

Ad Infinitum 331

Chapter 331: Sudden News

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian's words, Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little scared and quickly asked, "Who is it from?"

Apart from the company and Genava, who else would send a telegram to the Old Task Force?

Jiang Baimian held the piece of paper and smiled. "Lehman—United Industries's arms dealer, Lehman."

"Lars's lover?" Long Yuehong asked in enlightenment. Compared to Lehman, Lars—whose body was occupied by DiMarco—left a deeper impression on him.

"Yes. He's also a pitiful person." Jiang Baimian sighed. "But this doesn't stop him from being an unscrupulous merchant at the same time. He said that he has already obtained an AC-45 military exoskeleton and a T1 multi-purpose mechanical arm and has asked us if we wanted them."

"Yes!" Shang Jianyao eagerly replied. As he spoke, he raised his left hand.

Long Yuehong suddenly considered a minor problem. "Another military exoskeleton won't fit the car."

In order to stuff the two military exoskeletons into the jeep's trunk, they had already transferred some of the food to the backseat.

Of course, with the long journey and the expenditure of supplies, the space in the jeep's backseat was finally freed up, allowing space for Genava to squeeze in.

"We'll get another car when the time comes. Which is rarer, a car or a military exoskeleton?" Jiang Baimian asked a soul-searching question.

"That's true." Long Yuehong finally came to a realization.

Bai Chen echoed, "If it really doesn't work out, let Genava sit while carrying it."

A smart bot wouldn't feel tired or uncomfortable because of this.

Jiang Baimian chuckled and looked at Bai Chen. "I thought you would feel sorry for the robot."

She remembered that Bai Chen had said that she used to have a robot that she was interdependent on.

"Everyone should do what they have to do," Bai Chen replied simply.

Jiang Baimian didn't say anything else. She drafted a manuscript, translated it into a code, and sent a telegram back to Lehman.

After doing so, she turned to Shang Jianyao and the others. "I got him to bring those two items to First City for the transaction. If he replies that it's undoable, we'll let him go to Redstone Collection in four to five months. I hope we can complete the main mission by then."

With the Old Task Force already having two military exoskeletons, there was no rush for a third.

Lehman quickly replied to the telegram. The content was very simple: "Sure, I'll contact you in two weeks."

After Jiang Baimian translated it, she casually sighed with emotion. "It seems like he has connections in First City."

"United Industries is south of First City," Bai Chen calmly pointed out.

Upon seeing that the matter had progressed smoothly, Long Yuehong couldn't help but imagine the Old Task Force's final form.

Three military exoskeletons, an electric eel-like biomechanical limb, a T1 multi-purpose mechanical arm, an Awakened with a range of 30 meters, a Mechanical Paradise smart bot, and a night pearl that provided strange abilities. All of these added together could be said to be beyond standard.

Many Pangu Biology military companies had never fought wars with such affluence!

Although this wasn't considered strong in a head-on battle between large factions, as a special operations team, they were equipped to complete many difficult missions.

At this thought, Long Yuehong suddenly realized a problem. "What do we use to exchange for them?"

Lehman provided the means to purchase the goods, not the goods themselves.

"We helped him bury Lars." Shang Jianyao seemed to think that this was very meaningful to Lehman.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "Isn't there still some time? We can first complete the Zhao family's mission and receive a generous payment. In the meantime, we can also try to raise it from other places. If it really doesn't work out, we can inform the company and get them to arrange for First City's intelligence personnel to provide the supplies. I'll be surprised if the company doesn't want it!"

Although the Old Task Force wouldn't obtain the items when the time came, they would at least accumulate contribution points. It wouldn't be a wasted effort.

Upon seeing his team leader's smile, Long Yuehong suddenly came to a realization: It's best not to provoke this woman for the rest of my life.

Jiang Baimian waited for a while longer. When they didn't receive any new telegrams, she stood up and said, "Alright, use the time to shower."

"I'll boil the water." Bai Chen walked to the door.

They had already missed the time to receive hot water from the empty walls that were connected to the stove. They could only draw water up and boil it with electricity.

Fortunately, it was spring, and water was relatively sufficient. Weed City's electricity supply wasn't that tight, and the electricity wouldn't stop until 10 p.m.

While waiting for the water to boil, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao—who was looking out the window. “What are you thinking about?”

“I’m wondering if I should meet my good brother, Xu Liyan,” Shang Jianyao said truthfully.

Jiang Baimian scoffed. “How can Xu Liyan not know that we’ve returned to Weed City after what Zhao Zhengqi did in the evening? If he wants to catch up with you, he will naturally send someone to invite us tomorrow.”

If he didn’t want to, he would pretend not to know of their arrival.

Shang Jianyao’s Inference Clowning effect was completely dispelled around the end of the year.

Shang Jianyao nodded and sighed. “I also didn’t see my sworn brother, Ferlin, this time.”

After spring, the Rootless embarked on a journey that was without destination. Only the car tracks recorded their previous visit.

As they conversed, Bai Chen finished boiling the water and adjusting the temperature.

As the laborer, she enjoyed the first bath.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong moved the conversation outside the bathroom.

Before long, Bai Chen came out, and Jiang Baimian took her place.

At this moment, the wooden door to a nearby room opened. A thin, stocky, and swarthy man then walked out.

He was less than 1.7 meters tall and was in his thirties. He wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt with traces of sewing and a pair of dark-blue canvas pants with many patches.

After glancing at Shang Jianyao and the others, the man pointed at the bathroom. “Is someone showering?”

“You’ll have to line up.” Shang Jianyao pointed at himself and Long Yuehong.

“I thought I didn’t have to wait after missing peak hour.” The man sighed, and as if they were familiar with each other, asked, “Are you new residents? I don’t recall seeing you.”

Without Jiang Baimian’s suppression, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen couldn’t compete with Shang Jianyao. They could only listen to him speak with a laugh.

“Do you believe that a dozen or two neighbors will come out and chat with us when I casually shout out?”

This is a friendship that we built by fighting side by side... Long Yuehong added inwardly.

The man smiled apologetically. “I just moved in a few days ago. Maybe you guys happened to be out.”

“Are you a Ruin Hunter from the Blackmarsh Wilderness?” Bai Chen asked. This was her judgment based on the other party’s Ashlandic accent.

The man nodded. “I wanted to get some rest while passing by Weed City. Oh right, how should I address you? Are you Ruin Hunters as well?”

“Zhang Qubing.” Shang Jianyao seriously introduced his fake name.

“Qian Bai.”

“Gu Zhiyong.”

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong replied.

The man smiled and pointed at himself. “Wang Fugui, a Senior Hunter.”

Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong casually introduced their ranks as well.

One was an Intermediate Hunter, and the other two were Official Hunters.

Wang Fugui didn't show any signs of disdain and casually said, "There's a big mission recently that can earn you a lot of credits."

"What mission?" Shang Jianyao was very curious.

"A legendary white wolf appeared in the mountains on the north bank of the Red River. Any human who encounters it will be amazed by its beauty and be impressed by its charm. They will leave with it and never return. A noble in First City seems to have been mesmerized by it and went to the guild to offer a bounty to capture it." Wang Fugui described the mission he had seen.

"Is that so?" Shang Jianyao listened very seriously.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen thought of a certain matter and person.

Wang Fugui laughed. "That's what the mission said. I don't know if it's true or not, so I can only trust the guild. In any case, I'll set off for First City after resting for a few more days. I'll enter the mountain from that side. To be honest, I'm also quite curious. How charming can a wolf be?"

At this moment, Jiang Baimian walked out of the bathroom while wiping her hair.

"This is?" She glanced at Wang Fugui.

Wang Fugui suddenly became serious. "A Senior Hunter who lives here, Wang Fugui."

Jiang Baimian smiled and casually asked, "What were you guys talking about?"

Bai Chen repeated the conversation while mentioning the key points.

Jiang Baimian maintained her smile and said to Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, “Who wants to shower first?”

“Me!” Shang Jianyao rushed forward.

“Then, we’ll return to our rooms first.” Jiang Baimian signaled to Long Yuehong and Bai Chen with her eyes.

After watching them walk to the end of the aisle, Wang Fugui stroked his chin and muttered to himself, “They’ve undergone genetic enhancement?”

After returning to her room, Jiang Baimian closed the door and turned to Long Yuehong and Bai Chen. “Does it ring a bell?”

Long Yuehong replied in a deep voice, “Qiao Chu! That wolf’s situation is very similar to Qiao Chu’s.”

Chapter 332: Morning Bell

To the Old Task Force, the name Qiao Chu not only represented a military exoskeleton, but it also symbolized their past weakness and powerlessness.

It was the first time they had encountered the danger of being unable to fight back. They had barely escaped his control through various fortuitous encounters.

If anything had gone wrong, they would’ve been wiped out. Therefore, even Long Yuehong—who didn’t bear grudges—had beef with Qiao Chu.

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded. “That wolf might very well be in a situation of ‘uncontrollable charm.’ However, we can’t be sure if this is the price it paid for its Awakening or an ability obtained from mutation.”

“Just like the Nightmare Horse and Ghost Cat from before.” Bai Chen also had a deep impression of Xiaochong’s ‘pets.’

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “Forget it. There’s no need for us to join in the fun. We’ll just sell a piece of information to the guild later. Let’s hope that it helps the hunters who accepted the mission.”

“This can also raise some supplies to exchange for the mechanical arm and exoskeleton.” Long Yuehong found the idea of selling information excellent.

Jiang Baimian replied with a grin, “Actually, with the information we have, it will be easy for us to exchange for the mechanical arm and exoskeleton if we really divulge everything. However, the company won’t let us off for that.”

As they chatted, Shang Jianyao returned from his shower, and it was Long Yuehong’s turn.

As they were exhausted from their traveling, they didn’t wait for lights out in Weed City’s residential area before going to bed in the darkness.

In the silence that seemed to ebb slowly, Jiang Baimian suddenly sighed. “I hope the trip to First City will end well.”

Shang Jianyao—who was on the upper bunk—replied, “I’m calculating how many people in First City owe us a feast. Bai Xiao, Lin Tong’s team, Oudick, and Han Wanghuo...”

Jiang Baimian decided to close her eyes and pretend to be asleep.

...

At 7 a.m. the next day, the sky lit up, and the entire city was revived once again.

While walking on South Street, Long Yuehong looked around and said in surprise, “Why aren’t many breakfast shops open?”

He remembered that although it was winter the last time they came, there were many shops that sold breakfast here. Their business was pretty good, and it could even be considered popular. After all, most Ruin Hunters didn’t have a home here and only rented rooms for a short period of time. They couldn’t cook and could only buy food on the streets.

The dry and coarse but cheap cornbread matched with 1 Cass per cup of warm water was their favorite.

But today, apart from the three to four breakfast shops doing business, the rest were closed. Even the ones selling breakfast had average business.

It was understandable if the streets were deserted and pedestrians were few. However, Long Yuehong swept his gaze and saw a large number of Ruin Hunters in tattered clothes gathering at Central Square as if they were waiting for something.

Bai Chen was also a little puzzled. "Usually, breakfast business is very good during this season."

Ruin Hunters in the surrounding area would gather in Weed City.

Shang Jianyao looked at Central Square with an eager expression. "There might be something interesting happening."

"Yes, let's go take a look." Jiang Baimian was in no rush to have breakfast.

They walked along a street that could only accommodate two side-by-side cars. They trod on green or grayish-white stone bricks and walked to Central Square among four to five-storey buildings with eaves and arches.

Before they really approached, they heard a bell gong.

The bell echoed in Weed City in the early morning. It was long and ethereal as if it could cleanse everyone's hearts.

Clang!

Clang!

The bell rang another two more times as the Ruin Hunters and local residents of South Street rushed to Central Square. Most of them held all kinds of lunch boxes and large bowls made of various materials.

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen became increasingly puzzled.

Shang Jianyao quickened his pace and entered the crowd.

They soon arrived at Central Square. What greeted their noses was the complex smells that would inevitably arise when there were many people.

It had to be known that many Ruin Hunters often didn't shower for two to three weeks. Some had already developed such habits.

After all, apart from Weed City and Redstone Collection—which occupied relatively abundant water sources—many settlements would occasionally use polluted water sources to survive.

It was also because of this that the Water Conservation Committee or similar institutions had a high status in many factions.

After getting used to the environment, Long Yuehong took in a whiff of the fragrance of the porridge cooked from rice.

At this moment, a voice with obvious electronic artificialness echoed in the square. “Patrons, please line up.”

Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up as he shouted, “Which Zen Master is it?”

Nobody paid him any attention.

Most people in Central Square seemed to have sufficient experience. It didn't take long for a long and neat line to form.

The crowd circled the square a few times, allowing Jiang Baimian and the others to see the situation where the sound came from.

At the intersection of the municipal square and the building where the library was, a grayish-white water tower stood proudly.

Under the water tower was a wooden frame with an iron-black bell hanging from it.

A robot in a yellow monk robe and a red kasaya stood on the wooden platform. He held a bell mallet and faced the crowd as he chanted, “Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti. Patrons, please listen to This Penniless Monk. Everything is illusory, but consciousness is real. All reality a phantom, and all phantoms real...”

On the side of the mechanical monk’s wooden platform were several iron pots. Each pot contained simmering porridge that wasn’t too thin.

Near the iron pots was a table. On it were white or yellow buns and stacked medium-sized bowls.

The gathered people lined up in an orderly manner. As they listened to the scriptures, they waited for the mechanical monk’s human servants to scoop them a spoonful of porridge and give them two buns.

“Xu Liyan fulfilled his promise to the Monks Conclave...” Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion as she came to a realization.

The promise was to allow the Monks Conclave’s mechanical monks—who didn’t lose control easily—to preach at Weed City.

Long Yuehong curiously asked a passerby who passed by him, “How often does this happen?”

“It’s now once a month. It’s said that there are two additional Buddhist festivals a year,” the passerby quickly replied.

He didn’t want to delay the line.

When the time came, the porridge and buns might run out.

“How extravagant.” Long Yuehong sighed.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “The Monks Conclave don’t have to eat porridge or steamed buns. It’s quite a good solution for the food they exchanged for.”

As the Old Task Force spoke, a person sized them up from the library's entrance. This person was in his twenties and had some Red River lineage. He had relatively deep facial features and was none other than Weed City's Castellan, Xu Liyan.

He wasn't dressed formally today, making himself look like an ordinary citizen. However, he didn't have any clothes that had traces of sewing, making him look a little different.

Xu Liyan did so because he wanted to visit Pangu Biology's four-person team in a friendly manner. But before he could implement this plan, he discovered Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others in the square.

This team is powerful and has special abilities. I don't know what they are doing to return to Weed City. I can only build a relationship with them first. It'll be easier to talk to them when the time comes... Xu Liyan muttered to himself silently. He straightened his clothes and signaled to the bodyguards around him.

At this moment, he saw Shang Jianyao take out a lunch box from his tactical backpack and rush to the end of the line.

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen followed closely behind.

"..." Xu Liyan suddenly wondered if he had recognized the wrong people. If he hadn't experienced it himself, there was no way he would've believed that the four people in front of him were powerful figures judging from what the Qian Bai Team was doing.

With your abilities, why line up for such free food... Xu Liyan exhaled and walked over. When he approached, he had a smile on his face.

Before he could greet him, Shang Jianyao had already seen the other. He pointed in front of him in surprise, joy, and excitement and shouted, "Here, here!"

Xu Liyan was stunned for a second before awkwardly shuffling his feet and cutting in line under everyone's gazes.

His bodyguards quietly scattered around and dutifully completed their missions. Among them were the two Awakened Xu Liyan hired with a large sum of money.

Xu Liyan calmed down and pretended to complain. “When did you guys come? Why didn’t you look for me?”

Jiang Baimian—who was behind Shang Jianyao—smiled first. “We’re just passing by. We won’t be staying for long.”

“Is that so...” Xu Liyan secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

After chatting for a while, as the crowd kept moving forward, Xu Liyan casually asked, “Why did Uncle Zhao look for you yesterday?”

Chapter 333: Lining Up

Jiang Baimian wasn’t surprised by Xu Liyan’s question at all. She laughed inwardly and said, “Councilor Zhao had some problems in the manors he has outside First City and wants us to resolve them.”

Shang Jianyao helped by adding, “I don’t know what’s wrong, but it sounds very bizarre.”

Although he had always felt that Zhang Qubing was a pure lunatic, Xu Liyan miraculously believed that he wouldn’t lie to him about such matters because this fellow was very proper. Therefore, he felt relieved and asked, “It’s not like you rely on the Ruin Hunter occupation for a living. Why do you need to take on missions?”

Jiang Baimian knew that Xu Liyan was trying to get information out of her by beating around the bush, so she explained simply, “We just want to earn some extra money in passing.”

This was the truth.

In the beginning, the Old Task Force only wanted to get an additional sum of money for their activities in First City and make use of the Zhao family’s connections there. It could barely be considered as making some extra money on the side. Lehman’s telegram had prompted them to earn extra money.

“In passing? Do you want to go to First City?” Xu Liyan asked thoughtfully.

“No,” Jiang Baimian replied before Shang Jianyao could. Without changing her expression, she said, “Didn’t a white wolf with strange abilities appear in the mountains on the north bank of the Red River? The one that can bewitch humans. As you know, our company mainly studies biological creatures. With such a sample appearing, how can we let it go?”

Her words implied that they were targeting the white wolf, but in fact, she didn’t spell it out.

Is Pangu Biology interested in the white wolf? It has to be!

After receiving the Old Task Force’s telegram and knowing that such a thing had happened, would Pangu Biology send a team to attempt capturing it? Definitely!

But what does the team they send have to do with the Old Task Force?

Long Yuehong was stunned when he heard that while standing behind Bai Chen. He felt that if he switched positions with Xu Liyan, he would also be misled in that direction.

What a scam... If we didn’t hear about the white wolf last night, what excuse would Team Leader come up with? No, what reason? Yes, we can’t reveal our plan to go to First City to Xu Liyan. Although he has already secretly cooperated with the company, he still hasn’t left First City’s sphere of influence and is inextricably linked to them... Long Yuehong glanced at Xu Liyan—who revealed a look of enlightenment—and muttered inwardly to express his sympathy.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian’s left hand secretly gripped the back of Shang Jianyao’s clothes, hinting at him not to spout nonsense and undermine her.

“I’ve heard of that mission.” Xu Liyan nodded and said, “My two consultants and Zen Master Jingnian agree that the white wolf is very dangerous. Even if an Advanced Hunter takes action, they might lose their lives if they aren’t careful. Haha, but with your team’s strength, it won’t be a problem.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t want to continue the topic and tugged at Shang Jianyao, hinting at him to use his unconstrained train of thought to change the topic.

Shang Jianyao asked a question he had previously asked. “Which Zen Master is giving the sermon now? Why do I feel that mechanical monks look the same and wear similar clothes? Can’t they

learn from smart bots and have some characteristics to stand out for themselves? For example, they can sharpen their metal chins a little. They could even use it as a weapon in close combat...”

He expressed his opinion incessantly.

Bai Chen agreed with this and couldn't help but nod.

As the team moved, they became much closer to the wooden platform. As Xu Liyan looked at the mechanical monk, he smiled bitterly. “To be honest, I can't tell either. If he introduces himself as Zen Master Jingnian, I'll treat him as Zen Master Jingnian. If he introduces himself as another Zen Master, I'll treat him as another Zen Master as long as he doesn't 'act up' in Weed City. Uh, Zen Master Jingnian is the one preaching the scriptures.”

Long Yuehong became curious and couldn't help but interject. “Then, how do the mechanical monks distinguish each other and accurately recognize each other?”

Jiang Baimian tried to provide an answer from the perspective of machinery and electronic products. “Launch radio signals, special verifiable keys, etc.”

As she spoke, she suddenly thought of something. “Did Zen Master Jingnian say what not to trigger him?”

It was widely known that mechanical monks had a sore spot that made them go crazy when touched. Some came from the price they had paid, and some came from the imperfect consciousness uploading technology.

Xu Liyan shook his head. “He didn't say.”

“This means that his trigger point won't appear under normal circumstances.” Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it and gave up on probing.

As they spoke, they continued following the crowd and moved toward the wooden platform.

At this moment, many people had already obtained steamed buns. They were either squatting or standing around and eating the porridge.

Shang Jianyao looked envious.

They didn't leave because the only requirement for the Monks Conclave's food distribution was to finish listening to the sermon.

It was fine if one left after getting the porridge and steamed buns. Nobody would stop them. However, they would be blacklisted in the future and wouldn't get anything.

Mechanical monks could scan faces and store large amounts of data.

After chatting for a while, Xu Liyan looked at the sky and smiled. "My butler recently harvested a batch of animals that were hunted in the wilderness. Are you interested in coming to a barbecue party at night?"

Shang Jianyao's eyes lit up. He then sincerely suggested, "Some ingredients aren't suitable for roasting."

Jiang Baimian smiled as if in thought. "Castellan Xu, aren't you afraid of causing unnecessary misunderstandings in First City?"

Xu Liyan laughed. "With the previous incident, I reorganized Castellan Manor and replaced many people. First City can only know the information I want them to know."

"Then, we'll do as you say." Jiang Baimian released her left hand from Shang Jianyao's clothes.

Shang Jianyao was very happy, but the questions he asked were as different as chalk and cheese. "How's the fake Father now?"

Xu Liyan's expression sank. "He's been dealt with. I originally wanted to recruit him, but his abilities are too dangerous. I'm afraid that I won't know when I'll become his puppet."

This was also applicable to Zhang Qubing, but he couldn't deal with him.

"Yes, it's better to be safe than sorry." Jiang Baimian expressed her understanding.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong also felt that this was the best solution. Only Shang Jianyao was a little disappointed.

Xu Liyan was just about to say something when Shang Jianyao smiled. “It’s our turn!”

Xu Liyan turned around in confusion and realized that he had already arrived in front of the iron pots.

Jingnian—who was preaching on the wooden platform—and the human servants, who were distributing food, simultaneously cast their gazes at him.

They all knew Castellan Xu. Xu Liyan had been the one who lent the servants to Zen Master Jingnian.

They were clearly surprised that Castellan Xu was lining up here.

Xu Liyan’s face flushed red. He was so embarrassed that he wanted to dig a hole nearby and bury himself.

A servant woodenly handed over a bowl and two buns. Xu Liyan received them blankly and watched the other servant scoop a ladleful of porridge into his bowl.

It was quite a lot.

...

The next afternoon, outside Weed City.

The modified military-green jeep sped through the wilderness.

The person in charge of driving was Genava—who had blue-light emitting eyes and a shiny metal skeleton in a military uniform. He had already rushed over from Redstone Collection and had charged up the high-performance batteries.

For this, Jiang Baimian made Bai Chen compensate Auntie Nan with a lot of Oray.

In the passenger seat was Shang Jianyao. From left to right were Jiang Baimian, the cramped Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen.

They all leaned back in their chairs, looking lazy.

“What’s wrong with all of you?” Geneva was a little confused.

As his slightly synthetic male voice echoed, Shang Jianyao burped in satisfaction.

“The barbecue party last night was pretty good.” He gave Xu Liyan a high evaluation of his hospitality, looking like their ‘brotherly love ran deep.’

Jiang Baimian laughed as well. “He also got us to bring some raw meat and condiments, but we can’t keep them for too long. We have to finish it in the next two days.”

Geneva had a good understanding of humans’ love for food and asked, “Are we heading to First City next?”

Jiang Baimian replied, “Yes, let’s go straight to First City!”

Chapter 334: First City

More than a week later, the military-green jeep drove over a charred piece of land.

Collapsed houses and lush, abnormal vegetation could be seen everywhere. Occasionally, strange beasts and Ruin Hunters—who used all kinds of transportation—passed by.

“This area suffered the most damage when the Old World was destroyed.” In the passenger seat, Bai Chen looked out the window and sighed with emotion. “However, it was near this area that humans established the first city in the New Calendar.”

In Pangu Biology’s textbooks, they only mentioned that First City was the first city built by humans using the Old World ruins. They didn’t mention that its neighboring area was the area with the most

damage. This fascinated Long Yuehong as he muttered to himself, “They probably suffered a lot back then and paid a huge price...”

But it was not destroyed.

Jiang Baimian—who was driving—echoed, “Yes. Regardless of what First City has become, they deserve our praise for being able to survive the apocalypse and rebuilding a civilization that belongs to humans.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

“What’s there to applaud?” Jiang Baimian was a little peeved.

Shang Jianyao replied truthfully, “Your words reminded me of the teachers in school.”

“Are you allowed to clap in class?” Jiang Baimian replied angrily.

Shang Jianyao glanced at her side profile. “In addition to lessons, there’s also morning assembly.”

He had a look that said, ‘Have you never been to school?’

Jiang Baimian ground her teeth and cast her gaze ahead.

As the jeep drove quickly, a wide river that amazed Long Yuehong appeared in front of them.

Red River—the longest and widest river in the Ashlands.

Its waves didn’t look that clean. From time to time, green seaweed and all kinds of trash floated above it.

On its other side were buildings that weren't tall. Chimneys stood tall as they spewed grayish-white or rust-yellow gases upward.

This made the entire sky appear foggy. Even though it was not evening yet, the lighting was rather dim.

A commotion sounded as two dark helicopters flew across the sky.

Further away, unmanned drones circled back and forth, patrolling their territory.

Long Yuehong held his breath.

This meant that they had arrived at First City's capital, First City.

After leaving Weed City, apart from going to a wilderness nomad settlement on the way to replenish their food supplies, the Old Task Force spent most of their time traversing the wilderness.

Although First City was known as the largest faction in the Ashlands and had the largest population, it could only control settlements of various sizes, places that could be called cities, areas around them that could be farmed or had mineral resources, and important transportation routes.

For the wilderness, mountains, forests, swamps, and ruins, they were beyond First City's reach. Therefore, the Old Task Force had only encountered many Ruin Hunters along the way and had never encountered First City's official army.

Now, they were finally about to officially make contact with the largest faction in the Ashlands.

In the jeep, apart from Shang Jianyao's unconcealed excitement, Jiang Baimian and the others more or less revealed a certain level of anticipation. Even Genova—the smart bot—followed his program's analysis and made himself appear more excited.

After going downstream along the Red River for a while, the forest-like chimneys gradually became sparse. High buildings made of steel and concrete rose from the ground; there were also a large number of ordinary buildings between them. This combined to outline a real city.

It was not much inferior to Swamp Ruin 1.

“How many people can live here?” Long Yuehong asked wistfully.

“It’s said that it can accommodate around a million people.” Bai Chen couldn’t give a precise number because First City’s statistics department didn’t know either. Furthermore, there were many hunters and caravans coming and going here. The flow of people here could be considered the highest in the Ashlands.

As they spoke, the Old Task Force saw a bridge. It could accommodate eight cars traveling side by side, and it connected the wastelands and mountains on Red River’s north bank to First City.

On both ends of the bridge were fully armed regular troops, each with more than 100 people.

They wore dark-gray helmets and uniforms of the same color. They had many machine guns mounted and used a few dark-green armored vehicles to build a simple fortification on the bridge, leaving only an opening for two ordinary vehicles.

Every person in every car had to stop when they passed through the gap and undergo a relatively strict inspection.

According to the information provided by the company before the team set off, Jiang Baimian knew that light weapons could be brought into the city. Heavy weapons were confiscated, as were other contraband items.

Unfortunately, military exoskeletons were a military-controlled item.

Of course, the Old Task Force could also choose to take a detour and head to the Red River’s south river. However, the other entrances to First City were also guarded by troops, and there were also various aircraft monitoring the area from the sky.

Long Yuehong wasn’t nervous about this and only glanced at Shang Jianyao. With Inference Clowning around, what place can’t we enter?

The military-green jeep continued forward and quickly got in line.

Jiang Baimian stepped on the brakes and looked out.

On the charred ground around them, many humans in old clothes were squatting or standing.

Some of them were bona fide Red River people. Their eye sockets were sunken, and their hair was striking. Some had darker brown skin, and their eyes were black; they were lean.

The latter was a branch of the Ashlandics that had migrated to the Red River Zone. They were called Red Coasters.

In First City, most of them had citizenship.

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian roll down the window, a Red Coaster—who was at most 1.65 meters tall—stood up and walked to the Old Task Force.

His black hair had obvious natural curls, and his dark-brown face had a fawning smile. “Do you need help?”

He spoke in authentic Red River language. Authentic referred to his First City accent.

Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows and didn’t answer.

The Red Coaster looked around and suppressed his voice. “I have a way to let you enter the city without being examined. I just need some payment.”

He rubbed his index finger and thumb as though he was counting notes.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and exchanged looks with Bai Chen and the others. She then said to the fellow outside the window in Red River language, “How may I address you?”

“Jadi,” the Red Coaster replied with a smile.

“How much is needed?” Jiang Baimian continued asking.

“Fifty Oray.” Jadi gave the price. “It’s very cheap.”

Jiang Baimian pretended to think for a few seconds before saying, “What should we do?”

Jadi’s smile became even more obvious. “Follow me and wait somewhere else first.”

Jiang Baimian turned the steering wheel and got the jeep to follow the ‘guide’ as they slowly drove toward a ruin by the Red River.

There was nobody here, and it seemed very quiet.

Jadi pointed at a relatively intact roadside house and said, “Have a seat and wait. I’ll discuss with the guards to decide when you can enter the city.”

There were tables, chairs, and other furniture in the room.

Jiang Baimian looked at both sides of the room and opened the door without hesitation.

With a sincere smile, Jadi watched the Old Task Force members alight one after another.

When Genova’s tall black body entered his vision, his expression instantly changed.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian pointed at the house by the side of the road. “You can get your companions to come out.”

Jadi tried his best to smile. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand what you mean.”

Just as he said that, Long Yuehong had already opened the trunk, carried the rocket launcher, and aimed in the direction Jiang Baimian pointed.

After a brief silence, four to five people came out. They were all Red Coasters with dark-brown skin, and they held slightly old assault rifles and mini submachine guns.

“You guys are very enthusiastic,” Shang Jianyao said with a smile.

Jadi tried his best to explain, “This is only a little protection for our own safety.”

Shang Jianyao walked over and—with his height advantage—stretched out his hands to massage Jadi’s shoulders. He then asked in a very friendly tone, “Does it feel good? Do you want me to use more strength?”

The corners of Jiang Baimian and the others’ mouths twitched slightly. They didn’t know what problem it was this time or if he had recently watched some Old World entertainment.

However, Jadi inexplicably felt fear. He couldn’t control himself any longer and shouted, “P-put the guns down!”

The Red Coasters slowly bent down, lowered the guns in their hands, and raised their hands.

Shang Jianyao continued massaging Jadi’s shoulders and gently asked, “What do you plan on doing if we don’t enter these ruins?”

“I-I’ll help you bribe the guards and get them to do a simple check of your car,” Jadi replied nervously.

Shang Jianyao smiled and asked, “How many people do you usually mug?”

“N-not many. Most people don’t fall for it and don’t come over,” Jadi said with a crying face.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian asked curiously, “How much Oray do you need to bribe the guards?”

“Twenty to thirty is enough,” Jadi replied in fear.

Shang Jianyao’s expression changed suddenly. He kicked the fellow and took out the pistol at his waist. “You wanted 50 from us. You unscrupulous merchant!”

Upon seeing the black muzzle aimed at him, Jadi almost couldn't control his bladder and peed his pants.

"It's only robbery. We don't harm anyone," he quickly shouted his grievance.

Shang Jianyao suddenly smiled, pulled him up, and patted the dust off his body. "Don't be afraid. We're very friendly, but we still have some questions to ask you."

At this point, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but raise her hand to cover her face. This fellow is so dramatic!

Jadi looked at his companions—who were being stared at by the robot—and tried his best to smile. "Please speak."

"Are the guards here easily bribed?" Jiang Baimian 'helped' Shang Jianyao ask.

Jadi quickly nodded. "As long as it's not a big problem, they prefer Oray. In any case, only the higher-ups benefit from any contraband they find. Oray is real to ordinary citizens like them."

Chapter 335: Making Friends

First City's management is still much worse than the company... Jiang Baimian nodded and asked another question after hearing Jadi's answer. "Has anything major happened in the city recently?"

Jadi shook his head like a rattle. "No, everything is as usual."

"Are all of you citizens?" Jiang Baimian asked.

Jadi glanced at his companions—who had their hands raised. "Yes, but over the years, the citizens at the bottom are living increasingly worse days. It's not as good as when the emperor was alive. We have a good relationship with some of the city guard captains and company commanders. We rely on them to earn some hard-earned money at the Red River Bridge entrance."

Hard-earned money... Jiang Baimian nearly chortled from amusement. How can extortion with a gun be considered tough?

Jiang Baimian asked a few more questions regarding First City's current situation before nodding. "Then, please help us get the soldiers guarding the bridge to make an exception. Money isn't a problem."

Jadi controlled the change in his expression and revealed a fawning expression. "No problem. I'll pay for it. You don't have to pay."

Jiang Baimian replied casually, "That works too. Treat it as an apology for offending us."

Jadi slowly turned around and assumed a posture of leading the way.

With his back facing the Old Task Force, a smile gradually appeared on his face.

As long as I speak to the soldiers guarding the bridge, I can let this unknown team know the consequences of offending me. Bringing heavy weapons and a robot to First City... Are they thinking of causing destruction in the city?

When the time comes, the supplies will be divided equally. The men will be sent to the mines, the women will be sold to the bathhouses, and the robot will be transferred elsewhere!

Just as Jadi took a step, he heard the man—who was sometimes friendly and sometimes fierce—say to his companion, "Look, you guys speak the Red River language, so do I. You have weapons, so do I. So..."

What does that mean? Jadi was a little confused.

The next second, one of his companions shouted in enlightenment, "Quick! Jadi will get the guards to betray you. No, us!"

Jadi's mind buzzed. For a moment, he didn't know if he should immediately curse or beg for mercy.

He slowly turned around and saw Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others smiling or looking calm. They weren't surprised at all.

Shang Jianyao walked toward Jadi and smiled. “Think about it. I just massaged your shoulders. You also answered my question. What kind of relationship should we have?”

After clearing the third mind island, the conversational format for using Inference Clowning became more flexible. As long as he satisfied the three-stage structure, he could replace ‘so.’

Jadi’s expression changed a few times as he punched his chest in tears. “I deserve death for betraying my brother!”

Shang Jianyao grabbed Jadi’s hands and said sincerely, “There won’t be a next time.”

It’s getting to his head again... Jiang Baimian turned her head and looked at Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Geneva.

She actually didn’t mind sinking Jadi and the others into the Red River. They said that they only mugged and didn’t harm anyone, but in fact, it was obvious to Jiang Baimian that there was no way they would let anyone who resisted off just like that.

The reason she didn’t take action was that this place was too close to the Red River Bridge. The bridge guards were also in cahoots with Jadi and the others, so any commotion would affect them from completing the mission.

Jadi—who had made up his mind to change for the better—wiped his tears and led the way in front of the military-green jeep. His companions retreated to their hiding spots in the riverside ruins.

Upon seeing that the bridge was in sight, the vehicle slowed down. Jiang Baimian signaled for Geneva to ‘switch’ the color of his eyes and change some of his characteristics to make him look like an ordinary robot.

At the same time, Shang Jianyao rolled down the window and handed the 20 Oray that Jiang Baimian had stuffed into his hands to Jadi.

“There’s no need! There’s no need!” Jadi waved his hand repeatedly.

Shang Jianyao’s expression turned solemn. “Are you looking down on me?”

“N-no.” Jadi could only take the 20 Oray.

After Shang Jianyao retracted his hand and straightened his body, Long Yuehong lowered his voice and asked, “Why are you still giving him money?”

How can this soothe the grudge if a vile person like him doesn’t bleed a little?

Shang Jianyao glanced at Long Yuehong and smiled. “This way, he won’t realize that he’s missing money when he returns.”

What kind of answer is that? Uh... If he ends up having money missing and was asked by his family and accomplices, Jadi will end up realizing that something is amiss on the spot and render Inference Clowning ineffective. If nobody else mentions this matter, he and the people from before could form a cyclic reinforcement, preventing them from detecting any problems for a long time... Long Yuehong was first stunned before he figured out Shang Jianyao’s meaning by himself.

Jiang Baimian—who was driving—casually asked, “How long can it last?”

“If nothing unexpected happens, it should last at least one month.” Shang Jianyao glanced at Jadi in front of the car.

“No problem.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

This way, it wouldn’t affect the Old Task Force’s operation in First City. Furthermore, they might have to rely on these locals sometime in the future.

At this moment, Jadi walked back to the jeep that was inching forward and spoke to Jiang Baimian, who had rolled down the window. “It’s better if you get someone else to drive. You’re too beautiful, and your figure is too good. It’s very easy to get into trouble. If you were of Red River ethnicity, those guards definitely wouldn’t dare to do anything with you, worried that you might be the child of some noble or official, but you are Ashlandic...”

“Whoa.” Jiang Baimian didn’t know whether to be pleased or angry. She had always had a sense of the overall situation and readily said to Long Yuehong in the backseat, “Little Red, do the driving. Little White, wear your sunglasses as well.”

As she spoke, she also wore her sunglasses.

She then saw Shang Jianyao take out his sunglasses and put them on the bridge of his nose.

Jiang Baimian stopped the car and switched seats with Long Yuehong as she asked in amusement, “Why are you wearing them?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “What if they like men? Boys should also be careful when out.”

Jiang Baimian controlled the urge to grab her hair and regretted indulging him in obtaining the Old World entertainment back then.

At this moment, Genava also asked, “Do I need to wear sunglasses? They previously said that many people want to capture a robot.”

Jiang Baimian glanced at Bai Chen, who seemed to be holding in her laughter. She opened the car door and sighed. “Whether you wear sunglasses or not can’t hide your heroic bearing...”

Shang Jianyao—who was squeezed to the middle of the back row by Jiang Baimian—quickly suggested, “You can wear a cloak!”

Genava ignored him. This was because the Old Task Force had no cloak but a sack.

It was more suspicious to wear a sack.

After a while, the Old Task Force’s jeep finally drove to the gap.

Jadi leaned forward and skillfully greeted the bridge guards with a hug. During this process, he handed 20 Oray to the other party.

The bridge guards looked at each other before getting the driver, Long Yuehong, to roll down the window and open the trunk.

They casually glanced into the car and flipped through the items behind. They ended the inspection without even opening the wooden crates containing the military exoskeletons.

As for the eye-catching, single-man rocket launcher, they tacitly pretended not to see it. For this, they conveniently took a few cans of food as compensation.

“You may pass.” The bridge guards made way in satisfaction.

The jeep slowly drove into the Red River Bridge. Shang Jianyao relied on the strength in his waist and abdomen to force his body across the empty space in front of Jiang Baimian. He stuck his face out the window and waved at Jadi.

Jadi was so touched that tears welled in his eyes, and he felt that his brother had indeed forgiven him.

“Isn’t it squeezey?” Jiang Baimian grumbled.

Of course, she believed that this action was necessary. This could effectively enhance the effects of Inference Clowning.

However, she wasn’t sure if Shang Jianyao did this with this goal in mind or if he had already gotten into character and really treated himself as a brother of Jadi and the others.

After the jeep passed the second checkpoint and drove out of the bridge, First City became increasingly clear in the five Old Task Force members’ eyes.

This place was really similar to the large cities of the Old World, but there weren’t that many skyscrapers. Low-rise buildings were everywhere in various styles.

Just from their line of sight, certain buildings in certain areas had seriously damaged the streets, making the originally wide road narrow.

“West is the Green Olive Zone. The residents are all lower-class citizens.” Bai Chen gave a simple introduction and got Long Yuehong to stop the car and change seats with her.

She was the only person in the Old Task Force who had come to First City and knew the way.

Genava was quite regretful about this. He had the opportunity to download the map of First City secretly drawn by Mechanical Paradise in the past, but he didn't do the corresponding academic research when he thought that it was useless for his defense of Tarnan.

Now, he was disconnected from Mechanical Paradise's intranet.

As the jeep drove into the city, many people in tattered clothes appeared on both sides of the road. They were mainly Red River people and Red Coasters. Some of them held paper signs with the words 'Guide.' Some were very young, and they were dirty. Their expressions were rather numb, and only their eyes kept following the cars.

Bai Chen didn't stop the car. She drove straight through the area and turned into a street in front.

The houses here weren't tall, and they seemed to belong to the Green Olive Zone.

Jiang Baimian turned her head to the window and sized up the street houses with different styles.

"There are many bathhouses here..." she sighed with interest.

As Bai Chen drove, she said, "Back when First City was first established, the citizens here believed that the Heartless disease and plague came from uncleanliness, so they developed the habit of building public bathhouses to shower.

"Later, there were too many people here, and water became a rare resource. The water purifying system couldn't handle it either, so a large number of bathhouses closed down. Many of the bathhouses that still exist today are part-time brothels. Men and women are welcomed.

"..."

During Bai Chen's introduction, the other four people from the Old Task Force showed sufficient interest in the topic.

After driving for about ten minutes, the jeep stopped in front of a yellowish-brown building that was only three stories tall.

A signboard hung by its door. On it were words written in Red River language: “Ugo Hotel.”

Chapter 336: Things That Need to be Done

“The greatest advantage of this hotel is that the boss doesn’t ask anything.” Bai Chen stepped on the brakes and pointed at Ugo Hotel. “Besides, he has a good relationship with the sheriff in charge of these streets. We don’t have to worry about someone suddenly kicking open the door and searching our rooms.”

Long Yuehong subconsciously wanted to say that they wouldn’t do anything bad in the room, but he shut his mouth at the thought of the two military exoskeletons.

As long as the sheriff discovered the two items, there was no way to explain their innocence even if they weren’t doing anything.

Of course, the most likely scenario when the time came was for the sheriff and his subordinates to cover their heads and squat on the floor, not daring to say or ask anything.

As she spoke, Bai Chen released the brakes and drove the jeep to the parking area beside Ugo Hotel.

“I thought the parking lot here would be underground.” Shang Jianyao had a look of disappointment.

Jiang Baimian understood his feelings very well. This was because the parking lots in large cities were often underground in the Old World entertainment that the Old Task Force had been watching recently. Redstone Collection—which was mostly a ruin—was an example.

But First City—the largest city in the Ashlands—was actually so crude.

Bai Chen parked the car and pointed east. “There are underground parking lots in places like Golden Apple Zone and Red Wolf District. Back when First City was established, some areas were modified based on the original buildings, while other areas were built by the citizens themselves on the land assigned to them. There was no uniform planning.”

“It’s no wonder that the roads aren’t good and that there are all kinds of architectural styles.” Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion as she came to a realization.

Golden Apple Zone was located in the southeast corner of First City, near the suburbs. It was where the nobles lived.

Red Wolf District was in the middle of the city. It had the Senate, the Administrative Office, the Overwatch Council, the governor’s office, the money-printing factory, the coin casting factory, and the power supply center; it was the core of First City. A large number of officials and citizens of certain statuses lived in this area, and various businesses and companies favored it.

After entering Ugo Hotel, Jiang Baimian saw the boss sitting at the front desk while having dinner.

The boss looked to be in his thirties or forties. His skin was a little tanned, and there were some wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, forehead, and mouth. However, he didn’t look that old. His blond hair still had a luster that didn’t have a hint of paleness.

His dinner was very simple. It was a plate of stewed beans and a piece of rough, black bread.

“Three rooms,” Bai Chen said in fluent Red River language.

“Is there those, you know those...” Shang Jianyao suddenly revealed a hesitant look. “The kind where the five of us can stay together. A suite with several small rooms?”

What’s there to be shy about... Long Yuehong muttered silently.

This was also what he thought. It was safest for everyone to live together!

The boss named Ugo shook his head and swept his light-blue eyes at the five Old Task Force members. “Only big hotels have suites.”

Tarnan’s lady boss, Aynor, is indeed business-minded... Jiang Baimian sighed and smiled. “Then, three rooms next to each other.”

“1 Oray per night for each room. There’s also a deposit of 5 Oray,” replied Ugo calmly.

“We’ll take a week for now.” Jiang Baimian took out a stack of notes and produced 26 Oray.

The Old Task Force had already used up the remaining money in Weed City. Their current Oray had all come from Shang Jianyao’s good brother, Xu Liyan, but there wasn’t much left.

Ugo counted the notes, checked their authenticity, and took out three silver-white keys with labels from the drawer.

“202, 203, 204.”

This hotel didn’t have an elevator. After Long Yuehong and the others took the keys, they went up the stairs to the second floor and opened the corresponding rooms.

“It’s pretty clean.” Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction.

The layout of the room was the same as most hotels. Two beds filled most of the space, and the rest of the room was filled with tables, chairs, and couches. There was also a small bathroom.

After taking a short rest, Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava gathered in Room 202, which was where Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao lived.

Long Yuehong pulled out a chair and sat down as he casually asked, “That boss’s meal looked bad. Is it that unprofitable to open a hotel in First City?”

This was someone who had ties with the sheriff.

Bai Chen shook her head. “Even if he can’t eat meat every day, it won’t be a problem for him to eat it two to three times a week. However, he’s very thrifty. He’s so thrifty that he’s a little masochistic.”

For a wilderness nomad like her, such thriftiness was almost perverse.

“Maybe he suffered some psychological trauma...” Jiang Baimian touched her metal cochlear implant and made a simple guess.

She then clapped her hands. “Next, let’s have a team meeting to put ourselves on the same page for our future operations.”

Shang Jianyao dutifully clapped. Unfortunately, nobody else did the same.

Jiang Baimian looked around and said, “Our main mission is to find the descendants of Maximian—First City’s Oray—and see if he left any clues. According to the information we have gathered, Oray’s surviving direct descendants are only his granddaughter Avia and his grandson, Marcus. They live at 14 Round Hill Street and 57 Crown Street, both in the Golden Apple Zone.

“Our plan is very simple. Find an opportunity to interact with them and get Shang Jianyao to make friends with them. What we need to take note of in this plan is that there might be great danger lurking unseen. Maybe a faction is wiping out all efforts to investigate the cause of the Old World’s destruction or the origins of the Heartless disease. Therefore, we have to be very careful and cautious. We’d rather miss an opportunity than take the risk.”

Upon hearing this, Genova raised his hand, having learned from Shang Jianyao. “I have a question.”

“What is it?” Jiang Baimian asked kindly.

“Since there are factions stopping all investigations regarding the cause of the Old World’s destruction, why don’t they just kill Avia, Marcus, or someone else and cut off all the clues?” This was the most reasonable development that Genova had analyzed.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “Indeed, Qiao Chu blew up the laboratory in Swamp Ruin 1.”

Smack!

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “I know the reason!”

Upon seeing everyone look at him, he calmly said, “Oray didn’t leave any clues. Avia, Marcus, and the others don’t know anything.”

Then, why are we here in First City? Long Yuehong criticized inwardly.

Bai Chen deliberated and said, "Maybe Avia and Marcus are being protected by First City. That faction's attempts have failed."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "This might be relatively likely. In any case, First City is the largest faction in the Ashlands. It would be too embarrassing if it can't even protect two people. This also reminds us to be more careful. Not only are our enemies hidden destroyers, but they are also First City's protectors."

At this point, she smiled bitterly. "Let's take things one step at a time. We still have too little information. Alright, the second thing we need to do is contact the Zhao family's liaison and investigate the manor in the suburbs. Let's try to raise the sum of money this week.

"The third matter is to go to the local Hunter's Guild and sell them information regarding the white wolf's other abilities."

This would be accompanied by Qiao Chu's various performances as evidence. It was very valuable.

"The fourth matter is to contact the company's intelligence agent in First City. The fifth matter is to find Han Wanghuo; we still have to observe him. The sixth matter is to visit Bai Xiao and Lin Tong's team. They still owe us a feast..." Shang Jianyao helped Jiang Baimian add to their plans.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "You're right!"

At this moment, a commotion suddenly sounded from somewhere.

Shang Jianyao leaned against the window and looked out. But as they were on the second floor and were blocked by many buildings and obstacles, he could only see people coming and going on the street.

As for cars, there weren't many. The majority were bicycles.

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a few seconds and said, "Let's go down and ask."

The five Old Task Force members quickly returned to Ugo Hotel's lobby and realized that their boss was also standing at the door, looking into the distance.

Bai Chen went forward and asked, "What happened?"

With a slightly complicated expression, Ugo said, "In the past week, this is the third Heartless case in these streets."

Just as he said that, a loudspeaker on the electric pole outside suddenly sounded. "Due to a water shortage, water rationing measures will be implemented from 7 p.m. Come tomorrow morning at 8 a.m."

Chapter 337: Unique Sights

News of a third Heartless outbreak, the hotel owner's solemn expression, and the broadcast that there wouldn't be water in the evening... This collectively formed an indescribable and intriguing atmosphere. It made the four carbon-based Old Task Force members maintain silence, and none of them spoke for a moment.

Ugo stroked his blond hair, and his expression returned to normal. He grumbled and anxiously said to Jiang Baimian and the others, "Quick, fill up the basins and buckets in the bathroom. If you want to shower, do so quickly."

As he spoke, he walked to the back of the lobby on the first floor as if he wanted to prepare for the water rationing. He acted so ordinarily as if he was long used to such matters.

This caught Jiang Baimian and the others—who were planning on asking about the recent Heartless outbreak—by surprise.

They ultimately decided to listen to the boss to collect and store away the necessary water before washing away the filth and fatigue they had accumulated along the way.

After the Old Task Force was done, the sun was already setting in the west and was about to reach the horizon.

"We won't do anything official tonight. We'll go out and find something to eat before returning to sleep. Rest, charge up, and do system maintenance," Jiang Baimian said, looking at Genava for her last sentence.

Every room here had a separate electric clock, either new, old, or pieced together.

As the others nodded, Shang Jianyao had already taken the lead to walk to the door.

Jiang Baimian then pulled him back.

“Wait a minute,” Jiang Baimian snapped. “Little White and I have to put on makeup first. No, we have to disguise ourselves.”

They naturally didn’t put on makeup to make themselves look better and more beautiful. Instead, they did so to make themselves look ordinary and less eye-catching.

Bai Chen shook her head. “I’ll pass.”

She had lived in First City before and knew that female Ashlandic nomads like her were relatively common.

Jiang Baimian looked at her and smiled. “Do you want to be recognized at a glance?”

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds before nodding.

“Count me in!” Shang Jianyao said.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and ignored him. She knew that if she retorted, Shang Jianyao would definitely respond with the theory that boys had to protect themselves when they were out or give an odd ‘reason.’

They quickly settled these matters and randomly found a restaurant along Green Olive Zone’s Labe Street.

The restaurant’s name was very simple; it was called ‘Akson.’ This was an ancient name for a region in the Red River Zone.

It was said that among the people who established First City, the majority came from Akson.

The boss also took on waiter duties. Wearing a linen shirt, he was relatively tall and muscular. He looked to be in his forties, and he had black hair and blue eyes.

Jiang Baimian scanned the area and asked, "Do you have a menu?"

The boss shook his head. "This isn't the Red Wolf Zone. Today, there's only sweet vegetable mixed soup, black bread, pork sausages, and potatoes."

He only mentioned potatoes and not the specific dish because there were several methods for cooking potatoes.

"We'll have one of everything." Shang Jianyao made his choice with a serious expression.

When Jiang Baimian touched her pocket, Bai Chen asked for the price. A full meal would almost empty the rest of the team's Oray.

We have to seriously earn money tomorrow. Uh, we'll get a sum of money from the company's intelligence agents first... Jiang Baimian sat down and began ordering.

During this process, Long Yuehong didn't give up and asked, "Is there no fresh meat?"

"We only get a little every day. It's sold out by noon," the restaurant owner explained simply. "It's not like we're in the Red Wolf Zone."

As the sweet vegetable mixed soup had been prepared long ago and the pork sausages only needed a little heating up, only the mashed potatoes took some time. The Old Task Force quickly had dinner.

The sky wasn't completely dark yet, and the sun was still hanging over the horizon, scattering its afterglow.

"This sweet vegetable mixed soup tastes a little strange." Long Yuehong picked up the spoon and scooped a mouthful of soup.

This was different from the palettes of Pangu Biology personnel. It was thick and sweet.

Shang Jianyao didn't echo him and focused on dealing with the sliced pork sausages.

Although these weren't considered delicious, they were still pretty good for the four carbon-based lifeforms of the Old Task Force—they were sick of eating canned food, compressed biscuits, and energy bars.

As they ate voraciously, waves of voices sounded from the distance. “We want land!”

“We want work!”

“We want to live!”

Long Yuehong curiously turned his body and cast his gaze outside the restaurant.

Before long, a large group of people passed the street. Some held wooden signs, and some held pieces of paper. On them were words in Red River language: ‘We want land,’ ‘We want work,’ and ‘We want to live.’

These people were typical Red River people. They had blond or chestnut hair and blue or green eyes. Their shirts and coats were very old, but they were washed relatively cleanly. Their faces were more or less ruddy.

“What are these people doing?” Long Yuehong asked in confusion. They appear to be demanding something?

As they were the only customers in Akson Restaurant, the burly boss casually replied, “Those people are demonstrating.”

“Demonstrating?” Jiang Baimian had only read this term in books.

First City was indeed different.

“Demonstrating?” Shang Jianyao seemed to find this very interesting.

The restaurant owner said disdainfully, “These are the descendants of those old citizens. They didn’t work hard and lost the farmland outside the city, but they aren’t willing to work in the western suburbs. They only want the Senate to start a war or establish a new settlement in the wilderness so that they can receive land or public office.”

First City’s situation was very problematic. The factory area was actually further west of the Red River, so much so that wastewater would flow through the city.

This was also a pragmatic issue. To the east and north of First City were heavily polluted places with many severely mutated creatures. Factories couldn’t be built; in contrast, there was a large number of fertile farmlands in the southeast and south.

At the same time, the local climate was a little chaotic due to the Old World’s destruction. The wind direction often went from east to west all year round, and places like the Golden Apple Zone—which was southeast of the city—relied on the water coming from a Red River distributary, the Wei River. Therefore, the situation continued.

Long Yuehong came to a realization after hearing the restaurant owner’s answer. “They’re lazy, but they don’t want to suffer either...”

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, “Why did so many people lose their fields at the same time due to not working hard?”

While they were conversing, the demonstration had yet to end.

The restaurant owner fell silent for a moment before saying, “With so many citizens, there will always be some who are lazy and don’t work hard.”

Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes to stop him from asking. In order to shut this fellow up, she forked a few pieces of pork sausage onto his plate.

Long Yuehong looked around and finally decided to focus on his meal.

The shouting—"We want land" and "We want work"—gradually faded away as if they had entered the Red Wolf Zone.

Perhaps due to their hunger, the Old Task Force quickly finished dinner like a sweeping storm.

Jiang Baimian looked at the situation and thought for a moment. "Let's walk around."

It's time for Team Leader's favorite observation of the environment and to gain familiarity with the terrain... Long Yuehong wasn't surprised.

"Alright!" Shang Jianyao—who had eaten his fill—was excited, and Genava mimicked his reaction.

Bai Chen didn't say that she was already familiar with this area because she hadn't been here for a long time. She wasn't sure if there were any changes, so she had to reassess the area before she could feel at ease.

The five Old Task Force members strolled down Labe Street as if they were having their after-meal stroll and walked toward the Red Wolf Zone.

Under the dim sky, they saw many people hurrying back and forth. They seemed very busy, but their expressions were rather numb.

From time to time, people with fierce expressions or groups of three to five sized them up, but they looked away when they saw Genava—whose eyes were glowing red.

Upon seeing Third Avenue—which separated the Green Olive Zone and the Red Wolf Zone—Jiang Baimian and the others heard a commotion.

They looked over and saw a figure standing atop a skyscraper. His body was rather hunched as he warily faced someone on the other side.

Bang!

After a gunshot, the figure fell backward and fell from the roof, crashing heavily to the ground.

As blood quickly gushed out, Long Yuehong heard someone sigh behind him. "It's the fourth one..."

At this moment, the sun had completely sunk beneath the horizon, and a large number of lights lit up all over First City.

The Milky Way above Third Avenue was reflected, and stars dotted around it.

Chapter 338: Bathhouse

Nighttime in First City wasn't like Weed City, where only one or two areas would appear rowdy. Here, there were all kinds of sounds coming from various places from time to time.

It was only after midnight that the city would fall silent.

After encountering the fourth Heartless patient, the Old Task Force lost the mood to 'stroll' around. They did a quick circle of the area before returning to Ugo Hotel to rest up.

The next morning, after completing their training to get back in shape and having a simple breakfast made of energy bars and compressed biscuits, they decided to split up in order to make the best use of their time.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao went to find the Zhao family's contact in First City to figure out if there had been any changes in the manors in the suburbs recently. After that, they decided to carry out a preliminary and peripheral investigation based on the situation. Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva went to the Hunter's Guild in First City and sold the information regarding the white wolf's abilities. At the same time, they asked about Han Wanghuo's whereabouts.

With the two military exoskeletons and Geneva, Jiang Baimian was relatively confident in Long Yuehong and Bai Chen's strength.

Furthermore, the Old Task Force wasn't planning on inquiring about Oray's two descendants today. Hence, there was almost no danger in what they wanted to do.

As for the company's liaison, Jiang Baimian had already arranged a time and place for their meeting at night through an encrypted telegram.

Just like that, Jiang Baimian drove the military-green jeep and drove Shang Jianyao to the Golden Grain Zone, south of the Red Wolf Zone.

The team of Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava found a way to get themselves another car so that they could carry the two military exoskeletons with them to prepare for any emergencies.

In the Harvest Bathhouse at Golden Grain Zone, Olao Street.

Jiang Baimian observed her surroundings and stopped in a parking lot that seemed to be part of the bathhouse.

It wasn't big because the city district east and south of the Red Wolf Zone was not a place where most Ruin Hunters could afford. Public security was relatively good, so there was no need to employ Ruin Hunters. In the Ashlands, cars had always been ranked first in 'production' in the various ruins. However, those vehicles often couldn't be used directly; they had to be repaired or modified. At the same time, the Ruin Hunter occupation required them to have transportation. Therefore, cars weren't commonplace in areas where Ruin Hunters weren't active.

The residents living in such areas might live better than Ruin Hunters and even safer at times, but they didn't have the driving force needed to get a vehicle, nor did they have the means to buy the limited number of new cars. Furthermore, they didn't trust the vehicles that Ruin Hunters had dragged back from the ruins and repaired. They always suspected that they would be totaled soon.

Of course, there were always exceptions. Otherwise, who would the Ruin Hunters sell the extra vehicles that they had painstakingly obtained to?

The Harvest Bathhouse only had three floors. The porch was propped up by a white stone pillar, and it was decorated with incomplete relief sculptures.

The bathhouse wasn't open at this time, but Jiang Baimian successfully met the boss, Lance, after reporting the name 'Business Partner, Mr. Zhao.'

Lance was a relatively tall Red River man, only slightly shorter than Shang Jianyao. He was in his thirties, and he had fluffy brown hair and bright blue eyes.

Wearing a black coat, he led Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao to his office and introduced the Harvest Bathhouse's situation as if he were discussing business with a business partner. "We have four steam baths, eight heated pools, and four cold pools here. They are divided into men and women areas... We have specialized attendants to provide relaxation services..."

Just as Bai Chen had previously introduced, First City's bathhouses also doubled up as brothels.

As they spoke, the three of them entered the office.

Lance sat in a leather chair and asked warmly, "Were you sent by Councilor Zhao?"

"Yes." Jiang Baimian nodded.

The Zhao family had two liaisons in First City. One had a front, while the other was hidden. The former was Rauen, boss of the bread shop opposite Harvest Bathhouse, while the latter was Lance. Only the family head, the future family head, and specific executors knew of him.

Of course, this was only Zhao Zhengqi's claim. Jiang Baimian suspected that the Zhao family had more than two liaisons in First City.

The reason they visited Lance instead of Rauen was that Rauen had reported that the manor was fine two weeks ago.

Lance was just about to make small talk when Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, "Are you a believer of the Furnace Church?"

His expression was abnormally serious.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian subconsciously raised her right hand and covered her face. This was because she had completely understood Shang Jianyao's 'logic.'

There was a steam bath here. The crux of the Furnace Church's Mass was a steam bath, so the boss here had to be a believer of the Furnace Church.

Following this logic, most bathhouse owners in First City were considered believers of the Furnace Church.

Jiang Baimian had just raised her right hand when she saw Lance's expression change.

The smiling bathhouse boss's expression turned completely solemn.

Uh... Jiang Baimian's right hand paused in midair.

Lance sized up the two of them and suppressed his voice to ask, "What exactly do you want?"

Stand up, leave the seat, begin... Jiang Baimian didn't respond as she counted down the time in her heart 'dazedly.'

At the same time, Shang Jianyao suddenly stood up, took two steps to the side, and convulsed as if he were scalded.

After dancing this strange dance, Shang Jianyao solemnly gave his blessings. "May the divine aura bathe you."

Lance subconsciously stood up and danced as if he had been scalded by the heat. After a few actions, he exclaimed in surprise, "Are you also a believer of the New World's door?"

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily and explained seriously, "Just a little short. When I was in Tarnan, I had already set a date for my baptism. However, I had to leave in advance because of some unforeseen circumstances."

He looked regretful.

"Yes." Jiang Baimian nodded cooperatively. She didn't deny or confirm that she was prepared to join the Church.

"So you're fellow parishioners." Lance heaved a sigh of relief. "It's no wonder you know that I believe in the Kalendaria."

No, it's just blind luck... Jiang Baimian muttered and curiously asked, "Did the Church get you to serve Councilor Zhao?"

Lance laughed. “No, this is only a job. I have to support myself and my family while believing in the Kalendaria.”

“I see...” Jiang Baimian expressed her understanding.

Shang Jianyao asked, “Is there Holy Communion here?”

Lance sat down again and shook his head. “I was afraid of being exposed and didn’t add this service. However, the believers in this area will secretly gather together and share Holy Communion every week.”

“I wonder if we can participate?” Shang Jianyao hesitated for a moment before deciding to bring Long Yuehong and the others along.

Lance smiled and said, “Once the Dedicator baptizes you.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t give Shang Jianyao a chance to divert the topic at hand and redirected the conversation. “What happened to Councilor Zhao’s manors?”

Lance hesitated and said, “The Ruin Hunters I hired replied that strangers enter and leave the manor every day. They were afraid of exposing themselves, so they didn’t dare use cameras. Uh, it’s not like they had cameras either. They could only draw the strangers’ faces from their memories.”

As he spoke, he pulled open the drawer and took out a stack of paper.

Shang Jianyao excitedly received it and flipped through a few pages before happily saying, “Their drawings are worse than mine!”

Jiang Baimian felt that it wasn’t a problem of inferior quality but that the portraits were completely featureless. It was impossible to recognize anyone by relying on them.

Lance didn’t harp on the problem and continued, “The manor stewards I came into contact with said that there were no strangers. That’s all we’ve figured so far.”

From the looks of it, Zhao Zhengqi got someone to investigate the manor through Rauen... Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Can you create a chance for us to make direct contact with one of the manor's stewards? Without entering the manor."

"That's simple." Lance smiled. "There's a steward named Zhao Shouren who likes steam baths very much. He comes every few days; he should be coming today."

"Is that so?" Jiang Baimian subconsciously asked.

"You can wait here, and you might see him at noon." Lance pointed at the ceiling and said, "There's a lounge on the second floor that you can use."

The Harvest Bathhouse officially opened when it was almost noon, but it only had two steam baths, two hot pools, and two cold pools available for use.

Before long, Lance knocked on Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian's room. "Zhao Shouren is here. He's in the steam bath."

"I'll visit him." Shang Jianyao smiled.

Lance then glanced at Jiang Baimian. "Why don't you enter the women's bathroom and get a steam bath? It's just next door."

Jiang Baimian was also a curious person. She pondered for a moment and said, "Alright."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly said, "Be careful not to get a short circuit."

This mockery... Jiang Baimian clenched her left fist and wished she could punch Shang Jianyao in the abdomen. However, she controlled herself because she felt that Shang Jianyao's words were a form of concern after some thought.

However, biological prosthetics wouldn't short circuit from encountering steam.

After returning to the first floor, Shang Jianyao entered the male bathroom, took off his clothes, washed his body, and wrapped a large white towel around his waist. He then pushed open the steam bath's door and saw white fog and steam rising from inside.

He vaguely saw a person in the corner. He also had his top bare, and his bottom was wrapped in a large towel.

Shang Jianyao walked over and sat beside him. He looked at the steam that spread from the red-hot stone and smiled. "What a coincidence. You're half-naked, and so am I. You're taking a steam bath, and so am I. So..."

The person was stunned for a moment before turning to look at Shang Jianyao. He asked in surprise and joy, "You're here too?"

He acted as if they had known each other for a long time.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao seized the opportunity and exchanged a few pleasantries. After confirming that the other party was Zhao Shouren, he raised their relationship to that of sworn brothers.

"I heard that many strangers came to your manor?" Shang Jianyao finally asked.

Zhao Shouren was stunned and replied in confusion, "No?"

Chapter 339: Being Frank

Shang Jianyao locked eyes with Zhao Shouren and stroked his chin as he asked, "They might not be strangers. What outsiders went over in the past few months?"

"None. Apart from a few merchants selling daily necessities who come regularly, there were no outsiders." Zhao Shouren shook his head again. He paused and asked in confusion, "Why are you asking?"

"Gossip is part of human nature," Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

"What? Gossip?" Zhao Shouren clearly didn't know what this term meant.

As Shang Jianyao looked Ashlandic, they naturally used Ashlandic in their conversation.

Shang Jianyao was just about to seriously explain what gossip meant and make clarification when Zhao Shouren waved his hand and said, “Let’s stop chatting. We’ll talk outside; it’s not suitable to chat here.”

In such a small room, the steam made it difficult to breathe. The high temperature oppressed every part of the body, making one’s head spin and chest heavy—it was indeed not suitable for chatting.

Shang Jianyao politely shut his mouth and occasionally scooped a spoonful of water to pour over the red-hot stone.

The two of them quietly listened to the sizzling sounds as if they were competing to see who could last longer in such an environment.

After a while, Zhao Shouren wiped his forehead and stood up with a wobble. “I can’t take it any longer. I’ll faint if I stay any longer.”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Let’s go out then.”

Zhao Shouren then opened the steam bathroom’s door and walked to a hot pool not far away.

Shang Jianyao followed closely behind and mimicked him. He took off the towel around his waist, slid into the water, and washed away the various sensations he got from the ‘steaming.’

In just a minute or two, Zhao Shouren stood up and switched to the cold pool beside them.

He hissed, and his expression became very warped. But as he got used to the water temperature, his facial muscles gradually relaxed, and he seemed to be energized.

Zhao Shouren took a towel and wiped his forehead. He sighed with emotion and said, “Brother, there’s no tomorrow in the Ashlands. You should enjoy it when you have to.”

Shang Jianyao also soaked himself in the cold pool. He looked around as if he found everything novel.

“You have to return to the manor in the afternoon?” he asked.

Zhao Shouren nodded. “There’s still enough time. I’ll take a nap and get someone to serve me after waking up. After that, I’ll take a shower, have lunch, and go out to shop.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped for his arrangements. At the same time, he glanced below the water surface.

Zhao Shouren coughed twice and returned to the hot pool. This time, he only soaked for a few minutes before quickly getting up and wrapping himself in his large towel.

After washing his body and changing into a bathrobe, Shang Jianyao saw the Zhao family’s steward clearly.

He was likely in his forties. He had a thin figure, thin hair, and obvious swelling around his eyes.

After leaving the male bathroom, the two of them entered a lounge. They each occupied a recliner and covered themselves with a thin blanket.

As they chatted, Zhao Shouren closed his eyes and began snoring.

Shang Jianyao turned his head to glance at him and smiled as he took out an item from his bathrobe pocket—it was a night pearl that silently emitted a green glow.

Shang Jianyao held the night pearl as his eyes gradually turned dark.

Destiny Connection!

Destiny Connection from DiMarco!

In Zhao Shouren’s Sea of Origins, Shang Jianyao’s figure appeared in a white bathrobe.

Over the shimmering sea, a faint fog filled the air. There were islands that could be vaguely seen, but Zhao Shouren's consciousness didn't materialize.

This was the mind world appearance of an ordinary person who hadn't entered Star Cluster Hall and opened the corresponding door.

Shang Jianyao then split into nine and sat cross-legged in midair.

Right on the heels of that, countless waves rose high in the Sea of Origins—which was affected by Destiny Connection. All kinds of scenes expanded one after another.

The nine Shang Jianyaos began to scan through all of Zhao Shouren's memories in the past few months. They were each in charge of a particular segment.

A few minutes later, Shang Jianyao—who had a small speaker over his shoulder—said in surprise, “Found something!”

He quickly maximized the scene.

In a room with bookshelves and tables, Zhao Shouren was reporting to a young man who looked a little like Zhao Yide but was not fat at all.

Sitting in the chair behind the young man was a person with ordinary facial features in a black trench coat. With the other bodyguards standing around him, he appeared rather special.

“Why do you think there's a problem with him?”

“How did you determine that there are clues to be had?”

“Is he not allowed to spend big sums of money on hiring Awakened?”

Three of the other Shang Jianyaos raised their questions.

Shang Jianyao—who held a small speaker—smiled. “This is part of Jiang Baimian’s train of thought—make bold assumptions and carefully verify them. Since this person looks relatively special, let’s focus on investigating all the scenes where he appears in Zhao Shouren’s memories.”

The other eight Shang Jianyaos agreed with this.

With their combined efforts, the memories of the black-robed man were quickly found.

He was a second-generation servant born and raised in the manor. He obtained the favor of Zhao Zhengqi’s second son, Zhao Yixue, and became his personal attendant.

However, Shang Jianyao acutely realized that the man in the black trench coat was nothing like his parents. Furthermore, this couldn’t explain why he had received special treatment.

Shang Jianyao and the others carefully observed the man in the black trench coat for a while and realized that he didn’t look well. He looked rather haggard.

This reminded them of someone: The fake Father.

...

It wasn’t too difficult to obtain a car in First City. As long as one didn’t pursue a car that was produced in recent years or one that could be used for long, there were plenty of cars of all kinds for one to choose from.

However, it would be more troublesome if one added the fact that they didn’t have much money, that people hadn’t committed crimes with the car, and that it was needed under short notice. At the very least, Long Yuehong and Geneva couldn’t figure out where to start.

Fortunately, their team had Bai Chen, who knew First City well.

After 10 a.m., Bai Chen led them out of Ugo Hotel and arrived at a place near the Red River in the Green Olive Zone.

This place wasn't too far from the hotel, and it was a 20-minute walk. However, the houses were increasingly dilapidated, and the roads were even narrower.

Sometimes, when Long Yuehong and the others walked along the streets, they could touch the outer walls of the houses on both sides when they stretched out their arms. The dense electric wires above them randomly divided the sky.

Along the way, what the small team encountered the most was dirty children. The adults either went to the factory district or were busy with other matters. Only a few stayed in this area.

Long Yuehong swept his gaze across the suddenly open area in front of him and the large number of derelict cars parked inside. He asked curiously, "Is this where cars are sold?"

After Ruin Hunters towed some of the vehicles discovered in the city ruins to First City, they often didn't have the time to find a final buyer. They would directly trade with the old car dealers.

Although they would definitely suffer a huge loss in price, it at least saved them time. Many Ruin Hunters would starve the next day if they couldn't sell their harvests on that day.

"Yes," Bai Chen replied with a nod.

"But we don't have much money left..." Long Yuehong carefully reminded her.

Bai Chen looked at Genava—who was carrying a sack—and calmly said, "They provide car rental services."

"Rent?" Long Yuehong was a little surprised.

This wasn't a house that couldn't be transported away. Typically, merchants lacked the Old World's various technological means. Weren't they afraid that they wouldn't be able to retrieve the vehicle after renting it out?

As they spoke, the three of them entered the dilapidated bungalow beside the parking lot and saw a few Red Coasters with dark-brown hair chatting behind a wooden platform.

“We’re here to rent a car,” Bai Chen said without waiting for the people to ask for the reason.

“We can only determine the price after you choose a car,” replied the tallest Red Coaster, who was still shorter than Long Yuehong. He then emphasized, “We also need collateral; otherwise, we’ll suffer a loss if you drive the car out of the city and never return.”

Bai Chen didn’t say anything and pointed at Genova.

Ah, we are mortgaging Old Ge here? This thought flashed across Long Yuehong’s mind.

The next second, Genova placed the sack on his back in front of him and took out the Death rocket launcher.

“Is this okay?” Bai Chen asked.

After exchanging looks with his companions, the Red Coaster in charge of receiving the small team nodded and said, “Sure.”

Such a heavy weapon was enough to exchange for an Old World car.

“Don’t lose it. We still have similar weapons,” Bai Chen warned calmly. “And we’ll soon replace them with other collateral.”

“Alright.” The Red Coaster hurriedly nodded.

The team quickly selected the vehicle they needed. It was a squarish, gray SUV. There were traces of after-repairs in some areas.

After signing a contract priced at 2 Oray a day, Bai Chen drove back to Ugo Hotel.

Due to the fact that some roads were very narrow on foot, making it impossible for cars to pass directly, she had to make a detour.

This allowed them to pass through First City’s West Port.

Ships that went up and down the Red River were docked there, where supplies were either being loaded or unloaded.

At this moment, Long Yuehong heard a few long wolf howls from the streets near the harbor. “Howl!”

These cries weren’t shrill or fierce, and they didn’t sound like real wolves. Instead, they sounded sad and indescribable.

“That’s?” Long Yuehong turned to look at Bai Chen. He felt uncomfortable hearing this.

Bai Chen looked ahead and said, “Ashlandic prostitutes.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong and Genava couldn’t understand how this had anything to do with the howls.

Bai Chen’s gaze remained fixated at the end of the road as she said in an unchanging tone, “They were captured as slaves and were picked by the brothels. Nobody teaches them the Red River language, so they can only simulate the howling of a female wolf to attract passing clients and the sailors at the harbor. In First City, they are called She-Wolves.”

Long Yuehong opened his mouth but didn’t say anything.

Chapter 340: Value of Intelligence

First City’s Hunter’s Guild was located along a crowded street northwest of the Red Wolf Zone.

It was a five-story building that wasn’t attached to any other buildings. The lobby was several times larger than that of its sister branch in Weed City, but it wasn’t as electronic. Only 20 machines that allowed one to peruse and take on missions were set up. Others had to rely on the large screens or the kiosk booths.

This resulted in the local Hunter’s Guild having a large number of employees. It also gave many people a living by explaining missions to illiterate Ruin Hunters. The entire lobby was crowded and abnormally noisy.

After Bai Chen informed a receptionist that she had information to sell to the guild, she quickly passed through the lobby and went to the second floor under his guidance.

During this process, Genava received a lot of attention as expected. But compared to other places, robots appeared much more frequently in First City. Many Ruin Hunters had one such member in the team, so nobody found it strange.

On the second floor, in Room 205.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava saw a black-robed elder with a high nose and slightly white hair. He was about 50 years old, and his light-blue eyes reflected the two people opposite him. “What information do you have to sell to the guild?”

Before Bai Chen could answer, Genava—who had barely managed to keep his chair from creaking—asked, “I wonder how I may address you?”

The elder laughed. “It’s rare to encounter such a polite robot.”

Most robots’ priority was to obey their master’s instructions.

Long Yuehong cursed inwardly upon hearing this wistful comment and quickly said to Genava, “Who taught you to ask someone’s name directly without considering the situation?”

The red light in Genava’s eyes flickered. “Hey said so. He told me that one has to be polite.”

As expected... Long Yuehong wasn’t surprised at all. The reason he had asked was to lead the elder opposite him to think that this robot had been corrupted by its owner, not that the robot in front of him might very well come from Mechanical Paradise and be a smart bot.

“There’s no need to listen to him all the time. His brain is different from normal people.” Long Yuehong naturally wouldn’t let go of the rare opportunity to badmouth Shang Jianyao behind his back.

The elder opposite him raised his hand and pressed it down. “It’s not a bad thing to be polite. My name is Friedrich.”

Bai Chen then nodded slightly. “Mr. Friedrich, we have information regarding the white wolf in the North Shore Mountains.”

“Is that so?” Friedrich was a little surprised. “You guys just came back from the North Shore Mountains?”

“No.” Bai Chen took out a neatly folded piece of paper from her pocket. “We previously encountered an enemy with a similar situation to the white wolf. We believe that there should be some similarities between the two. You can use this to gather some useful information.”

Friedrich tapped the table’s surface with his right index finger and thought for a few seconds. “In other words, you can’t be sure that this information will definitely come in handy?”

“Yes.” Bai Chen didn’t deny it. “But similarly, you can’t be sure that it won’t come in handy.”

This conversation is like a tongue twister. Little White’s Red River language is still much better than mine... Long Yuehong muttered silently. He only dared to call Bai Chen’s nickname inwardly; it was the same for ‘Big White.’

Hey was an exception; he would shout it a few times from time to time. In any case, he and Shang Jianyao were used to denigrating the other. The only thing they needed to consider was whether they could withstand the other party’s verbal counterattack.

As for Old Ge, he didn’t have any intention of teasing him. He felt that it didn’t matter.

Friedrich retracted his right hand and smiled. “This makes me feel like I’m gambling.”

“But you are the house,” Bai Chen replied calmly.

Ruin Hunters had to consider the consequences of directly selling information to the guild. This wasn’t a one-time deal of skinning the sheep. If the guild discovered that one was suspected of fraud after obtaining the information and reading it, punishments would range from requesting compensation and deducting a certain amount of credit points—with a note entering their records—to being blacklisted or even offering a mission to capture the person in question.

Individuals were always insignificant when compared to the guild. As long as one still wanted to be a Ruin Hunter, very few people would play any tricks in this regard. Of course, there were also situations where one had no choice but to scam the guild. One could only consider becoming a Dark Hunter and not accept missions through the guild, just like the earliest Ruin Hunters.

Friedrich laughed. "You're very calm. Tell me, how much do you want?"

"400 Oray." Bai Chen offered a price.

This was enough for a family of three in Green Olive Zone to live for a year. If they were more thrifty, they could even last two years.

However, this was nothing compared to the price of a military exoskeleton and a mechanical arm that could easily be priced around 10,000 Oray. Such resources were often priceless.

For the Old Task Force, this information was mainly to fill their thinning wallets. After all, they weren't offering all the information regarding Qiao Chu. Furthermore, they didn't know the abilities of the Eighth Research Institute's commissioner well.

Friedrich thought for a moment and said, "I hope it's worth the price."

He immediately picked up the phone on the table and dialed a number, requesting the other party to go through the procedure and approve 400 Oray.

After he hung up, Bai Chen pushed the folded paper over.

Friedrich picked up his reading glasses, unfolded the paper in his hand, and read it carefully. "...We once encountered a person named Qiao Chu. The guild's bounty for intelligence on him was a ton of flour... He can make people involuntarily like him, be infatuated with him, and obey his orders... This is suspected to be a price, not an Awakened ability... His known abilities are 'forcefully changing the target's hobby' and 'making people depressed.' The rest is unknown... If the wolf in the North Shore Mountains didn't obtain the ability to bewitch others through mutation, one has to consider that it has other abilities..."

Friedrich looked up at Bai Chen and Long Yuehong. "You met Qiao Chu? You guys actually escaped him and survived to this day?"

He was surprised by the latter matter.

Without changing her expression, Bai Chen pointed at Genava beside her and said, “We had him.”

“Him?” Friedrich asked.

In Red River language, ‘him’ and ‘her’ were pronounced differently, unlike Ashlandic. It was obvious.

Bai Chen casually explained, “I’m a wilderness nomad. My parents died early, and I relied on the smart bot to survive until adulthood.”

“I see...” Friedrich expressed his understanding.

Long Yuehong was secretly speechless. He didn’t expect Little White to be as good at lying as his team leader.

There were clearly no robots back then! Besides, it wasn’t Genava who brought her up! I wonder if Little White was like this to begin with or if she was influenced by Team Leader... Long Yuehong fell into deep thought.

At this moment, Friedrich sighed. “From the looks of it, that kind of charm doesn’t work on robots. This is also a very important piece of information. Alright, your intelligence is indeed worth 400 Oray.”

Jiang Baimian had priced it at 400 Oray using the previous bounty as reference. A kilogram of ordinary-grade flour was about 4 to 6 Drace in First City—it was equivalent to 0.5 Oray.

Of course, this was also during years without disasters. In places like First City and Weed City, a kilogram of flour was worth a life in many settlements in the Ashlands.

Overall, 400 Oray was equivalent to 800 kilograms of ordinary-grade flour, making it about the same price as the previous bounty.

Bai Chen quickly obtained 400 Oray notes. She took out 50 Oray from it and pushed it to Friedrich as she said, "I want to commission a mission."

Friedrich pointed at the floor. "You can commission missions below."

Bai Chen didn't stop and continued, "The content is to help us find a friend. He's very sensitive and is also a Ruin Hunter. He will definitely hide when he sees that someone has issued a mission to search for him. We can only ask the guild for help and privately entrust it to local Ruin Hunters with sufficient connections. There's no need to get detailed information. Just tell us where he lives or where he often appears."

There was always a vice president in the Hunter's Guild who was in charge of such missions that had confidentiality requirements.

Fredrich took the stack of notes and shook them. "If it's only this bit of payment, it's hard to say how long it will take. For 50 Oray, nobody will mobilize everyone they know to help search."

"No problem." Bai Chen took out another piece of paper.

On it was Jiang Baimian's depiction of Han Wanghuo's appearance; it could be said to be lifelike. At the same time, she also labeled the color of his eyes, aliases, and other details.

After entrusting this matter, Bai Chen led Long Yuehong and Genava back to the first-floor lobby.

They casually browsed through the available missions and didn't consider accepting them. They mainly wanted to understand First City's current situation.

After leaving the lobby and returning to the street, they were just about to turn elsewhere when they suddenly saw a convoy drive by on the road ahead.

These were all sedans. They were dark in color, and the glass seemed to have been processed. The interior couldn't be seen from the outside.

Such a large convoy gave Long Yuehong a sense of grandeur as he subconsciously held his breath. He turned his head to glance at Bai Chen and realized that she was staring ahead in a daze.

After the convoy disappeared at the end of the road, Long Yuehong asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Bai Chen shook her head.

...

In a room in the Harvest Bathhouse.

“You think this matter is related to the Anti-intellectualism Church?” After Jiang Baimian heard Shang Jianyao’s description, she thought for a moment and asked, “Was the Zhao family behind the assassination of Xu Liyan? That’s not right. Zhao Zhengqi and Zhao Yide were also in the Aristocratic Council Chamber. They would’ve been blown up as well! Is there a conflict within the Zhao family?”

Shang Jianyao didn’t answer Jiang Baimian’s question and continued, “There are also a few people that exist in Zhao Shouren’s memories that were born in the manor and grew up there. However, it’s obvious they were brought there from another family. Many of the details don’t match. They often enter and leave.”