

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 21: Battle Encounter - Read Embers Ad Infinitum Chapter 21: Battle Encounter

Chapter 21: Battle Encounter

The gigantic python's corpse lay quietly in the sparse forest in the direction of the swamps. Its violent and terrifying performance from before seemed to remain fresh in Long Yuehong's and Shang Jianyao's minds.

Seeing that they hadn't come to their senses, Jiang Baimian smiled and added, "In the previous accident, I lost not only part of my hearing but my entire left arm as well."

"No." Long Yuehong subconsciously shook his head. "I mean... it's settled just like that? The Blackmarsh Iron Snake is dead just like that?"

He had completely forgotten that he had not spoken a few seconds ago or expressed any thoughts. He couldn't help but show his surprise. He found it a little unacceptable that the mighty Blackmarsh Iron Snake had lost its life in just a few seconds, even though this was a good thing.

Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's twisted corpse and smiled. "Didn't I tell you that, in all the mountains and forests in the wilderness, apart from an extremely small number of living beings, humanity's strongest enemy will always be other humans? Unfortunately, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake is not one of those rare creatures. In a sense, the best predators should be humans."

Just as she finished her sentence, she suddenly sensed something and turned her head in the direction of the sound.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

A muscular man—wearing a military exoskeleton—carried a Storm submachine gun and a light machine gun, led the way, and rushed to the area where the gunshots and cries came from.

Behind him, two heavy motorcycles protected his left and right flanks. The black SUV trailed slightly further behind. The people inside did not intend to participate in the battle's first wave and only intended to clean up the battlefield.

Ah Yu, Ji Shun, and the others were very confident in the military exoskeleton. They felt that their boss alone could easily finish off the Ruin Hunters and the Blackmarsh Iron Snake since both parties were injured.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The scene in front of him was reflected in the crystal goggles of the muscular man's metal helmet.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake that was thicker than two ordinary buckets was covered in thick, pitch-black scales. Its 15-meter-long corpse silently laid by the side of the road. Around the area were fallen trees and the python's blood and brain matter that it had flung out.

Tens of meters away, the grayish-green, four-seater jeep was flipped over. Two men in gray camouflage clothes stood outside the jeep. One was standing on the left of the trunk while the other stood outside the right car door. They both held black assault rifles.

The tall woman with a ponytail rubbed her left shoulder with her right hand. She was situated between the grayish-green jeep and the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse. Of course, she was closer to the former.

At that moment, the woman had already turned around to look at them.

At the front of the jeep was a long rifle. Another woman was crouching behind it and turning her scope over.

Turning over... The blood vessels on the man's forehead throbbed. He ducked without a thought. With the exoskeleton's help, the man instantly jumped up and leaped seven to eight meters to the right.

Bang!

Bai Chen pulled the trigger, and a bullet flew out—passing through the spot the man was in a second ago—and hit a tree trunk in the distance.

As the man jumped, he realized what had happened. He was momentarily shocked and regretful. Why aren't they injured at all? The Blackmarsh Iron Snake died just like that? They finished off the Blackmarsh Iron Snake so quickly and even had time for a chat? How did they do it? If not for the comprehensive warning system, I would have died. I wouldn't have been able to react in time!

As his thoughts raced, the man quickly made a decision. Even if the other party could easily kill the Blackmarsh Iron Snake and showcase their terrifying strength, he had to charge forward and complete the firepower suppression.

With the military exoskeleton, it would not be a problem for him to turn tail and run at this moment. However, Ah Yu, Ji Shun, and the rest would not be able to escape! Furthermore, he did not believe that he was necessarily better than the Blackmarsh Iron Snake while wearing a military exoskeleton. His speed and reaction speed might exceed the snake, but his strength and resistance were far inferior.

Even the Blackmarsh Iron Snake had been easily dispatched by the group of people opposite him. Could he definitely escape while wearing his military exoskeleton?

As soon as his feet touched the ground, he immediately raised the light machine gun in his hand and fired it in a sweeping manner.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The muddy ground splattered as bullet holes appeared in the grayish-green jeep's door.

The moment Bai Chen fired, before the muscular man wearing the exoskeleton dodged, Jiang Baimian—who was the first to discover them—drew her United 202 pistol with her right hand. The muscles on her legs tensed up as she darted towards the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's massive corpse like a cheetah.

She had reacted in such a manner partly because she felt that it might be too late to turn around and hide behind the jeep. It was also because she felt that a crossfire was needed to allow them to support each other. In addition, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake was much more bulletproof than the jeep.

Unfortunately, the electricity in her artificial limb needed to be conserved. It would also take some time before she could use the limb again after utilizing a maximum charge once. Thus, Jiang Baimian could only think of other ways to deal with the enemy now.

As Jiang Baimian ran, Shang Jianyao couldn't be bothered to get back into the jeep before getting off from the other side. He pressed the door with one hand and exerted strength with his waist and knees. He rose into the air and flipped over the top of the jeep to land beside Bai Chen.

He had been genetically enhanced before birth and had undergone arduous training post-birth. His physical fitness was vividly displayed at this moment.

Bai Chen had just finished firing when Shang Jianyao bent his knees and rounded his back. He ran to her side in small steps and hid behind the car's head.

This was what they had been taught in their training: In a gunfight, if one wanted to use a vehicle as a 'wall' to protect oneself, one had to choose the vehicle's front part since it was installed with all kinds of equipment. It was very easy for bullets to pierce through other parts of the vehicle, and they would not pose much of an obstacle.

Therefore, despite being nervous, Long Yuehong—who was standing beside Bai Chen—reacted in time despite being a little slow. He also shrunk to Shang Jianyao's right.

After seeing the target wearing an exoskeleton, Bai Chen made a prompt decision. She dragged her rifle back and squatted down.

Da! Da! Da! Da! Da!

The sound of gunfire rang out, striking at their nerves. It made their bodies uncontrollably tense up.

On the other side, Jiang Baimian pushed off the ground with her feet before the light machine gun could sweep over. She jumped behind a section of the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse and lay prone herself.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The pitch-black scales on the corpse's outermost part finally cracked after repeated strikes, but there were still two layers inside.

Even if the bullets could shatter these two layers, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's flesh also had a powerful deceleration and reduction effect. Furthermore, the other side of the flesh had another three layers of pitch-black scales before leading to Jiang Baimian.

In other words, it was almost impossible to penetrate the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse with a light machine gun unless one always aimed at one spot and had enough rounds. At the same time, this was only if Jiang Baimian did not crawl or change her position.

With the exoskeleton's help, the burly man carried the light machine gun and quickly approached the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse and the grayish-green jeep.

He fired suppressive shots at Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Jiang Baimian to the point that they did not dare appear or counterattack.

After the barrel became seriously hot, the few rounds that were prepared and wrapped around his body had been expended. Only then did the burly man throw down the light machine gun and raise the Storm submachine gun in his right hand.

He raised his left arm and pointed the grenade launcher ahead.

At the same time, the Precision Aiming System's corresponding crosshairs appeared on the crystal goggles of the exoskeleton's metal helmet.

A series of numbers rapidly flashed around the crosshairs, helping the man choose a suitable trajectory. As long as he launched the grenade, the grayish-green jeep would be blown to pieces.

Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong—who were hiding at the vehicle's head—would undoubtedly lose their lives.

However, the jeep itself and the things it carried would definitely suffer heavy damage if he did this.

For wilderness bandits, supplies were their ultimate goal when engaging in combat.

After hesitating for a moment, the man changed targets and aimed the grenade launcher at Jiang Baimian.

As he continued firing the Storm machine gun to suppress Jiang Baimian, he used the comprehensive warning system's thermal imaging module to determine her exact location.

During this process, he signaled to the people who had caught up. His two companions on the heavy motorcycles circled around the jeep and suppressed Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shen Jianyao with firepower. They couldn't allow the enemies there to disturb them.

The two bandits were no stranger to such situations. They almost didn't need their boss to speak to understand what he meant. They immediately circled around the area that was far away from the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse and approached the front of the jeep.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

They were skilled. They held the motorcycles' handlebars with one hand and fired their mini submachine guns with the other, preventing Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen from poking their heads out.

When Jiang Baimian's orange, red, and green thermal image finally transmitted to the bandit leader's eyes across the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's cold corpse, the latter revealed a sinister smile and began to choose the grenade launcher's trajectory.

After the Blackmarsh Iron Snake fell, even though it was very large, its corpse was not considered tall. It was far shorter than the front of the jeep. As long as the shooting distance and the grenade launcher were suitable, it was difficult for it to provide any cover.

Chapter 22: Within 10 meters

Jiang Baimian crawled behind the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's heavy body. From time to time, she would shift her position to avoid the enemy completely locking onto her. She had no intention of continuing like this. However, she was unable to determine if the other party carried a heavy anti-tank, anti-armor weapon since things that usually weren't convenient for humans to carry around would become sufficiently 'light' with an exoskeleton's help.

The pungent smell of soil and blood lingered around Jiang Baimian's nose, but it didn't make her concentration waver. The team leader of the Investigation Unit for the Cause of the Old World's Destruction tilted her head slightly as if she was listening to something.

However, with her hearing, she couldn't rely on the various sounds produced by the exoskeleton to determine the enemy's location, even with the help of a mechanical cochlear implant.

However, when the enemy wearing an exoskeleton appeared in her field of vision, she—who was facing the target—was the first to sense something abnormal and react. She reacted earlier than Bai Chen, who was using the Orange rifle scope to monitor Jiang Baimian's area.

The firing continued, drowning out a lot of activity. Jiang Baimian seemed to be unaffected as she silently counted the changes in the distance between them. During this process, she used her left hand to take out a dark-green grenade.

When the muscular man in the exoskeleton raised the grenade launcher and entered a certain range, Jiang Baimian suddenly used her teeth to pull out the grenade's ring.

She then exerted strength with her waist and somersaulted. Under the premise that she did not escape the Blackmarsh Iron Snake corpse's protection, she abruptly threw the grenade at the target.

In addition to producing, storing, and releasing electric currents, her electric eel-like prosthetic limb also gave her extraordinary strength that exceeded that of humans. Pangu Biology was one of the best at doing such modifications.

Boom!

A blazing fireball spread out violently with a shockwave, engulfing the area.

However, the muscular man in the military exoskeleton had already received a warning beforehand. He jumped more than 20 meters away in advance and perfectly dodged the explosion.

Even if he didn't dodge, he had plenty of time. With the precision aiming system's help, he could use the Storm submachine gun to blast the grenade apart. However, he didn't know what kind of grenade it was. Out of fear of an accident, he eventually gave up on the option of staying put and attacking by force.

Jiang Baimian seized the opportunity to stand up and high-kneel behind the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse. She held the United 202 pistol in her right hand and fired at the target repeatedly.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The 11.18 mm bullets whizzed out and headed straight for the muscular man in his military exoskeleton. The targets were key areas without armor or auxiliary bone protection.

Although she did not have help from a precision aiming system, Jiang Baimian's marksmanship was not inferior to the other party's. This made the enemy have no choice but to rely on his exoskeleton equipment to dodge continuously, not daring to stop.

This made a cold sweat break out on the man's forehead. He couldn't believe that his opponent's every shot didn't miss, not giving him a chance to counterattack at all. If not for the fact that he was wearing a military exoskeleton and had the comprehensive warning system's help, he didn't think he could have dodged the barrage of attacks.

She was a real sharpshooter!

The employees who had undergone genetic enhancement in Pangu Biology all had good firearms talent. However, some were better, some were average, and some were relatively weak. Among them, Jiang Baimian was the best among the best. Be it Shang Jianyao or Long Yuehong, they were all inferior to her.

At the same time, she did not give up on her training.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

For a moment, Jiang Baimian used the United 202 pistol to suppress the exoskeleton-wearing enemy. The only thing she was worried about was that the bullets in the magazine were almost empty. Unlike the Berserker assault rifle, there was no way to rely on technology to replace the magazine seamlessly. The other party was not a normal enemy either. As long as a slight opening appeared, he could immediately counterattack and not give her a chance.

On the other side, as the roar of the heavy motorcycle engines approached, Bai Chen placed the Orange rifle to the side and aimed at the space under the jeep's high-bottom plate.

She crouched there with her back against the front of the car. In front of her was a small mirror that she had placed at some point in time.

This mirror was like a rearview mirror, informing Bai Chen of the situation around the cramped area while she couldn't show her face.

Then, Bai Chen quickly said, "Suppress the other two for me and herd them to the side!" With that, she took off her coat and violently threw it into the air.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The gray shirt with a hint of camouflage was riddled with several bullet holes.

Bai Chen rolled over to the car door and lay prone there, gripping the Orange rifle again. The next second, she aimed at the enemy wearing the exoskeleton through the underground space and fired at his ankles from an angle he didn't expect.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The man was just about to counterattack Jiang Baimian when he sensed additional danger and could only continue dodging.

Not bad... Jiang Baimian thought to herself. She was very satisfied with Bai Chen's combat acuity, decisiveness, and risk-taking spirit. She seized the opportunity to throw down the United 202 and swapped to her Ice Moss.

At the front of the jeep, while Bai Chen provided Jiang Baimian with firepower support, Shang Jianyao had already taken off the Berserker assault rifle he carried and placed it beside Long Yuehong.

"Suppress them and herd them to the side!" he repeated.

Herding the two heavy motorcycles to the side was to prevent the enemy from aiming at the car doors. If that happened, the bullets could easily pass through the jeep door and have a high chance of injuring Bai Chen, who was lying prone below the door.

"I..." Long Yuehong was very nervous.

"Fire!" Shang Jianyao's expression was slightly contorted.

Long Yuehong was also someone who had undergone arduous training. He no longer hesitated and used the front of the car as a shield. He raised his hand and crazily fired the assault rifle at a spot his back faced without aiming.

The two mini submachine guns instantly went silent, and the motorcycle engines' activity became louder.

Long Yuehong seized this opportunity and flipped around, revealing half of his body to the front of the jeep. He then aimed and continued firing, suppressing the enemies and herding them to the side. This also meant that he could fire at the people on the other side of the vehicle.

After he finished firing, he didn't reload. He grabbed Shang Jianyao's Berserker and continued firing.

Amidst the firing, Shang Jianyao drew his United 202 pistol, bent his back, and rushed out towards the two heavy motorcycles like a cheetah.

Long Yuehong did not expect Shang Jianyao to be so bold and take such a risk. However, he did not stop because of this—his eyes had bloodlust in them. Instead, he continued providing Shang Jianyao with suppressive fire.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The two bandits held mini submachine guns with one hand and counterattacked as their motorcycles sped forward.

Shang Jianyao suddenly pounced forward and rolled to avoid the burst of shots. Several fine plumes of dust rose up behind him.

However, the two heavy motorcycles had already approached him at this moment, thanks to their speed. They were less than ten meters away from him.

The helmeted enemy on the motorcycle, who was closer to Shang Jianyao, aimed at him once again. At this distance, he had absolute confidence that Shang Jianyao could not dodge. A corresponding scene even surfaced in his mind: Amidst gunshots, the motorcycles quickly drove past. The enemy's body convulsed and fell. It had already turned tattered and mangled.

The enemy on the other motorcycle counterattacked Long Yuehong, not giving him a chance to restrain them or save his companion.

After Shang Jianyao did his roll, he jumped up and saw the mini submachine gun's black muzzle.

The enemy wearing the helmet didn't hesitate to squeeze the trigger with his finger. Suddenly, his body stiffened, and his movements stopped. A large amount of sweat dripped from his forehead and back. He realized that he had forgotten how to pull a trigger!

He couldn't complete such a simple action as if he had lost the corresponding ability, no matter how hard he tried!

How am I to complete the shot? At that moment, this ridiculous thought surfaced in his mind.

Shang Jianyao's eyes darkened as he seized the opportunity. His expression was cold as he raised his arm and pulled the United 202 pistol's trigger.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

One bullet struck the target's body, another struck the target's neck, and the last one struck the motorcycle.

A hideous wound appeared on the enemy's neck. A large amount of blood gushed out and splattered into the distance.

The bandit's body swayed before he fell from the motorcycle with a thud.

The heavy motorcycle—which had lost its driver—continued racing forward for more than ten meters before crashing to the side. It left the ground slightly trembling, stirring up a large amount of dust.

Shang Jianyao did not stop. His wrist moved slightly, and he aimed at the other enemy—the one shooting at Long Yuehong.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

One of his bullets burrowed into the heavy motorcycle's gas tank, while the two other shots hit the target's torso at the same time. Shang Jianyao's talent with firearms was considered above average among genetically enhanced humans, so his accuracy wasn't bad.

Boom!

The heavy motorcycle fell to the ground and exploded for various reasons.

A gigantic crimson flame rose and wrapped around the enemy on the motorcycle, making him scream, twist, and twitch before falling silent.

The muscular man—who was wearing the military exoskeleton—turned his head when he heard the sound, and his eyes reddened.

Shang Jianyao did not look him in the eye. He ran frantically, did a roll, and returned to the front of the jeep.

The muscular man roared. He no longer cared about the energy depletion and the burden on his body. He went into overdrive and utilized his exoskeleton's powerful mobility. He ran, jumping in the process, and desperately rushed towards the jeep.

This was completely different from his previous cautious approach.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Jiang Baimian's and Bai Chen's shots failed to hit the other party's vital spots. At most, the bullets only created a few scratches.

The strength of a military exoskeleton was evident.

Bang!

The muscular man rose into the air and landed on the jeep's hood heavily. He then aimed his Storm submachine gun, grenade launcher, and electromagnetic weapon's 'muzzles' at the three people below.

At the same time, Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao had aimed at him.

Chapter 23: Getting Worked Up

Despite being angry and willing to take risks, the muscular man still had basic reasoning. He had never considered taking revenge for his two companions at the risk of his life.

According to his plan, he would use the exoskeleton's powerful leg strength to jump high again after landing on the jeep's hood, dodging the life-threatening shots from the enemies in front and behind him. He would then fire a grenade from the sky, blowing up the woman and two men hiding near the jeep's head!

During this process, he could also fire the submachine gun in midair so that he didn't miss a single target. He would then activate the exoskeleton's simple jetpack and forcefully change directions in the air, not giving the enemy hiding around the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's corpse a chance to counterattack.

Just as the muscular man bent his knees slightly and was about to jump up, a strong thought suddenly flashed across his mind. No! I won't!

He felt that he had to beat the enemy—who had riddled his companions' faces with holes resembling a beehive—face-to-face and watch them die in horror and regret. Only then could he vent the anger in his heart. Only then could he truly help his companions take revenge!

Jumping up and delivering a sweeping shot from above was the behavior of a coward. There was no sincerity! A real man had to kill the other party head to head against each other!

This thought quickly turned into an uncontrollable urge, making the man instantly abandon his original plan. Of course, he did not lose his rationale completely. Wearing the iron-black exoskeleton, he suddenly crouched, bent his waist, and tipped his upper body down like a giant. This way, the two men and woman hiding at the jeep's head would face his metal helmet, chest armor, and the spots where he was covered with an auxiliary exoskeleton. Only a few attacks could hit his unprotected body this way.

The next second, he saw his target's eyes that seemed to be darker than a normal person's.

Shang Jianyao did not put on a brave front. He gave up on aiming as he ducked to the side and continued rolling.

Jiang Baimian—who was behind the muscular man—found his actions and posture perfect. She didn't even think before instinctively pulling the trigger.

Bang!

A glistening yellow bullet traversed a distance around 20 to 30 meters, grazed past the iron-black auxiliary exoskeleton, and drilled into the area where the muscular man's spine intersected with the powerpack at a skewed angle.

This completely matched the point that Jiang Baimian was aiming at. It was like shooting an immobile target. For a sharpshooter like her, this wasn't difficult at all. It wouldn't be a problem even if the distance was increased by 20 meters.

With a dull sound, blood bloomed from the man's back.

Amidst the intense pain that almost numbed him, he snapped out of his daze. He couldn't believe that he had been so unreasonable at the critical moment and made the worst possible choice.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Jiang Baimian's second bullet arrived on schedule. Bai Chen's burst of bullets also sank into the muscular man's abdomen. Long Yuehong's continuous shots were blocked by the metal helmet and chest armor, preventing him from harming the enemy.

The man knew that he could not escape, and his expression immediately turned grotesque. As his thoughts raced, he prepared to launch the grenade launchers and fire crazily, a suicidal attack to kill all the enemies in front of him. However, he couldn't pull the trigger no matter what.

Even someone who had never learned how to shoot wouldn't have taken such actions at that moment as long as they had some general knowledge.

His hands seemed to have died one step ahead of him.

Clang!

This muscular man—who wore an exoskeleton that weighed 70 to 80 kilograms—fell onto the jeep's hood heavily. Fresh red blood rapidly polluted the surroundings. His eyes were wide open, seemingly filled with confusion and indignation.

The black SUV that was holding the line in the distance had already begun charging over crazily after the motorcyclists let out tragic cries. However, it was still one step too late. When it entered the passengers' effective firing range, Ji Shun and Ah Yu happened to see the blob of blood erupting from their boss's back. Nôv(e)B\\jnn

Ah Yu roared and stretched half of his body out the window in an attempt to find the enemy and kill them.

At that moment, the bandits' boss fell down with abnormal weight, causing the jeep to shake visibly.

With a creak, the black SUV completed a large drift and flipped over.

Ah Yu was almost thrown out of the car. However, he did not fly into the air because he wore somewhat bulky clothes and had found support in time.

Bang!

The black SUV made another turn and sped back the way it came. It was extremely fast.

"What are you doing?" Ah Yu retracted his body and roared furiously.

The older Ji Shun held the steering wheel and replied loudly, "Fleeing!"

"Boss and the rest are still there!" His eyes bloodshot, Ah Yu pressed his United 202 pistol against Ji Shun's temple and roared, "Go back!"

Unmoved, Ji Shun shouted again, "Boss is already dead! Do you want to die with him?" He almost floored the accelerator.

Ah Yu's lips quivered a few times, and his expression kept changing. After staying stiff for a while, he suddenly swung his arm back and threw his body heavily into the passenger seat.

"You fucking coward!" he shouted angrily. "I'm a fucking coward too..." His voice trailed off, his face covered in tears.

...

Jiang Baimian swapped the magazine of her 9mm Ice Moss and sighed with emotion as she watched the black SUV disappear into the distance. "Wow, they sure ran fast."

It was a pity that she did not bring the grenade launcher with her when she alighted from the jeep. Otherwise, she could have tried launching fireworks at her fleeing enemy.

In the jeep, Long Yuehong had already emptied his gun. He stopped, bent his back, and panted heavily. His eyes were unfocused and dazed. His entire mind seemed to have entered a world that was isolated from the outside world.

Bai Chen held the Orange rifle and looked around. She only heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that there were no other enemies. Her expression was relatively calm as if what had just happened was only a part of her daily life. She would experience it once in a while, so it was not worth wasting too much of her emotions on it.

She had seen the grenade launcher that Jiang Baimian had placed in the passenger seat, but she had confirmed that the muscular man was dead. There was no need for her to fire again. The black SUV had already fled very far. Due to lacking proficiency with grenade launchers, it had lost its value for Bai Chen to attempt attacking.

There's no need to waste a grenade... Bai Chen retracted her gaze and looked at Shang Jianyao, who was seven to eight meters away. She was very confused about the man's final choice.

In the situation earlier, the enemy wearing the exoskeleton had the perfect chance to kill the three of them at the cost of a light injury or a scratch. Unexpectedly, he acted as if he had lost his mind from anger and did not use any tactics. He could only be described as being reckless, nothing else.

In that instant, Shang Jianyao was the only one who reacted differently and pounced to the side in advance.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and glanced at Jiang Baimian, who had run back. "Are you guys injured?"

There was a medical kit in the jeep.

Long Yuehong shuddered when he heard this and snapped out of his daze, returning to the real world. His body trembled from nervousness, but this did not stop him from quickly checking his condition. "I-I'm fine."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao replied with a smile, "My head hurts a little."

"Maybe the sound of explosions and gunshots put some pressure on your ears." Bai Chen analyzed the situation from a practical standpoint.

"Good." Jiang Baimian praised Bai Chen when she returned to the jeep. She then said to Bai Chen, "I have a few abrasions. Give me a bottle of iodine."

After saying that, she took the opportunity to teach Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao. "In the wilderness, fatal danger often comes from infection and pollution. We can't be

careless in this regard just because people who have undergone genetic enhancement have strong immunity and self-repair abilities.”

After Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong nodded, Jiang Baimian took the iodine and disinfected the wound on her hand with a smile. “How was it? Wasn’t it exciting? Thrilling, I might say, right?”

Long Yuehong frowned and spoke with a slightly pale expression. “Team Leader, how can such a thing be described as exciting and thrilling?”

He only felt scared, sad, and nervous. He didn’t want to experience it again. If it weren’t for the fact that his companions hadn’t died, he felt that he might have collapsed on the spot. Even so, he still felt an indescribable feeling when he saw the three people he had previously conversed with lying on the ground silently, each in their own tragic state.

Jiang Baimian was not angry at Long Yuehong’s retort. She smiled and sighed. “This is the norm in the Ashlands. It’s completely different from the situation inside the company. After you experience all kinds of battles, you will realize how lucky and happy you are to still be alive after every battle, especially when your comrades remain alive.

“I mainly wanted to give you a sense of relaxation so that you can get over your PTSD quickly. Heh, don’t compare yourself to Shang Jianyao. His problem might be worse. PTSD isn’t even comparable.”

Shang Jianyao opened his mouth as if he wanted to say that there was nothing wrong with him. At this moment, Bai Chen had already pushed the exoskeleton-covered corpse off the engine hood, causing a heavy thud to sound.

Bai Chen then opened the hood and checked the vehicle’s situation.

Several bullets were jammed in the front of the jeep.

“How is it?” Jiang Baimian asked.

“It’s indeed damaged... I don’t know if it can be repaired. I’ll give it a try first.” Bai Chen pulled the gray scarf around her neck and returned to the trunk. She took out the plastic carry box that contained the repair tools. “I hope it can be fixed.”

Jiang Baimian turned to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “Clean the battlefield and gather valuable items. I’ll be in charge of guarding the surroundings and preventing any accidents. Yes, let’s start from here.”

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong walked towards the corpse wearing the exoskeleton.

If they could strip the exoskeleton as soon as possible and grasp its usage techniques, they had a high chance of dealing with future situations successfully.

Chapter 24: Letter

As the problem of recycling after the wearer died had to be considered when designing military exoskeletons, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had familiarized themselves with such objects during their first two months of training. Therefore, they were no strangers to such matters. Shang Jianyao did a simple search before he found the button and successfully switched off the integration system and powerpack.

After Shang Jianyao completed this step, no further technical work was needed. Thus, he undid the metal buckles on the auxiliary joints one by one.

As Long Yuehong fiddled with the buckles on the elbows and wrists, he opened his mouth before closing it again. After hesitating three times, he finally couldn't suppress his voice and asked, "Weren't you nervous or scared just now?"

Shang Jianyao—who was in charge of the legs—pointed at himself. "Are you asking me?"

"Who else is here besides you?" Long Yuehong asked, bemused and angry at the same time.

Bai Chen was repairing the jeep behind him. Jiang Baimian held a pistol and had circled to the other side. Only he and Shang Jianyao were in the tiny area where the corpse was.

Shang Jianyao patted the corpse's thigh. "There's still him."

"..." Long Yuehong wanted to curse the guy opposite him, but he felt a little scared for some baffling reason. He recalled the stories adults often used to scare children.

Shang Jianyao restrained his smile, and tersely agreed. "Being nervous and scared is definite."

"But I couldn't tell at all," Long Yuehong blurted out.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. "Because I told myself in my heart: your goal is to save all of humanity."

"...What's the connection?" Long Yuehong felt that he was already used to Shang Jianyao's occasional brain spasms. "I mean, why aren't you scared or nervous any longer?"

Shang Jianyao replied solemnly, "On the way to achieve this goal, sacrifices are inevitable."

At that moment, Long Yuehong didn't know if Shang Jianyao was normal or not. He quickly decided to abandon the topic and asked, "Don't you feel terrible after killing two people with your own hands? Not long ago, they could still joke, walk, and jump. They were alive with blood pumping through their bodies. Uh... It might not be terrible, but don't you feel anything different?"

Shang Jianyao nodded indiscernibly. "Yes."

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief for some reason.

Shang Jianyao continued. "I wanted to fire two more shots."

"...Why?" Long Yuehong gave up trying to keep his train of thought in sync with Shang Jianyao's.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him and cast his gaze at the jeep behind him. "We never thought of robbing them, hurting them, or shooting them. Yet, they had ill intentions towards us from the beginning. They tracked us all the way here and attacked us the moment they had the chance.

"If we hadn't acted with outstanding results and they made an additional mistake, we would be the ones lying here now with our corpses being searched. Do you think they would feel anything special about this?"

"No, they only know how to sing, spit on us, eat our energy bars, eat our compressed biscuits, eat our military canned food, and cook hot pot with the Blackmarsh Iron Snake we killed. How can that be tolerated?"

The described scene instinctively flashed across Long Yuehong's mind, reminding him of the intense hunger he had endured since he was young. He immediately flew into a rage. "No way!"

After answering, he immediately deflated like a basketball that hadn't been pumped in a long time. "However, I still don't find it comfortable."

When Shang Jianyao heard this, the corners of his mouth slowly rose, revealing a slightly exaggerated smile. "This is the Ashlands. Get used to it."

"You make it sound like this isn't the first time you've come to the surface..." Long Yuehong muttered and started busying himself.

Before long, they opened up all the metal clasps and took off the military exoskeleton from the corpse.

Jiang Baimian had returned to the jeep at some point in time, and thoughtfully said, "Long Yuehong, give it a try and see if you can drive it."

Such things always made some men fervent with passion, and Long Yuehong was one of them. He couldn't care less that blood was still on the exoskeleton, and he quickly urged Shang Jianyao to help. With Shang Jianyao's help, he adjusted the auxiliary bone's length, put on the powerpack, the iron-black helmet, and locked the metal clasps in place.

After the integration system had completed its self-checks, Long Yuehong shot a glance at the indicator and quickly reported, "There's still 23% battery left. It says it can last 1 hour and 55 minutes."

Jiang Baimian raised her left leg and pointed at the man's corpse with the tip of her foot. "Don't believe that. It will only last that long in a situation when you maintain normal operation and only do the basics. If you want to fly, burrow, and jump like how this person did earlier, I estimate that it will last half an hour at most with all the systems operating at maximum capacity."

"Okay." Long Yuehong began doing all kinds of basic actions.

After a series of maneuvers, he said in surprise, "Team Leader, this is much more useful than the one we use in the company!"

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "That is because our company is the one making replicas. Think about what kind of capabilities our biological company can have with machines and electronics."

"That's true." Long Yuehong excitedly tested the military exoskeleton's other functions.

Shang Jianyao remained crouching in the same spot, searching the corpse's every pocket. He didn't even miss out the underwear's inner layer.

Finally, he looked at the items in front of him in disdain. "There are only two bags of biscuits."

These two packets of biscuits were not compressed. On the wrapping were rows of Red River words. Due to the severe wear and tear, Shang Jianyao could barely identify the words 'scallions' and 'soda.'

In the Ashlands, the two most mainstream languages were the Ashlands language and the Red River language. The former was the common language of Pangu Biology, the Salvation Army, and other factions. The latter was mainly used in the Red River Zone and the factions closest to the Red River Zone. This included First City, the White Knights, and the Orange Company.

In addition to these two packs of biscuits, Shang Jianyao also found two pieces of paper and a badge. One of the two envelopes was neatly folded, while the other was randomly folded.

Shang Jianyao unfolded the neat, clean letter and casually evaluated it. "This has been folded many times."

After Jiang Baimian instructed Long Yuehong to guard the surroundings, she went to Shang Jianyao's side, squatted down, and read the letter with him.

This letter was in the Ashlands text: "Dear Father, I led a good life in First City in the beginning. Although I still have some problems reading the language, there's basically nothing wrong with my conversational speaking skills. No one will ever discover that I come from the wilderness..."

"...The ranks here are very strict, but it's beautiful like heaven compared to the outside world. As long as you follow their rules and obey people of a higher ranking than you, find your own social class and status, you can lead a smoother life..."

"...You don't have to worry about my studies. With that person's help, I've already been transferred to a formal school. As long as I graduate successfully, I can get rid of my slave status and become a citizen..."

"...I wonder if there's still enough food in town? Although it's still summer, I heard from my classmates that winter will be especially torturous this year. I don't know where their judgment comes from, but I feel it's necessary to tell you so that everyone can make some preparations as soon as possible. Even if it's a rumor, I'd rather believe it than ignore it..."

"...You previously said that you became a Ruin Hunter. This is a good thing. Compared to being a bandit, this occupation is clearly safer. Of course, it's also very dangerous... Don't go to the newly discovered city ruins, and don't go to the city ruins that few people return from. Also, don't be a bandit any longer, even though it's the fastest way to bring back winter food to town..."

"...I will try to find merchants in the city who dare smuggle food, but I don't have the confidence or the resources to exchange for them. I only hope that I get an opportunity from the descendants who introduced me to the Senate Elders..."

"...Finally, I hope that you will always be healthy. I hope that the famine won't come. I hope that Uncle Ji Shun, Uncle Jinfeng, Ah Yu, and Qian Ning will lead a good life. I hope that they will all be able to bring back enough food for their families. I hope that everyone can wait for the Senate's approval until the day they join First City as citizens, not slaves. Also, that person is very good to Mother. There's no need to worry about her..."

“...Your baby, An Ji.”

After reading it, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao didn't speak for a long time.

“This is the Ashlands.” After a while, Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly.

Shang Jianyao replied in a low voice. “He has read this letter no fewer than 20 times...” He could make a judgment based on the letter's creases and the paper's condition.

Jiang Baimian wanted to tell Shang Jianyao that there was no need to feel guilty about fighting to the death in such a skirmish. However, she suddenly recalled something and could only pat Shang Jianyao's shoulder. “Everyone has two sides, sometimes even more than two. They're completely different to a child and to a stranger. As a stranger, you don't have to care about what happens to that child after he loses his father. You just have to be thankful that you're still alive.

“I know what you're thinking. I've also heard some rumors, and I can tell you with certainty that our company's people will not be reduced to wilderness bandits of such a level. If we want to plunder, we will only plunder an opposing faction's supplies and transport team.”

Shang Jianyao didn't say a word. He folded the letter and stuffed it back into the muscular man's inner pocket. He then unfolded the other letter, a crumpled one.

“Mission description: Explore the northern area of Yuelu Station and gather information regarding the target.

“Target description: Male. Unknown origins. About 1.8 meters tall, has black hair and golden eyes. He's very handsome and has the same outstanding charm. He likes to wear a trench coat, boots, and gloves. His hair is always neatly combed. He's nothing like a wilderness nomad. His danger level is temporarily considered High.

“Reward: One ton of ordinary-grade flour (Guild guarantee).

“Quest level: C, 100 credit points.”

“This is the Hunter's Guild's mission document,” Jiang Baimian introduced. Then, she thoughtfully picked up the badge that Shang Jianyao had found. “Yuelu Station is an Old World ruin in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. Further north is the Great Swamp's depths. It's filled with danger.”

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian checked the badge in her hand. The badge was brass in color. Embossed on the front was a human face with blurry facial features. On the human face's cheeks were a saber and a spear. On the back of the badge was a small chip.

This was a badge from the Hunter's Guild.

Chapter 25: Sweeping Clean the Battlefield

Jiang Baimian played with the badge and placed her left index finger on the chip. An undetectable electric current seemed to flash.

Jiang Baimian retracted her finger after a few seconds and smiled. "He's also an Official Hunter."

Official Hunters were a term used by the Hunter's Guild because of their differentiation to Ruin Hunters. This differentiation had nothing to do with strength, at least on the surface. The Hunter's Guild relied on so-called credit points. After all, the Hunter's Guild was established with the intention of helping everyone exchange information and resources better, not providing them with an opportunity to rise.

When it came to transactions, credit was more important than strength. Therefore, the first president of the Hunter's Guild obtained inspiration from the Old World's systems and designed the credit point system.

After Ruin Hunters joined the guild, they could obtain different amounts of credit points by completing their assignments, making deals with others, and providing reliable information to the guild. This did not conflict with their compensation, and the two could be considered as having levels of overlap.

When one's credit points reached 100, a Rookie Hunter could become an Official Hunter. Above Official Hunters were Intermediate Hunters, Senior Hunters, Advanced Hunters, and Master Hunters. One could only reach these ranks by repeatedly taking missions and carrying out transactions. Of course, if one's rank and credit points were insufficient, one could not accept many missions or carry out many kinds of transactions. Others would not trust the person in question unless one or a few highly credible hunters could vouch for them.

Therefore, it was not unacceptable for a Rookie Hunter to be stronger than an Advanced Hunter or a Master Hunter. However, from a different perspective, being able to complete many missions and transactions in the dangerous Ashlands, remain alive, and accumulate sufficient credit points proved many things. Advanced Hunters and Master Hunters were always outstanding in terms of strength, team strength, and the resources they had.

In other words, those with low credit points might not be weak, but those with high credit points were definitely strong—at least in some areas.

Due to the importance of credit points, the Hunter's Guild always strictly dealt with breaches of contracts, violations, fraud, and dishonest transactions. Upon discovery, the corresponding credit points would immediately be deducted, and the information

regarding the breach of trust would be labeled in the badge's chip. If the problem was serious, the guild might even revoke the person in question's membership and blacklist them across the world. These people were generally known as Dark Hunters. Of course, because an information network didn't cover the entire Ashlands, it might take months or even longer for the blacklist to spread to all the branches.

As for whether Ruin Hunters were part-time bandits or if they had killed people, the guild didn't care as long as it didn't involve the missions or transactions. In addition to these things, the Hunter's Guild also had a title—Chief Hunter.

This was considered an honor. It depended more on one's qualifications. There could only be one Chief Hunter in every region's Hunter's Guild branch.

These were all the things Shang Jianyao learned in class and during training. Therefore, he was not curious about the term 'Official Hunter.' However, he still looked at Jiang Baimian seriously without saying a word.

Jiang Baimian looked down at herself and suddenly laughed. "Are you wondering why I can read the contents of the Hunter's Badge chip?"

A Hunter's Badge chip usually could only be read by special machines at the various Hunter's Guild branches.

Shang Jianyao immediately nodded without hiding his intent.

Jiang Baimian raised her left arm and said, "Since it's an electric eel-type biomechanical limb, it's very reasonable to install simple chips, sensors, data transmission lines, and other miscellaneous items that require electricity.

"It's not too difficult to read the contents of the chip. Oh, but it's very difficult to erase and rewrite it. The Hunter's Guild uses a special chip and special machine bought from the Mechanical Paradise. The technology involved can't be underwritten."

Shang Jianyao came to a realization and curiously asked, "Are biological prosthetics nowadays all equipped with electronic and mechanical objects?"

"Our philosophy is: as long as it's useful. Besides, the intersection of biological, electronic, and mechanical objects is also a key research area. Just like how many large factions are attempting to combine exoskeleton equipment and artificial intelligence armor to create a truly practical kinetic armor," Jiang Baimian explained casually.

Suddenly, she yelped.

Shang Jianyao's hand immediately reached for his Ice Moss's handle.

“Haha, I’ve squatted for too long. My legs are a little numb.” Jiang Baimian stood up in embarrassment and flexed her legs. Her ponytail shook behind her.

After Shang Jianyao stood up, she said, “This mission is a little strange. Gathering information on a specific person in the Blackmarsh Wilderness is like casting a net into the sea to capture a specific fish.”

Shang Jianyao quickly asked, “Have you seen the sea?”

“...That’s not the point.” Jiang Baimian spat. “At least I’ve seen a real lake. The sea should be much wider than that.”

Shang Jianyao ignored Jiang Baimian’s answer and continued discussing the previous topic. “Maybe this mission isn’t just issued to one hunter.”

“That’s true. Spreading out the net is wise.” Jiang Baimian agreed with his words.

After saying that, she and Shang Jianyao sighed with emotion in unison. “How rich!”

Anyone who could provide effective information would be rewarded. This meant that more than one ton of flour had to be prepared.

Jiang Baimian cast her gaze deep into the swamp, which was north of Yuelu Station. She muttered to herself in confusion, “Who exactly is that fellow? He’s worth so much attention...”

At this moment, Bai Chen completed the repairs. She sat in the driver’s seat and tried to start the jeep.

A hubbub sounded. Even Shang Jianyao could tell that it was abnormal.

Bai Chen stuck her head out of the window and shouted at Jiang Baimian. “It was damaged in the back, as well as in many places. I can barely drive it now, but it can’t go fast. Besides, I’m not sure when it will completely break down.”

“Can’t you fix it?” Jiang Baimian asked solemnly.

Bai Chen shook her head. “I can, but we lack key components. Team Leader, I remember there’s a nomad settlement in the wilderness not far away. We only need two to three hours to reach it. Why don’t we take a detour and go there to see if we can exchange for what we need?”

“Even if the jeep breaks down halfway, I can still rush over on that motorcycle and come back.” She pointed at the relatively intact heavy motorcycle.

The other motorcycle had been destroyed in the previous explosion, leaving behind only a pile of scrap metal.

Jiang Baimian thought for two seconds before saying, "Alright."

Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao immediately checked the other two corpses and finally obtained a slightly damaged heavy motorcycle, two mini submachine guns, some submachine gun rounds, some useful components from the motorcycle remains, half a loaf of bread, and a few tobacco leaves that had been rolled into cigarettes.

They also obtained a Storm submachine gun from the muscular man who died.

Long Yuehong put on the exoskeleton and carried the light machine guns back.

Jiang Baimian identified them and happily said, "These three submachine guns use 9mm rounds, the most common type. We've prepared a lot of them!"

She then looked at the light machine gun and sighed regretfully. "7.92 mm bullets. That's temporarily useless. Let's put it in the car first. We can exchange it later or bring it back to the company."

"There won't be a place to put the exoskeleton if we put this in the trunk," said Bai Chen with a frown.

Their trunk had canned food, biscuits, ammunition, and filter chips.

"The exoskeleton can be placed on the passenger seat. Everyone will take turns riding the heavy motorcycle. Besides, the three of us can squeeze into the backseat. It's very spacious," Jiang Baimian casually said.

Bai Chen tersely acknowledged her words. "That heavy motorcycle needs fuel, so we might not be able to refuel it. Let's try our best to trade it away later."

Jiang Baimian did not respond directly and looked around. "Alright, everyone, disperse and pick up the bullet shells that you can see. This is a strategic resource. Long Yuehong, you can take off your exoskeleton and conserve some electricity. We only brought along a spare high-performance battery this time. We have to be careful."

As for the solar charger board on the car roof, it could only charge the jeep once a day.

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong had just finished answering when he suddenly thought of something. He turned around and pointed to the side of the road. "What about that?"

He was referring to the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's massive corpse.

Jiang Baimian's smart-looking eyebrows twitched. "There's no way to move it... We can forget about the meat. It's best not to eat such creatures that have mutated due to pollution unless you have nothing to eat.

"We can't take the poison sac in its mouth either. We didn't bring any sealing devices, and the liquid inside is prone to bursting. When the time comes, the Blackmarsh Iron Snake will unknowingly succeed in its revenge.

"Strip off that layer of skin. We should be able to take it away. Yes, fold it up and tie it to the top of the car. This is an excellent biological material. The Research Department will definitely like it. They have been making similar bionic armor.

"Long Yuehong, go deal with it in the exoskeleton. Its helmet provides anti-poison protection. Also, if I remember correctly, it should have the auxiliary function of high-temperature cutting. Remember, start with the eye and mouth."

After 15 minutes of busy work, Long Yuehong skinned the mutated python with Shang Jianyao's help—the latter wore a gas mask.

It was folded, then bundled up and tied to the top of the jeep. It was secured to a fixture on the solar charger with a cord.

"Phew, it's settled." Jiang Baimian clapped her hands and watched Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao put the exoskeleton on the passenger seat.

"How are we going to deal with this?" She pointed at the three corpses not far away. "Are we going to strip them of their clothes?"

Clothes were also a form of currency in the Ashlands, only slightly inferior to food and firearms.

Before Bai Chen and Long Yuehong could give their opinions, Shang Jianyao spoke first with a serious expression. "Let's throw them into the swamp."

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. "Alright."

Chapter 26: "Makeup Lesson"

A corpse was thrown very high and far into the swamp ahead, splashing up plenty of mud. It became embedded in the black and muddy surface before sinking inch by inch.

Beside it was two scenes that were mostly the same, except that the corpses were buried deeper in the mud.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong stared at each other for a few seconds before retracting their gazes and walking to the jeep.

Jiang Baimian did not ask for a raise of hands to decide who would be the first to ride the heavy motorcycles. She immediately wore the corresponding helmet and sat on it. While carrying a mini submachine gun on her back, she turned her head to look at Shang Jianyao and the others and said with a smile, "I've always wanted to get myself one of these for a long time, but I never had the chance."

Before she could finish her sentence, she had already revved the engines, producing a deep and mighty roar from the heavy motorcycle. Jiang Baimian lowered her torso. Although it was her first time riding a motorcycle, the way she posed looked rather professional.

The engine's roar grew louder as the heavy motorcycle shot out like an arrow, racing along the edge of the swamp and heading into the distance.

"The romance of steel and fuel..." Long Yuehong muttered enviously. "As well as freedom and wind."

With a boom, the heavy motorcycle turned around and stopped not far away.

Jiang Baimian propped herself up with her feet and pulled up her helmet visor. She laughed dryly. "Hey, erh, Bai Chen, which way should we go?"

Bai Chen looked down at her scarf and loudly replied, "Follow the jeep!"

"Huh? What did you say?" Jiang Baimian raised her hand to cup her ear, but it was blocked by the helmet. That didn't change her smile though. She pulled her visor down and rode the heavy motorcycle back to the jeep as if she made that decision herself.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong got into the jeep one after another. Bai Chen sat in the driver's seat again and started the jeep.

They advanced through the Blackmarsh Wilderness at a relatively low speed due to such a roster. From time to time, they would change directions and circle around any obstacles. During this process, Jiang Baimian repeatedly used the excuse of investigating their surroundings to leave the convoy and speed off in different directions on her motorcycle.

Nearly two hours later, Bai Chen stopped the jeep, which seemed a little overburdened. She pushed open the door and said to Jiang Baimian, who had just come roaring back from the distance, "Team Leader, we're almost at the settlement."

Jiang Baimian propped herself up with one foot and pulled up her visor. "What do you have in mind?"

Bai Chen touched the rather rough skin on her face. "I'm worried that the wilderness nomads in the settlements will overreact if we go over like this. They are always very

vigilant about such matters. How about this? You guys wait here while I ride the motorcycle over and finish the job before returning to bring you over? If they don't allow us entry, I'll try closing the trade outside."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, "Our firepower is indeed terrifying."

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake's outer skin tied to the top of the jeep was even more terrifying.

Jiang Baimian immediately dismounted, parked the motorcycle, took off her helmet, and handed it to Bai Chen.

After watching Bai Chen's back disappear into the sparse forest ahead, Jiang Baimian opened the jeep's door and sat in the driver's seat.

"Do you want one?" She smiled and picked up a simple cigar from the armrest compartment. These were the spoils of war they had previously obtained.

The tobacco leaf, roasted yellowish-black, exuded an indescribable fragrance.

"No thanks." Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao shook their heads at the same time.

"What's wrong with the two of you? This is a luxury good!" Jiang Baimian put down the simple cigar. "Countless people who have been on battlefields are crazy about it. This allows them to relax their minds and keep their sanity. It's just like how alcohol-based beverages can make people forget many unhappy matters they are unwilling to recall. Sigh, many people can only be happy when they are drunk."

"That's not true happiness[1]." Shang Jianyao suddenly sang.

"Yo, you're even singing." Jiang Baimian's mouth opened slightly as she reprimanded him in jest.

Shang Jianyao nodded seriously. "I like music."

"But the lyrics don't seem right..." Jiang Baimian stroked the metal device in her ear.

Shang Jianyao replied as if he were discussing an academic question. "The lyrics can be modified to suit the current scene. This can help in expressing it better."

"..." Jiang Baimian waved her hand. "That's not the point. I almost forgot what I wanted to say after you interrupted me!"

She grunted angrily. "I mentioned tobacco because I wanted to raise the topic of war trauma. Although the battle you just experienced hasn't reached that level, you still need to pay attention to such problems. Be it cigarettes, alcohol, or even drugs, they aren't

actually a good way to deal with the trauma. It's easy for you to develop a serious reliance on them, and it's not good for your health.

"If there are any situations where you are too tense, stressed, anxious, irritable, or unable to focus, you can chat with me at any time. I've taken some psychiatry lessons."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong replied loudly. "Just now, on the way to the settlement, Bai Chen actually talked to us about this matter. I feel much better now."

"Good." Jiang Baimian praised him. "Ever since the higher-ups approved the establishment of this Old Task Force, the best thing I did was approve Bai Chen's application. Tsk, you have to agree on my good taste, right?"

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's response, she leaned against the driver's seat and continued speaking, her eyes darting about slightly. "I don't know when Bai Chen will return. Since I have nothing to do, I'll tell you guys something else—something I didn't tell you guys before."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong immediately sat up straight as if they were still in school.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Relax! Pay attention to our surroundings! Aren't you afraid that a rocket will come from nowhere and wipe us all out? Alright, let's get back to the topic at hand. Didn't I tell you before? In the Ashlands, apart from an extremely small number of creatures, humanity's most dangerous enemy will always be humans.

"Then, which humans are considered dangerous? Long Yuehong, what types of humans do you think are dangerous?"

Long Yuehong thought for a moment before saying, "Those wearing an exoskeleton."

The military exoskeleton had left a deep impression on him in the previous battle. He even suspected that this would be one of the sources of his nightmares.

"Yes, there are also people wearing bionic artificial intelligence armor. These two types of people can deal with a team alone, or even wipe out a small nomad settlement in the wilderness." Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Shang Jianyao. "What other types of people do you think comes under this category?"

"A team equipped with heavy weapons, a team with outstanding firepower, and people who have installed a specific type of biomechanical limb or undergone corresponding mechanical and electronic modifications." Shang Jianyao offered three answers in one breath.

“Indeed.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. She stroked her left arm with her right hand and said, “It has raised my strength significantly, but my original arm is still the best. You guys have to cherish what you have!”

She then added, “In addition, there are the monks from the Monks Conclave and the Genetically Enhanced. You might not know this, but people like you are called the Chosen Ones in many factions.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

Jiang Baimian laughed. “You two have had too much contact with such matters. Furthermore, you are one yourself, so you don’t understand how precious such technology is. Among all the factions, only our company and the White Knights can steadily carry out genetic enhancement and produce the corresponding liquid.

“Think about it. Wouldn’t a tall, muscular, fast, energetic person with good reflexes, solid coordination, a good sense of balance, strong immunity, powerful self-healing ability, relatively outstanding vision, and talent in firearms be like heaven’s chosen one to an ordinary person? Isn’t such a person synonymous with danger?”

“However, don’t let your arrogance get to you. Some factions are extremely resistant to genetic technology, believing that this is a violation of nature and sacrilege towards the gods. They believe it’s the main reason for the Old World’s destruction.”

Jiang Baimian took a breath before continuing, “Those stronger than Genetically Enhanced are those who have undergone genetic modification. They often have abilities that humans do not have. In this regard, Subhumans that are abnormal due to pollution have similar performance. I’ve even seen Subhumans who can carry out photosynthesis by themselves and not have to eat for three months. However, the technology for genetic modification is still very immature. The failure rate and mortality rate are rather high. Don’t try it easily.”

Subhumans were normal humans themselves. However, they had been infected during the Cataclysm that destroyed the Old World, which resulted in mutations.

Although a large portion would die shortly after infection, some still managed to survive and pass on their abnormalities to their descendants. Normal humans discriminated against these people and banished them from the settlements. They were also given the insulting name of ‘Subhuman.’

Due to their physical changes and similar encounters, it was inevitable that Subhumans would hate normal humans. They always carried an indescribable resentment, and the two parties gradually became mortal enemies.

This development resulted in the term ‘Subhuman’ truly spreading across the Ashlands, becoming an academic term.

In the New Calendar era—many years after the Old World was destroyed—there was still intense pollution in certain areas. The abnormalities had not disappeared amongst the human population, so new Subhumans constantly appeared. Of course, most of the living Subhumans in present times were the result of natural reproduction.

“I didn’t know that there are such Subhumans...” Long Yuehong knew what a Subhuman was, but he had never heard of the Subhumans described by Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and glanced at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong before speaking nonchalantly. “Apart from the ones I mentioned just now, there is also a type of human that can be considered dangerous, or you could say, extremely dangerous.”

“What kind of human?” Long Yuehong was abnormally curious. Shang Jianyao was the same.

The two of them had more or less learned all of the things that had been mentioned in the textbooks and from their training. However, nobody had put together the content from the perspective of ‘dangerous humans.’

Jiang Baimian lowered her head and smiled. “Awakened.”

“Awakened...” Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao repeated softly.

Jiang Baimian looked up at the two of them and said, “The Awakened are humans who have undergone strange mutations for some reason. All of them have some strange and terrifying abilities. Some people used to think that some of an Awakened’s abilities should be described as funny. However, it has been proven that no matter how funny an ability is, it will become very terrifying when used in the right circumstances.

“To date, no faction has been able to figure out the law governing the production of the Awakened. All experiments on artificially-produced Awakened have failed. Therefore, there are very few Awakened, and they are not easy to encounter. I was in no rush to inform you about them. Ah, right. This is knowledge that needs to be kept confidential.”

Long Yuehong worriedly asked, “Team Leader, you make the Awakened sound so strong. How should we deal with them if we encounter them?” Nôv(e)B\\jnn

Shang Jianyao remained silent, not saying a word.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “Other than a small number of very powerful Awakened, the powers of most Awakened have a limited range. That range limit isn’t that high. Based on this, you should try your best to distance yourselves and solve the problem with firearms from afar if you encounter them.”

“I see...” Long Yuehong began to imagine the corresponding scene.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly as if he was pondering over something.

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian added, "Also, don't only focus on these dangerous humans. Our bodies are too fragile. If we are careless, even a seven-year-old child has a chance of finishing us off."

...

Bai Chen rode on the heavy motorcycle. After circling around for a while, she actually followed a seemingly muddy path into the swamp.

Ten minutes later, a red dot appeared on the road in front of her.

A gently moving red dot of light.

It was a warning.

[1] Author's Note: From May Day's "You Are Not Truly Happy." Originally, in order to prevent censorship for this book, I made this book completely a fantasy. However, sometimes, in order to trigger a resonance with readers, I will still quote and modify some real-life poems or lyrics to allow everyone to produce the corresponding melody and scene in their minds upon reading it. This is very necessary for the later scenes.

Chapter 27: Moat Town

Bai Chen immediately slowed down the heavy motorcycles and looked up ahead.

A reddish-brown wall was 100 meters away. It stretched out to the sides as far as it could, bending at the ends of Bai Chen's line of sight as if it were going to surround her.

Most of the bricks on this wall were mottled and old, but a small number looked very new, as though they had been cast in the past year.

Rusted barbed wire lined both the walls and their exterior. Only one path provided passage.

On the wooden outposts that were erected between the barbed wire and walls were armed, patrolling guards, wearing dirty and messy clothes.

The one who warned Bai Chen was the guard standing on the highest wooden outpost. He wore a yellowish, stiff shirt inside, and a navy-blue coat outside. It was suspected to be a cotton jacket that appeared puffy and bloated.

This guard had an automatic rifle slung over his body while he held a black, pen-like object. This object emitted a red laser that shone in front of Bai Chen, forming a small dot.

Bai Chen stopped the motorcycle, took off her helmet, and tried to tuck her short hair behind her ears. She was deliberately revealing herself as female. This was not to charm or seduce anyone, but simply to let the other party relax a little and not be too nervous.

She knew very well that, in the Ashlands—where there was little law and order—even if firearms could reduce the harm men and women could dish out to those of the same level, they could not truly bridge the gap between the two parties.

Be it in terms of physique or aggression, men were more dangerous than women. A male stranger induced greater panic than a woman.

In the years Bai Chen roamed the wilderness, she had always been in two different states. When she needed to explore ruins, hunt in the wilderness, pass through relatively dangerous areas, and transact with certain bandits, she would hide her long hair, darken her face, and change her clothes to make herself look like a man.

When she approached a settlement with a certain level of order or interacted with Ruin Hunters from large factions—who cared more about news and information regarding the Old World—she would reveal her female identity.

After she was recruited by Pangu Biology and gained some confidence, she could finally cut an ear-length hairstyle that she preferred.

After placing the helmet in front of her, Bai Chen let the heavy motorcycle slowly continue forward. During this process, the red dot of light kept swaying in front of her, occasionally landing on her motorcycle. This meant that the other party was already aiming at her and wasn't letting his guard down.

When the distance between the two parties reduced to 30 meters, Bai Chen tilted the motorcycle, propped herself with one foot, and shouted, "I'm here to look for Mayor Tian Erhe!"

She repeated it twice and stopped talking before waiting patiently.

One of the guards on the wooden outpost broke rank and stomped down the slanted wooden plank.

Five to six minutes later, an elder appeared on the wall. He wore a furry, dark-blue hat as if he wore an overturned, alms bowl on his head. He had very obvious white hair at his temples. His eye sockets were sunken, and his face was thin. Wrinkles were in all the normal spots, making him look very old. However, his dark brown eyes remained bright and spirited. He was none other than Tian Erhe, the mayor of this settlement.

He wore a white, yellowing T-shirt, a wrinkled, patched suit, and a large, military-green coat that did not match his figure. He also wore a pair of dark-yellow woolen pants. It was unknown how many other pants were stuffed inside, but it looked baggy.

Tian Erhe looked at Bai Chen and took several seconds to identify her. "Ah..." He seemed to recognize her, but he realized that Bai Chen was too far away when he wanted to greet her. He couldn't shout as loudly as he used to.

He quickly turned his head and angrily said to the guard beside him, "Give me my loudspeaker! Seriously, there's a shortage of brains here!"

The guard aggrievedly replied, "Your loudspeaker has long run out of battery. I haven't been able to exchange for a battery of the same model. I-I can help you shout..."

Tian Erhe thought for a moment and said, "Help me shout: Bai, where have you been this past year? I thought you were gobbled up by beasts!"

"Bai..." The guard came to a realization. "Is she the Bai Chen who used to come here often?"

"Who else could it be? I'm already in my seventies. My eyesight is getting worse and worse, yet I can recognize her. Why are you, a young lad in your twenties, acting like a blind person?" Tian Erhe glanced at the guard and cursed.

Everyone in this settlement was already accustomed to Tian Erhe's temper. The guard did not mind his tirade and only muttered, "She's much better looking than before... I wouldn't have recognized her if I didn't look carefully..."

Without waiting for Tian Erhe to glare at him, the guard shouted, "Bai, where have you been this past year? I thought you were gobbled up by beasts!"

Bai Chen's expression softened unconsciously as she replied loudly, "Somewhere else. Mayor, I'm here to exchange for some items!"

This place was called Moat Town. Bai Chen had heard Tian Erhe mention that the name of the town came from before the Old World was destroyed, and it was named this way because of the four water bodies circling it.

After the destruction of the Old World, the prolonged wars, and the multiple geological disasters, the nearby water bodies had already become a part of the Great Swamp. This gave Moat Town a natural defense, providing it with sufficient cover.

Only Moat Town's residents and the guests they previously invited could find the path that seemed to be covered in mud in the Great Swamp and reach this place despite the maze-like environment. Compared to the settlements that often had to migrate, Moat

Town—with a clean water source and plenty of arable land—had been here since the Old World was destroyed.

Tian Erhe wanted to speak loudly, but his throat itched before he could really speak. He couldn't help but cough twice. "Come in, come in." He waved his hand in exasperation.

The guard beside him immediately shouted, "Come in! Come in! Leave the guns with the person at the door!"

Smack!

Tian Erhe slapped him. "Who told you to say the last sentence? Bai is someone we can trust!"

"But she hasn't been here for a year," the guard replied stubbornly.

Tian Erhe fell silent for two seconds. He didn't say anything else and turned to get off the wooden outpost.

Bai Chen didn't resist. She handed the rifle on her back, the pistol on her belt, and the heavy motorcycle to the guard at the door.

The two panes of the iron-black door opened.

Tian Erhe was already waiting there. He sized up Bai Chen and chuckled. "Looks like you've been doing well recently. You used to be a lass caked in mud."

Bai Chen instinctively closed her eyes. "A team took me in."

Tian Erhe nodded thoughtfully. "Not bad, not bad." He didn't continue the topic and casually asked, "Where's your robot? It was called... 35 if I remember correctly."

Bai Chen's eyes drooped slightly. After a second, she said, "It's broken."

Tian Erhe fell silent. After a few seconds, he took a deep breath and asked her a question as if nothing had happened. "What do you want to exchange?"

"Some car components..." Bai Chen replied calmly.

Tian Erhe smiled and interrupted Bai Chen, "Stop! Don't tell me what they are. I wouldn't know either. I'll bring you there to take a look, and you can choose."

He turned around and led Bai Chen deeper into the town.

This town was not large, completely different from the towns based on one's understanding of the Old World.

Bai Chen looked over and saw three three-story buildings in the distance first. The buildings weren't tall, but they spanned a long stretch. There were many rooms on each floor.

These three buildings weren't built along a straight line. From a bird's-eye view, they were all slanted, forming an inverted and skewed equilateral triangle.

As far as Bai Chen knew, the people who lived here were members of the town guard and their families. People with important skills could be assigned rooms. For example, those who knew how to repair firearms or those who knew about agricultural technology from the Old World.

These buildings came with private bathrooms or common bathrooms on each floor. Also flanking both sides of the triangular layout were two large public bathrooms—one vertical and one horizontal. In front of the buildings was a town square paved with cement. Beyond the town square were three small squares—which were side by side—made of compressed soil.

A row of houses were on each side of the town square. They were not far from the wall and belonged to the original residents of Moat Town. With Moat Town's population, most residents had town guards in their family. Otherwise, a town guard could not have been maintained.

On the four squares were countless houses erected haphazardly. There were mud houses, brick houses, and tents. These buildings came from the wilderness nomads that Moat Town had taken in over the years and original townsfolk who had broken the law.

At this moment, the sun was still in the sky. Evening was still some time away.

A portion of Moat Town's residents were still working in the fields towards the back of the town. The other portion had gone out to hunt as a team, with only a few people staying behind to guard the town.

They walked out of the densely packed houses and cast their gazes from behind the glass. The thing they had in common was that their faces weren't too clean. Their hair was yellow and greasy. Their clothes weren't a complete set, nor did the sizes necessarily match their bodies. However, their eyes were more spirited than the wilderness nomads whom Bai Chen had encountered elsewhere.

Bai Chen didn't care about other people's gazes. Somewhat unaccustomed, she asked, "Mayor, how... how have you been lately?"

Tian Erhe laughed self-deprecatingly. "Still doing alright, but I'm getting more and more afraid of the cold. Look, it's not even winter yet, but I'm already wearing so much. Heh, I wonder if I can survive this winter."

“You definitely can,” replied Bai Chen firmly, but her tone was a little airy. She followed Tian Erhe and walked along the path between the messy houses, heading towards the three buildings.

“There’s no need to comfort me.” Tian Erhe stroked his chin that had a hint of white stubble. “I’m already 77 years old! How many people who have experienced the destruction of the Old World can live to this age? Besides, my children are no longer around. Even if I wait a few more years and really find the New World, it will be meaningless to me. Sigh, if Nan was still alive, she would be about your age...”

“...You should at least wait until you take a look at the New World.” Bai Chen fell silent for a while.

Out of the corner of her eye, she swept her gaze across the haphazard houses around her. She saw plastic bottles, glass bottles, old cardboard, buttons, and rags stacked by their doors and windows. She didn’t know where the components came from—long and short electric cables, metal caps, gamepads with missing buttons, cracked mirror boxes, bullet shells, scopes, and rusty glasses. It looked like a junkyard or a recycling station.

Tian Erhe chuckled and sighed. “New World... Who knows where it is... Young people can believe in it. At least it gives them hope. For old folks like me, forget it.”

Chapter 28: Entering Town

Bai Chen fell silent. She looked around and changed the topic. “Are you still accepting foreign nomads?”

Tian Erhe followed her gaze and looked at an old and tattered tent. “Not anymore.” He sighed openly. “We are almost running out of arable land that can be shared.”

Upon saying that, he laughed self-deprecatingly. “It’s only people like me who are prone to being soft-hearted that would try their best to help others simply because they don’t want others to suffer. The others in town aren’t too willing. After all, the terrain here is special, making it impossible to open up new fields. There’s a limit to how much we can harvest. With more people, the share that everyone receives will naturally decrease.

“I was able to use reasons like lacking population and underutilization of the fields to suppress their voices in the past. However, we are even planting mushrooms in the forest behind us now. Heh heh, I’m already old. My body is getting weaker, so I probably won’t have the chance to head out again. Since I won’t see such things, I won’t be soft-hearted.”

Bai Chen couldn’t help but say, “Don’t keep mentioning your age. You look pretty energetic, don’t you?”

“Alright, alright, alright.” Tian Erhe straightened his furry hat and smiled. “There’s really good stuff in the Old World’s city ruins. Old Brute, Little Bull, and the rest found a book called ‘Mushroom Cultivation Technology.’ We followed it and actually were able to produce something.”

Bai Chen smiled. “Mushrooms are good. They are quite delicious.” She paused and said, “I can’t promise you anything. I can only say that I can sell you some high-quality seeds and fertilizers if there’s a chance in the future.”

Tian Erhe’s eyes lit up. “That’s great!”

As they conversed, the two of them passed through the town square and arrived near the three buildings arranged in a triangular fashion. On the right side of the small town square made of cement—in front of the public bathroom—was an empty space with six derelict cars parked.

There were milky-white cars, a silver minivan, a tall, large van, a medium-sized bus that could seat more than ten people, and a uniquely-designed electric vehicle...

In addition to these, there were also many vehicles with three wheels or two wheels crowded to the side. Some relied on electricity, some needed gasoline, and some moved solely on manpower.

A large shed covered all the vehicles. On the left side of the shed were three individual rooms side by side. They were interconnected to a certain extent, and all kinds of spare parts were placed inside.

Some of them were already damaged. Others looked very old. Some were well-maintained, and some were mixed with deflated basketballs and soccer balls.

“See if there’s anything you need.” Tian Erhe pointed at the three buildings and said, “They were all removed and taken back from city ruins.”

Bai Chen didn’t say anything else. She entered the building that acted as a warehouse and circled around it. She then pointed at a few things in quick succession. “This, this, and that...”

Tian Erhe nodded casually. “No problem. Bai, what do you intend to trade in exchange?” Although he was mayor, he did not have the right to give away the items in the town for free. Of course, with his authority and the level of respect he received in town, no one would object if he really did that. However, Tian Erhe had never violated his principles for decades. This was also one of the reasons why he was so respected.

Bai Chen subconsciously replied, “Food?”

Tian Erhe jogged his memories and said, "Not for the time being. Although the weather has been a little abnormal this year and the harvests haven't been too good, our production has only dropped by 20%. With the surplus from the previous three years, it shouldn't be a problem for us to survive the winter. If you can get a few pigs and a few cows here, not only will I welcome you with my hands and feet, but I will also cough out more! However, I believe that's unlikely, right?"

What Moat Town lacked the most was meat. They could only rely on sending small teams out to hunt for resupplies. With insufficient food for humans, the population of chickens, ducks, and geese kept dropping. Furthermore, diseases would wipe them all out from time to time.

Bai Chen tersely acknowledged his words. "What do you think of my motorcycle? It uses gasoline. You should be able to find supplies for it."

"There's still a lot of gas left in one of the city ruins' gas depot." Tian Erhe laughed like an old fox. "What else can be used in exchange? Besides looking good, what use is this motorcycle to us? How many people can it carry at once?"

Prepared, Bai Chen said, "A light machine gun that uses 7.92 mm rounds..." She described the bullet's length and other parameters in detail.

"Light machine gun?" Tian Erhe's wrinkled face seemed to glow. "This is a great weapon for guarding the town. We do have such rounds." Without waiting for Bai Chen's response, he clapped his hands and said, "It's a deal!"

"Alright, but I have to go back and discuss it with them." Bai Chen agreed without hesitation. This was despite her having communicated with Jiang Baimian and being given the right to negotiate. In any case, not only was the light machine gun useless to them, but it also occupied space.

Tian Erhe looked up at the sky and frowned slightly. After some thought, he said, "It's going to rain soon, and it's getting late. It's not suitable for us to continue moving in the wilderness. Yes... you can bring your companions over and rest here for the night. They don't have to be disarmed. I trust your judgment in companions."

Bai Chen glanced at Tian Erhe in confusion before looking up at the dark clouds gradually approaching from the horizon. She then replied, "I'll ask for their opinions first."

Tian Erhe did not blame Bai Chen for her hesitation. He only smiled and said, "Be quick. It's going to rain soon."

Bai Chen immediately walked out of Moat Town, retrieved her firearms, and mounted the motorcycle. She returned to Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong and told them the details of the deal and Tian Erhe's good intentions.

“Team Leader, what do you think?” Bai Chen leaned against the heavy motorcycle and waited for Jiang Baimian to make a decision.

Jiang Baimian did not mention the possibility that Tian Erhe or the people from Moat Town could have ulterior motives. She asked with interest, “Mayor Tian is 77 years old? He experienced the Old World’s destruction?”

Bai Chen nodded without hesitation. “Yes, I’m certain. He has been saying that all these years, and he often recounts the past. A lie might be able to last a long time, but it will only continue if it definitely brings benefits. Also, he has never used this identity to cheat others of anything.”

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “Then let’s go.”

“Team Leader, isn’t this a little dangerous? Didn’t you say that many wilderness nomads might become wilderness bandits at any moment?” Long Yuehong didn’t hide his worry.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Whoa, you can still remember this? Not bad. Having such concerns means that you’ve improved. However, with our firepower, they won’t dare do anything as long as we take precautions. If they want to take us down, they will have to pay for it with at least 30 to 50 lives. Furthermore, there’s still more than a month until winter. Even if they don’t have much to eat, they won’t be willing to pay such a high price. Who’s more dangerous? Us or the beasts in the wilderness?”

“Indeed, people won’t care too much in winter when they are about to starve to death. Besides, a settlement is a limited environment. The small area is actually more advantageous for a smaller group of elites like us.” As she spoke, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao with a smile.

Shang Jianyao immediately turned his head to look at Long Yuehong and pretended to ask solemnly, “Have you forgotten what our team name is? Have you forgotten what our duty is?”

“O-Old Task Force, Investigation Unit for the Cause of the Old World’s Destruction...” Long Yuehong was not stupid. He instantly understood the reason behind the two questions Jiang Baimian asked Bai Chen. “Team Leader, are you trying to get clues from Mayor Tian?”

Jiang Baimian turned around and looked at Bai Chen. With a bright smile, she said, “There might not be any clues. Mayor Tian was definitely not old back then. However, we have to ask since we’ve encountered each other. Since you find Moat Town trustworthy, it will be the same for me. I trust you.”

Bai Chen’s eyes drooped slightly. After a moment of silence, she said, “Yes, it’s safe.”

“Let’s go!” Jiang Baimian shrunk back into the driver’s seat and started the jeep.

Under Bai Chen's guidance, they entered the swamp and slowly navigated the maze of paths that were virtually indistinguishable.

They arrived at Moat Town before the sky turned completely gloomy.

This time, under Tian Erhe's orders, the town guards didn't request them to turn in their weapons. They only led them to the right after they entered before getting them to park outside a wooden shed around the corner.

"You can sleep in the shed tonight. As for the car, it can handle getting drenched," Tian Erhe explained briefly. "Don't set up a bonfire. I'll get someone to bring a stove over for you and give you some charcoal as a gift for this transaction. Our people will patrol and be on guard. I trust you understand why."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were curiously sizing up the interior of Moat Town. Jiang Baimian was not surprised and smiled at Tian Erhe. "Understood! Mayor, I wonder if I can invite you for dinner?"

As she spoke, she took out a can of braised beef and a yellowish-black leaf cigarette that she had prepared beforehand.

Tian Erhe's eyes widened as the wrinkles on his face unfolded one after another. "That's good stuff! Why? What's the matter? What else do you want to exchange for?"

Jiang Baimian smiled. "I want to hear stories about the Old World. As you know, knowledge equals wealth."

"Deal!" Tian Erhe smiled very happily. He quickly turned his head and ordered the guard beside him, "Doggy, quick, bring my stove over! Hurry!"

The guard named Dog didn't dare grumble. He quickly ran to the three buildings.

At this moment, the sky became darker and darker. The people working in the fields behind Moat Town returned one after another, as did the hunting teams closest to them.

The small town became lively, and pairs of curious eyes looked towards the corner where the jeep was parked.

Chapter 29: Reminiscing the Past

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked around. There were two things about the residents of Moat Town that left the deepest impression on them: Everyone wore an assortment of clothes as if they came from different places, and the clothes were covered in patches. Their bodies, hands, faces, hair, and clothes were dirty.

Apart from these two points, fatigue, thinness, and shortness were relatively common.

The townsfolk took a few looks at the outsiders. Upon seeing Tian Erhe also there, they stopped paying attention and worrying. They returned home, moved out stoves, started a fire, and prepared dinner. Otherwise, they would carefully take out a bowl of mixed grain and pour it into a pot. Another possibility was them getting some cold water and eating half of the leftover cold cornbread from lunch... The entire town gradually filled with the smell of smoke and food.

Tian Erhe noticed Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's observation of the townsfolk and asked with a smile, "How is it? Did you notice anything?"

Long Yuehong opened his mouth, but he felt that it wasn't polite to mention his impression of the town directly. Therefore, he closed his mouth and deliberated over his words.

Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze and frankly said, "It's not clean."

"It's not clean... Heh." Tian Erhe chuckled softly. "It's definitely not clean compared to what you guys have."

Although Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others had mud stains on their bodies because of their previous battle, they habitually wiped their faces when replenishing their water supplies.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen to interject, Tian Erhe pointed to the middle of the town square with his chin. "Although Moat Town has a clean water source, we still have to save on charcoal. I read that excessive chopping of trees will make the land less fertile. Therefore, we forbid the townsfolk from chopping down trees nearby. They have to go very far to do so.

"Occasionally, we can get coal from smuggling caravans. It is like the festive new year at that time. As you know, the White Knights have plenty of coal. Heh, it's fine in the summer. You can even shower with cold water. However, all you can do is endure it during autumn. It's better to be dirty than to be sick. If one can't take it, they can boil a kettle of water and sponge their body."

Tian Erhe paused when he said that. His smile became colored by other emotions. "Besides, they work from morning to night every day. Who would have the energy to do so when they get time to rest?"

Long Yuehong immediately recalled his two months of training. Jiang Baimian trained him and Shang Jianyao until they were exhausted every day. When they returned home, they only wanted to lie in bed and do nothing.

However, Pangu Biology had a staff cafeteria. He and Shang Jianyao could directly bring their lunch boxes over or choose not to. They could eat in the cafeteria with what was already prepared without tiring themselves out.

“No wonder.” He expressed his understanding.

Shang Jianyao didn't say anything and nodded silently.

Jiang Baimian smiled at him. “I thought you would ask why they don't wash themselves with cold water during winter. This seems to be effective in promoting blood circulation and increasing their resistance.”

“Poor physical constitution,” Shang Jianyao replied seriously.

At this moment, the town guard named Dog ran over with Tian Erhe's family stove in his arms. He also had a small bag of charcoal on his back. He helped light the fire in a very showy manner before taking the initiative to join the patrol team in charge of the surrounding area, unwilling to leave.

This was not because he yearned to receive some braised beef canned food. Instead, compared to most of the ladies in town, Bai Chen and Jiang Baimian—who had their hair and faces cleaned up—were more attractive to young men like him. Jiang Baimian, in particular, was tall and had long legs. She had undergone genetic enhancement from the moment she was an embryo. She was as beautiful as a fairy in these town guards' eyes, making them want to circle around her.

In the Ashlands, there was nothing conservative about relationships between men and women. Even if they had only known each other for a few minutes, they could still have sex with each other as long as they caught each other's eye. Therefore, the town guards patrolling and guarding the area held their heads and chests high, showing off their abilities to the fullest.

Jiang Baimian scanned the area and almost laughed at their antics. She ignored them and walked to the back of the jeep, pulling out four more cans of food.

“Do you want a pot? Do you want a pot? There's also cutlery. Do you want them?” Tian Erhe asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Sure, it's much more convenient than us using lunch boxes.” Jiang Baimian did not mind at all.

“Doggy! Quick, go get my pot and cutlery! Count how many people there are!” Tian Erhe immediately raised his voice.

The town guard named Dog agreed quickly. It didn't take long for him to carry an iron-black pot with five bowls and chopsticks inside. After helping to set the pot, he stole a glance at Jiang Baimian and spoke very feebly to Tian Erhe. “Mayor, can, can you stop calling me by my nickname? I'm already 20...”

“What’s wrong? I watched your dad grow up, and I’m still calling him by his nickname!” Tian Erhe replied angrily before waving his hand. “Go, go, go. Don’t spoil our appetite, I mean, our nice chat.”

Shang Jianyao had been staring at the pot the entire time and realized that the bowl inside was light-green and had extremely exquisite patterns. The chopsticks were ivory-white and spotless.

They were much better than the utensils most Pangu Biology employees used.

Tian Erhe glanced at him and chuckled. “What, are you finding the bowl not big enough?”

“He thinks it’s too good and exquisite.” Jiang Baimian rushed to answer Shang Jianyao’s question as if she was afraid that he would say something rude.

Shang Jianyao didn’t mind and nodded to indicate that this was his opinion. The next second, he looked at Jiang Baimian and shut his mouth before whimpering for a while. Amidst everyone’s surprise and confusion, he asked Jiang Baimian, “Guess what I was trying to say?”

“...How can I guess?” Jiang Baimian’s expression was a little dazed, and she barely maintained her smile.

“Didn’t you guess correctly just now?” Shang Jianyao was rather regretful.

Jiang Baimian took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “If it weren’t you, I would definitely think that you were angry about what just happened.”

As she spoke, she did not stare at Shang Jianyao’s eyes but at the top of his head as if she wanted to rap it.

Tian Erhe watched their interaction with a strange expression. Finally, he smiled and said, “The camaraderie between you seems... relaxed and lively.”

“It’s mainly because he sometimes has a screw loose. Yes, that’s how it is.” Jiang Baimian emphasized Shang Jianyao’s strangeness in all seriousness, and Bai Chen nodded in agreement.

Shang Jianyao immediately asked, “How do you know I’m not trying to liven up the atmosphere?”

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth. “...Try your best to maintain it.”

Tian Erhe laughed and picked up a set of cutlery. “These were all taken from an Old World ruin. There are too many similar items there, and they themselves aren’t worth

much. Which Ruin Hunter will travel all the way here only to carry or drive back with cutlery?"

Jiang Baimian listened very seriously and felt inspired to reply. "Indeed. There are still many good things buried in the Old World's city ruins. Well... just because they aren't useful right now doesn't mean they aren't valuable."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian poured the five cans of food into the pot. "Mayor, before heating up the canned food, can you tell us about the Old World and your encounters back then?"

Jiang Baimian casually threw the empty food cans to the side and politely handed the yellowish-black cigarette to Tian Erhe.

Tian Erhe took the cigarette and lit it with the charcoal in the stove. After taking a suck, Tian Erhe narrowed his eyes and said, "My greatest wish now is to smoke three times a year. It's my second time this year."

After sighing, he looked around and revealed a reminiscing expression. "I was only a little over ten years old when the Old World was destroyed. I was still a... heh, a primary school student. My mother was a teacher at a middle school in the city while my father was an employee of a government unit. We had just started winter break back then, and the weather was a little colder than it is now.

"It might have been much colder. I don't remember the reason, but it might have been because middle school holidays started later. However, my father got busier as the end of the year neared. Nobody watched over me back at home. Therefore, my parents took the weekend off to send me to my grandfather's house in a village not far from Moat Town.

"I remember it very clearly. They said that they would pick me up eight days later, bringing Grandpa and Grandma to the city for the new year. Heh, it was wild back then. I ran around the village doing all kinds of things, but I would still miss home every night and look at the calendar. I counted down the days, looking forward to having my parents pick me up.

"On the penultimate day of the countdown, my companions and I wanted to go fishing by the river, but we were stopped by the adults. We could only play near a very shallow stream. We then heard an explosion and felt the ground shake.

"I was terrified. I just wanted to go back to Grandpa's house and never come out again. The explosions came one after another, their intensity increasing with each subsequent one. Cough, cough. I even felt like there was a very strong earthquake on the Richter scale accompanying it."

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, Jiang Baimian, and the others listened attentively.

Tian Erhe stretched out his hands to warm them against the fire and continued recounting his experiences. "I fainted for some reason while this was happening. Maybe I was struck by the explosions' shockwaves. Anyway, I didn't find myself injured when I woke up.

"After I woke up, I continued running back and saw Grandpa's collapsed house... They failed to run out in time... Back then, my grandfather and grandmother were much younger than I am now. They raised chickens, planted vegetables, and did everything.

"Ahem, let's not talk about that. Back then, many people were still alive in the village. I followed those uncles, aunties, and grandparents all the way to town. There were still many intact houses in town, but we didn't choose any of them. We chose this place because it had an open area. We could live in tents for the time being and not worry about the buildings collapsing.

"Back then, communications were also cut off. There was no signal. Everyone waited here for help and rescue. Unfortunately, there was no sign of it..."

Tian Erhe's voice gradually softened as if he still remembered his fear and despair back then. "A few uncles and aunties didn't want to wait any longer. They went to the supermarket and some houses, gathered some food, and tried to leave Moat Town to go to the city. I-I followed them, hoping to return to my parents' side. Don't laugh. This was a child's instinctive choice.

"We drove for a while, crossing the broken roads. We then walked for a long time before we finally reached the city. However, it was even more terrifying there..."

Tian Erhe's eyes gradually lost focus. He felt like he had fallen into a nightmare that he could never escape in his life.

Chapter 30: Tiny "Transaction"

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others did not rush Tian Erhe. They quietly sat by the fire as if they were attentively waiting for dinner.

After about ten seconds, Tian Erhe's eyes focused again. He chortled and shook his head. "The city was covered with corpses and Heartless, who had lost their minds. It was the same on the streets, in the residential estates, and in the malls.

"The Heartless ate corpses, leaving their mouths bloody. They looked no different from the most ferocious of beasts. They could even climb high-rise buildings like monkeys before suddenly swinging down from nearly ten meters high and appearing behind you. They also knew how to use firearms..."

“There were a total of eight of us back then. Half of us quickly died when faced with that situation. Perhaps it was because of my young age... I was short and inconspicuous. I didn't suffer any attacks in the first wave, so I survived.

“In our panic, we ran crazily and entered a nearby police station. We were still considered lucky. Although the Heartless could shoot and reload, they didn't actively search for weapons. We found quite a number of guns and bullets on some of the corpses in the police station.”

Having said that, Tian Erhe smiled and said to Bai Chen and Jiang Baimian, “Do you think that we eventually broke through the encirclement with those weapons? Not at all. The few of us, including the older uncles and aunties, didn't know how to use guns. The sound of gunfire only served to attract more Heartless.

“Back then, I thought I couldn't take it anymore and cried. Fortunately, those uncles and aunties had a strong desire to live. They didn't abandon me either. They kept themselves on the go and arrived at a parking lot.

“We found an SUV there, with the doors open and the key inserted. However, the owner was gone. I guess he turned into a Heartless and wandered off without any mind or reason. Anyway, we sent several Heartless flying and rushed into the streets with the SUV. There weren't many Heartless in the area. We seized the opportunity and rushed out of the city. It was much safer when we reached the suburbs.”

Tian Erhe sighed. “Before I left Moat Town, I hoped to return home and see if my parents were around. In the end, I never saw them again.”

After sighing, Tian Erhe looked at the iron pot that gradually steamed and continued speaking. “We had to return the way we came. On the way, we gathered some food and clothes. We then abandoned the SUV and crossed the destroyed roads with the things we had gathered. We eventually found the two cars that we used to drive out of town.

“Just like that, we returned to Moat Town. Since we were already in winter and, with no sign of help coming, we came to a consensus and decided not to consider the problem of aftershocks. We began using the buildings that remained relatively intact in town. It isn't like people can force themselves to freeze to death, right?”

“Thanks to the Lunar New Year, every family had prepared new year goodies. There was also a lot of food in the supermarkets. We didn't worry about food much the entire winter. However, some uncles and aunties suggested that it wasn't wise to distribute food as we were doing. They claimed that it was easy to develop complacency and waste precious time. They suggested using labor in exchange for food.

“Most people agreed. Before spring really came, we divided the few buildings here into many small rooms. We repaired the perimeter walls and maintained the canals in the

fields outside town. We also built the water tower here for the water plant and familiarized ourselves with the use of firearms...

“The subsequent developments later proved our actions to be extremely important. Be it the response to famine or the defense against wild beasts, bandits, and Heartless that chanced upon us, they played a great role.”

Tian Erhe’s gaze became unfocused again as if he had returned to that year of collective labor. His voice unconsciously softened a little. “When the weather warmed up, and the spring cold ended, we finally confirmed one thing: help was never coming...”

Tian Erhe looked up and forced a smile. “You should be able to guess our subsequent experiences. It was nothing more than using the opportunity of numerous Heartless dying during winter to begin exploring the ruins of the surrounding cities. From there, we gathered food, clothes, firearms, ammunition, batteries, and fuel supplies. At the same time, we organized a production line and attempted hunting. We also sent people far away to see if there were any surviving cities.

“How is it? Do you still want me to continue?”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “Yes!” With that said, she smiled brightly. “You can tell us as we eat. We can listen as we eat.”

The braised beef in the pot had almost finished heating.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao rubbed his stomach. “Let me go to the bathroom first.”

“Me too.” Long Yuehong stood up.

“Alright, we’ll wait for your return.” Jiang Baimian understood the two team members who had just come to the surface very well.

The first time she left the company and entered the Blackmarsh Wilderness, she had resisted the idea of relieving herself. Unless she couldn’t hold it in any longer, she was unwilling to hide in the woods or behind bushes to relieve herself.

Taking a piss was fine. It didn’t take much time, so the effects the environment had on them wouldn’t be too great. It wouldn’t worsen one’s sense of shame. As for taking a dump... it required one to muster their courage.

From her observations, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had yet to take a dump since they left the company.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong followed Tian Erhe’s instructions and passed through the haphazard buildings before walking to the public bathroom that was parallel to the perimeter wall. During this process, they took in all kinds of smells. These smells

mixed together, making it impossible to determine what they were. All they knew was that it didn't smell good. They had to put up with it, or they would have definitely retched.

Shang Jianyao also saw a few families gather together and share a stove for cooking so as to conserve charcoal. He saw people squatting by the door without bothering to take off their clothes that were covered in mud. They were slurping thin congee that obviously didn't have much grain in them.

He also saw sick people lying in a half-open building as they groaned in pain before pulling over a spittoon. He saw a mother carrying a baby that was definitely not yet a year old. As she couldn't return home in time, she could only let the child urinate on the spot. He saw many children under the age of ten helping their parents start a fire for cooking or brushing their clothes...

As they walked, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong arrived at the public bathroom under many vigilant, guarded, and curious gazes. Drawn on the left was a figure of a woman in a dress, and on the right was a stickman.

As soon as they turned right, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's eyes widened.

The public bathroom was completely different from what they had imagined. It was nothing like the public bathrooms in Pangu Biology.

Across the front wall was a long urinal. Towards the back was the same length but seemingly wider latrine.

The town relied on equipment situated at the junction with the women's bathroom to flush at fixed times. There was no blockade in the middle. When flushing, it would wash away everything.

It was as though two streams had been moved in.

The only thing that comforted Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong was that Moat Town paid attention to the public bathroom's hygiene and made it relatively clean.

"Shall we?" Long Yuehong was a little hesitant.

"Let's do it." Shang Jianyao led the way. He chose a spot, took off his pants, and squatted down.

Long Yuehong chose a spot further away from him and stealthily unbuckled his belt. "I-I find it a little strange..." He couldn't help but turn his head to look at Shang Jianyao. There was nothing in between the two of them.

Shang Jianyao pinched his nose. "You should watch what you eat."

Long Yuehong was speechless.

Just as they thought that this was the most awkward scene, a group of Moat Town residents rushed in from outside. They sized up Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. Some went to the urinal, and some found a spot to squat down.

“This makes it even stranger.” Shang Jianyao said what was in Long Yuehong’s mind. Then, his train of thought chugged over to a strange place. “If Mayor Tian were also squatting here, will a person come in front of him and greet him when they enter...?”

The townsfolk beside Shang Jianyao subconsciously said, “The mayor has an individual bathroom in his room.”

The two of them began chatting in the strange environment, making Long Yuehong gasp in amazement.

Finally, Long Yuehong finished relieving himself. He pulled up his pants and went to the sink outside to wash his hands. He took in a deep breath of relatively fresh air and firmly confirmed one thing again: Compared to the nomad settlements outside, Pangu Biology’s underground building was as beautiful as heaven.

After a minute or two, Shang Jianyao walked out and washed his hands.

They didn’t discuss the public bathroom, and tacitly maintained their silence. They once again passed through the haphazard area with brick houses, mud huts, and tents.

Suddenly, a little girl ran to Shang Jianyao. She was about seven or eight years old. Her hair was gently draped over her shoulders. She wore a light-green sweater that had many lint balls and two obvious holes on the inside. She wore a patched jacket that almost reached her knees and had been washed white on the outside.

The pants she wore on her lower body were of an indistinguishable material—a grayish-blue color with patches of other colors. She wore a pair of black shoes made of tattered cloth. Her face was thin and jaundiced, but her eyes were very bright.

This little girl held a pile of junk in her hand. There was thread, torn pieces of cloth, a faded button, a snapped hair tie, a glass ball with embedded flower petals, an empty matchbox, and a clump of rubber.

She looked up at Shang Jianyao eagerly. “Hello, can I use this to exchange for some of your food? Just a little would do. Can I? Can I?”

In the corner of the wooden shed, the fragrance of braised beef wafted over.

Shang Jianyao silently looked at the girl for two seconds. Before she spoke again, he squatted down, stretched out his finger, and pulled at the pile of junk a few times. He

picked out the transparent glass ball with yellow petals embedded in it and stood up with a smile. "I'll take this."

"...Thank you! Thank you!" The little girl was initially stunned, but she quickly thanked him profusely.

Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at the wooden shed where Jiang Baimian and the others were. "Let's go over."

The little girl tersely acknowledged him and followed closely behind him.

Long Yuehong didn't know what to say. He looked around and followed.

They soon returned to the jeep.

"Who is she?" Jiang Baimian looked at the girl and expressed her doubts.

Shang Jianyao smiled clearly and said, "She used something very good to exchange for a piece of braised beef from me." He immediately sat down and picked up his bowl and chopsticks. "Can we begin?"

"Sure." Jiang Baimian and Tian Erhe looked at each other.

Shang Jianyao quickly picked up a piece of beef and placed it in his bowl before passing it to the little girl.

The little girl gulped and quickly took it, wanting to stuff the entire piece of beef into her mouth. However, Shang Jianyao took the bowl and chopsticks back at that moment.

The little girl quickly looked up at him, confused and aggrieved.

"Don't burn yourself," Shang Jianyao muttered expressionlessly. As he spoke, he pressed his thighs together and placed the bowl there. Then, he held a pair of chopsticks in one hand and tore the large piece of beef into several tiny pieces slowly and seriously.

After doing this, he picked up a piece of beef and brought it to the girl's mouth.

The little girl's eyes lit up. She bit it and quickly chewed.

"Does it taste good?" Shang Jianyao watched her finish the small piece of beef.

The girl nodded heavily. "Delicious!"

Shang Jianyao immediately smiled and offered her another piece.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but sigh. "You..."

As she sighed, she pointed into the distance with her chin.

Shang Jianyao looked up and saw that more than ten to twenty children were in the square where all kinds of houses were hastily built, eagerly approaching with a pile of junk in their arms.

Shang Jianyao's body suddenly stiffened.

Tian Erhe sighed and turned his head with a smile before roaring. "Go back! All of you!"

The children immediately revealed unconcealed disappointment as they walked back home, turning their heads with every other step.