

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 31: Once Upon A Time - Read Embers Ad Infinitum Chapter 31: Once Upon A Time

Chapter 31: Once Upon A Time

“Alright.” Tian Erhe turned around and teased Shang Jianyao. “Do you now know how difficult it is to maintain order in a settlement like this?”

Jiang Baimian did not want to continue agitating Shang Jianyao, so she interrupted and asked, “Mayor, I didn’t see that many children when we came in. Were they working with the adults?”

Tian Erhe turned his body and pointed at the three buildings. “They were having lessons over there. They are only dismissed when the adults come back.”

“Lessons?” Jiang Baimian’s eyebrows twitched slightly. “You guys still maintain a classroom education system?”

Excluding the large factions, this was very rare in Ashlands settlements. At the very least, none of the settlements Jiang Baimian had previously visited had such a system. For people who found it difficult to even survive, organizing a classroom education system was completely unnecessary. It was a waste of both energy and resources. Manual labor was a very important resource. A teacher out of the labor force and a child who did not help out at home or in the fields were considered a form of luxury in many settlements.

In those places, only parents and elders could occasionally teach their children in their daily lives, helping them obtain general knowledge. They learned how to farm, gather, cook, clean, shoot, hunt, and take care of infants.

Tian Erhe smiled and said, “Outsiders are always surprised whenever they learn of this. Indeed, it won’t be easy for us to maintain a school with what we have. Everyone tries their best to be thrifty. We tighten our belts to prevent us from losing this tradition.”

He subconsciously looked up at the dark, rainy evening sky and said with mixed emotions, “The first person to suggest giving children formal education was an uncle named Shen Liuxin. He said: No matter how difficult it is, we still have to make the children literate. They have to read books and learn the most basic knowledge. Only in this way can they, their descendants, and the future residents of Moat Town remember who they are, where they came from, what species they belong to, and what kind of culture and history they once had. Only by always remembering these things can they persist in a terrible environment, this ‘darkness’ where hope eludes us.

“Back then, although I agreed with Uncle Shen’s suggestion, I didn’t think too much about it. Every time items and instruction manuals were brought back from the city ruins, I didn’t know a portion of the words on them. Even if I did, I often failed to understand them when piecing them together. I couldn’t effectively use the items, so how could we let that continue?”

“This kind of thinking was really simple. It was only in recent years that I gradually understood Uncle Shen’s words.” At this point, Tian Erhe stood up and pointed at the three buildings. “Do you know where this used to be?”

Bai Chen, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong shook their heads in unison.

“This is the school of the former Moat Town. That’s the basketball court, that’s the flag-raising square, that’s the teachers’ dormitory, that’s the student dormitory, that’s the computing lab, that’s the library, and that’s the science building. That’s the teaching building...” Tian Erhe introduced them one by one, and his face reflected the glow of the small charcoal fire.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others listened attentively. They were also watching attentively. Even the buildings and venues could barely be made out in the evening darkness with just their silhouettes.

Tian Erhe retracted his hand, turned around, and repeated what he originally said. “This used to be a school.”

His expression was serious and solemn. Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and the others to respond, he sat down again and laughed self-deprecatingly. “On this matter, many townfolk don’t understand. It’s not that they aren’t willing to maintain such a small school, but they feel that it should only be provided to the original residents. As for the wilderness nomads that we later took in, providing them with food is already out of great kindness. Why waste resources?”

“They believe that the land should be divided among the original residents, especially the town guards’ core members. The subsequent wilderness nomads are only eligible for renting the land, and they need to turn in a certain portion of the harvests they receive. They also believe that the nomads who came later shouldn’t be allowed to join the town guard or hold relatively better weapons.”

At this point, Tian Erhe shook his head. “Heh, I’m still able to suppress such demands while alive. Nobody really dares to object because of the prestige I enjoy. They will, at most, complain in private. When I die, I really don’t know what will happen to Moat Town. Enough, enough of this old man’s ramblings. Let’s eat. Let’s eat.”

It wasn’t Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen’s place to voice their opinions on Moat Town’s internal affairs. They could only maintain the attitude of guests. They ate the pot of

braised beef, matching it with compressed biscuits, energy bars, and mixed-grain buns that Tian Erhe had gotten someone to deliver.

Shang Jianyao was in no rush to join them. He continued to pick up pieces of beef from his bowl and fed them to the young lady beside him.

The young lady was also very sensible. After she finished eating, she didn't ask for any more and seriously bowed. "Thank you!"

After thanking him, she carried the rest of her junk and skipped back to the area that had many buildings built in a haphazard manner. The land beneath them were originally basketball courts that were laid out side by side.

"That's a bow that's very up to standards," Shang Jianyao praised her from behind.

"This was specially taught by the teachers." Tian Erhe appeared a little pleased with himself.

Shang Jianyao still didn't eat the braised beef. He quietly ate the yellow mixed-grain bun with water.

Jiang Baimian did not persuade him. As she ate, she asked Tian Erhe about his experiences after the Old World was destroyed.

Most of his experiences were mundane. After all, Moat Town had a terrain advantage and suffered relatively few trials. However, Jiang Baimian and the others still listened with relish, making Tian Erhe recount his experiences with increasing excitement. He even talked about the process of him and his wife developing feelings for each other during a hunt.

When everyone was almost done eating, Shang Jianyao began to eat the rest of the braised beef. He dipped the mixed-grain bun in the gravy.

"I haven't been this happy in a long time." Tian Erhe rubbed his stomach and looked at the cigarette ashes on the ground. "I have to return to my room. There are still some things in town that await my decision."

Jiang Baimian suddenly thought of something and quickly said, "Mayor, I have another question."

"What is it?" Tian Erhe tightened his army-green coat.

Jiang Baimian recalled some information and said, "Have you ever seen such a person? Male. Black hair, golden eyes, about 1.8 meters tall. He's very handsome, probably more handsome than him." She tilted her head to gesture that the reference target was

Shang Jianyao before continuing. “He likes to wear trench coats, gloves, and neatly combs his hair. He also likes to wear boots.”

Tian Erhe thought for a moment. “There are very few outsiders in Moat Town. It’s been a long time since I left town. I have no impression of the person you’re talking about. Doggy, go ask the people who have recently gone out to hunt and see if they have seen such a person. Then, come back and tell Bai and the others.”

“Alright, Mayor.” Upon seeing an opportunity to perform, the town guard named Dog ran off quickly.

After watching Tian Erhe—who was wearing a military-green coat and a furry hat—leave the wooden shed and enter the area where all the buildings were randomly built, Bai Chen looked around and confirmed the town guards’ positions.

She then sat down and muttered to herself, “Why did the mayor tell us about Moat Town’s internal conflict?”

Jiang Baimian looked at the fire and smiled. “He obviously hopes that the large faction behind us can take in Moat Town. Why else do you think he invited us here as guests? Even if he trusts you sufficiently, there’s no need to go this far. He could use other means to express his concern and kindness.” Nôv(el)B\jnn

She turned her head to look at the confused Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao—who was thinking about something—and continued speaking. “I can tell that the internal conflict in Moat Town has vexed Mayor Tian for a long time. He’s worried that Moat Town will go down a path of destruction after he dies until it eventually collapses.

“Amidst his worries, he has encountered a wilderness nomad that he knows and can trust. Clearly, this nomad has sided with a nontrivial faction and seems to be doing well. If it were the two of you, wouldn’t you be a little tempted? Wouldn’t you like to build a relationship with them so that Moat Town can come under the large faction that doesn’t have any ill intentions towards wilderness nomads?

“With such protection and a large faction’s coordination and planning, Moat Town’s tiny conflict really isn’t a big deal.”

Long Yuehong finally understood. “Is that so... Team Leader, will the company accept them?”

This was also what Bai Chen wanted to ask. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have deliberately muttered to herself.

Feeling Bai Chen’s gaze, Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at the stove in front of her again. She smiled and said, “When we return to the company, I’ll report it as per normal. Whether the company accepts them or not will depend on the board of directors. In this

regard, the entire Security Department and the Strategy Committee merely have the right to give suggestions.

“However, I’ll definitely hide the exact location of Moat Town. I’ll only say that I encountered their hunting team in the wilderness.”

Bai Chen heaved a sigh of relief and whispered, “That’s good. That’s good.”

Long Yuehong was clearly confused. “Why will you be hiding the exact location of Moat Town?” She is going to report to the company, nobody else. Why the secrecy?

Jiang Baimian glanced at him with a smile. She didn’t answer or explain. She only said, “Look, Shang Jianyao didn’t even ask.”

Shang Jianyao looked at his team leader when he heard his name. “Ah, what were you talking about?”

Jiang Baimian forced a smile onto her face. “I said that you look good.”

“It’s alright.” Shang Jianyao was rather modest.

The scene immediately quietened down. Before long, the town guard named Dog ran back and came to Jiang Baimian’s side. “Someone has seen the person you described. He went north of Yuelu Station. He is a very strange man. Back then, everyone in the hunting team found him very charming. They couldn’t help but want to curry favor with him and get close to him. However, he was very cold and deliberately distanced himself from them before disappearing into the wilderness.”

“That’s a little strange...” Jiang Baimian muttered to herself as if she had thought of something after hearing that. She then looked up and said with a bright smile, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!” Dog replied excitedly.

With Jiang Baimian not asking any more questions, the town guard had no choice but to leave the wooden shed.

Shang Jianyao looked outside and saw that the sky had already turned dark. Dark clouds gathered, and Moat Town was blanketed by the darkness.

The sound of the fuel generators buzzed. In the three buildings, many rooms emitted light. On the town’s perimeter walls, light bulbs were lit one after another, helping the guards illuminate the area outside. In the area filled with houses and buildings, a small number of candles, flames, and light flickered before quickly extinguishing. The entire compound almost sank into the darkness of the night.

The heavy storm that had been brewing for a long time finally began to unleash its load in the dark.

Chapter 32: Review

In the dead of night, the winds were cold, and the rain was harsh. The entire town seemed to have been swallowed by the darkness, with only a few scattered lights shining through.

The clamor, noise, and all kinds of mixed smells quickly vanished, allowing Shang Jianyao to sense a silence, which made him feel like he was isolated from the world.

As it rained around the wooden shed, a few town guards patrolled the areas that were under shelter. The others put on dark raincoats and large woven bags that they had prepared beforehand and walked back and forth on the wall's wooden structure.

From the light bulbs' illumination, the raindrops looked like disconnected strings of pearls. They were densely packed together and came in droves.

"They originally had two diesel generators here, but one broke down and couldn't be repaired, no matter how hard we tried. Well, for settlements in the wilderness, the lack of electricity isn't too serious. Food, clothes, weapons, and clean water are the most important resources," Bai Chen casually said.

Jiang Baimian smiled and added, "Can you speak louder? Yes, food and clean water determine whether you can survive. Clothes determine whether you will freeze to death or fall sick while weapons determine whether others will leave you food, clothes, and clean water."

She looked around and saw the rain falling heavily. She clapped her hands and said, "We'll repair the jeep tomorrow morning. We'll have our first field training class tonight. We need to review our battle today and summarize our experience and lessons. Everyone has to take themselves as the lead and describe their choices and experiences back then. Bai Chen, you first."

As a nomad who had not joined Pangu Biology for long and had never participated in wilderness field training like this, Bai Chen never imagined that there would be an after-action review. She hesitated for a moment, clearly not prepared. However, she did not object to it. The reason she could wander the wilderness for so many years and still live well was not only because of the help she received, but also because she often reflected on her mistakes.

After organizing her words, she began reviewing every detail she remembered from the moment she met the Ruin Hunters, who were part-time bandits.

She was followed by Shang Jianyao, then Long Yuehong, and finally Jiang Baimian.

After Jiang Baimian had finished, she looked at Shang Jianyao and said, “Your choice to take the initiative to shoot the two motorcycles was very decisive, but it was also very reckless. If not...” She paused and said, “If not for your good luck, the chances of you dying would have been high.”

Upon saying that, she smiled slightly. “However, luck is also considered a type of strength. You have to balance the two and try your best to increase your chances.”

Shang Jianyao was a little confused at first, but he then nodded thoughtfully to indicate his approval of his team leader’s words.

Long Yuehong felt that Jiang Baimian’s last few words were a joke. He didn’t think too much about them and raised his greatest doubts with a frown. “Team Leader, you just said that the bandit leader in the exoskeleton suit was killed by us because he made a mistake in his judgment and wasn’t careful enough.

“So how should we deal with a person wearing an exoskeleton that doesn’t make such big mistakes?”

Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong. “Why do you think there’s a solution? The fact that one doesn’t make any major mistakes means that the person wearing the exoskeleton is relatively experienced. Their physical fitness also won’t be a problem. When such a person is combined with an exoskeleton, they will be killing machines even on real battlefields. They will be the best of the best.

“How can we defeat such an enemy when we lack the numbers and don’t have any heavy weapons? All we had was a grenade launcher, which we didn’t have the chance to use. Don’t you think you are underestimating a military-grade exoskeleton?”

“Then, doesn’t that mean...” Long Yuehong realized that he had really been walking on the edge of hell.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, “The best time to deal with such an enemy is before they wear the exoskeleton. If you don’t grasp this opportunity, flee from them before they can close the distance. A military-grade exoskeleton isn’t much faster than a high-speed jeep. Some models might even be a little slower, and their endurance will be worse.

“Unfortunately, we encountered anomalous terrain and fought a Blackmarsh Iron Snake beforehand. We did not have any advantage in any aspect. Frankly, it can be deemed a hopeless situation. He obviously couldn’t bear to waste too much energy or destroy his war spoils. He was also being too calculative. This led to him hesitating. Otherwise, half of us would have died in the first round of attacks—perhaps more.”

Long Yuehong's face turned pale when he heard this, and he gained a deeper understanding of the Ashlands's danger. Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen listened attentively, clearly sensing that Jiang Baimian was not done.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged something. "Before Shang Jianyao killed the motorcyclist and agitated that fellow, I had two plans. The first plan was to surrender immediately to close the distance. I have the means to counterattack as long as I enter a certain range, even if I'm seriously injured and unable to move."

After saying that, she smirked. "The biggest problem with this plan is that Bai Chen and I have a high chance of surviving and becoming captives. At the very least, we will be temporary captives. As for the two of you... it was very likely that both of you will be directly shot to death unless one of them prefers men."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's expressions instantly became complicated.

Upon seeing their reactions, Jiang Baimian said in a good mood, "The second plan is to use that fellow's overly apprehensive attitude to devise a trap so that he can't dodge in advance. As long as he doesn't dodge in advance, I have a high chance of hitting his unprotected vital spots."

"What kind of trap?" Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Jiang Baimian looked at him for two seconds before she shrugged. "I haven't thought of one yet."

"..." Long Yuehong's and Shang Jianyao's facial muscles twitched slightly.

Jiang Baimian immediately acted up. "It happened so suddenly, so how could I have thought out of a plan so quickly? Things also changed while I was still thinking. There was no need for me to waste my brain juices further!"

She then turned her head to look at Bai Chen, who was listening quietly. "What do you have to add?"

Bai Chen thought for a moment before saying, "Most bandits in the wilderness have the goal of plundering supplies, not killing people. If there's really no other choice, I'd consider giving up the jeep and the supplies inside. For example, I'll make the unmanned vehicle rush into the swamp. This way, I can draw their attention away. I'll then take the opportunity to hide elsewhere in the swamp."

"In many places in the Great Swamp, humans can barely traverse it with difficulty. However, it won't do for those wearing exoskeletons because of their excessive weight."

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction after hearing that. "That's right. This is the difference in perspective between wilderness nomads and people from large factions when it comes to handling the same matter. Have you guys learned anything?"

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao didn't miss the opportunity to clap. Even Long Yuehong subconsciously clapped.

What am I doing... Long Yuehong quickly reacted and awkwardly replied, "I've learned something, but I still have to digest and absorb it slowly."

After reviewing the battle during the day, the four of them split up into teams like yesterday. As teams of two, they took turns guarding the area.

As it had just rained, the weather was much colder than the night before. The charcoal that Tian Erhe provided free of charge was also limited. They took out thick cotton coats from the trunk and wrapped them around themselves.

Rain poured down, washing away all things in the darkness. It did not stop until the sky gradually lit up.

Moat Town had a mature, working drainage system. There was no flooding because of it, but the ground remained wet. Some of the soil had even turned muddy.

Bai Chen drank some water and finished the compressed biscuits. She then began to swap the jeep's parts and carried out a relatively simple repair.

At this moment, Tian Erhe walked over in the thin morning fog and asked with a smile, "Bai, can you fix it? If you can fix it, we'll take the light machine guns and the motorcycle."

Bai Chen didn't turn around and raised her hand to indicate an affirmative. "Sure."

Tian Erhe immediately called out to the town guards around him. "Come, move that machine gun. Aiyah, I feel like you guys have given me too much. Why don't I throw in a tent for you guys?"

"Sure." Jiang Baimian had no objections.

Tian Erhe only saw the Blackmarsh Iron Snake's outer skin on the jeep's roof at this moment. "This..." His eyes widened. "Did you guys kill this?"

When the jeep came in yesterday, it was already dark due to the dark clouds. They did not clearly see what was tied to the top of the vehicle and thought that it was a black tent.

Following Tian Erhe's gaze, the surrounding town guards saw the snakeskin that imposed an oppressive pressure on them.

"Blackmarsh Iron Snake..." Someone muttered this nightmarish name.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "This fellow is too big. We could only skin him."

The townsfolk fell silent, so silent that Jiang Baimian felt a little awkward. Since she had nothing to do, she looked at the town—which was beginning to bustle—and asked, "Mayor, can we walk around and take a look?"

"Be our guests. Where do you want to go? I'll bring you there." Tian Erhe adjusted the hat on his head. "Why don't we visit the classroom? Weren't you guys interested in our classes?"

Under the bright morning light, the wrinkles on his face became increasingly striking and deep.

"Sure." Jiang Baimian turned to Shang Jianyao and said, "Follow me. Long Yuehong, help Bai Chen keep an eye on the surroundings."

Shang Jianyao did not refuse. He followed Jiang Baimian and Tian Erhe to the three buildings.

On the way, they passed by the haphazardly-built residential area. They saw holes in some of the walls, which could only be blocked with wood and dry grass. They saw some townsfolk drink a ladle of cold water before they rushed to the fields behind the town. They saw a tent that had turned damp from the rain last night and seemed to be leaking water. They saw jaundiced, thin people in tattered clothes running in different directions.

After passing through this place, they arrived at the town square, which was paved in cement. The flagpole remained standing, but there was no flag.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian continued forward with Tian Erhe. They circled around the first building and entered the building on the left. They then went up to the third floor.

On one side was an aisle with a railing, and on the other side was a small room. It had sufficient light and excellent ventilation.

After taking a few steps, Tian Erhe led the two of them to a relatively large room.

Through the bright and clean glass window, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian saw more than twenty tables and chairs. The aisles were very narrow, and the gaps were very small.

At this moment, more than twenty children—all less than ten years old—were wearing all kinds of tattered and dirty clothes. They sat behind tables and chairs, looked up at the podium, and listened attentively to the teacher's lecture.

Some of their bodies trembled slightly as if they were still not accustomed to the early morning's cold. Some of them had their younger brothers and sisters hanging down their chests in swaddling clothes. From time to time, they had to coax the baby.

The children were of both genders, and all looked different. However, their backs were very straight as they sat upright.

Shang Jianyao looked over and saw their timetable on the wall. "Morning exercise... General knowledge... Language ... Mathematics... History..."

"These are the secondary school students," Tian Erhe introduced in a lowered voice as if he did not want to disturb the children inside.

Jiang Baimian stared at the scene for a few seconds before tersely acknowledging his words. "Let's go. Don't disturb them."

After touring Moat Town with Tian Erhe, the two of them returned to the wooden shed. Bai Chen had already finished repairing the jeep.

As there wasn't much food in Moat Town, nor did they have sufficient meat, Jiang Baimian didn't attempt to make any further transactions. She said to Tian Erhe, "Mayor, we have to go."

Tian Erhe nodded gently. "I hope we can meet again."

"Yes." Jiang Baimian smiled and nodded.

"We will," Bai Chen replied at the same time.

They quickly packed their things and got into the jeep. Jiang Baimian was the one driving.

As the jeep slowly drove toward the gate that led to the barbed wire, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked at the area filled with haphazardly-built buildings.

The residents there had already gone to the fields or gone out hunting, leaving only a few people at home. This made the area appear increasingly decrepit with signs of decline.

In the silence, Shang Jianyao and the others suddenly heard a regular and young voice coming from the building in the depths. "Before my bed, there's a pool of light... I

wonder if it's frost on the ground. Looking up, I find the moon bright. Then bowing my head, I drown in homesickness.”

Note 1: The poem above was derived from Li Bai's "Quiet Night Thought.”

Chapter 33: First Stop

Amidst the recital that echoed within Moat Town, Long Yuehong opened his mouth. However, he didn't know what to say. He felt that his feelings were abnormally complicated and indescribable.

None of the four spoke, seemingly listening to the recital attentively until the jeep drove out the gates and sped into the distance.

“What were they reading? I didn't hear them clearly.” Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and spoke in a slightly vexed tone.

“Before my bed, there's a pool of light.” Shang Jianyao repeated the beginning of 'Quiet Night Thought.'

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion, but she didn't say anything else. She drove seriously, allowing the jeep to drive quietly along the intersecting and hardly distinguishable paths in the swamp.

After they completely left the area, Bai Chen looked ahead and muttered to herself, “Part of the reason I wanted to be an official member of the company is so that I can borrow a lot of books.”

“They aren't that great...” Long Yuehong—who had lived in Pangu Biology since he was young—didn't find anything special about them. “Are there no books or libraries in the Old World's city ruins?”

Bai Chen's gaze seemed to be cast far away. “Yes, there were many in the beginning. However, I wasn't born then. Later, many of the books were taken away by large factions or certain people. The rest were used by Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads as easily combustible fuel for fire. Some were gnawed and torn apart by mice and other animals, leaving them deformed. Only a small number of them can be found and read now.

“There may be a large number of books in the city ruins that have not been explored much. However, those places are too dangerous.”

After a brief silence, Shang Jianyao's mind raced as he asked, “You can read?”

“Yes, my father and mother taught me. After they died, they even left me a very good teacher.” Bai Chen's expression gradually softened as the corners of her mouth curled

up indiscernibly. However, her eyes were a little unfocused. It was as if she had just woken up from a dream in the middle of the night and was sitting with her arms around her knees, staring blankly out the window.

Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at Bai Chen before she returned to staring ahead. She then smiled and said, "Can you guys communicate louder? Are you taking advantage of my poor hearing? I'm even wondering if you guys are badmouthing me behind my back."

Long Yuehong's heart palpitated as he muttered, "We are saying it in front of you."

"We are saying it in front of you." At the same time, Shang Jianyao replied to Jiang Baimian's accusation.

Long Yuehong felt a little amused. "Haha, how is it? Don't I know you well? I can keep up with your train of thought!"

"How do you know I didn't do it on purpose so that you could keep up?" Shang Jianyao didn't back down at all.

"Not bad. You have to pay attention to the team's atmosphere whenever you are training in the field. You have to be both serious and lively. Otherwise, it's very easy for you to end up overly tense. It won't be long before you crush yourself from the stress." Jiang Baimian casually evaluated the duo.

"Alright, let's not talk about this. Let's discuss Mayor Tian's experience. Let's see if we can conclude anything useful from the details of his recount. Uh, I'm mainly referring to the Old World's destruction."

Shang Jianyao seemed to have thought about it and immediately said, "Heartless mostly appeared in larger cities; there were virtually none in the villages or towns."

"The destruction of villages and towns seems more like a combined result of war and geological catastrophes," Bai Chen added.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "Wars and geological catastrophes might be equivalent. It's possible that geological weapons appeared before the Old World was destroyed. Of course, this remains unconfirmed. We need to find the corresponding information by exploring certain city ruins."

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong thoughtfully asked, "What has the Heartless's appearance got to do with war? Did their appearance lead to war, or was it war that induced their appearance?"

"There's no way to answer that. We lack the necessary information." Jiang Baimian smiled. "This will be the main direction of our work as the Old Task Force."

She looked down the path, pulled the wheel, and continued to raise questions, guiding the team into thinking about certain topics. “Why do you think the Heartless originally appeared in large cities but almost never appeared in villages or towns?”

“Maybe it’s because a city’s population is denser? Is this an important condition for its spread?” Shang Jianyao replied, combining the definition of a city from the textbooks with his new knowledge.

Bai Chen took another angle and said, “A city is more important, so it’s a main target?”

“That’s possible.” Jiang Baimian did not deny it.

The four of them discussed the corresponding problem for a while. Although they couldn’t come to a conclusion, it broadened their horizons. It gave them clearer ideas on subsequent investigations and the information gathering they would carry out in the future.

As the jeep drove on at an adequate speed, Jiang Baimian raised another question. “What do you think of the fellow that the Ruin Hunters are searching for? The one with black hair and golden eyes that Moat Town’s townsfolk encountered.”

Long Yuehong hissed. “I find him very strange. Not only is his background mysterious, but he’s also very strange. Normally speaking, nobody can obtain a group of people’s admiration when they first meet. Also, there are both men and women involved!”

“Actually, I’m a little curious. I’m curious about his looks and how charming he is.” Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, “However, you’re right. This is indeed quite strange. For people who can create strange phenomena, my first reaction is to categorize them as Awakened.”

“Why?” Shang Jianyao blurted out a question.

Bai Chen did not show any doubts regarding the term Awakened. It was obvious that she knew of such existences.

Jiang Baimian released the accelerator and reduced the speed of the car. “In addition to having bizarre and terrifying abilities, Awakened can also have traits that appear strange and different from normal people. Yes, such traits are the same as their abilities. However, the probability of them being the same is not high.”

“For such an Awakened to appear in the Blackmarsh Wilderness... It’s definitely not just for survival.” Bai Chen looked out the window and stared into the swamp’s depths. “He might be searching for something... There might be considerable secrets hidden deep in the swamp.”

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Indeed. Forget it. Let's not talk about it. Our route won't go north of Yuelu Station. Besides, it's too dangerous to bring two rookies into this obviously abnormal situation. We can only find an opportunity to report it to the company.

"Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, you can rest now. Ah, Bai Chen, don't be in a rush to sleep. Tell me where to go next..."

"..." Bai Chen glanced at Jiang Baimian, wondering if she was still the unusually reliable team leader from before.

Just like that, the jeep drove through the Blackmarsh Wilderness. When it was almost noon, it stopped at a cement intersection that was overgrown with weeds.

Jiang Baimian opened the door and walked out. She pointed to the left of the jeep and said, "This is the first stop for this field training session."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong alighted from the car and looked in the direction their team leader's finger pointed in.

There was a fork in the road that led downward. The concrete ground was cracked by clumps of weeds, and almost nothing was intact. On the left of this path was what appeared to be a field, but most of it had been swallowed by the swamp. Many different types of plants grew in the remaining spots. On the right were three buildings that surrounded an open square. One of them had already collapsed, while creepers and other plants covered the remaining two.

At the end of the road was a sizable square. On both sides of the square were more four, five, and six-story buildings. However, there was also a very large, tall single-story building. A portion of the buildings had also collapsed. The rest were mixed with greenery, making it difficult to distinguish them from each other.

At the end of the square stood a two-paned, metal-black door that could allow four jeeps passage. The door was completely open, revealing rows of houses that didn't look like residential ones.

Behind these houses, in areas that Shang Jianyao and the others couldn't see, several chimneys—red or grayish-black—extended into the air. It was a rather spectacular sight. Their outer walls were embedded with very crude, iron-black stairs. The higher one went, the sparser the plants in the cracks.

After Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong observed the area for a while, Jiang Baimian explained why she had stopped here. "In the future, our team will inevitably encounter city ruins from the Old World, especially those that few people visit or have yet to be discovered. These city ruins will be somewhat dangerous. Therefore, you have to get used to such places in advance and accumulate some experience."

Long Yuehong couldn't help but say, "But this doesn't look like a city."

Jiang Baimian laughed. "We definitely have to start with the lowest difficulty. This used to be a steel factory, the kind with a complete social structure. It's equivalent to a miniature city. Look, the buildings by the side of the road are part of a hospital and radio station.

"Yes, this place has been visited by Ruin Hunters many times. There's basically nothing of value left. You have two main missions today: First, get some food here. It doesn't matter if we find something that others haven't found or if we target the beasts that appear here. The second is to draw a complete map and label all the key areas. How about it? Simple enough, right?" Nôv(el)B\jnn

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong didn't answer because they couldn't determine if it was simple or difficult with their experience.

Jiang Baimian looked at the steel factory again. "Ruin Hunters often appear here. If you encounter them, you have to learn how to deal with them, interact with them, and exchange for information and supplies."

"Team Leader, didn't you say that there's basically nothing valuable here? Why would Ruin Hunters be here?" Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Isn't there a saying that goes: 'Even a rotten ship still has three pounds of nails, much less a large steel factory'? Therefore, if one fails to harvest anything useful elsewhere, they might come here and search. Perhaps they can find something useful. For example, a Ruin Hunter previously dug up the ground and removed a section of the water pipes. He then dragged it back and exchanged it for some food."

Upon seeing Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao nod, indicating that they had no more questions, Jiang Baimian turned around and said, "Let's begin then. Bai Chen and I will stay here and watch the car. If you encounter any trouble that you can't handle, send a signal for help. If you need guidance, come back within two kilometers of us and use the walkie-talkie."

Chapter 34: Nothing Left

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong watched Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen return to the jeep and drive it to a relatively obscure spot not far away. They then checked their Ice Moss pistols, United 202 pistols, and the Berserker assault rifles that they had slung over their shoulders.

After confirming all the details, they took turns crouching down to re-tie their military boots' shoelaces again so as to ensure that nothing would go wrong. After carrying this

out, they carried their assault rifles and walked along the derelict cement path at a moderate speed, heading towards the square.

Although it was autumn, and the weather had already turned cold, there were still many mosquitoes amidst the weeds. They incessantly buzzed around Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong held it in for a while before finally asking, "Do we have to take turns swatting away the mosquitoes?" He believed that someone had to be in charge of keeping vigilance at all times.

"Why don't I help you?" Shang Jianyao asked as he looked at the black mosquitoes lunging at Long Yuehong's face.

Long Yuehong warily asked, "Are you trying to slap me?"

"Do I leave such a bad impression on you?" Shang Jianyao laughed involuntarily. He then took out a small plastic bottle the size of a finger from his pocket, unscrewed the cap, and sprayed it at himself. "Have you forgotten that our company is called Pangu Biology? The mosquito repellent has excellent effects."

Long Yuehong's eyes widened as he asked, "W-when did you take it? Wasn't it in the car?"

There were almost no mosquitoes in Pangu Biology. In the few days since he came to the surface, Long Yuehong had not been troubled by mosquitoes. Therefore, he had forgotten about mosquito repellent.

"I had it on me when I was on night duty," Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

"I-I... Why didn't I encounter any mosquitoes when I was on duty?" Long Yuehong was deeply confused.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. "Use your brain and think about it. You'll figure it out."

When Long Yuehong remained stumped, Shang Jianyao announced the answer. "During the two days when Team Leader and I were on night duty, she would spray mosquito repellent into the surroundings. Actually, when we first start a bonfire, she will also spray into it. Did you never see that?"

"..." Long Yuehong didn't expect the answer to be so simple. In order not to be mocked by Shang Jianyao, he immediately pointed to the right and said, "Let's take a look at those buildings first. Team Leader said that they're a hospital and radio station."

He was referring to the three buildings that surrounded an open square on the right side of the concrete path. One of them had already collapsed.

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao casually put away the mosquito repellent.

“W-what about me?” Long Yuehong’s mouth fell open. He was shocked, astounded, and confused.

Shang Jianyao laughed silently. “You didn’t say you wanted it. How would I know if you didn’t tell me...”

“Stop, stop! Don’t repeat the lines from radio programs.” Long Yuehong immediately interrupted Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao didn’t tease him any further. He quickly unscrewed the cap and sprayed the mosquito repellent on Long Yuehong. After all, they were in the wilderness, the ruins of a steelworks factory. Every joke had to be done within reason. They couldn’t afford to lose focus and lower their guard of the surroundings.

After getting rid of the mosquitoes, the two of them turned towards the place that Jiang Baimian called a hospital and radio station. The first thing they saw were two lone columns.

“The—the door has been moved away?” Long Yuehong suddenly felt a headache.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “This is called human subjectivity. If it weren’t for the shattered cement and bricks that can’t be exchanged for anything, these two columns might not even be standing here.”

“Tsk, tsk.” Long Yuehong sighed and walked past the columns.

It was only then that they realized that a row of houses was beside the wall in front of the building closer to the roadside. They only needed to make one right turn to reach it. If they went straight, they would head up the slope and arrive at a small pond, a garden, and a parking lot.

Through this square, it seemed like one could directly enter the second floor of the building by the side of the road.

Long Yuehong signaled to Shang Jianyao and led the way to the aisle between the row of houses.

There was a not-too-wide drainage ditch, overgrown with moss and weeds.

Long Yuehong looked around and realized that there were doors at the bottom of the building. The space inside varied greatly. The two rooms closest to the slope were connected. The windows facing the outside were completely open, not covering anything. The row of single-story houses was neatly divided into small, almost identical

units. As far as they could see, there were tables with all their drawers open and high stools that had been overturned.

Long Yuehong combined the terms 'hospital' and 'radio station' in an attempt to determine which area this was. However, he couldn't figure out the answer. "What place is this?" he asked without much anticipation, not believing that Shang Jianyao could answer.

Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze, lowered his right elbow, and raised the Berserker assault rifle's muzzle slightly. "Outpatient department." His voice was low and confident.

"Huh?" Long Yuehong was surprised and confused. He was about to ask how he recognized it when he suddenly recalled something.

Within Pangu Biology, there was a small sickbay in each floor's Residential Zone. It was responsible for treating the ordinary ailments that were similar to headaches and fevers, which each floor's residents might suffer. Such a sickbay was divided into two sections—the exterior section had a pharmacy on one side and a doctor's consultation room on the other. In the interior section was an infusion room and an injection room.

Apart from these, Pangu Biology had three large hospitals. They were located on specific and different floors. They mainly handled employees that the sickbay couldn't treat.

Long Yuehong had been healthy since he was young. His parents and elders also never had any major problems. Therefore, he had only been to the sickbay on his floor and the university's floor. He had never been to the hospital, so he did not have a direct impression of the outpatient department.

Shang Jianyao's mother passed away because of an illness. She had also been hospitalized for a long time prior to her demise. Back then, Shang Jianyao had to rotate between the school, the hospital, and his home every day.

After figuring out the reason, Long Yuehong shut his mouth.

Shang Jianyao used his chin in place of his right hand and pointed at the single-story building. "On this side should be the outpatient department, injection rooms, and infusion rooms. There's more than one of each."

He then faced the building area. "The two rooms that are connected to the outermost area should be the pharmacy. There should be a metal grill on the windows. There should also be a gap for handing out medicine. However, they have all been taken away. The other rooms might be the machine room, the finance department, or the laboratory. There's no way to be sure."

"Yes, yes." Long Yuehong didn't retort.

The two of them carried assault rifles and searched the rooms one by one. However, they couldn't find anything useful. Even the wooden tables and chairs were in smithereens or in shambles. They were clearly taken to light a bonfire.

When they arrived at the last room in the row of buildings, Long Yuehong kicked open the half-closed wooden door and saw a white skull. He stared at the two black sockets for a full second. Startled, he suddenly raised the Berserker assault rifle a little higher and prepared to fire.

Shang Jianyao looked around and said in a deep voice, "It has been dead for a long time."

Long Yuehong relaxed a little and carefully observed the situation inside.

A wooden table had fallen to the ground, and a few yellowed, tattered pages were scattered messily. The skeleton leaned against the table. There was no flesh or blood left, nor was there any cloth to cover it. Furthermore, it had lost many bones.

"The Ruin Hunters from before didn't even let the corpse's underpants go... Many beasts have also been here..." After all, Long Yuehong had undergone strict training. Therefore, he could determine many things from the minute traces left behind.

Just as he said that, a small black figure jumped out of a corner, ran to the wall, and burrowed into an inconspicuous hole.

"...Rat." Long Yuehong almost peppered it with bullets.

Shang Jianyao nodded thoughtfully. "Is it edible?"

"...In theory, yes. However, it has too many viruses and bacteria. It's very easy to end up getting infected with serious diseases." Long Yuehong tried his best to explain, in case his good friend had any ideas. "If Team Leader were here, she would definitely say, 'Do not eat such things unless there's no other choice.'"

Shang Jianyao exhaled, seemingly a little regretful. "Look around."

He took a few steps forward and squatted beside the yellowish pages. Unfortunately, there was nothing on it. However, Shang Jianyao also saw something. The outline and size of the complete pages were basically the same. They must have been torn from the same notebook.

"If there's any important information on them, they definitely would've been taken a long time ago," said Long Yuehong.

Shang Jianyao did not comment. "Put them away first. I'll get Team Leader to do some research on them later."

With that said, he took out a bag and a plastic tweezer. He then picked up the pages and placed them in the bag.

The two of them searched the side of the building again, but they still didn't find anything.

After returning to the slope, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong walked up to the small square. They saw that the opposite building had collapsed, and the four-story building on the right was covered in green plants.

Above the building's first-floor door were three large red words. They had already mottled and faded, vaguely visible in the greenery: "Inpatient Department."

"It really is a hospital." Long Yuehong turned his head to look at the building beside the slope. "This is also part of the hospital. Then, it seems like the radio station is the one that collapsed."

The bricks at the top of the collapsed building had been removed, indicating the Ruin Hunters' professionalism and patience.

"Let's go in and take a look." Shang Jianyao led the way to the inpatient department.

There were lots of glass shards and animal feces inside, but they were preserved relatively well. However, there were no hospital beds in any of the wards.

"No way. The beds should be very heavy..." Long Yuehong was rather surprised.

"They can be pushed," Shang Jianyao said simply. "They also might have brought cutting tools."

"There really isn't anything left... Are these what Ruin Hunters are capable of?" Long Yuehong sighed and followed Shang Jianyao up the stairs to the second, third, and fourth floors.

Walking in the inpatient department gave him a constant feeling of gloominess and coldness. The scent he breathed in also had an indescribable weirdness to it. It didn't resemble the residual smell left from excessive rot.

"I think that's about it? There's nothing else." Long Yuehong couldn't help but urge Shang Jianyao to leave.

"Yeah." Shang Jianyao looked at the bathroom close to the stairs, took out a pen and paper, and began to draw a map of the hospital against the wall.

"Can't we go out and do it?" Long Yuehong paced back and forth.

“Soon, soon.” Shang Jianyao’s pen flew across the paper. Finally, he drew a strange symbol that resembled a squatting person in the inpatient department.

“What does that represent?” Long Yuehong asked curiously.

Shang Jianyao did not answer him. He drew a similar symbol to the side. He then drew a horizontal line before labeling it. “Bathroom available.”

“...” Long Yuehong didn’t want to bother with Shang Jianyao any further.

After completing this portion of the map, the two of them left the inpatient department and went down the slope.

After entering the main road, they saw two figures emerge from the steelworks factory’s depths before they could search for their next target. Each was on a bicycle and carried a rifle.

Chapter 35: Strange Death

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not react immediately until the people on the two bicycles saw them.

Clang! Clang!

The armed duo immediately abandoned their bicycles and scrambled to hide behind a nearby obstacle.

Upon seeing this scene, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong came to their senses. They no longer raised their assault rifles vigilantly and reflexively. They quickly pounced to the side and used the two pillars at the hospital’s entrance to provide them cover.

The scene instantly became extremely quiet, with only the occasional chirping of birds coming from the distance.

Upon seeing Long Yuehong seemingly raise the walkie-talkie, Shang Jianyao raised his voice and shouted, “We mean no harm!”

After a brief silence, a slightly hoarse voice sounded from the other side as though it was blocked by phlegm. “Neither do we!”

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, “Maybe we can exchange information!”

After a few seconds, someone shouted, “Communicating like this doesn’t seem too convenient!”

“Then let’s get a little closer!” Shang Jianyao suggested loudly without thinking.

The other two conversed in a low voice with the obstacle in the way. However, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong couldn't hear the exact contents due to the distance.

In less than a minute, the other party replied, "Alright!"

Shang Jianyao turned to Long Yuehong and said, "I'll take point. You take the rear and have the honors of providing support and protection."

"Okay." Long Yuehong released his grip on the gun's handle and gestured that he was okay with it.

Shang Jianyao did not attempt to make the other party leave their hiding spot. He held his assault rifle and left the pillar step by step, his muscles tense. During this process, he was highly vigilant, prepared to pounce and roll at any moment.

Upon seeing his sincerity, another person appeared on the other side with the same vigilant posture.

This person was in his thirties and about 1.7 meters tall. He wore a slightly shriveled, dirty, dark-blue down jacket with three to four patches. His receding hairline was a testament to his severe baldness. His hair was a pale yellow, and his eyes were light blue. His facial features and contours were relatively deep. An obvious difference between him and people like Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong was that he had Red River ethnicity.

Perhaps a result of him living in the wilderness for too long, his skin had many dry cracks, and his nails were clearly black. The man gripped his rifle tightly and closed the distance between him and Shang Jianyao meter by meter.

After they entered a convenient range for conversation, Long Yuehong and the other person left their hiding spots and moved closer to their respective companions.

"How shall I address you?" Like before, the bald man used the Ashlands language—the mother tongue of Shang Jianyao and the others—as opposed to the Red River language. As he spoke, he didn't relax and remained highly vigilant.

"Shang Jianyao," Shang Jianyao replied calmly. "An Official Ruin Hunter. What about you?"

Long Yuehong, who had wanted to answer, heaved a sigh of relief. He was quite afraid that Shang Jianyao would 'act up' at such a time. After all, they were not familiar with each other, and not everyone could appreciate or tolerate his 'humor.'

The bald man thought for a moment and said, "Harris Brown, Intermediate Hunter." He didn't show his Hunter badge or get Shang Jianyao to show his. This was because they

were in a ruin. Without a special machine to read the information in the chip, it was impossible to determine the badge's true owner and the corresponding credit rank.

In the wilderness, many people casually registered themselves as a Hunter or obtained the corresponding item from their enemies' corpses. Just having a badge didn't mean anything. The technique of engraving a name on a badge was too primitive and very easy to imitate. Most importantly, the person holding the badge could simply report the name on the badge without using their real name.

Harris Brown and Shang Jianyao's conversation was actually closer to 'small talk' to ease the atmosphere.

Shang Jianyao looked at Harris Brown's companion and realized that it was a woman. She was more than 1.60 meters tall and had average facial features. Her flaxen hair cascaded down to her shoulders naturally. She wore a beige beret that was relatively clean.

"You don't seem to have obtained anything?" Shang Jianyao turned his gaze back to Harris Brown.

Harris Brown replied without a smile. "I was just passing by and casually spent some time trying. It's very normal not to find anything. In this ruin, it's very difficult to obtain supplies without suitable equipment. Is it your first time here?"

"Yes." Shang Jianyao frankly replied before asking, "Did you guys also take on that mission of finding the black-haired, golden-eyed fellow?"

Harris Brown nodded slightly. "I'll give you a piece of advice that needs payment: Give up on this mission. It hasn't been peaceful north of Yuelu Station recently."

"Is it related to the anomaly in the swamp's depths? All of you heard the roars that night, right?" Shang Jianyao pressed.

Harris Brown's expression gradually turned solemn. "Yes, we were north of Yuelu Station back then. After dawn, we continued forward. We discovered several corpses—people that had obviously just died a few hours ago.

"These corpses didn't have any fatal wounds, but their expressions were distorted. Some showed pain, some were filled with fear, and some seemed to be laughing. Their smiles were terrifying."

Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine, and his scalp tingled. However, this feeling was quickly washed away by Shang Jianyao's question.

"There were no fatal wounds... What about clothes? Did they still have clothes?"

What the hell is that question... Long Yuehong couldn't help but criticize Shang Jianyao inwardly.

Harris Brown's expression froze slightly. "No. Someone clearly discovered the corpses before we did and took away all their items."

"Professional," Shang Jianyao praised, making Harris Brown feel like he couldn't keep up with the conversation.

Harris Brown then took a silent breath and continued. "Sigh, they didn't even let go of a strand of hair. Otherwise, I could have gotten myself a wig. In short, we gave up the mission and headed straight back after we saw those corpses. We didn't dare rest much. We just arrived here an hour ago."

"That's pretty fast," Shang Jianyao casually commented.

Harris Brown didn't turn his head. "We were on bikes, so we could use some of the small trails in the swamp. However, cars and motorcycles won't be able to pass through them and can only take detours."

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. "Final question. Are there any other Ruin Hunters or wilderness nomads here?"

"There are a few. However, considering your equipment, they won't provoke you as long as you don't launch an attack on them." Harris Brown's head reflected a little light as he stood under the sun.

Shang Jianyao seemed to be in thought as he asked, "What if we didn't have these weapons?"

Harris Brown's face suddenly distorted. "In the Ashlands, being weak is a sin." His eyes became a little fierce, revealing some unconcealed hate.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to ask again, he exhaled and restored his expression to normal. "It's my turn to ask. This is the payment for the advice I just gave."

He actually didn't expect Shang Jianyao to give a definite answer or go back on his word. After all, the information contained in his advice wasn't too valuable because many Ruin Hunters that had pulled out of the mission had more or less discovered something abnormal.

Besides, more than a day had passed. Furthermore, it would take at least a day to reach north of Yuelu Station. At this rate, even if Harris didn't give them any advice and allowed the two people opposite them to go, they might not be able to make it in time.

“Can I use another form of payment?” Shang Jianyao released his left hand, which was holding the assault rifle’s magazine—and reached into his pocket.

“It depends.” Harris Brown and his companion suddenly raised their guard, afraid that Shang Jianyao would take out something dangerous.

Shang Jianyao quickly took out two small bags of compressed biscuits and showed them. This was supposed to be part of his lunch in the factory ruins.

“...Excellent. You’re very generous.” Harris Brown didn’t expect him to be willing to pay with food. The biscuits were barely enough for them to settle a meal.

Shang Jianyao immediately threw the two small bags of compressed biscuits over.

Harris Brown and his companion didn’t pick them up, allowing the two small bags of compressed biscuits to fall to the ground. They were afraid that the other two would fire as they caught the biscuits.

“Let’s chat later.” Shang Jianyao smiled as though he was bidding farewell to a good friend.

He and Long Yuehong immediately walked towards the steelworks factory ruins’ entrance. They didn’t let down their guard against Harris Brown and his companion.

It was the same for the other party.

After sufficient distance was between the two parties—such that even a sharpshooter couldn’t hit them—Harris Brown got his companion to pick up the compressed biscuits and pushed their bicycles over.

After watching the duo leave the ruins on their bicycles, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked around the square beyond the door with their assault rifles.

“It should be the residential area outside. Shall we search this place or inside?” Long Yuehong asked hesitantly.

Shang Jianyao didn’t look at the ‘green’ buildings that had collapsed or were dilapidated on both sides of the square. He pointed at the door and said, “Let’s go inside first and figure out the basic layout.”

“Alright.” Long Yuehong didn’t object.

They then passed through the iron-black door that could accommodate multiple cars.

Long Yuehong looked back and sighed. “It seems like Ruin Hunters have limits. This door wasn’t removed and moved away.”

Shang Jianyao looked over. "Maybe it's not worth it."

They didn't say anything else and walked deeper into the steelworks factory along the wide but tattered road.

On the right side of this place was a row of very tall, unoccupied, and spacious individual rooms. Furthermore, they were not like the ones in the outpatient department. Walls separated these small rooms. There was only a pillar in the middle as a dividing line.

In some of the rooms that did not have walls to their left or right, they could see grooves that allowed people to stand or lie down.

"What is this place?" Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

Shang Jianyao shook his head. "I don't know. However, don't you think it would be very convenient to repair the bottom of a car while standing in those grooves?"

"This is a repair area? The space beside us is equivalent to a garage?" Long Yuehong came to a realization. "Remember to label it later."

On the left of the road was a putrid pond, a small cluster of trees, and a small building hidden deep in the greenery.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong temporarily ignored these places and walked deeper into the factory area.

Before long, they arrived near the towering 'chimneys.' They saw many steel frameworks and rugged buildings erected around them.

Large iron-black pipes that resembled dragons slid down from the 'chimney' to different areas at not very steep angles.

These pipes were not sealed. They seemed to be the remaining half after being sliced perpendicularly.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong entered the area and walked up and down the road, traversing the rusted steel forest.

An incomplete guardrail soon appeared at the edge of the road. Outside was a pool filled with rainwater, but it was unknown what it was used for.

As this place was shielded from the sun's rays from above, it made the surroundings appear very gloomy and dark. In addition, there was no sound—only silence. Long Yuehong's heart palpitated as he walked.

He couldn't help but say, "Wasn't it said that there are other Ruin Hunters here? Why haven't we encountered any of them?"

Shang Jianyao glanced at him. "It doesn't seem auspicious to say such things at a time like this."

Just as he said that, a sudden clang sounded from high above.

A black figure quickly fell. After colliding with the steel frame and the parts that extended from the building a few times, the figure heavily landed not far in front of them.

It was human. His body had already been damaged, and blood rapidly flowed out.

At this moment, the crashing sound still echoed in the area. It had not completely subsided.

Before Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao could react, they saw a figure walking over from the corner of the road ahead.

This figure was slightly taller than Shang Jianyao. 'His' entire body was made of black metal. 'His' left arm was equipped with a grenade launcher, and 'his' right palm contained a flamethrower's nozzle and a laser firing hole.

'He' was wearing a tattered, yellow monk's robe and a large red kasaya. On his face was a pair of shimmering red eyes.

Chapter 36: Monk

Upon seeing this tall and strange 'robot,' Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's hearts palpitated at the same time. Every pore on their bodies couldn't help but tighten, and their hair stood on end.

At that moment, the same thing flashed in their minds: A monk from the Monks Conclave!

These monks were very dangerous beings in the Ashlands. They also had another name: 'Eternal!'

According to Pangu Biology's textbooks, humans had made groundbreaking progress in certain technologies before the Old World was destroyed. Among these breakthroughs, the most outstanding and admirable one was consciousness uploads.

This technology could transmit a human's consciousness to a specially designed robot bionic chip through special equipment. This allowed humans to escape the restrictions of their fragile bodies. They would no longer age, become unwell, or starve. They also

no longer died from the passage of time. All they needed to do was carry out maintenance or switch carriers periodically to achieve consciousness-level immortality.

However, the technology still had many flaws before the Old World was completely destroyed. It had never been officially used, only existing in laboratories.

When the Old World was destroyed, a group of robots—which called themselves Eternals—suddenly appeared when the Chaotic Era came. They used their imagination and methods of thought—which were identical to humans—as well as other strong pieces of evidence to make survivors believe that they were formerly humans and that one's consciousness could be granted eternal life.

However, according to the Eternals, the technologies for consciousness uploading had been lost during the cataclysm. They said that only a few remaining pieces of equipment could still be used.

Only one factory could produce bionic chips and the corresponding robots that could carry a human consciousness. However, they were unable to reverse-engineer the manufacturing process. They only knew how to use whatever they had on hand to create a limited number of Eternals.

Therefore, their goal of walking the land was to unite humanity, reverse-engineer the equipment, and reproduce the corresponding technology so as to allow everyone to obtain eternal life, end the Dark Age, and enter the New World.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not know how it developed back then. They only knew what was recorded in the textbooks: "As time passed, the Eternals gradually revealed many problems. This wasn't because they were malicious, but that the technology was far from mature. Among them, the most prominent problem was that a person lost various sensations after losing their physical body. This resulted in them losing the motivation that humans had in the struggle for survival.

"Many Eternals began to find their lives boring and meaningless, resulting in very serious mental problems. Meanwhile, the Eternals that went crazy dealt another round of severe damage to the already fragile human race. Although the remaining Eternals didn't go crazy, they became lost. They began to seek comfort from the various religious remnants of the Old World.

"Finally, they focused on a particular religion and absorbed the traits of other religions, creating a new religion that was self-consistent but extremely warped. It was a new religion that could help them resolve their psychological problems. They called themselves monks. They called the hidden stronghold that hid the consciousness relay equipment the Glazed Pure Lands."

These monks—who were exoskeleton robots—were not afraid of light weapons and possessed great firepower. They were like exoskeleton devices with human intelligence.

They were dangerous beings that ordinary humans in small teams could not defend against. Even with heavy weapons, it required dozens or hundreds of well-trained people coordinating and using the appropriate tactics to have a chance of finishing off a monk.

When Jiang Baimian previously did a summary on the more dangerous types of humans, she did not mention Eternals. This was because the members of various large factions and wilderness nomads treated these monks as another type of creature, a creature completely different from them.

Of course, the monks of the Monks Conclave did not have strong aggressive tendencies towards humans. In fact, they were often somewhat friendly. However, the problem was that human consciousness could not be produced out of thin air. Every destruction of a monk—who had lost their ability to reproduce—would mean one less.

In order to maintain the 'population' and the parish, the monks were active in the various wildernesses in search of the 'Fated.'

If they found a Fated, they would 'redeem' their target and bring them back to the Glazed Pure Lands. They would then make these Fated give up on their physical bodies and transmit their consciousness into a robot's bionic chip.

Among the Fated, a small number had strong desires for 'eternal life.' Thus, they did not resist it. Most did not dare attempt it due to the rumors of the Eternals' flaws. However, it was not up to them to decide as long as they were chosen by the monks, even if they were unwilling.

This worsened the Monks Conclave's reputation rapidly, making it almost notorious.

At the same time, perhaps because of flaws in the consciousness uploading technology, many mechanical monks had certain and different problems. When they encountered a specific scene or heard a specific sentence, they would lose control of themselves and go crazy. It would take them some time to calm down. It was akin to triggering the mentally ill or a personality defect.

This unstable state made many humans in the Ashlands view the mechanical monks as ferocious beasts.

It was due to these reasons that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong reacted so strongly when they discovered a mechanical monk opposite them.

Only monks from the Monks Conclave liked to wear monk robes and a kasaya around their bodies. An ordinary robot wouldn't have such requirements or 'hobbies.'

Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao aimed their Berserker assault rifle's muzzle at the iron-black robot in the red kasaya. Their foreheads were covered in a cold sweat. They

knew that their weapons could not threaten the other party at all. Furthermore, unlike the exoskeleton-equipped bandit leader, the other party did not have any vital spots they could target.

When facing a mechanical monk, they had no chance of winning in regards to equipment. The reason they aimed was mainly because of their conditioned reflexes. At this moment, they could only pray in their hearts silently, hoping that they were not 'Fated.'

The next second, the 1.9-meter-tall robot wearing a tattered monk robe and a red kasaya turned its cold and black face slightly and swept its blinking red eyes past them.

The mechanical monk didn't say a word as he silently walked to the person who had fallen to his death. A cold and emotionless voice then sounded. "Life is suffering. Why remain so obstinate? Come back to the Pure Lands with me. Abandon your mortal coils and gain enlightenment. Then, you will understand that everything is nothing but hollow. Those who realize it will exist forever."

With that said, the mechanical monk pressed his palms together and recited, "Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti[1]."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked at each other when they saw that the other party had ignored them. They tacitly began to retreat silently.

At that moment, the mechanical monk in the red kasaya maintained his posture and spoke with his cold, emotionless voice again. "Patrons, why don't you wait a little longer? Although you are not fated with Buddha, all life has a Buddhist nature. It's not a bad thing to listen to the scriptures."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were secretly delighted when they heard the words 'not fated.' They heaved sighs of relief. At the same time, they were afraid of infuriating the other party, so they could only stop retreating.

Since the monk did not intend to attack or 'redeem' them and only wanted to proselytize, it was better to listen than risk their lives.

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong stop, the robot monk looked at the corpse on the ground and continued speaking. "Although you remain obstinate, Buddha Subhuti is compassionate and cannot bear to see your corpse exposed in the wilderness, never to gain liberation. I will send your spirit off. I hope you can completely escape your mortal coils and obtain new life in the Pure Lands."

Long Yuehong quietly watched everything when Shang Jianyao's voice suddenly sounded in his ears.

"How do you intend to do the sending?"

The mechanical monk stretched out his right hand and aimed his palm at the corpse. As he kept his left palm raised, he then chanted, “Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti possesses great compassion and delivers all living beings from suffering. Purifying fire shall wick away your shackles...”

As he chanted, the mechanical monk’s right palm spewed out thick, white flames that instantly incinerated the corpse. These flames seemed to stick to the corpse’s surface in an inextinguishable manner.

After doing this, the mechanical monk in the red kasaya turned around and walked towards Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “Patrons, This Penniless Monk’s Dharma name is Jingfa. I’m a monk.”

When it saw that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not respond, he suddenly sat down cross-legged, gently flicked his kasaya, and said in an icy, emotionless voice, “Have a seat.”

Shang Jianyao hesitated for a moment before taking a few steps forward. He then sat on the ground in a way that gave him the most leverage to jump up.

Long Yuehong was a few seconds slower. He walked to the same spot and sat down.

Jingfa’s eyes flashed red as he nodded slightly. “Patrons, what do you know of Buddha Subhuti?”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong shook their heads in unison.

Jingfa didn’t go into a rage. His cold voice inexplicably sounded solemn as he said, “Buddha Subhuti is one of the 13 Kalendarium; he controls time, as well as this world. ‘He’ is the ruler of January, the beginning of all things. ‘He’ is the source and embodiment of consciousness.”

[1] Usually, it’s Namo Amitabha. The religious texts found by the Monks Conclave are all incomplete. Therefore, it is normal for there to be mistakes in the Buddhist proclamations and teachings. It’s also a result of them mashing their teaching with other religious teachings. Yes, this is also to differentiate it from real religion to avoid trouble.

Chapter 37: A Great Dream

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were stunned when they heard Jingfa’s words.

Jingfa stared at them for two seconds with his blinking red eyes before saying to Long Yuehong, “You don’t know about the Kalendarium.” After saying that, he looked at Shang Jianyao and spoke without any emotional fluctuations. “You know.”

Huh? Long Yuehong turned to look at Shang Jianyao in confusion and surprise. The two of us have received the same education and lived in the same environment. We are also often inseparable. Why have I never heard of the term 'Kalendarium' before when Shang Jianyao seems to know it very well?

Shang Jianyao's eyebrows twitched slightly as he frankly replied, "I've heard a little about them."

The red light flickered on Jingfa's metallic black face again. "Ending, beginning; end of year, beginning of year... You learned about it from the believers of the Arbiter of Fate."

Shang Jianyao, who had been feeling strange, immediately confirmed one thing—the mechanical monk opposite him seemed capable of hearing some of the voices in his heart!

Long Yuehong couldn't be bothered to think about the title, 'Arbiter of Fate,' and also sensed that something was amiss.

Jingfa didn't continue. Instead, he simply explained, "The Kalendarium are the deities who control time and this world. There are a total of 13 such deities, and they correspond to different months."

"Aren't there just 12 months?" Long Yuehong pointed out the obvious. He had an inkling that the Kalendarium was a popular religion or myth on the world's surface.

Jingfa's voice was cold and deep, sounding nothing like a human's. "There's one Kalendria that rules over the leap month, or rather, the entire year—all time."

Without waiting for Long Yuehong to ask any further, Jingfa cut to the chase. "Our parish speaks of the corporeal body's nothingness and the four elements' hollowness because this world is Buddha Loke?vara-Tathāgata's dream world."

Shang Jianyao suddenly interrupted Jingfa. "Loke?vara-Tathāgata? Isn't it supposed to be Subhuti?"

Jingfa pressed his palms together. "Loke?vara-Tathāgata is a Buddha of the past, the sovereign of creation. Buddha Subhuti is the Tathāgata of the present world, the origin of all sentience. Don't you want to ask about the Kalendria who's in charge of the leap month and represents the entire year? This Penniless Monk will tell you now that it's Loke?vara-Tathāgata."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong came to a realization and nodded indiscernibly.

Jingfa lowered his head and chanted, "Namo Loke?vara-Tathāgata."

As he chanted, he straightened his back—which was made up of metal bones. He maintained the posture of pressing his palms together and bowed slightly at the towering ‘chimneys.’

“Are you going to ask why this Penniless Monk bows to the tower that refines iron and steel?” After Jingfa raised his body, he took the initiative to voice Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong’s thoughts.

“That’s because Buddha Loke?vara-Tathāgata has another name, Stupa. This is another form of address for Buddhas. At the same time, it represents a Buddha tower. Therefore, when we recite Loke?vara-Tathāgata’s Buddhist title, we should salute the highest tower around us. It can be a Buddha tower, a water tower, iron tower, signal tower, or high-voltage towers.”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong originally found the mechanical monk, Jingfa, to be reasonable and logical. However, they began to find him a little strange when they heard the latter half of his preaching.

It was unknown if Jingfa had sensed their thoughts, but he stopped in time and said, “Outside of asceticism, Buddha Loke?vara-Tathāgata has another honorific name.”

“What is it?” Long Yuehong blurted out.

Jingfa remained cross-legged. It was impossible to discern any emotion from his metallic face. “Master Zhuang.”

“Master Zhuang... Kalendaria Master Zhuang... Once before, Master Zhuang dreamt of being a butterfly...” Shang Jianyao couldn’t help but mutter to himself.

Jingfa’s head bobbed up and down. “Master Zhuang’s dream is referring to our world. All of you should have had dreams before and know that everything in a dream is an illusion. All your feelings and interactions are only emulated by fate. If you can’t figure this out, you will continue to sink into this darkness, experiencing life, old age, disease, death, love, separation, hate, desire, and pain of the five appropriated aggregates over and over again.”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong thought about it and inexplicably felt that the mechanical monk opposite them made sense. Of course, the premise was that this world was indeed a particular deity’s dream.

At that moment, Jingfa changed the topic. “Patrons, please wait a moment. This Penniless Monk needs to carry out maintenance.”

“...” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong dazedly watched the monk in the monk robe and kasaya opposite them as he opened a metal cover at its waist and took out a plastic bottle.

He then unscrewed the small metal lid at the location of his clavicle and poured a little of the plastic bottle's sticky yellow 'oil' in. Nôv(él)B\\jnn

"This is..." Shang Jianyao spoke curiously.

He didn't expect Jingfa to answer, but the latter frankly replied, "Dedicated lubricant."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's expressions froze for two seconds. They instantly found themselves ridiculous for previously finding sense in what the monk had said.

Jingfa seemed not to notice anything. After putting away the special lubricant, he looked up at the two people opposite him with his blinking red eyes. "Patrons, how old art thou?"

"?" Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were momentarily at a loss for words.

The textbooks in Pangu Biology were more focused on poems and idioms, not ancient languages.

Jingfa didn't mind and asked in a more general manner, "Patrons, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one," Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong replied in unison.

Jingfa picked up the red kasaya and draped it over his knees. "The two of you are still young, so you might not be deeply affected by what this Penniless Monk said. However, wait another 30, 40, or 50 years. When the two of you age bit by bit, becoming weaker and weaker, plagued by more and more diseases, and have seen just as many tragedies, you will understand that the meaning of life is suffering."

Shang Jianyao opened his mouth. He wanted to say something, but he tightly shut his mouth again. After a few seconds, he seriously said, "However, we've all undergone genetic modifications. By the time we're 50 years old, our bodies should still be healthy."

Jingfa was speechless, but he quickly recovered. "However, you will eventually die. Over the long years, there is no fundamental difference between 50 years and 100 years."

Long Yuehong wanted to retort, but he rationally gave up on the idea when he saw the grenade launcher attached to the mechanical monk's left arm.

"You're right." Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze from the same spot.

A red glow flickered in Jingfa's eyes. "What do you think is real in the dream? Judge from your usual dreams."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong pondered for a moment before shaking their heads.

Jingfa's cold and emotionless voice sounded again. "Actually, they exist. In a dream, there is only one thing that is real—your knowledge of yourself. Everyone in a dream understands that they are themselves. I think, therefore I am.

"Do the two of you still not understand? Everything is illusory, but consciousness is real. When you escape the shackles of your mortal coils and truly control your consciousness, you can escape this dream and enter the Pure Lands to obtain eternal life and paradise."

Shang Jianyao habitually replied, "How can I truly control my own consciousness then?"

Jingfa pointed at himself. "Use a device to transmit your consciousness into a robot's body. This can allow you to escape your physical restraints easily and directly."

"However, shouldn't a normal religion emphasize self-cultivation?" Long Yuehong said some of the words mentioned in Pangu Biology's textbooks.

In a monotonous voice, Jingfa said, "There are 3,000 orthodox paths and 40,000 side doors. Each path is different, but they all lead to the Pure Lands. Our Monks Conclave has chosen the technological path of the 3,000 orthodoxies."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's lips quivered. Their thoughts were in a mess, and they had no way of replying.

Jingfa continued, "When you abandon your mortal coils and upload your consciousness to a robot's bionic chip, you will see the Pure Lands, the so-called 'New World' in the Ashlands. This can allow you to gain insights into the Buddhist Dharma and obtain certain divine powers.

"This Penniless Monk was able to hear the voices in your hearts because Buddha Subhuti is benevolent. He allowed this Penniless Monk to comprehend his mind-reading techniques. Of course, this Penniless Monk's Phala is still lacking and cannot delve too deep."

...Why did he expose his weakness so naturally? This thought flashed across Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's minds.

Jingfa pressed his palms together and chanted a Buddhist proclamation. "A monk doesn't lie."

"...What is Phala?" Shang Jianyao asked another question.

Jingfa monotonously answered, "The uploading of one's consciousness is not the end, but the beginning. Technology that corroborates the path isn't the core but an auxiliary component. Its use is to provide better conditions for us to study the Buddhist Dharma.

“After our mortal coils are abandoned, we can see the world from a different angle. From there, we can better understand the Buddhist Dharma and understand the hollowness of all four elements. There’s a process involved. The critical juncture during the process is known as Phala. When your Phala achieves the Great Arhat, you’ll truly enter the Pure Lands and transcend the world.”

After explaining this, Jingfa glanced at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. “To the two of you, this is rather profound. Let’s call it a day. This Penniless Monk can tell that you will be walking the Ashlands. I hope you can experience the world and understand that life is suffering and that the body is hollow.

“When the time comes, this Penniless Monk will redeem and send you the Glazed Pure Lands if we are fated to meet again.”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were delighted when they heard the mechanical monk end the preaching. They didn’t dare ask any more questions. They quickly got up, walked to the side, and made way.

“If you don’t want to call this Penniless Monk by his Dharma name, call me Zen Master.” Jingfa pressed his palms together. He then swung his kasaya and retraced his steps, disappearing around a corner.

After watching him leave, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong looked at each other and followed the path they came from, leaving the rust-covered steel ‘forest.’

When they arrived at the door, Long Yuehong looked around and calculated the distance. He then picked up the walkie-talkie quickly and pressed a button. “Team Leader, we encountered a monk from the Monks Conclave!”

This was also what Shang Jianyao wanted to do, so he didn’t stop him.

“What? What’s its Dharma name?” Jiang Baimian’s voice sounded amidst static.

Near the towering ‘chimneys,’ Jingfa—who was walking towards the steelworks ruins’ depths—suddenly stopped. The red glow in his eyes suddenly lit up. His neck stiffly rotated as he spoke in an extremely cold and emotionless voice. “A woman’s voice...”

Chapter 38: Price

At the steelworks factory’s door, Long Yuehong held the walkie-talkie and answered Jiang Baimian’s question. “Jingfa! He said his name is Jingfa!”

The person on the other end of the walkie-talkie fell silent for two seconds. Sounds of static transmitted across the airwaves. Jiang Baimian then anxiously said, “Retreat! On the double!”

As soon as she finished speaking, she switched off the walkie-talkie.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong didn't really understand why their team leader's reaction was so dramatic. She didn't even find out what had happened to the two of them after they encountered Jingfa and if they had been determined to be 'Fated.' She just ordered them to retreat immediately.

Although they were confused, the two of them had no intention of violating Jiang Baimian's decision. On the one hand, they followed the Security Department's standard operating procedures when they were out in the field and trusted their team leader's experience and judgment. On the other hand, they were also filled with fear for the mechanical monk, who was full of strange theories.

The two of them didn't say anything. They bent their backs slightly and widened their strides while holding their assault rifles, sprinting out of the steelworks factory.

With their genetically enhanced bodies and the fact that they had been training for a long time, it was not difficult for them to maintain their high-pace run for quite some time. It was not until they left the derelict cement road and were about to make a turn towards the jeep's hidden spot that they slowed down and took a few breaths.

The jeep had already begun driving over in an attempt to pick them up. This time, Bai Chen was in the driver's seat again.

Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong got into the backseat through their respective doors and slammed the doors behind them.

Huff. Huff.

The two of them exhaled heavily.

"Drive at full speed," Jiang Baimian ordered Bai Chen. She turned her head and asked Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "How far were you from Jingfa when you used the walkie-talkie?"

Long Yuehong panted as he replied, "Very far. We were at the steelworks factory. Huff. Over at the door. Jingfa should have—huff—been behind the chimney by then. We weren't able to see each other any longer."

He didn't see Jingfa anywhere. He only estimated Jingfa's location based on the direction, approximate speed, and time from when the two parties separated. It could be said to be very inaccurate and could only be used as a reference.

Jiang Baimian clearly had a certain level of understanding of the steelwork factory ruins. She recalled the layout and said, "Speaking at that distance isn't too safe... A mechanical monk's auditory system is very strong. It can capture sound from relatively far away."

"Bai Chen, don't worry about the electricity or overturning the car. Stay at the current speed."

It was just then that Long Yuehong noticed that his team leader had already picked up the somewhat heavy grenade launcher and replaced it with a more explosive grenade.

"Team Leader, Jingfa said that we aren't fated with the Monks Conclave. There's no need to be so nervous." He quickly revealed the key information to prevent Jiang Baimian from overreacting.

Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror and shook her head indiscernibly. "That's not the point. All of you should have learned that there are certain flaws in Eternal technology. All mechanical monks have certain mental problems."

"These problems are different for all of them. According to the information the company has gathered, Jingfa—yes, he's one of the more active mechanical monks in the Ashlands. His problem is that he mainly..." Jiang Baimian paused before saying, "Hates women!"

"Huh?" Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong understood the meaning of her words, but they weren't sure what they meant or how serious it was.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Bai Chen and said, "As long as Jingfa encounters women or even hears a woman's voice, he will go crazy and indiscriminately attack everyone around him. Also, from the remains of certain corpses, we have learned that he has rapist tendencies."

"He's just a robot..." Long Yuehong couldn't imagine it.

Jiang Baimian exhaled. "That's why it's so scary... Oh right, which one of you will use the exoskeleton?"

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao's and Long Yuehong's response, Jiang Baimian's already serious expression became even more serious. "Quiet."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong instantly understood something. They turned their heads to look out the window, searching for the robot monk in the red kasaya. However, they could only see sparsely forested land, soggy gray soil, a black swamp, and rocks of different sizes. Apart from that, there was nothing.

At this moment, many potholes and rocks appeared in front of them. Bai Chen had to slow down the jeep. If the car really overturned, it would only exacerbate the problem.

Jiang Baimian's left hand—which was holding the grenade launcher—inexplicably slid down and silently patted Bai Chen's right elbow.

Bai Chen did not turn her head. As she turned the steering wheel to the left, she reduced the speed of the car to a crawl, almost returning to normal speeds.

During the entire process, the windows on both sides of the jeep were open.

A black figure—wearing a tattered monk robe and a red kasaya—suddenly jumped down from the tree beside the road and went straight for Jiang Baimian's passenger seat. It was the mechanical monk, Jingfa!

However, Jiang Baimian seemed to have foreseen this already. She had already raised the grenade launcher and aimed it at the Eternal.

This series of actions made it appear as though Jingfa had taken the initiative to pounce at the grenade launcher.

The grenade—which was filled with powerful explosives—was strong enough to cause damage to the mechanical monk.

Just as Jiang Baimian squeezed her finger and was about to pull the trigger, the red glow on Jingfa's metal face suddenly flickered.

Jiang Baimian immediately saw many people. The figures were slightly illusory as they laid on the ground around her. They crazily grabbed soil, rocks, and leaves and stuffed them into their mouths.

Their stomachs bulged as if they would burst from eating anything at any moment. However, they didn't feel satiated at all; they ate whatever they saw.

Jiang Baimian seemed to have become one of these people. She didn't have the physiological feeling of hunger, but she felt that she should be very hungry. She felt like she was starving and had to eat something.

This urge, this self-awareness, made Jiang Baimian unable to control herself. She immediately relaxed her right index finger—which was pressing on the trigger—and threw the grenade launcher back into her lap. She then took out a bag of compressed biscuits and crazily tore open the packaging before stuffing the food into her mouth.

During this process, she didn't even have the time to drink water. Despite choking to the point that her eyes rolled back slightly, she couldn't help but continue swallowing.

She was not the only one. Bai Chen stepped on the brakes and crazily ate an energy bar. Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong also took out their food and irrationally enjoyed a late dinner.

They couldn't be bothered that an infamous and dangerous enemy was lunging towards them.

The robot monk, Jingfa, landed beside the jeep with a click.

He opened the passenger seat door with his left hand and aimed his right palm at Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen, which also had Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong within the blasting range.

It was only at this moment that Jiang Baimian broke free from the hunger illusion she experienced.

The slightly illusory, pregnant figures on the ground around her had already disappeared.

Almost at the same time, Shang Jianyao leaned forward slightly and lowered his head.

Jingfa paused for two seconds. He did not use any laser weapons or fire to purify the four of them. The red light in his eyes flickered a few times before he said, "Do you think this Penniless Monk wants to send all of you off? This Penniless Monk won't do as you wish. This Penniless Monk will first take you deep into the swamp and find a place where no one will disturb you so that you can enjoy yourselves."

As he spoke, he only paid attention to Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen.

Jiang Baimian's expression changed slightly, but she didn't respond. She seemed to be considering how she could get themselves out of this conundrum.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao straightened his body and asked in confirmation, "Are you an Awakened?"

"Yes." Even though they were enemies, and he would go crazy from seeing women, Jingfa seemed to maintain the principle that a monk shouldn't lie.

He examined Shang Jianyao's seat. He then walked to the backseat and opened the door as he continued aiming the laser weapon and flamethrower in his right hand at Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen.

"This Penniless Monk will sit in the middle," said Jingfa coldly and emotionlessly.

This way, he could monitor everyone in the car and allow the jeep to drive to his destination smoothly.

Shang Jianyao quickly alighted from the jeep and made room for Jingfa as if the latter was not an enemy.

Jingfa did not let down his guard. He boldly sat in the middle of the back row.

Shang Jianyao sat to the side as if he was thinking about something. “Hating women is your flaw?” Shang Jianyao did not use the word ‘price.’ Instead, he used the term ‘flaw,’ which ordinary people often used to describe mechanical monks.

Jingfa didn’t lie and replied truthfully, “No, the price I pay is increased lust. I originally imagined that I could obtain peace and be unaffected after I transmitted my consciousness to the bionic robot chip. However, that wasn’t the case.”

Shang Jianyao looked enlightened. “I thought you couldn’t lie.”

“Not lying is a precept of the conclave.” Jingfa answered all of Shang Jianyao’s questions. “Either way, all of you will be liberated. It doesn’t matter if you know.”

Shang Jianyao closed the jeep’s door and curiously asked, “What was that ability?”

“Hungry Ghost Realm of the Six Realms of Rebirth and Existence—Samsara.” Jingfa’s red eyes looked at Bai Chen. “Drive; keep going straight.”

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao and Jingfa’s conversation, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen felt an indescribable sense of absurdity.

The mechanical monk clearly held them hostage and wanted to kill them somewhere, but Shang Jianyao and Jingfa were acting like good friends that had not met in years.

Just as Bai Chen stepped on the accelerator, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Haha, I understand! You hate women because your current body makes it impossible for you to satisfy yourself. Your attempt to escape by uploading your consciousness ended up magnifying your flaws infinitely! Your mental state has already warped. Only physical violence can provide you with a certain level of relief! Haha, doesn’t your conclave preach purity? Yet, a monk like you has such a tainted heart!”

Jingfa—who was forcefully suppressing his fluctuating consciousness—immediately lost control. His eyes lit up as his body leaned forward. He was just about to pounce on Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—and launch an attack at her.

Jiang Baimian did not dodge. Instead, she took the initiative to meet him. She flicked her left arm and gripped Jingfa’s black metal neck. Her left index finger extended as if she was prepared. With a slightly silvery-white electric current, Jiang Baimian inserted something into a hole in the robot monk’s neck.

It was a 'tool' attached to the electric eel-like biomechanical limb. It had components that could connect chips, circuits, and sensors. It could also be used to read the data of computer-related objects and crack certain firewalls!

Apart from having a human consciousness, the mechanical monk was essentially an artificial intelligence robot.

Chapter 39: Waving Goodbye

After Jiang Baimian inserted her left index finger into the hole in Jingfa's neck, the mechanical monk's metal body froze in the passenger seat as if he had lost his energy source.

At the same time, Bai Chen released her right foot from the accelerator and fell to the side, attempting to pick up the grenade launcher on Jiang Baimian's lap.

Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao reacted almost simultaneously.

Long Yuehong quickly raised the Berserker assault rifle he carried and aimed it at the back of Jingfa's head.

Shang Jianyao leaned forward slightly, and his eyes suddenly turned dark. "Zen Master, look..."

Just as he said those words, he saw Jiang Baimian's body suddenly collapse into the passenger seat.

Her left hand hung from Jingfa's neck limply. Her eyes were filled with confusion as she muttered strange words. "Who am I... What am I doing here...?"

Slap!

Jingfa's body returned to normal. He pressed down, stretched his left hand forward, and gripped Bai Chen's neck tightly, preventing her from picking up the grenade launcher.

Clang! Clang!

Long Yuehong's bullets accurately hit the back of Jingfa's head, but it only produced sparks and two small depressions. Not only that, but the ricocheting bullets almost hit Long Yuehong's face. They scraped the jeep's quarter glass and flew out the window.

Shang Jianyao's pupils dilated when he saw this, but he still quickly said the words he had prepared. "You have human consciousness, and so do I."

Jingfa placed one knee on the armrest compartment and clasped Bai Chen's neck as he turned his head to look at Shang Jianyao. Perhaps it was because Shang Jianyao

had been asking questions and conversing with him in a friendly manner, or perhaps it was because Shang Jianyao was not a woman, but the mechanical monk did not stop him immediately and only stared at Shang Jianyao with his bright red eyes.

Shang Jianyao quickly said, “You are an Awakened, and so am I. So...”

Long Yuehong turned his head in surprise, and the confusion in Jiang Baimian’s eyes vanished a little.

The red glow in Jingfa’s eyes rapidly flickered for a while before quickly returning to normal. His cold, emotionless voice hesitantly sounded. “So, we should get along?”

“Yes!” Shang Jianyao nodded heavily.

Jingfa hesitated for two seconds before he finally let go of Bai Chen’s neck.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian seemed to have escaped her strange state from before. She then sized Shang Jianyao and Jingfa up in surprise and confusion. Just as she was about to pick up the grenade launcher quietly—ignoring whether the explosion would affect them—she saw Shang Jianyao shake his head twice.

Jiang Baimian seemed to have understood something and released her grip on the grenade launcher. At the same time, she tightly shut her mouth and didn’t make a sound so as not to divert Jingfa’s attention.

During this process, she placed her right index finger vertically by her mouth, indicating for Bai Chen not to do anything.

Shang Jianyao kept looking at Jingfa as he sincerely said, “Zen Master, we appreciate your kindness. Farewells are inevitable. Why don’t we part here?”

Jingfa thought for a moment and shook his head up and down. “Alright.”

Shang Jianyao immediately turned his body to the side and opened the car door. He then walked down and made way.

Jingfa didn’t stay any longer and quickly exited the jeep.

Long Yuehong’s mouth remained agape the entire time as if he were dreaming. This is too strange and absurd!

Jingfa—who had alighted from the car—was just about to press his palms together when Shang Jianyao stretched out his right hand first.

Jingfa hesitated for a second before extending his right palm.

A flesh-colored human palm and a gigantic palm formed from a black metal skeleton held each other.

Shang Jianyao gently rocked his palm twice and retracted it. He then sat back in the jeep's backseat and closed the door.

When Shang Jianyao saw that the mechanical monk, Jingfa, remained standing there without moving, he raised his right hand and waved it from side to side through the open window. "Goodbye!" he shouted sincerely.

Jingfa—who was wearing a monk robe and a kasaya—quickly replied and waved his hand. "Goodbye." Nôv(e)B\jnn

Without Shang Jianyao's reminder, Bai Chen—who had already returned to the driver's seat—stepped on the accelerator and let the jeep speed up.

Jiang Baimian didn't say a word, nor did she allow Bai Chen to make a sound. She only watched the mechanical monk in the rearview mirror—who was wearing a yellow monk robe and a red kasaya—grow smaller as they traveled further away.

After she could no longer see this abnormally terrifying member of the Monk Conclave, Jiang Baimian did the math to calculate the distance and asked with a suppressed voice, "How long can this effect last?"

Shang Jianyao didn't hold back anything and frankly replied, "If the people, matters, and environment around him constantly instill the same answer in him, he will never be able to sense it until he discovers the opposite argument or result.

"However, there's nobody or anything around him who can tell him that we're friendly. Therefore, there's no way to maintain the loop of corroboration. He should be able to sense something amiss in five minutes or less. After all, he must remember that there are two women in our team. He also knows very well how he treats women."

Long Yuehong's mouth was still agape. Listening to Shang Jianyao's explanation was like listening to a radio host tell a story.

Jiang Baimian didn't waste her breath and immediately turned her head. "Bai Chen, stop the car. We'll change seats."

"Team Leader, I'm more familiar with the Blackmarsh Wilderness." Bai Chen tried to reason with Jiang Baimian as she gently stepped on the brakes without any resistance.

Jiang Baimian was in no rush to explain. She opened the door first, went to the driver's seat, and swapped seats with Bai Chen.

After the jeep started moving again, she looked ahead and said, "I've undergone genetic modification and obtained some unique abilities."

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao were all stunned when they heard this. Even within Pangu Biology, genetic modification technology was far from mature. The failure rate was rather high, so nobody was willing to try it unless they really had no choice.

"The genetic modification was conducted to save my life back then. It was done together with the biological limb transplant." Jiang Baimian quickly explained everything. "I have a special cell in my body that can sense electric field signals within a certain range. When humans and beasts move, their muscle contractions and certain reactions will produce weak electric signals. Therefore, I can easily discover the enemy's location and condition as long as they are within a certain range, regardless of whether they are hiding or not."

"No wonder you sensed the Ruin Hunter in an exoskeleton device coming over earlier than me..." Bai Chen came to a realization.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong immediately had one of their earlier questions answered.

During their first night out, Shang Jianyao had clearly discovered traces of humans. However, Jiang Baimian was not curious at all, nor did she order them to search the surroundings. She should have long grasped the human's characteristics and condition and made a judgment back then.

While driving, Jiang Baimian quickly continued, "The Blackmarsh Iron Snake was in a hibernation-like state back then. The electric signal it produced was very weak, so I thought it was just an ordinary animal. This was why I didn't discover it in advance.

"However, Jingfa is a mechanical monk. A mechanical monk's physical activity relies on very strong electric signals. Hence, I could sense him from a further distance and determine what he was up to. I was actually prepared for this attack. I deliberately made Bai Chen slow down to incite him into attacking, hoping to take the opportunity to destroy him or seriously injure him.

"Previously, I didn't tell you that Jingfa has always been a persistent mechanical monk. If you are targeted by him, he will definitely chase you all the way. However, this would've been too dangerous. The best way is to hurt him and make him lose the ability to chase after us for a short period of time. Unfortunately, I never imagined that he would be an Awakened. A mechanical monk—who is also an Awakened at the same time—might have killed us all.

"I need to apologize for that. Jingfa will definitely attempt to launch a long-range attack when he chases after us. I'm the only one here who can sense it in advance and get the

vehicle to make evasive maneuvers in time. Yes, it will definitely be too late if I provide verbal guidance.”

Bai Chen nodded in understanding. “I’ll pay attention to the road ahead and our surroundings. I’ll tell you which direction you can’t go in advance. How about using clock positions as a substitute?”

There were five bloody finger marks on the back of Bai Chen’s neck. It was quite harrowing.

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian slowed down and let the jeep smoothly bypass an obstacle. At the same time, she looked in the rearview mirror and said, “Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, quickly decide on who will wear the exoskeleton. The person wearing the exoskeleton will be the main force in resisting Jingfa.”

Before Long Yuehong could speak, Shang Jianyao firmly said, “Let me do it.” He looked at Long Yuehong—who was about to argue—and simply explained his reasons. “Jingfa is also an Awakened. You can’t be on par with him in this regard. I need the exoskeleton to help me narrow the distance.”

“...Alright.” Long Yuehong stood up and bent down. Together with Shang Jianyao, they dragged the exoskeleton from the trunk to their seat.

He then helped Shang Jianyao wear it.

“Remember to change it to the high-performance battery in the trunk,” Jiang Baimian reminded them.

Very few large factions could produce real high-performance batteries; currently, only the Orange Company and the Future Intelligence Company could produce them. The other factions could, at most, produce some inferior imitations—which were only suitable for civilian use that did not venture beyond the faction’s sphere of influence.

Therefore, the high-performance batteries for many different types of military equipment were compatible—with a 50% chance of success. The Old Task Force was rather lucky this time. The high-performance batteries needed for the jeep and the high-performance batteries for the military exoskeleton were standard items produced by the Future Intelligence Company.

“Okay.” Shang Jianyao didn’t dare be careless in this regard.

After changing the batteries, Shang Jianyao wore the powerpack and metal exoskeleton. Then, as he bent down to button the auxiliary joint clasps, he asked, “Team Leader, why did you suddenly fail when you hacked into Jingfa’s internal system?” Shang Jianyao suspected that it was one of Jingfa’s abilities as an Awakened.

He currently knew about two of Jingfa's abilities—Hungry Ghost Realm and mind-reading.

Chapter 40: Pursuit

Jiang Baimian was very busy. On the one hand, she had to focus on the road, afraid that she would drive the jeep into a swamp or cause the vehicle to be overturned by rocks, roots, and other obstacles. On the other hand, she had to focus on sensing the various electric signals around her to determine if the mechanical monk, Jingfa, was rushing over or what his current condition was like.

However, this did not stop her from thinking. Her brain seemed to have been optimized due to genetic enhancements.

"That moment..." Jiang Baimian pondered before answering, but her voice was louder than a normal person's. "I was in a very strange state. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to do. Uh... It wasn't that there was a problem with my memories. Back then, I could recall many things that had happened, but I couldn't obtain information on who I was or what I wanted to do."

At this point, Jiang Baimian habitually self-reflected. "I thought that Jingfa would be unable to use his Awakened abilities by affecting his body. However, I made a mistake... Is this the difference between a mechanical monk and an ordinary human?"

Bai Chen shook her head. "This has nothing to do with a misjudgment. Back then, you were desperately counterattacking. You had no way of considering so much at the time."

After Shang Jianyao buttoned up the clasps at his legs, he looked up and said, "Awakened abilities mostly and probably rely on their consciousness and the influence that their bodies exert on them. For example, by injuring an Awakened's body and causing them intense pain, they will not be able to think or shift their consciousness into what needs focus. In that case, they won't be able to use their abilities..."

As he spoke, Shang Jianyao suddenly fell silent as if he had realized that this could be used against him. Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and the others to speak, he took a deep breath and continued. "Similarly, if one can knock out an Awakened with one punch, the Awakened will definitely not be able to use their abilities."

After giving an example, Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and agreed with Jiang Baimian's previous judgment. "In this regard, mechanical monks are indeed different from ordinary humans."

Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. "Unfortunately, my 'golden finger' isn't too strong. If I could quickly hack into Jingfa's energy supply system and turn off his power source, he probably wouldn't be able to use his Awakened abilities either. Actually, that

might not work either. Who knows how long an Eternal's consciousness can remain conscious after freeing itself from the bionic chip's control.

"Ha, you guys have to be careful too. You can't be too confident. Without solid evidence, it's best to have more doubts about your judgment."

Bai Chen was a little stunned when she heard that. She turned her head to glance at Jiang Baimian. "Team Leader, you seem to be in good shape. You don't seem depressed at all."

After all, they were currently being pursued by a terrifying mechanical monk. They should have been tense, repressed, angry, depressed, and uneasy.

"The current situation is much better than when Jingfa captured us. Shouldn't we be happy and joyful?" Jiang Baimian remained focused on her surroundings. "If it weren't for Shang Jianyao, I wouldn't have been able to escape his control. I really would've ended up in the hands of that psychopath. My fate would have been tragic—very tragic. Although I've never seen the female corpses Jingfa killed, I've heard someone describe them..."

When this matter was mentioned, Jiang Baimian—who had always been rather optimistic—couldn't help but let her expression be clouded by gloominess. She did not start a lecture because she was worried that it would affect Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong's conditions.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already finished wearing the military exoskeleton. His lips quivered a few times before he finally opened them. "Normally speaking, an Awakened only has three abilities."

Jiang Baimian turned the steering wheel and let the jeep circle a tree that stood in the middle of the road. "Three... Jingfa has one that makes me unsure of who I am... Then there is Hungry Ghost Realm... Anything else?"

Long Yuehong—who was listening quietly—immediately thought of an answer. "Mind-reading! Jingfa told us that he can mind-read and that he can hear some of a person's thoughts."

Jiang Baimian muttered to herself as she drove, "We've figured out all three abilities... Perhaps we can consider it from this angle and find an ingenious method to deal with Jingfa. Ah yes, there should be a limit to an Awakened's abilities..."

She had been musing to herself very loudly, so everyone could hear her clearly.

Shang Jianyao thoughtfully replied, "Jingfa was within a meter of us when he used his mind-reading and cognitive dissonance abilities. It's impossible to determine what his maximum range is."

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment before smiling. “However, it’s not like we can’t make a preliminary judgment. When he pounced at us from a tree in the distance, he chose to use Hungry Ghost Realm.

“This choice itself implies some problems. Either the range of the ability to make a person suffer cognitive dissonance is far inferior to the Hungry Ghost Realm, or it can only be used against one person. In contrast, the Hungry Ghost Realm can affect everyone in a specific area.”

Bai Chen recalled her experience and said, “I have an impression of that. When I discovered the hungry ghosts around me, it was shortly after Jingfa pounced at us from the tree. He was about 20 meters away from us, or perhaps a little more.”

She clearly knew more about the teachings, stories, and legends of the Monk Conclave than Jiang Baimian.

“Yes, you need to remember that the Hungry Ghost Realm’s effective range is at least 20 meters.” Jiang Baimian raised her voice slightly.

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before saying, “He’s better than me.”

“I don’t know how many times older he is than you. He probably has also been an Awakened for years,” Jiang Baimian consoled him.

Jiang Baimian had no way of knowing when Jingfa had become an Awakened. She could only determine that Jingfa had transferred his consciousness into a bionic robot chip, becoming an Eternal, after he had become an Awakened. Jingfa became rather active as a mechanical monk in the late Chaotic Era, before the establishment of the New Calendar.

At this moment, Long Yuehong seemed to accept the truth. His good friend—Shang Jianyao, who he had grown up with—was actually an Awakened with strange and terrifying abilities! He felt that he would never forget the scene he had just seen in his life.

Jingfa—who was originally filled with killing intent and had a firm will—suddenly became extremely friendly after hearing Shang Jianyao’s two sentences. He even shook Shang Jianyao’s hand and bade him farewell reluctantly. Nôv(ē)B\jnn

This overturned everything Long Yuehong knew.

He looked at Shang Jianyao and couldn’t help but ask, “W-when did you become an Awakened?”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before saying, “Not long ago.”

Long Yuehong wanted to ask something else, but he suddenly felt that it wasn't a good idea. It was like poking into someone else's secrets.

In the jeep, nobody spoke for a moment.

Jiang Baimian broke the silence. She looked ahead and smiled. "Do you need us to keep this a secret?"

"Thank you." Shang Jianyao slowly exhaled.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong expressed that they would definitely keep it a secret.

Shang Jianyao was just about to say something when he saw Jiang Baimian's expression suddenly changing slightly. At the same time, Jiang Baimian abruptly turned the steering wheel and made the jeep take a large turn.

Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong couldn't help but lean to the right in the car, even though they were all wearing seatbelts.

A grenade flew past and landed where they were supposed to pass.

Boom!

Blazing flames bloomed as a violent shockwave made the ground tremble.

After the jeep turned a corner, Jiang Baimian floored the accelerator, making the vehicle shoot forward like an arrow.

A red laser drilled into and melted the ground with a sizzling sound, forming a bottomless hole.

"Eleven o'clock." Bai Chen seized the opportunity to inform Jiang Baimian which direction she couldn't go in using the hands of a clock. Otherwise, the car would sink into the swamp slowly.

Jiang Baimian was very familiar with such lingo. Without needing to do any conversions, she turned the steering wheel. Then, she shouted, "Shang Jianyao!"

Shang Jianyao took an indiscernible breath and suddenly opened the dashing jeep's door. His body tilted and rolled down.

With the jeep's current speed, it was inevitable that he would be injured if he did this under normal circumstances. However, he was currently wearing a military-grade exoskeleton.

With a push of his arm, Shang Jianyao easily jumped up and ran towards the source of the grenade and the laser in a zig-zag fashion. He did not bring an assault rifle or a submachine gun because they were useless against the mechanical monk. He could only rely on the grenade launcher and electromagnetic weapon that came with the exoskeleton.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

As he ran without regard for energy, Shang Jianyao saw the iron-black robot wearing a tattered monk robe and a red kasaya through the crystal goggles on his metal helmet.

However, Jingfa turned around and ran the next second. He circled Shang Jianyao and gradually increased the distance between them using the exoskeleton's lack of reaction speed and fluidity that was inferior to a robot's.

After a short pursuit, Shang Jianyao lost track of the mechanical monk. The exoskeleton's comprehensive warning system did not detect anything either. It was clear that the other party had an anti-warning capability.

Unable to continue chasing, Shang Jianyao had no choice but to return the way he came. He relied on the traces of the jeep's wheels to find Jiang Baimian and the others. Then, without letting the jeep stop, he opened the door and got in.

On the way back, Shang Jianyao deliberately destroyed the wheel tracks and forged traces in other directions, hoping to interfere with Jingfa's judgment.

"He's hiding from me." Shang Jianyao briefly explained the situation after closing the door.

"He's afraid of you? Does your ability counter him?" Long Yuehong subconsciously voiced his thoughts.

"No, the range of his abilities is greater." Shang Jianyao didn't avoid the question.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly and was about to speak when she suddenly turned the steering wheel.

Boom!

Jingfa's long-range attack came again!

However, Jingfa took the initiative to retreat and widen the distance when Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—alighted and ran over, not giving Shang Jianyao a chance to fight.

Once, twice, thrice... Similar situations happened at different intervals.

“What is he trying to do?” Long Yuehong also realized the problem.

Jiang Baimian curled her lips and said, “Maybe he brought along quite a number of high-performance batteries. Maybe he feels that there’s a chance of exhausting our exoskeleton’s energy. He sure is patient...”

Long Yuehong reflexively said, “However, he can’t carry that many grenades.”

Bai Chen looked at the rearview mirror and said, “He has only been using his laser weapon the past few times.”

Long Yuehong was a little worried. “Then what should we do?”