible rhythm.

The onlookers immediately clapped.

“Sick moves!”

They finally understood what their Caravan Leader meant by performance.

Upon hearing such ‘compliments,’ Zhao Tie's face flushed red. He couldn't control himself any longer and pounced forward.

Shang Jianyao easily dodged Zhao Tie and stretched out his foot to trip him. Stretching out his hand, Shang Jianyao gripped Zhao Tie and threw him to the ground with a loud thud. It left him seeing stars.

Shang Jianyao then bent down and completely restrained the other party.

Zhao Tie was straightforward. Upon seeing that there was no way to salvage the situation, he didn't put on a brave front. He lowered his head and gruffed. “I lost.”

Shang Jianyao stood up and walked back reluctantly. He put away the small speaker and switched it off.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and asked with a frown, “Don't tell me you went through all that just to dance outside?”

Shang Jianyao nodded sincerely. “Yes. You forbade me from going out directly.”

Jiang Baimian laughed. “Aren't you too persistent? Woah, you even know how to make a feint. You're pretty smart.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and replied, “Maybe my condition has worsened.”

[1] Phoenix Legend's Above The Moon