

Ad Infinitum 241

Chapter 241: Meal Buddies

Having been saved and acknowledged, Miens had the intention of repaying the favor. He immediately said to Shang Jianyao, “If you really want to join our Furnace Church, make a trip to Tarnan. I’ll write a letter for you to bring to His Excellency Li Zhe. I’ll inform him about your friendliness, sincerity, and the help you rendered.”

Upon seeing that Tarnan was somewhere they were heading toward to begin with, Jiang Baimian didn’t stop Shang Jianyao with her eyes and let him do whatever he wanted.

“Alright, alright.” Shang Jianyao agreed without hesitation. As he spoke, he even took out a piece of paper and a pen as if he wanted to say, “Quick, write it now.”

Miens was a little stunned. It wasn’t that he was just being polite, but everyone seemed to have proper matters to discuss. How could he write one on the spot?

Jiang Baimian quickly resolved his embarrassment and asked, “Apart from your Linhai Alliance, what other large factions does Tarnan have?”

“None,” Miens replied almost without thinking. “Apart from us being neighbors with Mechanical Paradise and having a good relationship with them, the other large factions either don’t know of Tarnan’s existence or can only trade through some small and medium factions recognized by Mechanical Paradise.”

For example, Redstone Collection and Weed City—which is relatively special in First City’s sphere of influence? Jiang Baimian gained further understanding of Redstone Collection as a smuggling node.

She smiled and said, “Mechanical Paradise sure is careful.”

“Actually, there’s nothing special about Tarnan other than the increased number of robots, machines, and electronic products.” Miens didn’t understand why Mechanical Paradise would do so.

A howling cold wind tore through the valley at this moment, making Miens and the other Omnidirectional Commerce members tremble.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian exclaimed, “Seriously, I was so focused on chatting that I forgot that all of you are wearing only a single shirt!”

Their coats had been taken away by the bandits after they were captured.

With that said, Jiang Baimian pointed to the side with her chin. “Fortunately, we don’t lack clothes and supplies. Yes, bury the corpses in passing as payment.”

There were many dead bandits in the area.

As for those who were seriously injured and hadn’t died for the time being, the Old Task Force had been heading south all the way. They were getting short on medical supplies, so they treated them as if they were already dead.

Miens had the intention of taking the corpses’ clothes, but he was too embarrassed to say anything. According to the rules of the area between Mechanical Paradise and the Linhai Alliance, they were spoils of war. Only those who had contributed could enjoy them.

To his surprise, the valiant and beautiful woman opposite him was not only willing to use the clothes on the corpses to help them, but she also gave them the supplies that the bandits couldn’t take away in their panic.

“I-I can’t do that.” Miens hesitated for a moment before waving his hand.

This didn’t mean that he was moral, noble, and unwilling to take advantage of others. It was just that the team in front of him was powerful. If they offended them slightly and didn’t perform well, they might not be able to leave this valley.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “You’re welcome. If you keep wearing this, you’ll freeze to death tonight. Also, you don’t have any food or cars. How are you going to leave in the future? Uh, those machines are your goods, right?”

She was referring to the portable computers that filled one of the cars. They were thin, white or black, and they shimmered with a lustrous luster.

“Yes.” Miens thought for a moment and said, “We won’t stand on ceremony with clothes, food, and cars; we really have no choice. Take away those portable computers as our gratitude.”

“That’s too much.” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Let’s do it according to Ruin Hunter rules. For such a mission, we’ll take about 30% of the supplies.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t deliberately appear generous because she might have to gather supplies to exchange for Lehman’s equipment in the future.

After an intense ‘negotiation,’ the payment was finally fixed at 40%.

At this point, Miens heaved a sigh of relief and beckoned his companions over to the corpses.

Just as he bent down, he suddenly exclaimed, “He threw it just like that? He really doesn’t know how to cherish things!”

Shang Jianyao ran over and asked curiously, “What is it?”

Miens picked up a small, blue cloth bag, the kind that could be held with one hand. “My spice bag—it’s filled with good stuff! Apart from our Linhai Alliance, where else can you find so many spices? The bandits initially thought that it was gold, chips, or high-performance batteries, so they directly took it away.”

Shang Jianyao asked with bright eyes, “Do you use it when eating?”

“Yes, some are used for cooking the soup base, and some are used for the sauce dip. Everyone chooses different combinations based on their preferences,” Miens replied in a slightly sacred tone.

Upon seeing that nothing was happening, Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Long Yuehong. “You can take off the exoskeleton. A normal level of alert will do.”

They had to conserve electricity! There was no sun today, so they were planning to use the spare battery for the jeep.

After Long Yuehong removed the exoskeleton with Shang Jianyao's help, Jiang Baimian walked to Bai Chen's side and looked at the bandits squatting on the ground. "You bandits call yourselves Mountain Fox?"

"Yes."

"Yes," the bandits replied eagerly.

"What's your boss's name?" Jiang Baimian picked up the Death rocket launcher with one hand, leaving the bandits, Miens, and the others speechless.

This strength was nothing ridiculous. Instead, it looked very relaxed.

A blond-haired bandit snapped to his senses and quickly said, "Panania."

"Will he come back to redeem you?" Jiang Baimian smiled.

The bandits fell silent for a few seconds before answering nonuniformly. "Probably."

"Maybe."

"Perhaps."

They had seen many captives that nobody had ransomed; those people didn't end up well. They were either killed directly to avoid food wastage, brought along as food reserves, or sold to human traffickers.

Jiang Baimian didn't comment and asked, "If you snatch something, where will you trade them?"

"We go to Tarnan if we can go there. Those robots are fair and trustworthy, and they can maintain order," replied the blond-haired bandit before any of his companions could.

While Jiang Baimian asked for information, Long Yuehong finally removed the exoskeleton and placed it back onto the jeep's backseat.

He then switched positions with Shang Jianyao. One of them held an assault rifle and was in charge of guarding the area. The other went to the stream to draw water and used the solar charger to boil it.

After the water boiled, Long Yuehong anxiously but patiently waited until the water temperature dropped significantly before pouring it into their waterskins.

After doing this, he held the waterskin and gulped it down. At this moment, he felt that the water was exceedingly delicious and intoxicating.

After drinking half a waterskin in one go, Long Yuehong wiped his mouth in satisfaction and looked around.

At this moment, Miens and the others had already buried the corpses. They changed into the bandits' coats and wrapped themselves up tightly.

While cooking with the coal and other supplies left behind by the bandits, they sensed Long Yuehong's gaze.

After lowering their heads and conversing for a while, Miens walked toward Jiang Baimian and the others and smiled. "Do you want to join us in our meal? Those bandits left behind a goat, some potatoes, and plenty of ingredients."

The bandits had come to this valley to prepare lunch.

Shang Jianyao first signaled Jiang Baimian with his eyes before agreeing. "Alright."

"We can also see what your Holy Communion is like," Jiang Baimian said with a smile.

Long Yuehong subconsciously wanted to raise his hand and wipe the corners of his mouth, but he immediately remembered that he wasn't Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian and the others watched as Miens and the others skillfully sliced off the meat, deboned it, and boiled the soup before scattering different spices.

Toward the end, a rich fragrance lingered in their noses. It didn't dissipate, no matter how the cold wind blew in the valley.

Upon seeing that his companions had mostly finished processing the ingredients, Miens asked Shang Jianyao and the others what they liked. He also took their lunch boxes and used soup as a base to match the various carefully selected condiments.

Before long, Shang Jianyao picked up a thin piece of freshly cooked mutton, rolled it in his dip, and placed it in his mouth.

"...S-so delicious..." he praised vaguely.

Long Yuehong's heart palpitated when he heard that. He immediately picked up a piece of mutton and placed it into the iron pot that the bandits left behind.

At this moment, a female employee from Omnidirectional Commerce stuffed her freshly scalded mutton into Long Yuehong's bowl.

"Give it a try," she said with a smile.

"Th-there's no need." Long Yuehong immediately felt a little awkward.

The female employees of Omnidirectional Commerce traveled the Ashlands all year round and had Hunter statuses. Although they had previously been molested by bandits, they quickly recovered and no longer felt depressed.

They discovered that their savior—who had descended like a deity—was a young man after he removed the exoskeleton. He was not short, and he had a clean face, leaving them with a good impression of him. Therefore, they took the opportunity to strike up a conversation with Long Yuehong while they prepared lunch.

The more passionate they were, the more reserved Long Yuehong became. He even wanted to ask why they weren't going for Shang Jianyao.

Back then, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian were seriously learning hotpot techniques from Miens without looking anywhere else.

Since the meat was already in his bowl, Long Yuehong couldn't bring himself to refuse it. After dipping it in the sauce, he stuffed the mutton into his mouth.

The tenderness of the meat, the saltiness from the salt, and the strange feeling of all kinds of spices mixed together erupted in Long Yuehong's mouth instantly, making him wolf down the food involuntarily.

This lunch was a joyous one for both the guests and hosts. Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen loved the soft potato slices.

During this process, they also chatted with Miens and the others about the Linhai Alliance. They learned that this large faction had sufficient supplies in a relative sense. Although the lower-class citizens still lived difficult lives and were only slightly better than the wilderness nomads in small settlements, the middle-class citizens had already begun paying attention to their choice of food and clothing.

Miens and the others hadn't only escaped danger, but they also had a full meal and retrieved most of their supplies. After their meal, they couldn't restrain their gratitude. They walked to the empty space by the stream one after another and danced a dance that praised the Kalendaria.

"How pious..." Jiang Baimian had just laughed when she realized that Shang Jianyao had joined them and was dancing in a way no different from them.

Chapter 242: The Interesting Way the Human Heart Works

When their dancing reached a climax, Miens and the others raised their hands and shouted, "Praise be to thee, the New World's door!"

As an official member of the Life Ritual parish, Shang Jianyao did the same thing without committing any mistakes. "Praise be to thee, the New World's door!"

After such a mass dance, even if Shang Jianyao didn't use Inference Clowning, the way Miens and the others looked at him was as if they were looking at their companion.

Two female employees of Omnidirectional Commerce—who originally thought that he was 'unattainable'—plucked up their courage and chatted with him.

At this moment, Miens wiped the sweat from his forehead and came to Jiang Baimian. “We have to leave.”

Jiang Baimian casually asked, “Are you guys going to continue heading to the Linhai Alliance or return to Tarnan?”

Miens frankly replied, “We decided to go home. Half a day’s drive southeast will bring us to the Mount Chilar area. There are settlements attached to our Linhai Alliance there, so we don’t have to worry about being attacked by bandits.”

“Alright, bon voyage.” Jiang Baimian didn’t urge him to stay.

After writing the letter to Dedicator Li Zhe in front of Shang Jianyao, Miens waved his hand and boarded the relatively intact car left behind by the bandits.

As the two cars that the Old Task Force had given to Omnidirectional Commerce slowly drove off, Shang Jianyao followed behind them. He waved his right hand with all his might and shouted, “Be careful on the way! We must meet again!”

How sincere... Jiang Baimian criticized inwardly and turned to look at the four bandits who had just finished their leftovers.

Upon sensing her gaze, the captives froze at the same time, not knowing what would happen.

Jiang Baimian slowly swept her gaze across their faces and smiled. “I’ve decided...”

She deliberately paused at this point, causing the four bandits’ hearts to leap into their throats and almost stop beating.

Jiang Baimian continued, “We’ll take you to Tarnan. If nobody comes to redeem you, we’ll hand you over to Mechanical Paradise.”

As the four bandits’ eyes lit up, Jiang Baimian changed the topic. “However, it depends on whether you guys are willing to cooperate.”

“Sure thing!”

“We’ll definitely cooperate!” The bandits enthusiastically expressed their attitude.

“Good.” Jiang Baimian pointed at the valley that was in a sorry state. “Clean it up.”

This ‘sorry state’ mainly arose from the previous battle and not the junk created by the hotpot Holy Communion.

The bandits didn’t hesitate at all and agreed. Under Bai Chen’s supervision, they cleared up all kinds of trash and recycled the useful items.

Long Yuehong—who originally thought that this was his mission—was stunned when he realized that he suddenly had nothing to do.

Jiang Baimian stood beside him and asked with a smile, “Does it feel good to have someone help you with your labor?”

Long Yuehong carefully experienced it. “Yeah, yeah.” Although he didn’t feel unhappy when he was instructed to do these menial chores, he liked to slack off when he could.

After the bandits completed their mission, Jiang Baimian asked the blond-haired, intelligent-looking captive, “What’s your name?”

“Jorgensen.” The blond-haired bandit beamed and gave his name. He had heard that if the other party was willing to know one’s name when they were held captive, it meant that they wouldn’t be killed on the spot.

“Tie up the hands of the other three and drive this car with them on-board and follow behind us.” Jiang Baimian pointed at a white car left behind by the Mountain Fox bandits.

Apart from the two cars that Omnidirectional Commerce had driven away, this was the most intact one. Apart from the dust and mud on its surface, preventing one from identifying its original color, there was nothing wrong with it.

Jorgensen quickly agreed and tied his companions' hands with a hemp rope with their cooperation. However, he was suddenly stunned when he got into the car. This was because Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others didn't care about him at all. Not only did they not assign anyone to monitor him, but they also started the jeep and slowly drove to the valley's other exit.

In the area upstream of the stream, only the four bandits—who were considered captives—were left.

“Jorgensen,” a bandit with a scar on his face shouted. “Why don't we turn around and flee in the opposite direction?”

Jorgensen hesitated for a moment and said, “Do you think they really don't care? Could they be testing us?”

The bandits fell silent. Nobody dared to guarantee anything.

This was clearly a perfect opportunity to escape, but they couldn't make up their minds. This was because Shang Jianyao and the others had really acted too casually and put on a 'do whatever you want' expression, causing them to instinctively think that something was amiss.

Upon seeing his companions remain silent, Jorgensen started the car and said, “Maybe they have absolute confidence in preventing us from escaping.”

After seeing that his companions still didn't respond, Jorgensen added, “Think about it. They defeated us with just one exoskeleton-wearing member. The other three didn't even do much. I don't know if you've heard the proverb, 'a lion will not be company with a wolf.' The person wearing the exoskeleton definitely won't choose companions that are much weaker than him. The other three most likely have their own strengths and can effectively monitor us or react to our escape in time.”

After hearing Jorgensen's words, the bandit with the scar on his face exhaled and said, “Then, let's follow. I don't want to be swallowed by the rocket just like Snaketooth and the others.”

Snaketooth was the driver of the first car that had chased after Jiang Baimian and the others.

“That’s right. Even if nobody redeems us and we are handed over to Mechanical Paradise, we will be locked up for a year or two at most. It won’t be a big deal,” echoed another bandit.

Although Mechanical Paradise’s prisons definitely didn’t provide enough food, they wouldn’t starve to death.

Upon seeing that his companions had no objections, Jorgensen drove and followed closely behind the modified jeep.

He had already thought about it. If these boorish idiots really decided to take the opportunity to escape, he wouldn’t have bothered. After all, they had their hands tied behind their backs and couldn’t threaten him.

In the backseat of the jeep, Long Yuehong turned around and looked at the car the captives were driving. He said in surprise, “They really followed us...”

He thought that his team leader had deliberately created this opportunity to release the captives because they didn’t know what to do with them.

Under normal circumstances, the Old Task Force didn’t kill captives. However, it was troublesome and prone to accidents if they brought them all the way to Tarnan. They also needed to assign manpower to watch over them.

In the end, the group of captives actually chose to supervise and escort themselves. They didn’t have to worry the Old Task Force the entire time.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it and said in agreement, “Maybe they can’t bear to miss out on hotpot.”

“Are you talking about yourself?” Long Yuehong muttered.

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao suddenly clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “Damn it. I forgot something.”

“What is it?” Long Yuehong instantly became nervous.

Shang Jianyao replied with a pained expression, “I forgot to borrow spices from Miens.”

“...” Long Yuehong felt a sense of familiarity that he shouldn’t have bothered with this fellow, but he also inexplicably felt that this was something worth ‘grief.’

Without the spices and condiments, it meant that they wouldn’t be able to make delicious hotpot in a short period of time. They could only make do with a simple and basic version.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian looked into the rearview mirror and smiled. “This is mainly because your performance just now crushed their courage to resist. The human heart is a very fascinating thing.”

Bai Chen—who was driving—added, “Compared to an acceptable outcome, the unknown is more terrifying.”

They continued driving into the evening. With the help of bandits—who were familiar with the terrain—the Old Task Force found a place with a clean water source and set up camp.

“Remove their ropes and bring them around to gather twigs and wood,” Jiang Baimian instructed Jorgensen. She could already tell that this fellow was bent on being a good servant in exchange for a better outcome.

With such a ‘shepherd’ around, Jiang Baimian believed that the captives would be more obedient.

After Jorgensen arranged jobs for the other three bandits, Jiang Baimian suddenly thought of something and shouted at him, “You don’t have to go. I still have something to ask you.”

“Yes.” Jorgensen wanted to respond to this powerful female warrior in a respectful manner, but he didn’t know how to address her. It was impossible to call her ‘boss,’ right?

As Jiang Baimian watched the other bandits go into the surrounding forest to gather firewood, she casually asked, “Have you heard of the Mainframe in Tarnan?”

“No.” Jorgensen shook his head. “Communication with those robots is like getting blood from a stone. There’s no way to get any useful information from their mouths.”

The mainstream language in this area was Ashlandic, so a Red River bandit like Jorgensen could use a few idioms.

“Who’s their mayor?” Shang Jianyao interrupted and asked. He seemed very interested in the smart robots.

“It’s a smart robot named Genava. It calls itself the leader of the Tarnan branch under some Security Hall.” Jorgensen recalled what he had seen and heard in Tarnan. “It’s a slightly strange robot.”

“How is it strange?” Jiang Baimian asked many questions mainly to verify the information provided by Redstone Collection.

Jorgensen scratched his head. “Maybe it’s not too strange; Tarnan has many similar smart robots. They will take the initiative to identify as men and women and form families. Some will also exchange for various modules through their internal channels and assemble small robots to be their children. What gender can a robot have?”

While Shang Jianyao and the others were discussing Tarnan, the other three bandits had already left the camp and were gathering firewood in the forest that had many dead branches.

As this place was no longer in the enemy’s line of sight, an idea flashed through their minds almost simultaneously. Should we escape?

On second thought, they recalled Jorgensen’s words. “They have absolute confidence...”

“A lion will not be company with a wolf...”

“The other three most likely have their own strengths and can effectively monitor us...”

As these thoughts raced through their minds, they gradually calmed down. They felt that going to Tarnan wasn’t a bad choice.

Forget it, forget it... They quickly abandoned the idea of escaping and diligently completed the assigned mission.

Chapter 243: New 'Island'

Translator: CKtalon

Having just enjoyed a 'feast' in the afternoon, the Old Task Force made do by eating some canned food, energy bars, and compressed biscuits in the evening. They didn't bother with hunting or cooking.

Furthermore, it was not easy to find beasts in the mountains during winter.

Jiang Baimian sat by the fire and asked Jorgensen, who was working hard as a servant, "Do many people know about this place?"

Jorgensen glanced at his companions—who took turns guarding the area—and smiled obsequiously. "This is the last clean water source from Mount Chilar when heading southwest. If it weren't winter, there would definitely be all kinds of caravans and Ruin Hunters camping here. We might encounter other humans if we aren't careful."

He paused and added, "We like to ambush people nearby. When we encounter people with plenty of firepower, we will pretend not to see them. If it were a small team consisting of four to five—uh, five to six people, we would rush out and rob them. Without such a place to provide a fixed source of income, our boss can't afford to feed so many people."

At this moment, the scarred bandit interrupted. "Later, the small caravans and Ruin Hunters learned their lesson. If they wish to draw water, they will gather a large group of people before coming.

"Sigh, there are also those who specially hire Ruin Hunters to wipe us out. Sometimes, we are forced to the point of not daring to ambush in such places. We can only barely survive by relying on the fields we plow in the mountains."

Upon seeing that this fellow seemingly had the intention of snatching his role and replacing him, Jorgensen looked at him angrily and took the initiative to say, "Don't listen to his nonsense. Mount Chilar is the main trade route from the Linhai Alliance to Tarnan. The things we snatch can be

easily exchanged for food in Tarnan. The rotten fields in the mountains are mainly for our wives to kill time back home.”

Jiang Baimian was already accustomed to bandits who were part-time farmers or farmers who were part-time bandits. What amused her was that Jorgensen was clearly of Red River heritage, but he kept using Ashlandic phrases.

Even bandits have partners... Long Yuehong sighed silently.

Shang Jianyao took the opportunity to ask, “How’s the harvest?”

“Huh?” Jorgensen didn’t expect the other party to be concerned about this. This made him feel like they were two farmers who were chatting as they squatted by their doors.

If the other party had his hands in his sleeves, the imagery would be even more apt.

Jiang Baimian didn’t know how Shang Jianyao had learned to speak like an old farmer and amusedly skipped the topic. “Two to a team tonight. You will take turns being on night duty. Us too.”

She didn’t make Long Yuehong and the others give up their long-standing habits because of the ‘servant army.’

At this moment, Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen cast their gazes at the water source’s entrance at the same time.

This was a relatively sealed valley. Clear water flowed down the rock walls and ejected into a quiet pool. There was only one path that allowed vehicles passage.

Of course, if one didn’t drive, there were still plenty of paths one could take.

Before long, a dark-blue mountain car with steel plates installed drove into the valley. It had a relatively high chassis, large tires, and a tall frame.

“Cool!” Shang Jianyao whistled.

This was not a beauty but a hunk.

He reacted faster than Jiang Baimian. It wasn't that his range had increased again, but he heard the engine's roar.

As soon as the mountain car drove into the valley, the people inside discovered the cars parked on the other side of the pool and the newly pitched tent.

It immediately slowed down. The people inside seemed to have picked up their weapons and assumed a vigilant posture.

The mountain car slowly drove to the furthest spot from Shang Jianyao and the others. They looked at each other across the sizable pool.

The people in the car alighted in a seemingly natural and calm manner, but they were very careful. They were a team of three men and one woman.

One of them was in charge of getting water, and the other was in charge of finding firewood. The last two stood beside the mountain car and warily watched the Old Task Force and their 'servant army.'

One could tell at a glance that Jorgensen and the other two bandits looked hideous. They exuded bandit vibes yet appeared timid in their actions.

Jiang Baimian and the others swept their gazes over, and one of them left a deep impression on them.

He stood beside the car hood at a height exceeding Jiang Baimian and was only slightly shorter than Shang Jianyao. A small half of his right head shimmered with a silver-white metallic luster as if it had been repaired with synthetic materials. On his left forehead was an irregular piece. For some reason, it hadn't been removed. It had only flattened the protruding part.

This person wore a black coat and carried a straight knife on his back. In his hand was a sleek pistol.

His black hair was extremely short, and his right eye seemed to have been modified. His iris reflected a strange purplish-red color, and there was an inconspicuous mole under his left eye.

“Mechanical modification?” Long Yuehong asked Shang Jianyao softly.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it and solemnly replied, “I can only see the modifications for the time being, but I don’t see any machinery.”

Not all metals could be described as machinery.

The woman—who was responsible for drawing water opposite them—was in her late twenties. She had long black hair and a gentle and intellectual bearing. She didn’t look like a Ruin Hunter who had been out adventuring for extended periods.

An antiquarian? A historian? A natural scientist? She hired a relatively powerful Ruin Hunter team to protect her for her venture deep into the Mount Chilar area? When Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze, guesses flashed through her mind.

The Ruin Hunter team didn’t seem to have any intention of coming over to communicate. Jiang Baimian also didn’t send Shang Jianyao over to agitate the other party. The two parties remained vigilant and maintained peace.

This was the norm when caravans and Ruin Hunters encountered each other at a water source. They weren’t related, nor did they have anything in common. There was no need to communicate unless they were gathered for a particular matter or someone was in a rush to ask for directions and information.

After the other party started a fire and had dinner, Jiang Baimian arranged for Long Yuehong and Bai Chen to take turns to be on duty. She and Shang Jianyao were in charge of the most dangerous period when people were most prone to lowering their guard.

Shang Jianyao got into the jeep and didn’t say anything. He massaged his temples and fell asleep.

...

Back when he had just familiarized himself with his abilities and had yet to leave Redstone Collection, he had wandered around the Sea of Origins again and headed for the next island.

In the shimmering illusory sea, Shang Jianyao rotated between all kinds of poses to entertain himself to tide through the boring ‘journey.’

He swam freestyle at times, switching to backstroke or doggy paddle at other times. He would trace out an S-shape as he aimlessly moved forward.

After an unknown period of time, an island appeared in front of him.

This island had mountains, water bodies, and vegetation. Compared to the previous two islands, it was like heaven.

Shang Jianyao had just climbed up when he assumed a posture to take on any possible attacks. However, nothing happened after a while.

He looked around and didn’t discover any monsters that were manifestations of fear.

After some thought, Shang Jianyao sat down cross-legged and decided to compete on patience.

Basking in the warm sunlight and taking in the gentle breeze made him feel a little sleepy, but it wasn’t to the extent that he couldn’t control himself.

This abnormal state continued until he began to tire.

Therefore, Shang Jianyao naturally left the Sea of Origins and returned to the real world.

He suddenly opened his eyes, looked at the front seat of the jeep, and opened his mouth.

After hesitating for a moment, Shang Jianyao shut his mouth and closed his eyes again.

This time, he really fell asleep.

...

Jiang Baimian stayed on duty until dawn. She instructed her team members and the ‘servant army’ to pack their items and prepare to leave.

As they slowly drove to the valley entrance, the man opposite them—who seemed to have undergone mechanical modification—hesitated for a few seconds before shouting, “Are you heading southwest?”

“Yes!” Shang Jianyao rolled down the window and answered—looking as though he would answer any posed question.

The man touched the cold metal on the right side of his face and said loudly, “Then, it’s best to circle around. A Superior Heartless appeared in the southwestern mountains.”

Superior Heartless? Jiang Baimian rolled down the passenger window and asked curiously, “When was this?”

Miens and the others had just come out of Tarnan and passed through the area to return to the Linhai Alliance.

The man—who had replaced half of his skull with silver-white metal—replied, “Just recently. He wasn’t there originally; he just entered the mountainous area yesterday.”

Jiang Baimian came to a realization and asked, “Did the Heartless mutate, or did an Awakened contract the Heartless disease?”

“I don’t know. This is information I obtained from several Ruin Hunter teams that suffered tragic casualties,” replied the other party.

They didn’t seem open to say anything more.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and didn’t continue pestering him. She loudly said, “Thank you!”

“Thank you!” Shang Jianyao also expressed his thoughts.

After leaving the valley, and before Jiang Baimian could stop Jorgensen's car to ask about a possible detour route, Shang Jianyao suddenly said, "I discovered the third island last night, but it's strange."

Why didn't you say so earlier? This thought subconsciously flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind before she gently asked, "What's strange about it?"

Chapter 244: Machine City

Shang Jianyao briefly recounted his experience on the island and concluded, "There were no difficulties or monsters. Maybe they were hiding to discuss how to surrender decently."

Jiang Baimian ignored Shang Jianyao's last sentence and muttered to herself, "This is indeed strange. What kind of psychological trauma will it be?"

As she spoke, she looked back at Shang Jianyao and suggested, "Give it a few more shots and see if there are any changes."

There was no other solution. Due to the lacking conditions, they could only attempt to gather information.

Long Yuehong—who was beside Shang Jianyao—smiled. "That 'island' looks like it's used for resting and vacations."

"Probably not. Every 'island' in the Sea of Origins definitely has its meaning." Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong and laughed. "If it were you, I can guess what mentality this 'island' corresponds to and determine what will happen next."

"What is it?" Shang Jianyao was curious.

Long Yuehong tried to stop her but failed.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "It's Little Red's fear of his will being corroded and disintegrated. Think about it. A sunny island, a warm sea breeze, a spacious and beautiful house, all kinds of food, no lack of supplies, a beautiful wife, all his relatives, friends, and outsiders that often visit. All of these combined will definitely make Little Red forget his lofty ambitions and wear down his will to work hard."

With all of this in place, why should I work hard? Isn't this my goal? Long Yuehong didn't dare to speak his 'mind.'

"He might think that this is a gift from the Kalendaria," Shang Jianyao said helpfully.

This time, Long Yuehong didn't retort. He only softly corrected a mistake. "Heavens."

He didn't believe in any Kalendaria, so it was naturally a gift from the heavens.

Jiang Baimian knew when to stop and didn't continue the topic. She thoughtfully said to Shang Jianyao, "Did that island really corrode your will?"

"I just found it very boring," Shang Jianyao replied truthfully.

Upon seeing that nothing would come out from the discussion for the time being, Jiang Baimian picked up the walkie-talkie, pressed the button, and spoke to the car behind. "Did you hear the Ruin Hunter's reminder?"

Although she wasn't sure if it was a Ruin Hunter team, everyone they encountered in the wilderness could temporarily be called Ruin Hunters.

Jorgensen held the spare walkie-talkie that Bai Chen had thrown at him when they set off and replied eagerly, "Loud and clear. However, there's no need to worry. That place is very close to Tarnan. Once the people from Mechanical Paradise receive the news, they will send their smart robot guards to eliminate the threat. They aren't afraid of any Superior Heartless."

They probably aren't afraid of Awakened as well... Jiang Baimian silently muttered and directly asked, "How long will this take?"

"I don't know. It depends on when Tarnan receives the news," Jorgensen replied honestly.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment. "Is there any other way to bypass that area?"

“Yes, but it will take more than half a day. The road is in terrible condition, and vehicles like trucks can’t traverse those routes. However, it shouldn’t be a problem for our two vehicles.” Jorgensen tried his best to play the role of a guide.

He didn’t want to have his hands tied behind his back like his companions.

As they waited for the car behind to overtake them, Long Yuehong couldn’t help but be a little worried. What if the Superior Heartless changes locations and happens to appear on our new route?

This wasn’t a real beast that would have a fixed area of activity. Even beasts could ‘move’ when they were agitated.

Long Yuehong didn’t raise the question because he was afraid that the mere mention of it would make it come true.

When the time came, Shang Jianyao would definitely ‘sigh’ in schadenfreude.

“Sigh, this is the power of having a bad name.”

...

Perhaps it was because Long Yuehong had held back his question, but the Old Task Force didn’t encounter any accidents on their subsequent journey. However, because the road was in terrible condition, the cars drove very slowly. Obstacles needed to be cleared from time to time, so they wasted a lot of time.

After crossing an old stone bridge in the evening, Jorgensen reported through the walkie-talkie. “We are half an hour’s drive south away from Tarnan.”

It went so smoothly? Long Yuehong couldn’t believe it.

Amidst his anxiety, the subsequent development had gone smoothly. After it was almost completely dark, the Old Task Force and their ‘servant army’ arrived at Tarnan.

This was a small city that spanned the river. There were not many towering buildings, and the roads were grayish-white, neat, and intact.

“We were blessed by Lady Luck.” Jiang Baimian could finally say this.

“Wrong,” Shang Jianyao retorted. “It’s Lucky Little Red’s blessing.”

“How did he bless us?” Jiang Baimian replied.

The driving Shang Jianyao smiled. “He didn’t say anything.”

Enough, you two... Long Yuehong weakly shouted inwardly.

Fortunately, as the car entered Tarnan, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s attention was focused on this small city dominated by smart robots.

On both sides of the clean and tidy cement road were street lamps. Under the black night sky, they emitted a bright glow like stars reflected on the ground.

Beyond the sidewalk were buildings that didn’t have many floors. At a glance, the tallest building only had 15 to 16 floors.

These buildings formed a half-closed courtyard. Although the outer walls were old, they were very clean. No plants grew out of the cracks.

This reminded Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and the others of Swamp Ruin 1. This was what it looked like after the lights were switched on. However, it was on a larger scale and looked more shocking.

At this moment, a red truck in a slightly complicated frame turned from the intersection and stopped beside an extinguished street lamp.

The small truck underwent a strange change the next second. First, it slowly propped itself up before stretching out its various components and restructuring certain parts.

About 30 to 40 seconds later, it slowly transformed into a five to six-meter-tall robot.

It then quickly but in a surprisingly steady manner removed the broken street lamp and repaired the circuit.

When the four Old Task Force members in the jeep saw this, they gaped their mouths and didn't come to their senses for a long time.

The only difference between them was that their respective emotions were focused on different things.

Shang Jianyao was excited, curious, and agitated. Jiang Baimian was surprised, inspired, and eager. Bai Chen was stunned, shocked, and confused. Long Yuehong was alarmed, puzzled, and amazed.

Upon seeing the car behind slow down, Jorgensen picked up the walkie-talkie and said, "Don't worry. This is Tarnan's repair robot; it's clumsy, inflexible, and not good at combat."

"But it can transform into a car!" Shang Jianyao's voice sounded through Jiang Baimian's walkie-talkie.

That was enough!

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and exhaled. "Take us to Mayor Geneva first."

"Alright." Jorgensen tried to introduce the area in detail. "This is west of the river, the area where Mechanical Paradise robots are active... After crossing the bridge and arriving east of the river, that's the place specially reserved for humans... Mayor Geneva's house is by the bridge west of the river..."

As he spoke, he instructed the driving bandit to their destination.

He naturally couldn't drive the entire day when traversing mountain roads. After obtaining Jiang Baimian and the others' approval, he released a companion he could deal with and took turns driving with him.

The city was not large. In less than ten minutes, the Old Task Force arrived at a relatively new bridge.

On the right side of the bridge, in the area by the river, stood individual buildings. They were all hidden by trees. Some of the doors even had lawns that were still green in winter.

“You are looking for the white one.” Jorgensen got his companion to stop the car and opened the door to do the introductions.

Under the illumination of the street lamps by the side of the road, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others barely saw the smart robot settlement. They also saw a group of people walking over from the bridge’s end.

The Mountain Fox bandits’ leader, Panania, held his bull-horned helmet and said to his subordinate, “Things are always better when you talk to Officer Geneva directly. We suffered f*cking heavy losses this time. I don’t even know how we can survive the winter if we don’t sell our supplies as soon as possible!

“Those unscrupulous merchants will definitely lower their offers when they see our wretched states. These robots are still the fairest. Although they won’t give us too much, they won’t cheat us of our dues.”

As they spoke, they turned into Riverfront Road and prepared to walk to the residence of the robot mayor, Geneva.

At this moment, they saw a few familiar figures under the street lamps’ illumination. These were the companions they had previously abandoned, as well as the people who had caused their team to suffer heavy losses!

Although they hadn’t encountered Shang Jianyao back then and couldn’t clearly see Long Yuehong through the exoskeleton’s helmet, the beautiful woman carrying the rocket launcher left a deep impression on them.

On one side was blood and fire, and on the other was a picturesque beauty.

Alarm bells sounded in their minds. Without thinking, they took out their weapons and assumed defensive postures.

Jiang Baimian—who had discovered them in advance—quickly scanned the area and muttered to herself, “Fourteen...”

She then said to Shang Jianyao, “You take the front; we’ll take the rear.”

It meant that he was in charge of the nine in front. Little White, Little Red, and Jiang Baimian would suppress the five at the back.

This was very simple.

When the atmosphere instantly became a one-sided, hostile showdown, Jorgensen and the others trembled a little. They didn’t know if they should obey the orders issued by their current ‘masters’ to resist their boss or take the opportunity to counterattack and escape their shackles. Or were they to ignore everything else and not stand between the two parties—it would result in them being shot to death.

The next second, a black surveillance camera beside a street lamp emitted an electronic voice. “Private fights are prohibited in Tarnan. Please put down your weapons immediately. Those in violation of the rules will have to bear the consequences.”

Upon hearing this, the bandits heaved a sigh of relief. Fortunately, we are in Tarnan.

Just as this thought flashed through their minds, they saw Shang Jianyao rush to the street lamp, raise his head, and excitedly urge, “Say more, say more!”

The talking surveillance camera fell silent as if it had never encountered such a request. There was no corresponding content in its database.

Chapter 245: Geneva

Upon seeing that the speech-capable surveillance camera was ignoring him, Shang Jianyao walked back to Jiang Baimian’s side in disappointment.

Jiang Baimian looked at the dumbfounded bandits and chuckled. “Where are you guys going?” At this moment, she inexplicably felt that she was really suitable to play the villain.

The Mountain Fox bandits' leader, Panania, forced a smile and said, "We're visiting Officer Geneva. It's the mayor of Tarnan and the robot guard captain."

He mentioned this name to boost his confidence.

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. "What a coincidence; we are also visiting Mayor Geneva."

At this point, she pointed at Jorgensen and the others as if she had just met the bandits opposite her for the first time and deliberately said, "We captured a few bandits on the way and are prepared to hand them over to Mayor Geneva to deal with."

Panania felt like he had been slapped in the face. He endured the burning pain in his heart and forced a smile. "Tarnan does come equipped with prisons."

He acted as if he had never met Jiang Baimian and the others or Jorgensen and his subordinates.

He was worried that the Ruin Hunter team opposite him would take action after he admitted that the bandits were his companions. They would then produce evidence and claim that they were arresting the bandits. Another possibility was them reporting to Mechanical Paradise's smart surveillance on the spot to request the local law enforcement robots to take action.

Panania had no experience with these two situations before. He didn't know what Mechanical Paradise's smart robots would do, so he didn't dare to take the risk.

Jorgensen and the others looked a little embarrassed. Fortunately, they didn't need to say a word.

Jiang Baimian didn't say anything else. She swept her gaze across Panania and the other bandits and smiled humbly. "Since we're all here to visit Mayor Geneva, you guys go first."

How hypocritical... Long Yuehong criticized inwardly.

"You're speaking ill of Team Leader!" Shang Jianyao suddenly turned his head as if he had caught Long Yuehong red-handed.

“N-no!” Long Yuehong stammered. This fellow’s ability has mutated to the point of being able to read minds?

Upon hearing his stutter, Shang Jianyao laughed. “You fell for it as expected!”

I’m really stupid, seriously... Long Yuehong hid his guilt and retorted adamantly, “There was no such thing!”

The bandits were a little surprised by their conversation, but this didn’t stop Panania from responding to Jiang Baimian. “We’re in no rush. We’re in no rush at all; we have other things to do.”

“I didn’t expect you to be so polite despite your vulgar and barbaric appearance.” Jiang Baimian praised him before turning around and walking to Genova’s bungalow.

Panania wore long, greasy blond hair. His face was rugged, and he held the bull-horned helmet in his hand. He indeed looked like a barbarian.

The team leader could be rude, but Shang Jianyao couldn’t. He waved at the Mountain Fox bandits and said, “Goodbye!”

It’s best if we never meet again... Although Panania felt hate and wanted revenge, he couldn’t muster the intention to wash away the humiliation from before when he recalled their encounter.

If it was just the military exoskeleton, he felt that he still had a chance if his bandit team was well-equipped. However, the most terrifying thing was that only one person from the Ruin Hunter team opposite them had attacked with all his might back then. The other three were just providing some assistance and appeared very relaxed. It was unknown where some of them were. They might be monitoring the captives or playing music.

As long as they weren’t much weaker than the man wearing the military exoskeleton, their team would be having a death wish if they wanted revenge.

As the name suggested, the nickname ‘Mountain Fox’ definitely had a hint of cunning and caution. There were only wrongly chosen names; it didn’t apply to nicknames.

As he had this in mind, Panania and the other bandits realized that the tall, handsome, and sunny young man was standing there, staring at them without moving.

Their hearts rose to their throats again.

As his thoughts raced, Panania tentatively raised his right hand and waved it. “Goodbye.”

Shang Jianyao turned around in satisfaction and quickly followed Jiang Baimian and the others.

“...” The bandits were speechless, finding it ridiculous and aggrieving.

“You had fun,” Jiang Baimian commented.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “The present me is the one with strict requirements on manners.”

The corners of Jiang Baimian’s mouth twitched slightly, and she decided to go with the flow. “They really should thank Mr. Shang, the teacher.”

Bai Chen—who was beside them—silently glanced at them and decided not to participate in such a conversation in case something went wrong with her mental state.

The Old Task Force quickly brought the ‘servant army’ to Geneva’s bungalow. They passed through the lawn that remained green despite the winter and arrived at the door.

There were no guards here.

Jiang Baimian turned her head and said to Shang Jianyao, “It’s time to show your manners.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t disappoint. He took two steps forward and pressed the doorbell.

The door opened as the ringing echoed, and a robot appeared in front of them.

This robot was about 1.9 meters tall. Its metal bones were silver-black, and it wore a neat, dark-green military uniform. Its eyes flickered with a blue glow.

As it was covered by clothes, Jiang Baimian couldn't tell what functional components or which weapon modules it had.

"You are?" the robot asked in a mellow male voice.

Its voice fluctuated and changed. It sounded like a human, but it still had a clearly synthetic tone; it didn't have much emotion.

Shang Jianyao mimicked Jiang Baimian's usual tone and words and said with a smile, "We are a Ruin Hunter team that has just arrived in Tarnan. We are here to visit Mayor Genova."

The tall robot in the dark-green military uniform nodded and said, "That's me. Come in."

It then asked, "Coffee or tea? They are all produced in the northern mountains of the Linhai Alliance."

"Let's have coffee." Jiang Baimian thought that the Old Task Force members had probably never tasted coffee apart from her. With a mischievous thought, she chose such a beverage.

In Pangu Biology, it was still possible for employees to exchange for some tea leaves around the end of the year. Although tea leaves in Redstone Collection were goods that could be exported and smuggled to factions like Future Intelligence, they weren't too rare.

As the smart robot in the dark-green military uniform, Genova, made way, it shouted into the house, "Susanna, prepare eight cups of coffee."

"Four cups are enough. They don't need it," Shang Jianyao said politely.

Genava's shimmering blue eyes looked at Jorgensen and the others before it corrected itself. "Four cups!"

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen listened to their conversation and inexplicably felt like the feeling would be no different from a conversation between humans if Genova's face, neck, and hands were covered.

This member of Mechanical Paradise—Tarnan's mayor and robot guard captain—acted too much like a human.

Is this the latest smart robot from Mechanical Paradise? The same thought surfaced in Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen's minds.

After entering the house, they walked into the living room and sat on the long sofa. Jorgensen and the others stood behind them.

Genava sat in an armchair, raised his right foot, and placed it on his left thigh. "What may I do for you?"

Jiang Baimian began with the trivial matters and pointed at Jorgensen and the others. "We encountered a band of bandits on our way to Tarnan and captured these captives. We wanted to leave them to you to deal with."

Genava was not surprised and nodded. "I'll get someone to send them to prison later for trial."

Upon hearing this, Jorgensen and the others heaved a sigh of relief. They knew that Tarnan's sentencing of bandits wouldn't be too strict, especially to those who had never committed a crime in the city. They would only be sentenced to one to two years and be forced to participate in some form of labor.

Although losing two years of freedom did make these bandits uncomfortable, and they didn't know if their wives would wait for them, it was at least much better than being killed or sold to the mines. It was a result that they were rather satisfied with.

After she was done communicating this problem, Jiang Baimian said, "A Superior Heartless appeared in the southwest area of Mount Chilar. Caravans and Ruin Hunters no longer dare to take that route."

Genava moved its metal neck. "I just learned of this in the evening. I'll send the guards to deal with it tomorrow. However, I still have to thank you for specially coming to report this piece of news."

As they spoke, a robot in a white dress walked out with a tray. It had a silver-white metal body and stood about 1.75 meters tall. A diamond necklace in the Old World's style hung from its neck, and its eyes also shimmered with a blue glow.

There were a total of five cups on the tray. They emitted a rich coffee aroma and a smell that Jiang Baimian was rather familiar with.

“Hello.” The silver-white robot—who took on the role of a woman—bent down and placed four cups of coffee in front of Shang Jianyao and the others before pushing the remaining cup to Genava.

“This is my wife, Susanna,” introduced Genava.

“Hello, Ma'am Susanna.” Shang Jianyao politely greeted her.

Susanna was very happy about this. “You're a really polite young lad.”

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen greeted her and cast their gazes at Genava as if nothing had happened.

They were very curious about how this smart robot drank coffee.

Genava picked up the cup with one hand and reached into his mouth with the other, twisting a switch. It then poured a little of the cup's liquid inside.

It was only then that Jiang Baimian realized that the liquid was much thicker than coffee.

Suddenly, she knew what the familiar smell mixed with the coffee aroma was—the smell of oil!

Genava looks like it's drinking coffee, but it's actually applying lubricant to itself and doing maintenance? Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen felt an indescribable sense of strangeness.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong didn't have much of a reaction. They had seen Zen Master Jingfa pour lubricant into his body while preaching the Buddhist Dharma.

At this moment, the blue light in Geneva's eyes gently flickered a few times. It then sighed with emotion. "How delicious."

"..." Jiang Baimian controlled the corners of her mouth and silently picked up her coffee to take a sip.

Chapter 246: Proving Sincerity

Long Yuehong wanted to imitate his team leader by picking up his cup and tasting the so-called coffee.

But at this moment, a very short figure ran down the stairs.

Long Yuehong focused and realized that it was a small robot. It was more than a meter tall, and its metal bones were silvery-white. It wore a light-blue dress and a cute furry hat.

"Daddy, Daddy." The little robot rushed out of the stairwell as it ran toward Geneva.

Suddenly, it seemed to trip over something and fell to the ground with a clang.

"Be careful. What if you fall and injure yourself?" Geneva instantly left his seat and ran over. He picked up the small robot and patted its back.

What if you fall and injure yourself... Long Yuehong stared blankly at the brownish-yellow floor—which had obvious potholes and cracks.

His facial muscles slightly twitched as he concealed his emotions and picked up the cup. He brought it to his mouth and took a sip.

An indescribable bitterness filled his mouth the next second, making him frown instantly as his entire being jolted awake.

What the hell is this beverage? Long Yuehong instinctively wanted to spit out the coffee; otherwise, he felt that he might be poisoned. But considering that this was someone else's home and that the coffee was a beverage he had chosen, he forced himself to hold back.

It would've been very rude.

With the coffee in his mouth, he looked around and realized that Bai Chen had also taken a sip, only to frown.

See, I'm not the one being picky... Long Yuehong consoled himself when he saw this.

After they had all tasted coffee in its original form, Jiang Baimian exclaimed, "I forgot to tell you guys: you can add milk and sugar."

She pointed at the few small paper sachets and a silver kettle that came with the coffee.

So that's how it is... Long Yuehong was still very inquisitive about food. He held the coffee in his mouth, put down the cup, and tore open a paper sachet. He realized that it was sugar that had been compressed into a cube.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and added, "You usually put one. Two if you like it sweet, or even more."

Putting one cube of sugar in just like that? How extravagant... Long Yuehong had never enjoyed such a comfortable life in Pangu Biology.

Even though he had been very extravagant after receiving his allowance and rewards, to the point of often eating sweets and drinking sweet beverages, he didn't recklessly throw so much sugar into his water.

With a spirit of frugality, he only put one cube of sugar into his coffee.

At this moment, he gradually felt that the coffee in his mouth wasn't as bitter as before and that it had an indescribable aroma.

Jiang Baimian saw that between Long Yuehong and Bai Chen, one put sugar while the other poured milk. However, not only did Shang Jianyao sit still, but he even drank a few mouthfuls. She asked curiously, "You're not adding?"

With a beaming smile, Shang Jianyao replied, “The bitterness keeps me awake.”

Which Shang Jianyao is this... Jiang Baimian’s expression froze for a second, and she decided not to pursue the topic.

After Bai Chen and Long Yuehong mixed their coffee and slowly relaxed their brows, Shang Jianyao took the pot and filled his almost empty cup to 90% full. Finally, he added a cube of sugar.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but ask, “Doesn’t the bitterness keep you awake?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “I’m awake; there’s no way I can be more awake.”

Everything you say is right, and everything you say makes sense... Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Geneva.

Geneva had already coaxed the wailing child and introduced it with a smile. “My daughter, Rides. Born in Year 41 of the New Calendar.”

Maybe it’s the assembly date... Long Yuehong replied inwardly. Of course, he definitely wouldn’t say such words out loud.

Geneva had also noticed the Old Task Force’s coffee drinking and smiled. “It’s always the same when it’s your first time drinking coffee. You’ll get used to it.”

You make it sound like you can drink it... Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen didn’t know how to respond.

Shang Jianyao sincerely asked, “What are you drinking? It seems different from ours.”

Geneva let out a hearty and synthetic laugh. “We Smart Bots are still different from you. This is coffee-flavored lubricant. After it enters my body, many sensors will capture the corresponding information and transmit it to my main module, allowing me to obtain the correct feeling directly. Believe me, our experiences are the same in this regard.”

At that moment, Long Yuehong felt the same way he did when he attended Zen Master Jingfa's preaching.

With that said, Genava lowered its head and spoke to its daughter, Rides. "Alright, it's time for after-meal study."

"Can I play a little longer, pretty please?" wheedled the silver-white robot, Rides. It mimicked a girl's voice; it was also fluctuating and had an accent, but it sounded synthetic and emotionless.

It made Long Yuehong feel like he was watching a stage show with a poor script.

During Pangu Biology's end-of-year report performance, there would sometimes be short and vigorous stage plays or operas.

"No." Genava patiently reasoned with its daughter.

Finally, Rides agreed to study for half an hour.

Satisfied, Genava opened its daughter's head, took out a chip from its pocket, and inserted it.

"..." Upon seeing this, the three Old Task Force members' expressions became complicated again.

Shang Jianyao had a look of envy as if he felt that it would save him a lot of time if he could directly 'imbue' himself with knowledge during his studying.

After leaving its daughter to study at the side, Genava looked at the four people from the Old Task Force and asked, "Apart from what has been mentioned, is there anything else?"

Jiang Baimian originally had a plan to extract information from Genava, but she suddenly had some inspiration. Multiple sources of intelligence have mentioned that many smart robots in Tarnan like to imitate humans and form families... Smart robots do things according to standard operating procedures and show sufficient fairness... Not only is Genava wearing a human military uniform, but it also has a wife and child. 'Drinking' coffee-flavored lubricant... It doesn't seem like using rhetoric to create logical flaws is the best strategy against a smart robot...

As these thoughts flashed through her mind, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly.

Indeed, I have to use Shang Jianyao's directness and show my sincerity at such times... Jiang Baimian made up her mind and smiled as she replied to Geneva's question. "We heard that your Mechanical Paradise has a Mainframe."

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong—who was drinking his coffee and slowly experiencing its unique aroma—almost spat out the liquid in his mouth. Isn't this too direct? What if this is a secret of Mechanical Paradise? Will we be attacked by the Geneva family for 'knowing too much?'

Geneva 'drank' another mouthful of coffee-flavored lubricant. The blue light in his eyes slowly swept across Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others' faces.

"You guys are very frank." Seven to eight seconds later, Geneva nodded slightly and said, "Although we won't take the initiative to reveal the Mainframe's existence to the outside world, certain partners still know about it. What's your goal in asking about the Mainframe?"

"So here's the matter." Jiang Baimian organized her words. "We are a Ruin Hunter team that's searching for the New World. It's very difficult not to establish connections with the Old World's legacy if we want to find the New World's door. We hope to obtain some information regarding the Old World's destruction from your Mainframe. It should've been in operation back then."

Geneva agreed with this reason. "I can understand that. I've also encountered some Hunter teams that are in pursuit of the New World."

It paused and continued speaking in a mellow but emotionless male voice. "First, it's no longer called Mainframe. Instead, it's called a 'Source Brain.' Second, I can't decide on behalf of the Source Brain on whether it will meet you. I have to report it according to the procedures. Yes, it might take one to three days for a reply."

Geneva's pronunciation was up to standard, so Jiang Baimian and the others didn't confuse 'Source Brain' with another phrase. They just couldn't figure out if it meant some other word.

One of Geneva's fingers immediately emitted a red glow as it wrote the word 'Source' on the strange curtain on the other side of the living room.

“Alright, we have no problems with that,” Jiang Baimian replied happily.

Things had developed better than she expected. Of course, if the Source Brain decided not to meet them, they would have to think of another way to move the intelligent core.

Wait a minute. Geneva said that it’s the Source Brain’s decision to meet us? The Source Brain can directly make a decision on this matter? Jiang Baimian immediately felt a little confused.

Geneva drank another mouthful of coffee-flavored lubricant. “You can head east next. There are several hotels there.”

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others—who could tell that Geneva was sending them off—didn’t waste their remaining coffee. They stood up after finishing it and bade them farewell.

As for Jorgensen and the others, they remained here and were handled by the robot guards.

Outside, Long Yuehong sighed with emotion as he breathed in the night breeze by the river. “Why do the smart robots here feel strange?”

“Have you seen other smart robots before?” Shang Jianyao asked as he opened the jeep’s door.

“No,” Long Yuehong replied honestly.

“Then, what are you using for comparison?” Shang Jianyao asked with a smile.

“...” Long Yuehong flew into a rage out of humiliation. “Common sense!”

As they spoke, they got into the jeep and drove toward the bridge that led east of the river.

Along the way, the Old Task Force occasionally saw strolling, patrolling, and chatting smart robots. They realized that all of them were basically wearing clothes. Some even had shoes and socks.

The area beside the River West Bridge was quiet and peaceful at night.

As the jeep drove past the bridge and arrived at River East, the area ahead gradually became lively.

On the street closest to the bridge, the street lamps were bright. People came and went, and there were many stalls. It was like Weed City's West Street, but they were laid out haphazardly.

Even with the windows closed, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others could hear the honking—it was another car urging the pedestrians to make way.

Chapter 247: Entertainment Material

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked to their respective sides and saw the stalls by the sides of the road. Some were selling crystals, diamonds, emeralds, and white jade jewelry in the Old World's style. Some had different-sized LCD screens and portable computers. Some had canned food, clothes, and other supplies. Some were simply selling all kinds of miscellaneous items.

“Contains entertainment material from the Old World...” Long Yuehong read a paper signboard.

It wasn't hung up and was placed in front of one of the stalls. This stall's main business was the repairing of Old World computers.

Upon hearing Long Yuehong read the words, Bai Chen—who was driving—warned him seriously, “It's best not to touch that.”

“Why?” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong asked in unison.

Bai Chen recalled and said, “When I roamed the wilderness, I knew a very powerful Ruin Hunter. He was roughly half as capable as Team Leader.”

Jiang Baimian was observing the lively street with interest and laughed when she heard that. “Whoa, I've become a standard for measurement?”

Bai Chen didn't respond to her jest and continued, “Once, when he explored a city ruin, he found a portable computer that didn't have any major problems other than a flat battery. Later, he got someone to fix all kinds of small problems and traded for a new battery meant for it. He eventually managed to boot that computer...”

As she had to avoid a pedestrian crossing the street, Bai Chen paused before she could finish her sentence.

Long Yuehong tried to make a guess. “Something terrifying happened in the end? The Old World’s entertainment material on that computer hid some kind of danger?”

“No,” Bai Chen said truthfully. “After he found the entertainment material on the computer, he became obsessed with it and stopped exploring city ruins. He relied on his past savings and connections to set up a small business in First City and barely managed to make a living. Furthermore, he wouldn’t leave the computer even when the shop was busy. He didn’t bother about focusing on his business or scaling it up. He only wanted to stay in front of the computer—constantly clicking the mouse and tapping the keyboard.”

Finally, Bai Chen concluded, “He was originally a very ambitious and capable person. He might have one day been able to get his own manor, but he ended up wasting his life away just like that.”

Long Yuehong oohed and aahed.

“How terrifying—those Old World entertainment material.”

Shang Jianyao excitedly said, “I want to challenge it and see if my will can emerge victorious when facing the Old World’s entertainment material.”

During the discussion, Long Yuehong glanced at his team leader and realized that she had her mouth tightly shut. Her cheeks had slightly bulged, and her body was trembling slightly as if she had a hard time holding in her laughter.

Team Leader must’ve come into contact with the Old World’s entertainment material in the past... Just as this thought flashed across Long Yuehong’s mind, Jiang Baimian laughed until she couldn’t straighten her back.

“Haha, Little White, you look so cute when you’re serious! Haha...”

Bai Chen pursed her lips and didn’t respond.

Jiang Baimian wiped the smile off her face and said seriously, “But we definitely can’t let Shang Jianyao touch the Old World’s entertainment material.”

Just the radio programs, the music list, and the end-of-year performance had made Shang Jianyao’s imagination go into overdrive. Wouldn’t it be pandemonium if he were to come into contact with the rich and complete entertainment material from the Old World?

“You don’t trust me?” Shang Jianyao protested.

“No, I don’t trust the Old World’s entertainment material. I’m afraid that they will be corrupted by you.” Jiang Baimian blatantly lied without any hint of guilt.

She felt that this should be the most convincing ‘reason.’

As expected, Shang Jianyao replied, “You have to be thankful that it’s the proud me now.”

“...” Jiang Baimian’s eyes darted up as she slowly exhaled.

The jeep drove for a while longer. Long Yuehong saw someone setting up a platform by the side of the road with a black-covered book in hand. He was speaking to the surrounding crowd from a raised platform. Some people were also holding thick books and constantly chatting with the pedestrians...

“There are indeed more religions here.” Long Yuehong sighed with emotion when he combined the information he had previously obtained.

As the smart robots of Mechanical Paradise didn’t believe in religion, nor did they care if others were religious, many originally secret religions surfaced. They established cathedrals, temples, or pavilions to preach in public.

As for an organization like the Furnace Church—which could publicly hold activities in the Linhai Alliance—they had no qualms at all. Not only did they build a cathedral and send a Dedicator, but they also directly turned themselves into the Tarnan Services Center for many merchant associations and teams from the Linhai Alliance.

Of course, the other premise of proselytizing was that there were people who needed proselytizing, and Tarnan had no lack of people.

Before receiving the information that Han Wanghuo had given them, the Old Task Force imagined that Tarnan was mostly made up of robots. Humans were caravans, hunters, and trade representatives that came and went—transients. Furthermore, there weren't many of these people combined. This was because only a few factions knew of Tarnan and were permitted to trade with Mechanical Paradise.

Even if every faction sent several caravans and Ruin Hunters—who were in charge of protecting them—the total population here wouldn't reach the standard of a medium-sized settlement.

Reality overturned this misconception. Before Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others left Redstone Collection, they had already known that there was a large number of local residents in Tarnan.

They came from three sources: The first were members of the caravans and their descendants.

Tarnan was controlled by Mechanical Paradise, and private fights were forbidden. The public order was relatively good, and it also had a powerful armed force. It didn't have to worry about being attacked by bandits or other factions. To many people, it was simply paradise.

In the Chaotic Era and the early years of the New Calendar, this was an irresistible attraction. Back then, many caravans and many city states' trade groups had personnel who either used official means or methods to defect from their original factions. They stayed behind and settled here. After all, there were too many ownerless houses in such a well-maintained city ruin.

Back then, the Linhai Alliance had yet to be established. Mechanical Paradise transacted with many city states in that area. Later, these city states—which were outside the polluted zone—formed states and then, as states, formed an alliance.

In fact, it was all thanks to Mechanical Paradise's help. This included, but was not limited to, sending robot volunteers, providing water purification technology, and resisting the Superior Heartless.

The second source was the wilderness nomads in the surrounding area. Such a peaceful city that allowed the exchange for necessities made every nomad here unwilling to leave.

The third group was foreign Ruin Hunters. Around Tarnan—including the Mount Chilar area—were many city ruins that attracted many Ruin Hunters. They inevitably discovered such a safe haven. After living in Tarnan for a period of time, a large portion of them chose not to take risks elsewhere and stayed behind. They lived by reclaiming farmland and exploring the various ruins in the area. They also established the local Hunter's Guild.

Of course, the premise behind the establishment of the local Hunter's Guild was the signing of a memorandum with Mechanical Paradise to ensure that the hunters' various actions were restrained. They were not to take the initiative to reveal Tarnan's existence to the outside world.

The jewelry, appliances, and miscellaneous items on sale in the stalls by the side of the road were all found from the nearby city ruins.

Previously, Omnidirectional Commerce's Miens had mentioned that Tarnan's robots didn't eat or farm. This resulted in the lack of fresh ingredients here. Everyone could only rely on canned food, biscuits, and energy bars for a living, but that was pertaining to 'outsiders.'

All local residents cultivated farmlands, but since they were in the mountains and the soil was poor, many areas were still polluted and unable to be farmed. Therefore, the food and vegetables produced were only enough for their families.

The livestock they reared would occasionally be sold.

In other words, it wasn't like people couldn't buy flour, rice, vegetables, and other supplies in Tarnan. It was just that they were more expensive and not worth it. Many caravans and Ruin Hunters would rather get it from somewhere nearby.

As they spoke, the jeep finally passed through the lively street and entered a quieter area.

The street lamps here were still bright. Tarnan didn't seem to lack electricity, but only a few houses had a yellow or white glow.

Behind the many windows were vacant rooms.

“I thought Tarnan was already considered lively and prosperous, but it isn’t able to fill every room in this city ruin.” Long Yuehong compared Tarnan to Weed City.

“This is a semi-secret place after all,” Jiang Baimian said casually.

Long Yuehong looked around and suddenly sighed with emotion. “Compared to Swamp Ruin 1, this is a small city. Such cities are definitely everywhere in the Ashlands. Before the Old World was destroyed, this place was mostly filled with people, but it was still a small city...”

Even a city that wasn’t even one-fifth filled could be considered lively in the present-day Ashlands. How prosperous was the Old World back then?

Shang Jianyao immediately echoed, “Yeah.”

He then said, “So, are you going to recite with me?”

“Recite what?” Long Yuehong was a little confused.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “In order to save all of humanity, I volunteer...”

It wasn’t Jiang Baimian who interrupted him, but Bai Chen. She stopped the car in front of a hotel.

This hotel was called Serene Dream. It was about 200 to 300 meters away from the busiest street. It originally seemed to be a hotel in the Old World, but it had been renovated and modified.

This was a place recommended by several smugglers in Redstone Collection. It was said to be the most comfortable.

After parking the jeep in front of the hotel, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others walked to the front desk through the automatic spinning door.

During this process, Shang Jianyao deliberately followed the door’s rotation. Just as he was about to head back out again, Jiang Baimian pulled him back.

Long Yuehong was also curious about the door that spun on its own when it sensed their approach.

This was an application in his field of expertise.

Sitting at the hotel's front desk was a woman in her thirties. She was Ashlandic and wore a thick, colorful, and unique skirt. Her facial features weren't bad, and she had a rather charming bearing.

As she twirled her hair, she smiled at the guests. "You have made a wise choice. If you go to places in the city where nobody lives and find a room to sleep in, you might very well encounter..."

At this point, she paused and said in a creepy tone, "Ghosts."

Shang Jianyao was immediately excited. "Where? Where?"

"..." The woman suspected to be the hotel owner was dumbfounded.

Chapter 248: Solo Operation

Jiang Baimian laughed inwardly and helped 'explain.' "He's a ghost enthusiast and has always been trying to prove that ghosts really exist."

The woman—who was suspected to be the hotel owner—sized up the four of them several times and exhaled. "I didn't expect such a person to exist."

"The world is large, so nothing is impossible," Jiang Baimian replied rather sincerely.

Even a self-proclaimed knowledgeable person like her often felt like a frog in a well. Shang Jianyao's antics, in particular, were often unimaginable to her.

Without waiting for the woman in the gorgeous dress to speak, Jiang Baimian asked, "Are you Madam Aynor?"

A few smugglers from Redstone Collection had mentioned that the owner of Serene Dream was named Aynor.

This was not her real name. It was a name she had given herself after coming to Tarnan. It could be used as an Ashlandic name, Ai Nuo, but it could also be seamlessly linked to a Red River name. It had the same effect as Oudick.

As for what kind of person this lady was before she came to Tarnan and what she had done, nobody knew. It was a mystery.

“Yes.” The charming woman released the hair twirled around her finger.

She then smiled. “It seems like you were introduced by an acquaintance.”

“Redstone Collection.” Jiang Baimian didn’t hide the truth.

Aynor was a little surprised. “Ha, you actually made friends with those people—who often hide and can’t be found—and obtained information on Tarnan?”

“We happened to encounter a merfolk and mountain monster invasion and fought alongside them for a period of time.” Jiang Baimian spoke the complete truth.

However, this didn’t cover their entire experience at Redstone Collection.

Aynor had only casually made a wistful comment and didn’t have any intention of probing further. She then asked, “How many rooms do you want?”

“Any recommendations?” Jiang Baimian asked in response.

Aynor sized up Jiang Baimian and smiled. “You sure are smart. Serene Dream is different from other hotels because I specially modified the layout of the rooms for Ruin Hunters and the various factions’ caravans.

“A team like yours definitely wouldn’t want to be separated into several rooms. This will prevent you from communicating and meeting up in time in the event of an accident. But if you are stuffed into a room with four beds, you won’t be able to live comfortably. It won’t be any different from being in the wilderness.”

She's at most a decade older than me, but she actually jokes in the tone of an elder... Jiang Baimian criticized inwardly and expressed her attitude. "We don't mind such matters. Two adjacent rooms will do."

Aynor's eyes darted around. "But why choose the worse ones when there are better choices? I recommend two types of rooms. The first type is two adjacent double-bed rooms. There's a door in the middle that's directly connected, making it easier for you to come and go. The second type is a suite that's similar to the Old World's three-bedroom apartment. The four of you can live in it. The environment is good, and there's privacy."

"How's the price?" Jiang Baimian asked. To be honest, she was a little tempted. Just like Aynor had said, who would choose the worse choices when there were better ones?

Furthermore, she swept her gaze around and realized that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were nodding slightly, indicating that they wanted to choose the better one.

Our Old Task Force doesn't lack supplies now!

They had just obtained a large number of portable computers from Omnidirectional Commerce's Miens.

As for Bai Chen, she had lived in environments that Long Yuehong and the others couldn't imagine, so she didn't mind such matters. Of course, she would also feel happy and satisfied with a good environment.

A light dimple appeared on Aynor's cheek. "That depends on what supplies you plan on using to pay. The most worthless things in Tarnan are electronic products, mechanical products, canned food, biscuits, and energy bars."

"We only have electronic products and many portable computers." Jiang Baimian wasn't surprised, having already been informed of Tarnan's situation.

"What models are they?" Aynor asked casually.

The four people from the Old Task Force fell silent. They really didn't understand how Mechanical Paradise's portable computers were categorized and what models there were.

Shang Jianyao then turned around and ran out of the hotel. He soon returned with two black portable computers.

“G-35? This is the latest model. How did you get it when you’ve just arrived in Tarnan? Normally speaking, even the Linhai Alliance will only come across them during spring.” Aynor looked down at the old computer she used for registrations and immediately felt a little envious.

Jiang Baimian casually explained, “We saved a caravan on the way. They just left Tarnan and were returning to the Linhai Alliance.”

“Ha, Miens and the others?” After Aynor received an affirmative nod, she laughed. “I told them that they shouldn’t leave in the winter and that something would certainly happen, but they didn’t listen. Haha, an old man’s sayings are seldom untrue!”

As Miens and the others seemed fine, Aynor gloated candidly.

She likes to act old... Or is she actually older than she looks? Some thoughts flashed through Jiang Baimian’s mind, but she lacked sufficient details to confirm them.

After talking about this matter, Aynor seemed to become much closer to them. She directly said, “Then, I’ll give you a suite. Two computers for seven days.”

Two computers for seven days? Any one of them can let us stay in First City or Weed City for more than a month... Jiang Baimian knew that portable computers were rather popular among large factions, especially those produced by Mechanical Paradise.

This was because there was a serious lack of production capacity in this regard. In many areas, a computer could play a great role.

The fact that Miens and Omnidirectional Commerce could get such a large batch of the latest portable computers from Tarnan showed their deep connections.

After some deliberation, Jiang Baimian gave an affirmative answer, considering that it was an unexpected windfall. “Alright.”

After receiving the black room card with a beautiful rose printed on it, the Old Task Force took the elevator to the second floor.

Many hotels in the Ashlands had similar rules. For example, the lower the floor, the more expensive the rooms were. This made it easier for residents to jump out of windows and escape when they encountered an attack or an accident.

This was a change brought about by broad demand.

The Old Task Force's room was 221; it was right at the end of the corridor. After opening the door, the first thing they saw was a living room with a sofa, a coffee table, tables, chairs, and cabinets. There were four doors in the living room that led to three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a washroom.

This couldn't be considered luxurious, but Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others—who had left Pangu Biology for a long time and had never lived in a nice place—felt satisfied.

"I'll sleep in the living room!" Shang Jianyao volunteered.

Although she didn't know why he wanted to sleep in the living room, Jiang Baimian decided to go against his wishes to prevent any accidents from happening. "I'm the team leader; I'll sleep in the living room."

She then added, "I have to watch over all of you, especially you. I can't let you wake up in the middle of the night to scare Little Red."

Upon hearing the latter half of her sentence, Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up as if he were saying, "Why didn't I think of doing such a thing?"

As Long Yuehong inexplicably shivered, Jiang Baimian became more determined to sleep in the living room.

After distributing the rooms with her authority as team leader, they washed their faces and hands and had a simple dinner.

After cleaning up, Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. "We'll have a training course tonight."

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was planning on turning in early because of his exhaustion.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “This training course is called ‘solo operation.’ Although I’ve always emphasized cooperation and teamwork, things are unpredictable. Everyone will inevitably be alone. Without the corresponding experience, we might not be able to resolve the difficulties we encounter when the time comes. Tonight, we’ll leave separately and gather information in Tarnan.”

With that said, Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her electronic watch. “It’s 8:30 now. Return to your room at 10.”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao replied excitedly.

Is it really appropriate to let this fellow act alone? Long Yuehong wasn’t worried about himself, but Shang Jianyao—who had lost his restraints.

He was very worried for Tarnan’s people.

Without giving Long Yuehong a chance to speak, Jiang Baimian pointed at him and said, “Little Red, you’re first.”

“Alright.” Long Yuehong only came to a realization when he walked out of Serene Dream and stood in the cold, dark, and relatively quiet street. I’m alone...

This was an unfamiliar city, and he was surrounded by strangers.

Long Yuehong habitually looked around, but he couldn’t find a figure that made him feel at ease. At this moment, he couldn’t help but feel a little nervous.

Breathe in, breathe out... Long Yuehong took a few deep breaths to calm his fear and unease. He then decided to plan what he wanted to do first.

Once his goal was clear, he wouldn’t be so flustered.

At this moment, a figure passed him and went straight to the busiest street.

Long Yuehong looked up and only saw Shang Jianyao's back as he turned to the right.

"..." He became worried for Tarnan's people again.

After a few seconds, Long Yuehong retracted his thoughts and considered his question. Team Leader said that I'm to gather information... What kind of information should I gather?

Our goal is to meet the Mainframe—no, the Source Brain—and search for clues regarding the Old World's destruction. If it doesn't agree to meet us, we have to produce something that can move it. Yes, I'll walk on the streets and find the older local townsfolk to understand what Mechanical Paradise has a strong need for.

With a direction, Long Yuehong indeed felt much more at ease. Therefore, he mustered his courage and walked to the intersection where Shang Jianyao had disappeared.

After making a right turn, he walked another 200 to 300 meters. He heard more and more sounds.

Finally, the lively street appeared in front of him. There were many pedestrians—Red River people, Ashlandics, and many branches of these two races.

Long Yuehong watched for a while, took a deep breath, and silently encouraged himself. No problem at all...

He then walked into the street ahead. During this process, he subconsciously touched the Ice Moss pistol on his belt.

Chapter 249: A Difficult 'Decision'

Under the light of the street lamps that weren't too far apart, Long Yuehong slowly walked along the street to observe if there were any older locals.

During this process, he couldn't help but be attracted by the dazzling assortment of goods in each stall. He was filled with interest in the strange items found in the city ruins.

After walking for a while, Long Yuehong stopped in front of a stall.

There were many pieces of jade, emerald, and diamond jewelry here.

He felt that his mother didn't have such things and wanted to get one or two for her.

Within Pangu Biology, the accessories of ordinary employees were mainly silk flowers and hair clips. Necklaces, earrings, rings, brooches, and scarves were either the kind that had been passed down for several generations or picked up by Security Department employees from 'picking up trash.' They were rare and not easy to obtain.

Long Yuehong squatted down, picked up a dazzling diamond necklace, and examined it for a while. He didn't have the ability to determine if this was considered good for women; he could only consider it from a different perspective.

Gold and silver accessories were more practical. Even if he exchanged for them, they could be used as items of equivalent worth if his mother didn't like them.

On the journey, Long Yuehong, Shang Jianyao, and the others had learned some economic concepts from Jiang Baimian.

Long Yuehong swept his gaze around with the diamond necklace in hand and asked in confusion, "Why isn't there any gold jewelry?"

The stall owner was an Ashlandic with a beard. He replied impatiently, "There are plenty of caravans that buy gold and silver. Why would they need to be put up for sale here?"

That's true. These are all items with industrial uses and can also be used as currency... Long Yuehong put down the diamond necklace after coming to a realization. He felt that the stall owner's attitude was deplorable and didn't want to trade items with him.

Just as he stood up, the stall owner also stood up and shouted, "Foreigner, don't you know our Tarnan rules? You have to buy what you've picked up! You've already touched it with your hands; why would others want it?"

Long Yuehong was alarmed and a little terrified. He was just about to explain that he didn't know about this when he saw a man—who seemed to be a local—play with a set of white porcelain plates in the neighboring stall from the corner of his eye. The latter then put them back and slowly turned around to leave.

During this process, nobody stopped him or insisted that he buy it.

Long Yuehong—who had plenty of experience in the Ashlands—immediately came to a realization. He pulled up the corners of his clothes, revealing the pistol on his belt.

The stall owner smiled disdainfully. “Are you going to commit blatant robbery? I think you don’t know how powerful the robot guards are!”

Long Yuehong naturally remembered the rule that ‘private fights are prohibited in Tarnan.’ He had only done so to express his attitude.

He looked up at the surveillance cameras on the nearby street lamps and asked the stall owner, “Do you want to hit me? This seems to be a private fight.”

The stall owner smiled. “The robot guards don’t care about weaponless private fights.”

As he spoke, the two stall owners beside him stood up to back him up.

“I see.” Long Yuehong obtained the answer he wanted and acted as if he had come to a realization.

Just as he said that, he took a step forward and rushed forward instead of retreating.

Back when he was going about Weed City with Bai Chen, he had received the corresponding guidance.

When facing such a situation, one mustn’t show weakness. Even if the other party’s firepower was overwhelming and capable of killing you, you have to bluff.

Of course, if the enemy didn’t fall for this, there was an old saying: “He who understands the times is a wise man.”

About a minute later, Long Yuehong patted his clothes and looked down at the stall owner and his two companions on the ground. He then said in a questioning tone, “How strange. How can a weaponless fight not be considered a private fight?”

The stall owner and his two companions curled up into a ball. They held their stomachs and groaned in pain, unable to answer.

Frankly speaking, if the three of them had really attacked together, Long Yuehong's two fists might not be a match for six hands. He couldn't kill them after all. But since he took the initiative to launch a surprise attack, the temporal advantage allowed him to quickly finish off his main target before the stall owner's companions could react. He then used the other two's weaknesses of being hesitant—a result of their consideration of the stall's goods—to take them down easily.

Upon seeing that the pedestrians and other stall owners didn't interfere in this matter, Long Yuehong gained a deeper understanding of the Ashlands' rules of survival.

In this era, where order hadn't been completely established, people submitted to whoever had the bigger fist.

Long Yuehong felt a little more confident as he walked forward.

As he walked, he saw a familiar figure.

Shang Jianyao stood in the middle of the street and looked around. He seemed very hesitant as if there was something important he couldn't make up his mind on.

Eh, he also has such moments? Long Yuehong was curious and had the intention of asking.

At this moment, he saw the situation on the street clearly.

On the right, a group of people was gathered there, dancing a strange dance to the drumbeat in the stereo. From time to time, they would shout, "Praise be to thee, the New World's door."

On the left, another group of people gathered around a raised wooden platform. They sang sentences like 'the world is but an illusion, nothing more than a dream' and 'Clam Dragon, thou art supreme; eternal be the Shattered Mirror.' They brought about an ethereal and sacred feeling.

On the right up ahead, there was an iron pot that emitted a rich fragrance. The chicken wings—which were wrapped in powder—were gradually turning pale gold. In front of the iron pot stood a very thin column. A woman stood on one foot above the column as she spread her arms to show her symmetry and balance.

When he retracted his gaze, Long Yuehong already understood what Shang Jianyao was troubled about: there were three different religions here. Between dancing, singing, and chicken wings, he couldn't make a decision!

This might very well be the most important crossroad in Shang Jianyao's life... A line from a radio play suddenly flashed across Long Yuehong's mind.

In fact, if it weren't for the fact that these religions were so close, he felt that Shang Jianyao would definitely 'want all of them.'

At the same time, Long Yuehong also roughly confirmed which of the three religions they were.

One of them was the Furnace Church they had recently encountered, and the other was the Glorious Scale that Ferlin—the leader of the Rootless Caravan—had mentioned. The other was probably a parish that believed in the November Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror.

Tarnan sure is lively... Long Yuehong decided to ignore Shang Jianyao and continue his 'adventure.'

Although he also wanted the fried chicken wings, he wasn't someone who would betray his faith for Holy Communion.

After passing the serious and hesitant Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong walked dozens of meters forward.

As he scanned the area, he saw an old lady sitting at the alley's entrance.

This old lady was wrapped in a thick, dark-red cotton coat. She was sitting on a rattan chair. Her hair was already white, and she was clearly not young.

There was no stall in front of her. It seemed like she was purely out to enjoy the bustle.

Upon seeing that the other party was Ashlandic, Long Yuehong mustered his courage, approached, and politely greeted, “Granny, can I ask you something?”

The old lady looked up and opened her mouth. “#%&^*&*.”

Long Yuehong stared blankly. It was only then that he realized that some of the Ashlandic dialects might be more difficult to understand than the Red River language.

What should I do? Just as Long Yuehong was about to leave politely, the old lady calmly took out a black, palm-sized electronic product from her pocket, pressed a button, and repeated her words.

The black object then emitted an electronically synthesized voice. “Lad, you’re very polite. What do you want to ask?”

Long Yuehong temporarily forgot his mission and blurted out a question. “What’s this?”

He had already confirmed that the other party understood his Ashlandic language.

After the old lady repeated herself in some indecipherable language, the black electronic device spoke again. “This is a translating device produced by the Old World. It was repaired by Mechanical Paradise. Last time, a caravan gave us a pile of canned food and this device in exchange for our grains, vegetables, and livestock. It’s pretty useful.”

“Indeed.” Long Yuehong gradually understood what Omnidirectional Commerce’s Miens meant previously.

There was nothing strange about Tarnan except that there were more robots, electronic products, and mechanical products.

While wondering if he should tell his team leader to get one or two backup units, Long Yuehong asked, “Granny, are you a local?”

“That’s right.” The old lady used the translating device to communicate with Long Yuehong. “I’ve been here since the third year of the New Calendar. It’s been more than 40 years, and my children

already have children. Sigh, the decision I made to stay back then was really wise. None of my friends in the south lived to my age. Either they were killed by bandits, or they encountered war, plague, famine, or all kinds of diseases when they were slightly older.”

Long Yuehong said some cursory praises and got to the point. “Granny, you’ve been in Tarnan for so many years. Do you know what Mechanical Paradise wants the most?”

The old lady recalled and said, “They want many things, but they haven’t been able to get their hands on them. There are also many things that weren’t successfully made or don’t exist at all. For example, nuclear power miniaturization technology, ultra-high-efficiency battery technology, key information on the Old World’s controllable nuclear fusion research, the construction of an oil pipeline from the Linhai Alliance to Tarnan, and the restoration of more roads and railway tracks between the two areas. Uh, they seem to be lacking in all kinds of minerals.”

“...” Long Yuehong’s expression stiffened.

Ignoring the mineral resources and infrastructure requirements, the Old Task Force could directly begin ‘saving the world’ if they could obtain or produce any of that.

After a few seconds, Long Yuehong didn’t give up as he continued asking, “Don’t they have anything else they especially want?”

The old lady thought for a while before saying, “There’s something else. When I first came to Tarnan, Mechanical Paradise offered a bounty to find a person. His name is Maximian, a Red River native. He seems to be a scientist. This bounty was offered for many years. I don’t know if he was found or if they gave up, but there was nothing else after that.”

Maximian... Long Yuehong memorized this name and asked, “Do you still remember that person’s characteristics?”

The old lady replied without hesitation, “I don’t remember. I didn’t take on this mission at all; I only heard someone mention it.”

Long Yuehong asked, “Then, who took on the mission?”

“That old bastard took it,” said the old lady with a smile. “He’s the current guild president, Old Man Gu Bo.”

Chapter 250: Balance of All Things

Gu Bo... Long Yuehong memorized this name and asked about something else.

After chatting for a while, he politely bade farewell and looked for someone else to consult.

About 20 to 30 meters away from him, Bai Chen wore a scarf. She had changed her clothes and was silently following him with the help of the shadows and pedestrians.

This was Jiang Baimian's special arrangement.

In the Old Task Force, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were the only two people who needed to accumulate experience in 'solo operations.' The former was worried that he would cause something major. Therefore, Jiang Baimian had Bai Chen secretly follow Long Yuehong to ensure that nothing happened to him, while she was in charge of watching Shang Jianyao and not giving Tarnan's residents any trouble.

Life's crossroads.

Shang Jianyao stood there, looking right and left as if he had fallen into an intense internal struggle. After a while, he seemed to have finally made up his mind and walked to the Furnace Church's proselytizing grounds on the right.

Yes, the Furnace Church not only has dancing, but it also has hotpot Holy Communion. It's indeed more tempting than the other Churches... Jiang Baimian nodded in understanding when she saw this scene from afar.

Shang Jianyao then joined in the mass dance. As the drumming sounded, he moved his body rhythmically and occasionally shouted, "Praise be to thee, the New World's door!"

You sure are pious... Jiang Baimian came a little closer and smelled the rich and alluring fragrance of fried chicken wings.

This made her a little confused. Isn't it said that apart from the local residents, everyone else in Tarnan lacks ingredients and can only rely on canned food, biscuits, and energy bars for a living? Could it be that Glorious Scale spends a large sum of money on buying a batch of live chickens from the local residents for their proselytization? They sure don't feel the pinch...

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Jiang Baimian saw that the Furnace Church's group dance had temporarily come to an end. The man presiding over this ritual took out a black book and talked about the New World's beauty and the Door of Scorching's greatness.

Shang Jianyao listened for almost a minute before suddenly taking out the smug monkey mask from his tactical backpack.

After putting on this mask, he turned around and crossed the road with a staid conscience and confidence.

He crossed the road.

"..." Jiang Baimian watched Shang Jianyao join the choir and sing a hymn with the group of people who had faith in the Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror.

Shang Jianyao seemed to have observed it for a long time, so there was nothing wrong with the lyrics or melody he belted out.

Do you think you're another person when you wear a mask? Jiang Baimian couldn't help but criticize. Just as this thought surfaced in her mind, she suddenly felt that Shang Jianyao really might've become another person.

He's really trying his best... She sighed with emotion.

After singing one hymn, Shang Jianyao quietly left the choir not long after the clergymen began preaching and returned to the middle of the street.

Shang Jianyao quickly took off the monkey mask and seemed to heave a sigh of relief. He then opened his tactical backpack and took out another mask—this was a fat pig mask with exaggerated nostrils.

Jiang Baimian was a little dumbfounded by her surveillance of him. When did this fellow bring out Little Red's mask? How well-prepared...

Shang Jianyao changed his mask and walked to the iron pot that had frying chicken wings without looking back.

So it's Little Red who's eating, not you? Jiang Baimian tried to guess Shang Jianyao's thoughts.

After circling around the thin pole where people were standing, Shang Jianyao walked to the side and forcefully squeezed through the waiting crowd to approach the iron pot.

The person in charge of frying the chicken wings was an elder with a white beard. He was of Red River heritage and had blue eyes. He was about 1.7 meters tall, and he wore a red apron.

“Are you from the Glorious Scale Church?” Shang Jianyao asked in the Red River language. After staying in Redstone Collection for a period of time, his Red River language became increasingly fluent.

The white-bearded elder paid attention to the pot of oil and replied with a smile, “Yeah.”

Even he had forgotten how many batches of chicken wings he had cooked tonight.

“Which Kalendaria do you worship?” Shang Jianyao acted as if he wanted to join. After asking, he found his manners. “How may I address you?”

“Just call me Mike,” replied the old man with a white beard and a red apron with a smile. “We believe in June's Golden Scale. ‘He’ controls the year's equilibrium—a symbol of symmetry and balance. The Old World was destroyed because something lost its balance.”

It was obvious that Mike was experienced in proselytizing. He explained his deity's authority and power in a few words.

With that said, he glanced at Shang Jianyao and casually asked, “You came from Redstone Collection?”

Apart from settlements controlled by the Vigilance Church, nobody liked to wear a mask all the time. Redstone Collection was the closest parish to Tarnan.

“You can actually tell?” Shang Jianyao was ‘shocked.’

Mike didn’t know if Shang Jianyao really felt that his disguise was flawless or if he was joking. He raised his hand and pointed at his face. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Yes, I, Gu Zhiyong, come from Redstone Collection.” Shang Jianyao frankly admitted his ‘background.’ He then added, “I’m not a believer of Eidolon Nun.”

It’s obvious that Eidolon Nun’s believers aren’t able to cheat them of fried chicken wings... Jiang Baimian—who was squeezed amid the crowd opposite him—cursed inwardly.

Her guess was right. It was ‘Long Yuehong’ who chose the Glorious Scale for fried chicken wings, not Shang Jianyao!

Gu Zhiyong was Long Yuehong’s alias. The origin of this alias was that Long Yuehong’s mother’s surname was Gu, and his father’s name had the word ‘Yong.’

After learning of this alias back then, Jiang Baimian used all her strength to resist the urge to mock him.

“Is that so? Are you interested in our religion?” Mike naturally wouldn’t let go of the opportunity to spread the faith.

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao nodded without hesitation. “Where did you get these chicken wings? How did you get so many chicken wings in Tarnan?”

Mike was just about to speak when his gaze suddenly focused. He skillfully scooped up the fried chicken wings and placed them over a filter.

The alluring fragrance became stronger.

“It’s your turn.” Mike looked at the group of people on his left.

The group of people walked in front of the pole and lined up to pick up the chicken wings that were no longer scorching.

“The rest of you, be patient. There will be more later,” Mike said to Shang Jianyao and the others.

When the group of people received their fried chicken wings, most of them spread open their arms and prayed. This was roughly divided into two categories. One was the ‘Balance of All Things,’ and the other was the ‘Glory of the Scale.’

After distributing this batch of fried chicken wings, Mike bent down, picked up new chicken wings, and threw them into the pot of oil.

After doing this, he turned his head and answered Shang Jianyao’s previous question. “These were all imported. Our Church has a specialized freezer truck and a chicken farm we built ourselves.”

Chicken farm? Is there something wrong with your religion? The corners of Jiang Baimian’s mouth twitched slightly when she heard that. This is actually a religion that has specially built chicken farms for believers to enjoy Holy Communion! Sounds harmless... Yes, it’s only harmful to birds!

Mike continued, “We don’t have that many resources either. Only during the Grand Mass in the middle of every month can believers enjoy Holy Communion. You’re pretty lucky; yesterday was our church’s Grand Mass. This batch of chicken wings was the last one left. It was specially approved for proselytizing.”

“Oh, oh.” Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a fat pig mask—nodded repeatedly. He then asked, “What’s the doctrine of your religion?”

He had always been very professional when it came to acting as a missionary.

Mike’s expression turned solemn. “I’ve already mentioned the core of our doctrine. There are only two words: Symmetry and balance. We have to maintain balance in everything we do. This includes the balance of your condition, the balance of your bodily fluids, the balance of your emotions, the balance between you and your family.

“On a larger scale, there is the balance between humans and nature, the balance between humans, the balance between humans and Subhumans, the balance between humans and the Kalendarium... Symmetry is the most beautiful phenomenon in the world. Asymmetrical things are dirty and ugly...”

Mike explained the beliefs of the Glorious Scale one by one. Shang Jianyao listened attentively and echoed him from time to time.

After a while, Shang Jianyao specially reminded him, “The chicken wings are done.”

“Ah, right.” Mike quickly scooped out the fried chicken wings and said to Shang Jianyao’s group, “It’s your turn.”

Shang Jianyao took the lead and lined up in front of the iron pot. His speed and firm attitude left everyone in awe.

Shang Jianyao quickly obtained a chicken wing that had been fried golden. After biting into it, he said with a mouth full of oil, “Delicious...”

Jiang Baimian’s expression became rather complicated when she saw this.

After eating the fried chicken wing, Shang Jianyao asked very politely, “Do you care that believers worship other Kalendarium?”

“That definitely won’t do!” Mike replied firmly.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. “Then, I’ll consider it.”

With that said, he turned around and returned to the middle of the street. He then took off the fat pig mask as quickly as possible.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao walk to the other side of the street, Jiang Baimian looked at the batch of chicken wings that had just been thrown into the pot. She gritted her teeth and squeezed out of the crowd.

She followed for a while before a commotion suddenly occurred in front of her.

A group of people surrounded the middle of the street. She had no idea what had happened.

Jiang Baimian curiously approached when she saw Shang Jianyao rush over to watch the commotion. She stood on her tiptoes and looked into the crowd.

The person in the middle seemed to be a person.

“Who is it?” Jiang Baimian asked the onlookers in front of her.

Without turning his head, a person said, “A survivor from the southwest mountains this afternoon. He ran out of the hospital.”

“It’s related to the Superior Heartless?” Jiang Baimian came to a realization.

“Yes.” Just as the onlooker in front of her replied, the middle area changed.

Someone asked, “Ninth Zhang, where are the others in your team?”

After a brief silence, a hoarse voice shouted with indescribable fear, “Dead! They’re all dead!”

The person asking the questions asked, “Who killed them? That Superior Heartless?”

Ninth Zhang’s hoarse voice fell silent for a while before he suddenly cackled. “It’s me! It’s me!”