

## Ad Infinitum 401

### Chapter 401: Asus

The tall gladiator didn't directly attack the double-headed tiger. Instead, he leveraged on the distance between them to jog around the arena's perimeter. While doing so, he kept his face facing the double-headed tiger and held his shield in front of him.

There was still a considerable difference in speed, agility, and reflexes between a human that hadn't undergone genetic modification and a large feline creature. In less than a minute, the double-headed tiger closed the distance sufficiently and pounced forward, bringing a gust of wind with it.

The audience—who were a little impatient because of the circling—immediately grew excited. They thumped the special armrests again, causing banging sounds to echo endlessly.

Jiang Baimian seemed to be admiring this battle, but her mind was elsewhere as she thought about a question. If the Mind Corridor-level powerhouse who created the virtual world really belongs to the Shattered Mirror domain, what price would they have to pay? Photophobia? Hydrophobia? Prosopagnosia? Directionally challenged? Eisoptrophobia?

Thoughts flashed across Jiang Baimian's mind. Subconsciously, she looked around the arena again and saw large mirrors erected in different areas of the spectator stands.

She immediately excluded a certain price.

Apart from this, she didn't believe that the powerhouse suffered from face-blindness or was directionally challenged. These two attributes made one unsuitable as a bodyguard.

The former would recognize the wrong person that needed protection, while the latter would easily lose the target.

When Jiang Baimian's attention returned to the center of the arena, the first collision between the tall gladiator and the double-headed tiger had already ended.

Relying on the shield, the threat of the spear's thrusting, and the skillful rolling, he widened the distance again.

But in two to three steps, the double-headed tiger caught up to him again.

The two gaping mouths opened at the same time, and the gigantic body pounced at the tall gladiator once again.

The gladiator employed the same strategy. As he pushed his shield forward to block the ferocious beast, he stabbed with the spear in his hand.

He could already predict that the double-headed tiger would dodge and retract its strength in midair. He then used the shield's ability to withstand pressure to roll to the side.

But this time, the double-headed tiger didn't change its posture. Its bloodthirsty and brutal eyes remained locked onto its target.

With a squishing sound, the spear stabbed into its side, but it had completely pounced onto the shield.

The immense force immediately overwhelmed the gladiator.

Just as his arm was about to bend backward, the shield and the beast slammed into his chest. He immediately gave up on the spear and the shield and pounced to the side.

This turn of events exceeded his expectations. This mutated creature was far more violent than ordinary ferocious beasts.

Without armor and weapons, a human had no chance of winning against a tiger. Even if one were proficient in sliding under its belly to attack it from below, they would only be delivering themselves into the tiger's jaws.

Furthermore, it wasn't an ordinary tiger. It was a mutated, even more ferocious double-headed black tiger.

This made the audience reel with anxiety. Some couldn't bear to see the gladiator being torn to pieces by the beast, while others looked forward to such a bloody scene excitedly.

Oray's grandson, Marcus, was the latter.

As soon as the tall gladiator—who had pounced to the side—landed, he propped himself up with his hands and jumped up.

He advanced instead of retreating. He traveled a small circle and rushed back to the area where the double-headed tiger had almost pinned him down.

This actually allowed him to dodge the double-headed tiger's pursuit successfully. He then rolled and picked up the shield and spear that had fallen to the ground.

This series of actions completely showcased the gladiator's experience, skill, decisiveness, and physique. The audience cheered in satisfaction.

At this moment, the steel shield had a slight depression, and blood was dripping from the double-headed tiger's side.

Following that, the two parties repeated the previous process. They pounced, bit, and struck each other again and again, only to be met with the sound of banging, piercing, tumbling, falling, and picking up the dropped items again and again.

Sweat gradually seeped out of the tall gladiator's forehead as his stamina quickly depleted. The double-headed tiger had multiple wounds on its body, and blood kept gushing out.

Before long, it was a battle of endurance.

Just as the tall gladiator was about to collapse and fail, the double-headed tiger finally couldn't get up again after a pounce due to excessive blood loss.

The tall gladiator took the opportunity to take a few steps forward and stab the prey's vital spot with his spear.

The double-headed tiger struggled for a while before turning completely motionless.

Upon seeing this, the audience thumped the armrests again and shouted the gladiator's name. "Joey! Joey!"

The gladiator then raised his hands and slowly circled the arena. Not only was he taking in the cheers, but he was also showing off his goods—hoping to be chosen by a certain noble and become their guard.

If he wasn't selected, Joey would have to fight another four to five times to regain his freedom. He felt like he was hovering on the brink of death every time he participated in a gladiator fight.

Amidst the cries of 'Joey,' Shang Jianyao looked at the tall gladiator and sighed. "How pitiful."

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong felt the same way.

During the intermission after the gladiator fight, an aristocrat—who was late—entered the VIP room.

Many people immediately stood up to welcome him the moment he arrived.

Jiang Baimian and the others also knew him because he was someone who would definitely be mentioned in many pieces of intelligence.

Asus Julias—son of First City's consul and Commander-in-chief, Beulis.

Asus had a tall figure, black hair, and blue eyes. He was handsome, and the lines on his face looked like they were carved.

In Long Yuehong's eyes, this fellow had most likely undergone genetic enhancement and was a Chosen One. Otherwise, why would he be so much taller than him? He was similar to Shang Jianyao, and he was rather good-looking.

The most beautiful thing about Asus's face was his eyes. They were deep, charming, and seemed to be electrifying.

At this moment, he was wearing a black shirt and pants of the same color. With one hand in his pocket, he led his private bodyguards and family guards to his room. When he encountered every noble who came to greet him, he smiled and replied politely without any arrogance.

Jiang Baimian noticed that this fellow's gaze always lingered on the nobles' female companions and maidservants, but he quickly looked away.

The next second, she saw Asus look over.

She tugged at Shang Jianyao, smiled, and nodded in greeting. During this process, Jiang Baimian felt like Asus had looked at her from head to toe. This couldn't be considered a perverted act, but it was still uncomfortable.

As usual, Asus quickly looked away and greeted the other nobles.

The commotion in the room died down a few minutes later. A new battle was about to begin.

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After leaving the arena, Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and Long Yuehong got into their cars and escaped an imaginary pursuit.

In the car, the three of them didn't say anything in case they were still in the 'virtual machine.'

After completing all the planned procedures and returning to the rented apartment to successfully rendezvous with Bai Chen and Genava, Jiang Baimian roughly described the gains from this operation.

Finally, she smiled at Shang Jianyao and said, "When the gladiator was killed, I was quite worried that you would rush down to save him."

In the subsequent gladiator fights, two gladiators died.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "I considered it, but doing so won't change such customs and such order. Similar things will happen again and again. Even if I sacrificed myself back then, I would

only save one person while resisting all the Awakened and security personnel in the arena with 18 punches.”

Long Yuehong previously felt that Shang Jianyao made sense, but he silently retracted his opinion when he heard ‘18 punches.’

Jiang Baimian avoided the details and praised, “That’s a good way of thinking about it.”

Shang Jianyao nodded heavily. “That’s why we have to fight to save all of humanity.”

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Genava clapped for him.

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, “I roughly understand what you mean by virtual machine. The point now is: how should we crack this protection and establish a real connection with Marcus and Avia?”

Jiang Baimian didn’t answer and looked at Genava. “Old Ge, what’s your suggestion?”

“Without sufficient Awakened information, it’s impossible to produce a feasible solution from analysis,” Genava replied honestly.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “This is also the difficulty I encountered.”

She fell silent for a moment before turning to look at Shang Jianyao. “Hey, contact Terrence of the Blackshirts and see if they know whether there’s a religious organization in First City that worships the Kalendaria, Shattered Mirror. If there is, please get them to provide some information.”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao had an excited expression. He seemed to be obsessed with the beverage at Terrence’s place.

After chatting about serious matters, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “That Asus appears to be rather lascivious...”

This wasn't a general conclusion brought about by a woman's intuition but an answer she had obtained through personal experience.

"Is that so?" Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. "At least he doesn't like men. He didn't even look at me much."

Long Yuehong skipped this fellow's train of thought and echoed his team leader's words. "Yes, yes, yes. He's especially focused on every woman except the ones that aren't beautiful."

"That's right. He's not polite at all; he doesn't have the decency to treat everyone equally." It was unknown if Shang Jianyao was criticizing Asus for not focusing on the women who didn't look good or if Shang Jianyao believed that he was promoting gender inequality.

Jiang Baimian ignored Shang Jianyao's words and raised her doubts. "But the problem is: As the son of First City's number one figure, what beauty can't he get? Why is he still like this?"

This was also a question she had when reading some of the Old World's history books.

Shang Jianyao sincerely replied, "Maybe their family's creed is abstinence."

"It might also be a habit, or it might be..." Genava quickly analyzed the reason. "The price."

Price... Jiang Baimian repeated this word thoughtfully. She subconsciously glanced at Bai Chen, wanting to hear her female companion's opinion. However, she realized that the female member had never joined in the conversation and had maintained her silence all this while.

Uh... Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze.

Chapter 402: Traces

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. "We can't rule out the possibility that Asus is an Awakened, but we can basically be sure that he has undergone genetic enhancement."

If Asus was an Awakened, Jiang Baimian could preliminarily determine that he was in the Mandara domain.

At this point, Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Let’s not talk about him; he has nothing to do with us. The most important thing for us now is to think of a way to bypass the virtual world and make contact with Marcus while we still have a few days left before the next gladiator fight.”

Jiang Baimian then looked around and clapped. “There’s no need to be too tense. Think about it. How many days has it been, yet so many things have happened in First City. The Heartless disease epidemic, the explosion at the Citizen Conclave, the Anti-intellectualism Church’s plot, the Church of Paragon Desire’s involvement, the assassination attempt in the arena, and the fact that the two factions are already divided. Things will only deteriorate. When the time comes, we will have a chance.”

At the mention of ‘we will have a chance,’ Jiang Baimian casually cast her gaze at Bai Chen and nodded with a smile.

“This is because Little Red is here,” Shang Jianyao said in a timely manner.

Long Yuehong retorted angrily, “Many of them were already brewing before I came.”

“Some things stop after some brewing. Not everything will happen.” Shang Jianyao always had his way of explaining things.

Jiang Baimian didn’t stop them this time and smiled as she watched the two of them ‘argue.’

This made the atmosphere in the room relatively good. Even Bai Chen’s expression relaxed.

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Red Wolf Zone, 25 Stern Street.

Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a black wig—once again scrounged on Terrence’s iced cola. He took a large gulp in satisfaction and asked with a smile, “Have you heard of November’s Kalendaria—Shattered Mirror?”

Terrence nodded. “As a member of a religious organization, it’s basic knowledge to know the various Kalendarium.”



“Then, have you noticed if there’s an organization in First City that worships Shattered Mirror?”  
Jiang Baimian also enjoyed her iced coke.

It was indeed good to occasionally taste that refreshing feeling.

Terrence recalled and said, “There’s nothing in the open—at least, I don’t know of any. However, I’ve heard people talk of a secret religion that worships mirrors. This doesn’t mean that they are showing their faith in Shattered Mirror but that they use mirrors as sacred objects and believe that mirrors are unique and mysterious. The other side of it is the New World, and the answer lies in the mirror itself.”

Jiang Baimian suddenly recalled the large mirrors erected in the arena and thoughtfully asked, “Where do they approximately appear, or is there any confirmation on who their members are?”

Terrence shook his head. “I only happened to hear a Ruin Hunter mention it, but he’s not in the city now. He went to the North Shore Mountains to capture the white wolf.”

What a coincidence... Jiang Baimian thought to herself and drank the remaining iced coke. “Then, please contact him if he returns.”

Terrence also didn’t idle as he sat. As he drank the iced coke, he nodded. “No problem.”

He paused and probed, “When can you return the money? It’s fine if it’s converted into supplies. Heh heh, I’m in no rush. However, these are assets of our Blackshirts after all. The one above me and the other employees are very concerned.”

Jiang Baimian was momentarily speechless.

Ever since they completed the transaction with Lehman, the Old Task Force had slacked off when it came to earning money. They placed all their attention on the primary mission and had no realization that they were bearing a huge debt.

If not for the fact that Shang Jianyao would occasionally harp about his mechanical arm, Jiang Baimian would’ve almost forgotten about returning the money.

Does a villain need to repay loans? She criticized herself and smiled. “Soon, soon. We’re working hard to gather the funds.”

At least it’s still in the planning stage... Jiang Baimian—who suddenly felt guilty—didn’t stay any longer. She waited for Shang Jianyao to finish his iced coke before bidding Terrence farewell.

After getting into the car, she was in no rush to discuss the debt. As she turned the steering wheel, she said, “I only hope that the Ruin Hunter can return before the next gladiator fight so that we can obtain some information on the Mirror Church and see if we can discover any clues to bypass the virtual world.”

Shang Jianyao sat in the passenger seat and looked ahead. “I have an idea. If it works, I can definitely crack the virtual world’s filter.”

“What idea?” Jiang Baimian wanted to hear what magical train of thought this fellow had.

Shang Jianyao said seriously, “I’ll convert to Shattered Mirror and pray for ‘Her’ help.”

He had a look as though ‘I’m making a huge sacrifice.’ After all, the Clam Dragon Church’s Holy Communion wasn’t that alluring compared to organizations like the Furnace Church.

Of course, he didn’t know what Holy Communion the Church that worshiped mirrors had.

“In theory, it’s feasible. However, the probability of getting a Kalendaria’s blessing is almost negligible.” Jiang Baimian rejected Shang Jianyao’s suggestion from a feasibility perspective.

After discussing this matter, she sighed and said, “How do we earn money to return the Blackshirts?”

Shang Jianyao smiled and replied, “There will be no debt without a creditor.”

He then made a slicing motion with his hand. “As long as we finish off the Blackshirts, there’s no need to return the money.”

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a second before subconsciously considering the feasibility.

For the Old Task Force—which was currently armed to the teeth—there was a chance of destroying the Blackshirts as long as they didn't involve the Church of Spiritual Transcendence.

Pui, what am I thinking! Jiang Baimian quickly came to a realization and snapped, “Am I that black-hearted? Do I look like such an untrustworthy person? Even if the Blackshirts have committed all the evils in the world, I have to return the money to them first before enforcing justice on behalf of the heavens.”

“Then, get the money back?” Shang Jianyao smiled.

Jiang Baimian finally confirmed that the fellow was joking. She glanced at him and muttered to herself as she drove, “Let's go to the Hunter's Guild later to see what missions we can take on. Also, we should report yesterday's harvest in the arena to the company and apply for a sum of money. Let's just say that the money is to bribe key figures and obtain tickets to the aristocratic VIP room. It's impossible for us to use our favors for everything, right?”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

As the two of them spoke, the jeep drove into the Green Olive Zone and went straight to Ugo Hotel. They wanted to confirm if the boss had discovered any traces of the Nightmare Horse.

It was almost noon. Ugo was having the same meal—clean water, rye bread, and stewed beans.

He looked up at Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian and didn't say a word.

Jiang Baimian led Shang Jianyao back to his room, having figured out something. As soon as she entered, she saw a piece of paper on the table, pressed under a dry cup.

Jiang Baimian picked it up and saw a simple sentence: “Someone saw that horse in the North Shore Mountains.”

North Shore Mountains? Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“It went after the white wolf!” Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm with a look of enlightenment.

Jiang Baimian frowned and muttered, “But the Slumber Cat is in the city. Xiaochong should be in a place with electricity.”

Shang Jianyao assumed a posture as though things were ‘very simple.’ “Previously, the Nightmare Horse ran more than 100 kilometers away to pursue Qiao Chu.”

“Indeed... It really is a horse of action...” Jiang Baimian sighed in amusement. “But how did it ‘smell’ the white wolf in the North Shore Mountains when it was in the city?”

Back then, Qiao Chu had ventured deep into Swamp Ruin 1.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “Maybe it was galloping about the North Shore Mountains and happened to bump into it.”

“Alright...” Jiang Baimian couldn’t think of any other explanation. Her expression turned solemn as she said, “If we encounter the Nightmare Horse, can we get it to bring us to meet Xiaochong?”

“I don’t know how to speak horse...” Shang Jianyao looked stumped. He was rather conscious of his role as an interpreter.

Jiang Baimian ignored him and sighed. “We really have to visit the Hunter’s Guild in the afternoon.”

Chapter 403: Leaving the City

The Old Task Force stayed at a safe house in the Green Olive Zone.

Jiang Baimian finished sending the telegram and heaved a long sigh of relief. “We can prepare to set off.”

She had already reported the team’s gains during this period to the company. On the one hand, it was to apply for subsequent funding. On the other hand, she hoped that the company could provide clues to crack the virtual world.

With a large faction backing them, it was foolish not to utilize the organization! In the past few years, perhaps the other Pangu Biology outfield members might've encountered similar matters and accumulated some experience.

Long Yuehong sighed with emotion when he heard that. "I never expected that we would still have to go to the North Shore Mountains to find that white wolf after all this while."

To the current Old Task Force, finding the white wolf had three meanings: First, this was the Hunter's Guild's most lucrative mission in recent times. As long as it was completed, the Old Task Force could pay off most of their debt.

Second, the Nightmare Horse might very well be in the white wolf's territory.

Third, the Ruin Hunter who had intelligence on the Mirror Church was currently at the North Shore Mountains, hunting down the white wolf. Shang Jianyao had already asked for his name, age, and appearance.

Under such circumstances, Jiang Baimian finally decided to take on this mission and visit the North Shore Mountains.

In any case, they had experience facing Qiao Chu. They wouldn't be at a loss.

More importantly, they still had the new member, Geneva, who wasn't afraid of Bewitchment. Others might be penetrable, but he wasn't—in every way of the word.

"This is fate's arrangement." Shang Jianyao smiled in response to Long Yuehong's sigh.

Long Yuehong rationally gave up the urge to 'discuss' and said, "But we have to make advanced preparations, just like how we dealt with Qiao Chu previously."

Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen looked at Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao smiled. "This is simple—it's even simpler than back when we faced Qiao Chu. As long as we deepen our resolve not to 'violate social norms even if it's possible,' we can resist it."

“But how can you accomplish that with Inference Clowning? Doesn’t Inference Clowning always distort the results? How can it deepen our resolve?” Bai Chen asked.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Deepening itself is a form of distortion.”

He pointed at Long Yuehong. “Let’s begin with you.”

Long Yuehong secretly hissed and hesitated for a moment before saying, “Alright.”

He then followed Shang Jianyao to the room inside and looked at the other party warily.

“You can’t be like that; being too vigilant will result in poor effects. Could it be that you want to have a relationship extending beyond friendship with that white wolf?” Shang Jianyao teased with a smile. “I don’t know if there are any reproductive incompatibilities between mutated creatures and humans. If there isn’t, your child will become something like a sphinx in the future. So...”

The first sentence made Long Yuehong feel that this was a conversation before it officially began. Therefore, he quietly listened and tried to find something to retort with.

As he listened, his expression suddenly warped. His face was covered in gloom, and it was unknown what he imagined.

“No! Absolutely not! Humans have to have an absolute bottom line. They can’t do such a thing! Pervert! Too perverted!” Long Yuehong said repeatedly.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped for him. “Well said! You can go back now.”

“Huh? It’s over?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “There’s no need for it. You have a very strong sense of morality and are good at self-management. Thus, there’s no need to deepen your resolve.”

“Is that so...” Long Yuehong glanced at Shang Jianyao and realized that the latter had a sincere expression. With a suspicious attitude, he returned to the living room outside and recalled every detail that had happened.

But no matter how he ran through the situation, he didn’t find anything wrong with it.

“Next.” Shang Jianyao placed a hand in his pocket and walked to the door that separated the two rooms.

“My turn,” Jiang Baimian said to Bai Chen. She quickly entered the room, closed the wooden door, and smiled at Shang Jianyao. “Bullying Little Red again?”

“I didn’t even use any strength.” Shang Jianyao sighed.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said with anticipation, “Let’s begin.”

“There’s no rush. Let’s chat first,” Shang Jianyao said in a relaxed state.

Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows. “You want to add conditions while chatting and complete the Inference? Alright, I’ll cooperate with you.”

Shang Jianyao’s expression suddenly turned serious. “I just want to discuss my views on love with you.”

“Oh?” Jiang Baimian grunted.

Shang Jianyao continued. “A woman with beauty and intelligence like you...”

“Pfft.” Jiang Baimian laughed. “Don’t be so exaggerated. Let’s get straight to the point.”

“I’m serious.” Shang Jianyao was very serious. “You should’ve been a scientific researcher in the past. Now, you are out and about, fighting all kinds of creatures. Your most basic requirement for love is that both parties have something in common. They can interact, communicate, and resonate

in both spirit and mind. Regardless, animals can't have human intelligence, can't speak, and can't think about complicated problems, much less become idealists. So..."

Jiang Baimian's expression gradually softened as she nodded gently. "That's true. Creatures without intelligence can only be pets."

"Alright, you can leave now. Get Little White to come in." Shang Jianyao laughed.

Jiang Baimian revealed an enlightened expression. She didn't ask or think about it. She turned around, opened the door, and summoned Bai Chen.

"How do you plan on convincing me?" Bai Chen asked Shang Jianyao curiously.

"I think it's possible that you might like animals—as long as they stay by your side as companions and never abandon you." Shang Jianyao gave a rare, serious assessment.

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds before nodding indiscernibly. "Maybe."

"Therefore, let's talk about robots." Shang Jianyao smiled brightly.

In less than a minute, Bai Chen opened the door and walked out, her expression normal.

Shang Jianyao then eagerly looked at Genava. "Old Ge, do you want to give it a try?"

"Alright." Genava had an adventurous spirit.

However, Shang Jianyao failed shamefully.

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As they already had three military exoskeletons, the Old Task Force couldn't only share a car. They rented a new SUV.



The two vehicles drove one after another along the road that they took on their first trip into First City and headed toward the bridge which led to the North Shore wastelands.

Jiang Baimian realized that something was amiss the moment they reached the bridge.

Not only did the vehicles and people entering the city have to be examined this time, but those leaving the city also had to be examined.

In front of them were dilapidated vehicles from the ruins. They were carefully searched by the city guards at the bridge's entrance, and it took them several minutes to let one pass.

“What happened?” Jiang Baimian muttered.

Entering the wastelands and hunting down mutated creatures was a rather dangerous matter. With the Old Task Force's current strength, it was impossible for them to think lightly of it. Therefore, they had brought along all their equipment except for the mechanical arm that they had pledged to the Blackshirts.

If they were examined, the three military exoskeletons would be enough to cause a commotion and make the city defense forces view them as terrorists.

A single-man combat rocket launcher was nothing compared to these contraband items.

“Capture the accomplices of the colosseum's assassin? It's to stop them from escaping?” Shang Jianyao—who was stroking his chin—replied.

“That's possible.” Jiang Baimian agreed.

As she swept her gaze, she suddenly saw a familiar figure.

It was a Red Coaster. His black hair was naturally curled, and his skin was dark brown. He was at most 1.65 meters tall.

He was Jadi, the person who had wanted to mug the Old Task Force back then but was forced to help Shang Jianyao and the others pass the city entrance inspection.

At this moment, Jadi approached the city defense armored vehicle and chatted with a few soldiers.

“Go and ask what happened.” Jiang Baimian instructed Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao long had this intention. He excitedly pushed open the door and went down. He passed through the traffic and walked toward Jadi with submachine guns trained on him.

Jadi was also pleasantly surprised to see him. It was obvious that he had yet to escape Inference Clowning’s influence. He quickly said to the soldiers, “My friend, my friend.”

He then pulled Shang Jianyao to the side.

“What happened?” Shang Jianyao asked directly.

Jadi subconsciously looked around. “You know of the assassination in the colosseum the day before yesterday, right? Yes, the assassin was captured on the spot and spilled the beans about his accomplices. Heh, you didn’t expect this, did you? His accomplice is actually the one who previously caused the explosion at the Citizen Conclave! Furthermore, it’s said to be related to a particular military faction. To prevent him from escaping the city, there’s a need to check those leaving the city now.”

“I see... So they are investigating personnel, not contraband?” Shang Jianyao asked in confirmation.

Jadi nodded. “Yes, but they can’t avoid arresting the person if something is found. If you want to leave the city, wait another two days. I can’t do anything about it now—it’s very strict. There are officers on duty.”

As he spoke, he turned around and pointed at the other side of the armored vehicle.

A dark-gray bulletproof command vehicle was parked not far away. A major was seated in the vehicle.

The major was wearing a gray military uniform. His short hair and eyes were brownish-red, and he was muscular. He had a cold bearing and was none other than Ducas, who the Old Task Force knew.

A smile immediately appeared on Shang Jianyao's face.

#### Chapter 404: Jianyao-Styled Conversation

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao—who had gotten back into the car—and heaved a sigh of relief. “Ducas is here? We can try using our relationship to pull some strings.”

With an acquaintance present, everything was easy. Although the muscular man, Ducas, didn't seem easy to talk to and wasn't too approachable, they had Shang Jianyao on their side.

If the situation wasn't suitable or convenient for the usage of Inference Clowning, he could goad Ducas into another round of arm-wrestling.

At this thought, Jiang Baimian didn't turn the car around. She continued following the car in front and slowly inched toward the inspection point.

Upon seeing that the armored vehicle blocking the road was already close, the soldiers in charge of inspection surrounded them. Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao with her eyes.

Shang Jianyao immediately rolled down the window, stuck his head out, and waved at Ducas with a smile. He was wearing a black wig and didn't disguise himself. He wasn't afraid that Ducas wouldn't recognize him.

When Ducas saw the familiar figure waving his hand, his eyelids twitched. He subconsciously turned his head, pretending not to notice.

How could Shang Jianyao permit this? As he waved his hand, he shouted at the top of his lungs, “Ducas! Ducas!”

Are we that close? The blood vessels on Ducas's forehead throbbed, and his body stiffened. He was in a dilemma whether to respond or pretend not to hear him.

On the other side, the soldiers—who were attempting to inspect the Old Task Force's two cars—were momentarily at a loss as to whether to continue or hold back when they heard the other party shout their superior's name.

As the scene became awkward, Shang Jianyao pushed open the door with great initiative and walked straight to Ducas.

The soldiers turned their bodies and cast their gazes at their commander, awaiting his instructions.

Ducas opened his mouth but didn't say anything in the end. His expression just didn't look good.

Shang Jianyao easily walked past the soldiers, passed through the inspection point, and came to the armored command vehicle that Ducas was sitting in.

“Long time no see.” He completely ignored Ducas's expression and greeted him with a bright smile.

Ducas took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “It hasn't been that long.”

Their interaction amused Jiang Baimian, who was a distance away.

A reserved, silent, and cold person would really suffer when facing Shang Jianyao. If one was strong, they could beat Shang Jianyao up. The most terrifying thing was when both parties were on the same level or when one was weaker than Shang Jianyao.

“Who are you looking for?” Shang Jianyao asked casually.

Ducas glanced at him and returned to his original coldness. “You don't need to know.”

Shang Jianyao touched his chin and mimicked Jiang Baimian's tone. “I've already asked around. The person you're looking for is the accomplice of the assassin at the colosseum. He's also the person who caused the explosion at the Citizen Conclave.”

Ducas made no comment.

Shang Jianyao continued, “I heard that the assassin at the colosseum is a believer of Shadow of Distortion, and 'His' believers are widely distributed in the army.”

Ducas's eyelids suddenly rose, and he saw a smile on Shang Jianyao's face.

Shang Jianyao smiled and raised two questions. “There are also Shadow of Distortion believers in First City’s army, right? Furthermore, it’s not the minority, right? The colosseum assassination attempt has deepened the Senate’s suspicion of certain military factions, so you have to prove your innocence?”

Ducas didn’t answer and asked, “Are you leaving the city?”

Shang Jianyao exaggeratedly revealed an ‘I understand.’ He chuckled and said, “We took on the mission to capture the white wolf in the North Shore Mountains. You should know very well that we have to find some insurance for ourselves when entering the wastelands. We have some heavy weapons, so it’s not too convenient for them to be inspected.”

He spoke clearly as if they were good friends.

Jadi—who wasn’t far away—was stunned. He never expected his brother to have such wide connections.

Ducas gave Shang Jianyao a side-glance. “You actually exposed yourself. Aren’t you afraid that I’ll detain you?”

“At this distance...” Shang Jianyao deliberately cast his gaze at the empty area between the two parties.

The two of them were less than a meter apart.

“What are you trying to say?” Ducas had never been amenable to reason or coercion.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “I mean that at this distance, many people around me can hear me if I shout.”

“What would you shout? Help?” Ducas sneered.

Shang Jianyao chuckled. “I’d shout ‘Ducas lost an arm-wrestling match to a woman.’”

“...” Ducas was momentarily speechless.

Shang Jianyao 'threatened' further, "I also have a loudspeaker and a small speaker. Do you want this matter to spread throughout First City?"

Ducas exhaled heavily. "Are you still underage? Will I let you off because of such a threat?"

"Then, we can compete again. If you lose, you have to let us out of the city." Shang Jianyao didn't answer Ducas's question at all. His thoughts skipped as he suggested a new idea.

Ducas did a short recall, and his face suddenly turned livid. He realized that he still didn't have the confidence to win!

The moment he recalled the terrifying strength, he felt that it wasn't something humans could achieve.

"You can also choose to compete with me." Shang Jianyao provoked him with a teasing tone.

Ducas fell silent for a few seconds before saying, "For a team like yours, it's better to leave the city now than stay in the city. However, we still have to conduct the inspection. I'll do it myself. Don't worry; I won't open your boxes. We'll only see if there are any fugitives."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped in congratulations.

This instantly filled Ducas with regret. He didn't wish to acknowledge what he had just said.

Shang Jianyao then changed the topic. "Does the person you're looking for have brown hair, green eyes, and is known to always use a scarf to cover his mouth?"

Ducas nodded and didn't deny it.

This was no secret. After the Citizen Conclave explosion, the sheriffs had been searching for this person everywhere.

“Maybe the scarf is just a deliberate feature.” Shang Jianyao raised his hand again and rubbed his chin. “Even if there are obvious traces around the mouth, there are other ways to hide it.”

Ducas didn't respond but revealed a thoughtful expression.

Shang Jianyao chuckled again. “Final question: What are those people trying to do? What goal are they trying to achieve?”

Ducas fell silent for a moment before saying, “The person who was captured came from the Eastern Army and is a retired officer. He wants to assassinate all the Conservatives and push for a new round of expansion.”

The commander of the Eastern Army Corps was the leader of the Reformists—the newly promoted Elder, General Gaius.

“Is that so...” Shang Jianyao was a man of his word, so he didn't ask further.

He returned to the cars with Ducas and accompanied him to open the doors and trunks to examine every spot where a person could be hidden.

Awakened could screen their consciousness and prevent their peers from sensing them unless they had already made contact.

After confirming that the crate containing the military exoskeleton wasn't problematic, Ducas followed his promise and didn't remove the lid. He only drew a thin military bayonet and inserted it into the cracks in the cardboard box. He stabbed it a few times and stirred it for a while.

Upon seeing that there was no sensation of hitting a human body, nor was there any blood flowing out, Ducas put away his military bayonet and said to the soldiers, “There's nothing wrong with these two cars.”

The soldiers immediately opened the checkpoint and allowed the Old Task Force quintet to drive out of the bridge.

During this process, Shang Jianyao rolled down the window, turned around, and waved at Ducas to express his gratitude.

Ducas didn't feel gratified at all. This fellow's performance made everyone around think that I'm biased!

With a livid expression, he turned around and walked back to the armored command vehicle.

In the Old Task Force's original jeep, Jiang Baimian chuckled. "For Ducas not to flare up on the spot and beat you up, it means that he has good control over his temper."

Jiang Baimian was actually prepared for Ducas to turn hostile suddenly. She was prepared to force her way through the obstacles here.

"I thought we had already established a friendship." Shang Jianyao had a 'surprised' expression.

Jiang Baimian didn't continue the topic and revealed a thoughtful expression. "The assassin at the colosseum actually served in the Eastern Army. The undercurrents of First City are really becoming muddier. Heh heh, it might be a fabrication, or it might be a secret collusion that the Shadow of Distortion's Church is using in an attempt to go alone. In any case, I don't believe that Gaius—who has finally found the Conservatives' weakness—will get someone to do such a thing at this moment.

"Yes, the assassin's accomplice was also the one who carried out the explosion at the Citizen Conclave. That gathering was convened by Gaius..."

"Maybe Gaius's brain isn't normal," Shang Jianyao explained.

As the two of them spoke, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Genava remained silent.

To Long Yuehong, there was no need for him to deliberately find a topic to talk about when interacting with his companions to prevent the atmosphere from becoming awkward. He could enjoy peace as much as he wanted and not worry about anything.

He subconsciously looked out the window and glanced northeast—Ruin No. 13 was there.



After Geneva's repeated monitoring and measurements from different locations, the Old Task Force finally confirmed that the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station was really in that ruin and that its location had never changed.

This made Long Yuehong feel like he was in a ghost story.

Fortunately, we're going to the mountains this time... Long Yuehong didn't dare to voice his wistful emotions out loud in case it happened.

#### Chapter 405: Advance Base Camp

The North Shore Mountains in the Red River wastelands were a vast stretch. There were many mutated creatures, Old World military bases, and research centers. Valuable discoveries were often made.

As many of the roads here had been destroyed and couldn't be repaired, and the environment was very complicated, it was difficult for First City's troops to enter on a large scale. They could only explore using platoons or small teams. Therefore, it became a paradise for Ruin Hunters.

Countless people came and went every year, working ceaselessly for survival. Several places in the mountains naturally formed different-sized advance base camps. They provided food, water, weapons, ammunition, bandages, fuel, batteries, and other necessities for Ruin Hunters that tried to enter the mountains.

At the same time, these advance base camps provided a relatively safe resting space for the Ruin Hunters that returned, allowing them to be treated for any ordinary diseases or relatively light injuries in a timely fashion.

As long as one could pay with the necessary supplies, one could even hire a helicopter to evacuate them to First City regardless of the severity of the injuries for emergency medical treatment. Such services were said to be related to the military.

The camp that the Old Task Force had arrived at was the closest to the mountains. Vehicles couldn't navigate beyond that point, forcing personnel to go by foot only.

Jiang Baimian looked over and took in the camp's general appearance.

It was built using an Old World ancient castle as its foundation. It had a stone wall as its perimeter, and its interior was a five-story main building and secondary buildings scattered around.

There was a relatively spacious square that was likely used to train soldiers in ancient times. Now, it was filled with cars.

Jiang Baimian noticed that apart from the dense green plants on the castle's outer walls, there were also a large number of bullet holes and obvious burn marks.

All of this meant that this place wasn't safe all the time.

After driving into the castle and finding a place to stop, Jiang Baimian led Shang Jianyao and the others through the sparse number of Ruin Hunters and entered the Coss Bar on the main building's first floor.

Although it was called a bar, there was no alcohol most of the time. By a stroke of luck, a caravan might occasionally bring some private brew over for sale.

Long Yuehong casually observed the area and realized that most Ruin Hunters used it as a restaurant. The only man sitting in front of the bar was holding a cup that wasn't filled with alcohol; instead, it was some sticky blob.

The man looked to be in his thirties. His beard was messy, and it was obvious that he hadn't shaved for days. The lack of thickness also meant that the man used to tidy his appearance.

At this moment, he drank the cup's contents and occasionally made chewing sounds. He looked down at the damaged watch in his palm with a pained expression.

Shang Jianyao walked over, pulled over a stool, and inquired as though he knew him. "What happened?"

The man turned his head to glance at him and smirked. "New here? For the white wolf? I advise you to give up. There are plenty of opportunities in the mountains. Don't be blinded by the high rewards."

Jiang Baimian also sat down and asked as if in thought, "Is this a lesson you learned?"

The blond, green-eyed man's expression changed slightly before he fell completely silent. After a few seconds, he sighed and said, "That's very obvious. In order to seize the opportunity in the mountains and ensure our own safety, hunters need to form teams. Just like you, there are very few lone rangers here. They are often terrifyingly powerful."

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao to ask, the man drank his cup's contents and chewed twice. "I no longer have any companions..."

As he spoke, his voice was low and deep.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and gently asked, "They died at the white wolf's claws?"

The man put down the cup and covered his face with his hands. After a while, he said, "We confirmed the white wolf's activity patterns and believed that we could hit it with a tranquilizer gun from beyond its strange bewitchment range. B-but it discovered our existence at some point in time. It actually changed directions at the last minute and circled to the spot where we were hiding... T-then, can you imagine the outcome?"

Toward the end, the man—who had already lowered his palms—had a panicked and terrified expression as if he was still immersed in the 'nightmare' that he couldn't wake up from.

Upon seeing that the Old Task Force didn't respond, the corners of his mouth twitched as he frantically said, "I don't know how I escaped. Maybe the white wolf was satiated. I'll never forget the way they looked at me. It was unfamiliar, hateful, and cold. It's like I've become that wolf's servant."

Phew... The man exhaled and said, "Later, I mustered my courage and returned there, only to discover this watch. It's Sachi's most precious item, and it's wrecked..."

He didn't continue speaking as if he didn't want to admit that his companions might've been wiped out.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others looked at each other as a thought surfaced in their minds: Can the white wolf sense human consciousness? Therefore, it easily resolved the Ruin Hunters' ambush.

"That's unfair," Shang Jianyao suddenly said.

This time, Jiang Baimian roughly understood what he meant.

Human Awakened couldn't sense beasts, but mutated creatures could discover human consciousness.

The man was stunned. "What's unfair?"

"It's unfair to humans," Shang Jianyao replied truthfully, but he didn't explain the full statement.

The man agreed deeply. "That's right. Why can a beast be so strong and have such strange abilities?"

He glanced at Jiang Baimian and the others again. "Those who encountered the white wolf and returned alive have all given up. However, there is an endless stream of confident rookies such as you guys."

At this moment, he saw Genava and was stunned. "You guys brought a robot... Good luck."

It was common knowledge among Ruin Hunters that robots could resist such special traits.

Jiang Baimian didn't answer and instead asked, "Can you share your summary of the white wolf's activity patterns with us? We will pay for it."

"That's a good deal." The man laughed self-deprecatingly. "We'll talk about it when we get out. There are too many people here."

"Alright, how should I address you?" Jiang Baimian asked. She had done her best to disguise herself to look ordinary with makeup.

The man casually replied, "Waite."

This is as ordinary as a fake name... Long Yuehong criticized inwardly.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao asked out of curiosity, “What are you drinking? It smells good.”

Waite pointed at the bar owner. “The meat brew here.”

The boss was an elderly man with white hair. He looked up and said, “The most commonly harvested prey in the mountains that are delicious, unique, and not dangerous have all been acquired by the nobles. The rest are either poor-quality meat, sour, and smelly, or have some problems. They aren’t suitable for eating often and can’t be sold for a high price.

“But it’s meat after all. I acquire them and turn them into meat paste. Coupled with some plants in the mountains, I stew them into such a thing. It smells good, but it doesn’t taste that good. It just satisfies some cravings.”

Jiang Baimian thoughtfully asked, “There should be people who specially buy such meat to eat, right?”

“Very few people have a choice, but many people don’t have a choice,” the boss replied concisely.

In the brief silence, Long Yuehong thought of something and quickly asked, “Is there a Hunter’s Guild office here?”

Waite laughed when he heard that. “How can there be?”

“Why not?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Waite pointed outside. “This place has been destroyed twice in the past ten years. It’s unknown how many people have died because of the large number of Heartless attacks and the migration of mutated creatures. How would the guild’s employees dare to come? In any case, it’s only half a day’s journey from here. People can take the opportunity to relax when submitting missions in First City.”

Long Yuehong stopped asking when he thought of the various marks on the outer wall.

Waite pointed at the boss again. “It’s not that there’s no other way. Who would be willing to open a bar here?”

“In any case, I’m already old,” replied the boss calmly.

Waite turned to look at Shang Jianyao and the others. “Ashlandic... You guys only came recently? It’s no wonder you don’t know about these matters.”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Shang Jianyao didn’t hide anything and directly asked, “Have you seen a Ruin Hunter named Ferrington? He’s the same height as him, has grayish hair, dark-brown eyes, and likes to use a shotgun.”

The ‘he’ Shang Jianyao was referring to was Long Yuehong.

Ferrington was the Ruin Hunter that the Blackshirts’ second boss—Terrence—had mentioned, the one who knew about the Mirror Church.

As Waite shook his head, the bar owner replied, “He went to chase after the white wolf. I don’t know if he will return.”

“Okay.” As Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, a person walked into the bar.

The person was thin and tanned. He was in his thirties and less than 1.7 meters tall. He wore a long black T-shirt and dark-blue canvas pants with traces of patching. This was a familiar face—the Ruin Hunter who had first informed the Old Task Force of the information—Wang Fugui.

Chapter 406: Lone Ranger

Wang Fugui had a utility belt around his waist with two holstered pistols. Apart from that, he had no other weapons.

The moment he entered the bar, he greeted the different Ruin Hunters with familiarity. “Williamson, how’s it going? Did you find the abandoned military base?”

“Locke, you’re still alive, eh? Weren’t you looking for that white wolf?”

“What prey did you get today?”

“The Heartless and mutated creatures in the mountains have been restless recently, eh?”

...

Wang Fugui—an Ashlandic—acted like the area’s boss. He knew everyone and could chat with anyone.

Just like that, he slowly walked to the bar counter and rapped the table. “A cup of meat brew.”

As he spoke, he turned his head and looked at Waite. This made him catch sight of Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others.

A surprised expression immediately appeared on Wang Fugui’s face. After a few seconds, he laughed and said, “You guys still came in the end.”

He deliberately didn’t use Ashlandic.

“You recognized us?” Shang Jianyao had an ‘incredulous’ expression. Although he disguised himself less than the two ladies by only wearing a wig and slightly altering his looks, it still wasn’t easy for Wang Fugui—who he had only met once—to recognize him.

Wang Fugui glanced at Jiang Baimian and smiled. “You guys left a deep impression on me. A team like yours doesn’t look like Ruin Hunters. Yo, there’s a robot now?”

The latter part of his praises was sincere. No matter where, it was enviable for a Ruin Hunter team to be equipped with a robot.

“This isn’t too rare in the area around First City, right?” Jiang Baimian replied in a rhetorical manner. Without waiting for Wang Fugui to speak, she asked curiously, “Have you encountered the white wolf?”

“Not yet.” Wang Fugui shook his head in self-deprecation. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be seeing me. Although the guild has provided some useful information, many Ruin Hunters have died or disappeared.”

At this point, he patted Waite's shoulder. "Take this person for example. He's lost all his companions but don't underestimate him. The fact that he returned alive means that he's not as ordinary as he looks."

Waite's expression immediately changed slightly before he retorted, "How am I ordinary in appearance?"

He didn't deny that he's not ordinary... How much of his sadness, fear, and panic was faked? Or could it be that a relatively strong Ruin Hunter like him has been scared out of his wits because of the white wolf? As Jiang Baimian muttered inwardly, her expression didn't change.

"That depends on who you're comparing with." Wang Fugui didn't have the intention to keep the argument going and easily parried Waite's question. He smiled at the Old Task Force members and said, "There's no guild or notary here. There's only the most basic and relatively weak order, so you have to be careful about everything. Did Waite offer to sell you information on the white wolf's whereabouts?"

"Heh heh, he's indeed a sad soul, but this doesn't stop him from thinking of ways to earn money. This is instinctual for most Ruin Hunters. I'm not saying that there's definitely something wrong with his information—he'd fall out with me for that. I can only remind you that any information you obtain or hear here has to be verified multiple times before you can trust it." Wang Fugui acted very friendly as if he were taking care of an 'old friend.'

"We were the ones who took the initiative to mention this." Jiang Baimian helped Waite explain.

Shang Jianyao curiously asked, "Then, do we have to verify what you just said from various sources before we can trust it?"

Wang Fugui was rendered speechless. After a long while, he mocked himself. "You're right."

"Haha." Upon seeing this, Waite laughed. He wiped the corners of his eyes and said, "Wang, you can finally understand how I usually feel."

He then exhaled and said, "I still insist on staying here and selling information and not escaping to hide under a blanket to cry because they still have family and need money and supplies."



Wang Fugui replied seriously, “You looked like you had a complete breakdown back then. I even suspected that you would go crazy at any moment. I never expected you to overcome the trauma.”

That... Long Yuehong’s preconceived image of Waite changed once again. He originally believed that the latter was a pitiful but lucky person who had lost his companions. After Wang Fugui exposed that Waite had been selling information on the white wolf during this period, he wrote him off as a wily old fox. He might be sad, but it was mostly for business. There was no reason to condemn him since most people in the Ashlands were like that. Everything was for survival—survival was everything.

Now, Long Yuehong had raised his evaluation of Waite and found it difficult to describe this person in specific words. He felt that the latter was a complex individual. He had a good side, but he was also cunning. There were even times when he had to be vigilant of him.

Wang Fugui looked at the Old Task Force again and continued the previous topic. “It’s not too peaceful here; someone might pull out a gun and kill you at any moment. Heh heh, where’s your car? Is anyone watching it? I’m afraid you won’t be able to find it when you return.”

“We installed alarms and surveillance cameras,” Shang Jianyao replied sincerely.

This was the electronic equipment they had bought when dealing with the real Father. The Old Task Force had sold a portion of it and left a portion for emergencies.

“...” Wang Fugui suddenly felt that his warning was a little groundless.

The team opposite him seemed to have deviated from the level of needing people to guard them. Compared to most Ruin Hunters, they were at least one level higher in technology.

Some Hunters knew how to use electronic items, but they couldn’t afford or obtain them. Some simply didn’t know how to use them.

Jiang Baimian smiled and resolved the other party’s embarrassment. “With a robot, we don’t have to worry about these matters.”

“That’s true.” Wang Fugui took the cup from the boss and chewed on the meat brew.

The Old Task Force also ordered a cup each and tasted the advance base camp's specialty.

As for Genava, he had already found a charging area. There was a sign erected there with the price written on it.

The meat brew was very raw—this was Long Yuehong's first impression. Following that, a slightly sour taste spread, but it was suppressed by the rich vegetative fragrance, making it less unbearable.

When mixed together, the tastes actually weren't bad.

After finishing the meat brew and munching on a piece of bread, Wang Fugui stood up and waved his hand. "I'm getting some rest. You can come to me if you encounter any difficulties."

As he spoke, he smiled. "It'll cost ya."

After watching Wang Fugui leave, Waite looked at Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others. "Have you known each other for a long time?"

"No, we just met him once somewhere," Jiang Baimian replied truthfully. Then, she deliberately showed a curious expression. "Do you know what kind of person he is?"

Waite fell silent for two seconds before saying, "I just said that Hunters here often need to form a team to ensure their safety. Only a few are lone rangers—he's one of them. He goes on expeditions with people very occasionally."

Long Yuehong's eyelids twitched as he subconsciously glanced at the bar's entrance. He remembered that Waite's evaluation of lone rangers was: Terrifyingly powerful.

After spending 20 Oray to buy Waite's information, Jiang Baimian and the others stood up and prepared to return to their parking lot.

They didn't ask how bad the public security here was because Bai Chen had informed them in advance. There was no public security here unless one was willing to pay.

A team of First City soldiers was in charge of maintaining order in this advance base camp. Their main responsibility was to monitor the changes in the mountains and warn the outside world in time.

To them, as long as the Ruin Hunters didn't start a large-scale gunfight, it wasn't their business. After all, the ones who died weren't their acquaintances.

Therefore, it wasn't rare for people to be mugged, robbed, or even assassinated in the advance base camp.

Waite's underlying meaning about lone rangers was: You have to band together to survive.

It was the same in many places in the Ashlands.

Perhaps Genova's image had intimidated the people eyeing them in the dark. The alarm that the Old Task Force had placed in the car wasn't activated, and the surveillance cameras didn't capture anyone's attempts to approach.

As they had spent too much time driving on the mountain road, the sky was already very dark. The echo of crows cawing sounded not far away.

Jiang Baimian pressed the jeep's hood and ordered, "Same old rules: Sleep in the car and take turns to do night duty."

This advance base camp had a hotel that provided a safe parking lot, but not many Ruin Hunters stayed there. On the one hand, they trusted the guns in their hands and their companions they had known for many years. On the other hand, they couldn't bear to pay for it.

The only reason the Old Task Force didn't stay was that Jiang Baimian wanted her team members to adapt to such an environment.

Just as Bai Chen had said previously, the wilderness nomads and Ruin Hunters in the Ashlands led a life as though there wasn't a tomorrow. It was gloomy, depressing, and painful.

In such a situation, they naturally found ways to vent their feelings in various ways. They would occasionally become ostentatious and wanton.

At a glance, Long Yuehong saw a large number of modified vehicles and motorcycles. This was completely different from the Rootless's modifications. It emphasized uniqueness and personality; there were all kinds of strange designs.

Apart from this, men and women wouldn't hold back on having a relationship that exceeded friendship—provided that they could guarantee their own safety—when they encountered each other. This was as long as one didn't have a partner and found the other party pleasing to the eye. They used this method to forget about the tomorrow that would eventually come, choosing to indulge in happy times.

They naturally couldn't bear to use the camp hotel, nor did they dare to go to the wild forest outside. They could either make do in a car or find something to cover them in a corner.

As a result, some sounds drilled into Long Yuehong's ears from time to time, and some of the shaking of cars left his face flushed.

At this moment, Geneva suggested, "Why don't I be on guard duty the entire night? There are enough batteries anyway."

"No," Jiang Baimian said seriously. "Everyone has their own responsibilities. You can't replace them every time."

As Geneva analyzed this sentence, a loud roar suddenly sounded from somewhere in the mountains. "Howl!"

This instantly gave Long Yuehong and Bai Chen the illusion that they had returned to Swamp Ruin 1. But the roar wasn't that terrifying or exaggerated, nor did anyone respond.

"That white wolf?" Shang Jianyao was instantly thrilled.

Chapter 407: Depressing and Indulgent

Nobody could answer Shang Jianyao's question because not many who had seen the white wolf returned alive. Not one had heard its howl at close distances.

After confirming the order for night duty, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Geneva each entered the car. They either laid down, sat down, prepared to sleep, or switch to power conservation mode.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen stayed beside a car and patrolled back and forth. At the same time, they kept a look out for each other's backs.

Not far from them, a small, tattered, and colorful car with abstract art painted on it wobbled. It alternated between fast and slow, and it took a while for it to settle down.

One of the greatest benefits of this advance base camp was that it had street lamps, searchlights, and a relatively sufficient supply of electricity. After all, the First City troops stationed here had to be wary of the Heartless and mutated creatures' attacks. Therefore, they were equipped with many diesel power generators.

This also meant that the camp wasn't pitch-black at night. The areas with street lamps were relatively bright, and the periphery was covered in shadows. This resulted in Long Yuehong always seeing things he shouldn't see.

He felt embarrassed about this, but he couldn't hide his curiosity as he stole a few glances.

Suddenly, the back door opened, and a young man with a naked upper body alighted.

He wore loose gray pants and buckled his belt as he smiled at Long Yuehong—who happened to be looking over. "I didn't expect there to be a kind person helping us keep guard."

Long Yuehong—who could tell that the other party was joking—politely replied, "We just came back."

He noticed that the man was relatively young and was about the same age as him. He was only 1.7 meters tall and had brown hair, green eyes, and many freckles on his face.

Long Yuehong straightened his back.

As the two of them spoke, the door on the other side of the car was pushed open. A relatively tall woman appeared.

The woman had one arm across her chest to cover her exposed skin, and the other hand reached for the trunk to make it easier for her to look at Long Yuehong.

Her skin was relatively rough, and her appearance was relatively ordinary. However, she was relatively young, and her hair color was very special—red.

At this moment, she didn't show any embarrassment and openly said to the man, "You did well. I hope there will be a next time, but don't let me provide the condoms again."

This topic is so explosive... Long Yuehong was speechless and could only watch.

The man chuckled and said, "Actually, I brought it. But since you were so proactive, there was no need to waste any time."

The woman opposite him ignored him and glanced at Long Yuehong. "Ashlandic? Your skin looks better than mine. Heh heh, I haven't experienced an Ashlandic before. I'm too tired today. Shall we make a date tomorrow at this time?"

She was so direct that Long Yuehong didn't know how to respond.

Fortunately, Bai Chen helped him out in time and coldly said, "He doesn't need it."

"Oh... Your girlfriend? Not bad." The woman smiled casually. "But don't you want to have a more eclectic experience? Maybe we'll die tomorrow or the day after. If we don't enjoy it now, we won't have a chance. Different people, people from different regions, and even two people who look similar will give you a completely different experience..."

She didn't continue because Bai Chen had already raised her Orange rifle and aimed at her.

"Alright." The woman made a surrendering gesture with one hand and retracted her body. She put on her clothes in the car and walked off into the camp with her weapon.

After Bai Chen patrolled to the other side, the young man—who was still half-naked—sat at the edge of the car. He pressed the open door with one hand and stroked his chin with the other. He suppressed his voice and said, "Your girlfriend is very cool."

“She’s not bad, not bad...” Long Yuehong replied patronizingly.

The young man smiled and said, “Actually, Aphra’s right. We Ruin Hunters don’t have hopes for tomorrow. Let’s enjoy ourselves while we’re still alive so that we don’t have any regrets in death.”

Upon seeing Bai Chen walk over, his expression turned serious. “How may I address you? My name is Bob.”

Long Yuehong maintained a polite attitude. “Gu Zhiyong.”

“You Ashlandics have such complicated names. I’ll call you Gu, alright?” The freckled Bob smiled. “You guys are new here too? For that white wolf?”

“Yes,” Long Yuehong replied concisely.

“Good luck to you and us.” Bob was a talkative person. “We’re also here for the white wolf. You just can’t ignore the payment.”

As he spoke, he revealed a look of anticipation. “As long as we can complete this mission, the few of us don’t need to be Ruin Hunters anymore. We can get some farmland in First City and settle down. We don’t have to worry about hunger and cold anymore. When the time comes, my parents won’t have to work so hard anymore. My younger brother and sister will also lead a different life.”

Upon hearing that Bob’s parents were still alive and that he had a younger brother and sister, Long Yuehong felt a little closer to him. He couldn’t help but give a warning. “This mission is very dangerous.”

“I know. We bought some information from the guild, and many Ruin Hunters here. After comparison and verification, we have a mature plan. Heh heh, I can’t tell you the exact details. You definitely know the core point: It’s to maintain a distance and rely on firearms for victory. My marksmanship is pretty good,” Bob said proudly.

Without waiting for Long Yuehong’s response, he continued, “Actually, after completing this mission and obtaining a large piece of farmland, I will still be a Ruin Hunter. However, I won’t go

on missions anymore. I will take time out every year to come to a similar camp and use my body to comfort the depressed ladies...”

Long Yuehong was dumbfounded. “Y-you don’t plan on getting married?”

“Why should I get married? Isn’t it good to experience more? There are so many women and different types and flavors...” Bob said frankly. “Besides, I don’t want my child to be born in this era. That would be too painful. If I do well in the future, I might consider it.”

Long Yuehong held it in for a long time before finally asking, “You can find a prostitute. Why do you have to continue being a Ruin Hunter?”

Bob chuckled. “That costs money. Well, that’s actually not the point. The point is that I like it when the other party enjoys it as well, get it? Here, every hug isn’t for money. She’s pleasing me, and so am I. We can obtain satisfaction from each other, relax, and comfort from each other. This makes me feel like I’m needed.”

Long Yuehong couldn’t argue with this theory at all.

Before long, Bob’s companions returned from elsewhere. Two men and a woman—all of them looked satisfied. However, it was obvious that a man and a woman were a couple.

As they took turns resting, Bai Chen took the opportunity when they crossed paths to whisper to Long Yuehong, “This is how most Ruin Hunters are. Only a few aren’t like that.”

Long Yuehong subconsciously wanted to ask if she was like them previously, but he quickly recalled that Bai Chen was considered a lone ranger in the past. She relied on a robot and only occasionally teamed up with others.

“This is the Ashlands,” he replied.

It was both depressing and indulgent.

Bai Chen glanced at Bob’s car and added, “Although what he said is romantic, most female Ruin Hunters require payment in the form of money or supplies unless you are willing to spend time nurturing a little affection through shared experiences, looks, and eloquence. Therefore, male Ruin



Hunters are mostly lonely. When they have some money and supplies, they will often stay in settlements with a Hunter's Guild. It's more convenient to find prostitutes, just like Weed City.

“As for female Ruin Hunters, the premise of choosing to indulge is often that there are safety measures. However, there are also those who don't mind. Many of them are actually more willing to develop a fixed relationship with a male in the same team. This will allow them to gain a stable supporter—a trustworthy protector who they can entrust their backs with—and they won't have to worry too much about safety in that area.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was stunned.

As Bai Chen turned around to patrol the other side of the vehicles, she left him with two sentences: “Everything is for survival. Isn't it good to receive some money, get some supplies, and exchange for a supporter while enjoying yourself?”

...

After comparing many pieces of information, the Old Task Force roughly grasped the white wolf's activity patterns and chose an ambush spot.

Although it was called an ambush, they were actually using themselves as bait to bait the cunning prey.

When the white wolf circled around and quietly approached them, it would discover that not only were they not bewitched, but they also had a robot with them.

At the same time, Jiang Baimian added a condition when choosing the location both for convenience and safety—it had to be reachable by car.

After leaving the advance base camp and turning into a mountain road, the Old Task Force encountered Bob's fancy car.

Bob enthusiastically rolled down the window and waved at them. “Good luck! You have to be lucky!”

“You guys have to be lucky too!” Before Long Yuehong could even speak, Shang Jianyao waved his hand in response as if he had encountered an old friend.

The two parties drove for a while before splitting up at a fork. It was obvious that the two parties’ plans and destinations were quite different.

Jiang Baimian looked ahead and said as she drove, “I hope we can finish off that white wolf as soon as possible. This way, fellows like him will stop throwing themselves at death.”

It was obvious that she was reminded of Waite—whose companions had been completely wiped out.

“I’ll try my best to persuade it to be obediently captured by us,” Shang Jianyao said seriously.

“You can speak wolf?” Jiang Baimian asked in amusement. Just as she said that, she suddenly recalled Shang Jianyao’s response—a howl—in the Blackmarsh Wilderness.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao didn’t do that this time. He thought for a moment and said, “I developed a set of hand gestures. I don’t know if it can understood them.”

“...” Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled.

The mountain road was difficult to traverse. The Old Task Force took almost three hours before they finally entered the designated ambush spot.

They hid their vehicles and got into position. They hid themselves and waited at the spot where the intelligence said that the white wolf would pass by at noon to drink water from a clean stream.

Chapter 408: Different

As it was unknown how long they would have to wait, Bai Chen was the only one in the Old Task Force who wore the relatively new M-45 military exoskeleton. She stayed in a concealed spot with Long Yuehong to conserve electricity.

When the time came, she would cooperate with Geneva and be in charge of capturing the prey if it fled.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao were elsewhere, while Genova was solely responsible for a single spot. They maintained their distance to the greatest extent to prevent themselves from being attacked and wiped out.

Although the target was a mutated creature, Jiang Baimian still strictly followed the tactical manual's rules and made such arrangements without letting down her guard.

At the same time, Jiang Baimian forbade her team members from applying insect repellent because she was worried about the sharp sense of smell of the white wolf—a canine creature.

Although the role of bait was to be discovered, the discovery had to be natural and reasonable. There couldn't be any flaws.

It was very normal for Ruin Hunters not to expect the white wolf to be able to sense human consciousness and not be suspected. However, it seemed foolish to use an item with a stimulating smell while not even knowing how to hide their scent when ambushing prey—or rather, it made them look like rookies.

Real rookies didn't dare to take on such missions.

Jiang Baimian didn't know what level of intelligence the white wolf had, but if something was too abnormal, even ordinary beasts wouldn't take the bait. After all, not all animals were silly roe deer.

The sun rose into the sky bit by bit. Long Yuehong hid in the grass and heard a buzzing sound echo around him.

Having known the plan in advance, he was currently wearing a long-sleeved shirt and pants. However, there were always places on his body that couldn't be covered by cloth. If he wasn't careful, he might suffer a slightly swollen bump that was itchy and painful.

He scratched the itch very slightly and drove away the mosquitoes slightly before returning to silence.

Time slowly passed as this kept continuing.

Elsewhere, Shang Jianyao wasn't stingy with using the Ring of Blindness to enhance his perception range. In any case, he wasn't hungry now, and he probably didn't have a chance to eat during the ambush.

Of course, he couldn't keep using it. There was a limit to the number of times he could use it unless he could find the corresponding Mind Corridor-level Awakened to charge it.

Coupled with Jiang Baimian's perception of bioelectric signals, he used it to monitor the nearby situation once in a while.

Fortunately, it didn't consume too much of the item's energy if one only sensed the area and not used its abilities.

Suddenly, Jiang Baimian frowned and said, "Try sensing the area again."

Shang Jianyao looked up at the blazing sun, causing the accessory weaved from black hair on his wrist to glow like fire again. He then said, "There's a large number of human consciousnesses."

Jiang Baimian confirmed the situation she had sensed.

It's another Ruin Hunter team. They're also here to set an ambush? Jiang Baimian subconsciously had this thought. But in the blink of an eye, she recalled herself and the others who had been 'charmed' by Qiao Chu back then.

Many of the Ruin Hunters who previously hunted the white wolf are missing... Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she picked up the walkie-talkie and ordered, "Change positions immediately and search for cover."

Without asking why, Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva quickly left their original ambush spot and found a hiding spot that wasn't that concealed.

Thanks to their habit of observing the environment and familiarizing themselves with the terrain, they knew where they could hide in the surrounding area. They almost didn't waste any time searching.

In just seven to eight seconds after they changed positions, a group of people appeared in the nearby forest.

These people wore tattered clothes, but they held weapons in their hands. There were rifles, submachine guns, grenade launchers, and rocket launchers.

Long Yuehong looked over and realized that these people didn't have hunched backs. Their expressions weren't hideous, and their eyes seemed normal.

They weren't Heartless, but their faces were filled with hatred as if they were searching for an enemy who had killed their father and snatched their wife.

At this moment, Long Yuehong's gaze suddenly froze. He saw a familiar face—Bob!

It was Bob from the chat last night—who was determined to comfort all female Ruin Hunters! The Ruin Hunter—who wanted to find the white wolf to change his life—was with his companions in the crowd. They held rifles and wore looks of hatred.

This made him appear so unfamiliar.

The next second, a few rockets were fired, flying toward the three spots where the Old Task Force was hiding.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Thanks to their cover and early precautions, the Old Task Force members weren't harmed during the explosion.

The group of Ruin Hunters rushed over and fired indiscriminately.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian acutely noticed a white figure in the forest—that giant wolf!

It looked rather handsome, and its eyes were jade green.

“Old Ge, chase after it!” Jiang Baimian immediately ordered. From her point of view, with the Old Task Force’s firepower, cooperation, and abilities, it wouldn’t be a problem for them to finish off this group of ragtag Ruin Hunters even if Genova was the only one. The only thing they needed to consider was how many people they could save in the end.

Genava also thought so. His analysis told him that this was the best plan, so he rushed out and stomped into the forest with an indomitable will.

Bai Chen—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—suddenly jumped out as well. At a height that exceeded human limits, she aimed the submachine gun that came with her equipment below.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

She didn’t deliberately avoid the enemy’s vital spots and finished firing as quickly as possible.

The Ruin Hunter—who was running toward her and Long Yuehong—collapsed like culled wheat.

A large number of Ruin Hunters—who were charging toward Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s hiding spots—suddenly lost the ability to pull the trigger.

Right on the heels of that, Jiang Baimian casually raised her assault rifle and fired a series of rounds without sticking her head out. However, nearly every shot she fired hit their intended targets as if a pair of eyes in the void was helping her aim.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao also drew two pistols and fired at the group of Ruin Hunters.

He and Jiang Baimian also didn’t deliberately avoid the enemy’s vital spots. After all, they were made of flesh and blood. They couldn’t be careless even for stray bullets. Holding back at this moment was equivalent to inflicting harm on themselves.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The group of Ruin Hunters seemed to have lost their minds. Even though Bai Chen—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—instantly killed many, they still charged forward and fired without any regard for their lives. Two to three people approached Long Yuehong's hiding spot.

Long Yuehong was no longer the young rookie from back then. Taking advantage of the other party's opening, he raised his Berserker assault rifle and fired a short burst.

A Ruin Hunter immediately fell to the ground—his chest completely torn apart, and his body almost dismembered.

Long Yuehong bent down and dodged the subsequent counterattack. He then locked onto another target. But this time, he didn't pull the trigger in time.

The target was Bob. It was the freckled Bob who had laughed and chatted with him last night.

At this moment, Long Yuehong suddenly felt like they had swapped positions. He was facing himself, and he felt like he was on the brink of death.

His fingers were momentarily unable to exert strength.

The next second, Bob fired.

Bang!

His rifle spewed out flames.

Although Long Yuehong was temporarily soft-hearted and couldn't fire, he could still observe the situation and dodge in time. He retreated into cover and dodged the shot.

Bob then crossed his cover, jumped in front of him, and aimed his rifle at him again.

While feeling regret, Long Yuehong stomped his foot, exerted strength with his waist, and lunged horizontally to the side. As he looked at Bob—who had a look of hatred and a deep sense of unfamiliarity—a sentence the latter had said flashed across his mind instantly: "When the time

comes, my parents won't have to work so hard anymore. My younger brother and sister will also lead a different life..."

As these thoughts raced through his mind, the flustered Long Yuehong pulled the trigger.

Ta! Ta! Ta!

The Berserker assault rifle fired several rounds.

At such a close distance, Bob didn't dodge a single shot. Blood bloomed from his body.

Thud!

He fell to the ground; his expression was first one of pain before it turned blank.

He saw Long Yuehong and finally seemed to understand his situation and regained some clarity of mind. He opened his mouth, and a hopeful and pleading expression appeared on his face. He was like a drowning person trying to grasp the last life-saving straw.

However, he ultimately didn't have the time to say anything. In just a few seconds, he opened his eyes wide and stopped breathing.

Long Yuehong glanced at him and didn't hesitate to mount the assault rifle over his cover and fire at the remaining Ruin Hunters.

After all the enemies were dealt with as they collapsed to the ground—either moaning in pain or being completely still—only then did Long Yuehong gasp for breath, his eyes a blur.

At this moment, Genava's voice sounded from the walkie-talkie. "The target has escaped into a cave. It's very deep, so I didn't dare to chase after it for the time being."

Jiang Baimian glanced at the Ruin Hunters and the blood everywhere and shouted at Long Yuehong, "Little Red, stay here with Shang Jianyao and me; we'll save as many as we can. Little White, go meet up with Old Ge. Don't be in a rush to enter the cave and check if there are any other exits in the vicinity."



Bai Chen replied with her actions. Wearing the military exoskeleton, she then disappeared into the forest with a few leaps.

After taking a deep breath, Long Yuehong immediately ran to Bob's side and squatted down to provide him first aid.

However, the Ruin Hunter was already dead.

Meanwhile, Shang Jianyao—who was treating the injured—suddenly said, “This doesn't feel like Qiao Chu.”

An idea suddenly came to Jiang Baimian. “That's right! After the white wolf fled, the Bewitchment was still maintained!”

The hunters were still ‘charging!’

This was clearly beyond its range. After all, the four carbon-based Old Task Force members didn't sense a charm that exceeded that of beasts.

Back then, Qiao Chu's Bewitchment was only effective at a certain distance.

Jiang Baimian immediately used the walkie-talkie to inform the other two members. “Old Ge, Little White, pay attention. The target's ability might very well not be Bewitchment, but a similar and more persistent ability.”

She and Shang Jianyao also increased the speed at which they saved the lightly injured. As for the seriously injured, they really didn't have the time. By the time they had time, most of them were dead.

The premise for them to save the lightly injured was that the other party had already recovered and was no longer controlled by the white wolf.

After a while, Jiang Baimian stood up and shouted at Long Yuehong, “Phew, I'm done. Little Red, let's go meet up with Old Ge and Little White now.”

Long Yuehong nodded with a dazed expression.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “No, there are too many people here. What if our cars are stolen? Stay behind and watch the cars.”

Chapter 409: Holding a Candle to the Devil

Long Yuehong replied with a stunned expression, “Alright.”

Jiang Baimian then said, “We’ll help you put on the military exoskeleton then. This way, even if there’s an accident, you can resolve them more easily.”

“Sure, sure.” Long Yuehong snapped out of his reverie and quickly nodded.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian immediately divided the work. One remained on guard, while the other helped Long Yuehong wear the AC-45 military exoskeleton they had bought from Lehman.

“If anyone proposes to contact the advance base camp later to seek help, give them the go ahead,” Jiang Baimian instructed as she carried the remaining old military exoskeleton.

She and Shang Jianyao quickly ran into the forest and disappeared from Long Yuehong’s sight.

After moving forward for a while, Jiang Baimian stopped and looked back. “Why don’t I stay here and watch Little Red in case anything happens to him?”

“He can handle himself,” Shang Jianyao said seriously. “Trust him.”

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before saying, “Alright.”

As the team leader, she was more eager to enter the cave, personally observe the environment, and set up the subsequent hunting operation.

The two of them didn’t delay any further. According to Geneva and Bai Chen’s descriptions and the various traces along the way, they rushed toward their target destination.

In the area where the intense gunfight had taken place, Long Yuehong—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—stood guard at the spot where the two cars were hidden. He dazedly looked at Bob’s corpse and the weeds more than ten meters away.

He then exhaled and perked up. He cast his gaze at the Ruin Hunters—who had received first aid treatment for their injuries.

Some of these people sat with their backs against the trees, moaning in pain from time to time. Some of them weren’t fully awake yet, and they sat there like wooden sculptures. Some panted and constantly observed the environment as if they wanted to confirm their current situation and think about what to do next.

The seriously injured people were basically dead, and the ground was strewn with corpses.

This was different from the riot in Weed City. Most of the deaths were a result of the Old Task Force.

Long Yuehong monitored the area instinctively, but his mind was empty. He didn’t know what to think or what he should be thinking until he saw a Ruin Hunter with relatively light injuries stagger to his feet and walk toward him.

His slightly blank eyes quickly returned to normal as he looked at the Ruin Hunter. “What’s the matter?”

He asked very politely, but the assault rifle in his hand was already raised. As for the grenade launcher, laser, and mini submachine gun attached to the military exoskeleton, they were also locked and loaded.

The Ruin Hunter was in his early thirties, with a scruffy beard and messy brown hair that was dirty and greasy. His clothes were tattered, and it was unknown how long it had been since he washed and patched them.

At this moment, he held his right rib with one hand and raised the other, indicating that he was unarmed.

“I want to ask how you plan on dealing with us?” The Ruin Hunter’s gaze swept across the military exoskeleton on Long Yuehong’s body, and his expression became increasingly humble as he smiled.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and said, “You aren’t criminals.”

He had gathered himself and didn’t hide his curiosity by asking, “What happened to you previously? Nobody knows each other at all. There’s no hatred, nor are there any spoils of war to vie for. Why did you suddenly attack us?”

After asking in one breath, Long Yuehong recalled that he should be polite. “How may I address you?”

“Just call me Roen.” The Ruin Hunter relaxed a lot when he saw that Long Yuehong’s attitude was relatively amiable. His blue eyes then revealed a look of reminiscence. “It’s also very difficult for me to understand why we were so crazy to kill you. It’s as if someone had issued such an order into our minds.”

“Were you guys... following that white wolf all this time?” Long Yuehong thought for a long time before finally coming up with the more appropriate term—‘follow.’

Roen’s face immediately clouded over. “You can say that. That day, my companions and I encountered it. I watched helplessly as the few of them became fanatical—as if they had become wolves themselves and were no longer humans. Their eyes were filled with hatred and vigilance when they looked at me, so I was terrified and quickly turned around to escape. But after running a few steps, I actually—actually felt that I should obey the white wolf. It was so powerful, so charming—a natural master.

“Subsequently, my companions and I—as well as the other hunters—have been following it, helping it eliminate traps, drive away prey, and finish off enemies. Now that I think about it, I wouldn’t be able to recognize myself. I’ve willingly done so many irrational things. I-I suspect that my mind was controlled by it...” At this point, a horrified and confused expression couldn’t help but appear on Roen’s face.

He paused and said, “That white wolf will eat a person regularly. My two companions died in such a manner, but I wasn’t sad at all back then. I felt that all was fine as long as Master was satisfied...”

At this moment, a sentence surfaced in Long Yuehong’s mind: Holding a candle to the devil.

Long Yuehong's feelings intensified when he recalled the Ruin Hunters' relentless charge. At the same time, he sensed a problem and couldn't help but ask, "When you encountered the white wolf, your companions were bewitched, but you were fine and could turn around to escape?"

"Yes." Roen gave an affirmative answer.

Long Yuehong asked, "Were you walking at the back of the team back then?"

The people in front had entered the range of the wolf's abilities, and he was just one or two steps away from being influenced?

"I was in the middle," Roen replied without hesitation.

This... is different from Qiao Chu's Bewitchment... Wait a minute, Team Leader and Shang Jianyao just said the same thing... Long Yuehong quickly picked up the walkie-talkie and reported this matter to Jiang Baimian and the others.

...

When Jiang Baimian received Long Yuehong's report, she had already arrived at the cave described by Genova and Bai Chen with Shang Jianyao.

This spot was very well-hidden, hidden by a few boulders and the surroundings. If not for the fact that they had tracked the white wolf, even Genova wouldn't have discovered it.

"There are no other exits in the nearby area." Genova—who had just circled back—reported his harvest.

Bai Chen—who was in charge of guarding the cave entrance—said, "The target didn't come out either."

Jiang Baimian looked at the bottomless black cave and deliberated before saying, "We have no idea what's inside. It's not a good idea to enter and explore rashly."

“It’s too deep. Part of the area has already exceeded my detection range,” Genova replied. “But everything is normal in the parts within my detection range.”

Just as he said that, the ground suddenly trembled. The entire mountain range seemed to shake a few times.

Following that, a dull and terrifying rumble sounded from the cave’s depths.

Shang Jianyao and the others quickly retreated. When they distanced themselves, the stone ceiling collapsed, sealing the entrance.

This... Jiang Baimian’s eyes widened a little. After everything returned to normal, she frowned and said, “The cave completely collapsed? The commotion and changes don’t seem natural...”

“Fortunately, Old Ge and I didn’t rashly enter.” Bai Chen sighed sincerely.

They would’ve been buried alive inside. For smart bots like Genova, this was also a fatal danger.

Jiang Baimian tried to analyze the situation. “Did that white wolf do it? It has a certain level of intelligence. After escaping from another exit, it used a certain method to detonate the explosives buried in the cave, hoping to use this opportunity to kill Old Ge—an enemy it thinks it can’t deal with personally?”

Shang Jianyao thoughtfully said, “There’s another possibility.”

“What?” Jiang Baimian wanted to hear what this fellow had to offer.

Shang Jianyao replied with a wistful expression, “That white wolf is arrogant. Cornered by us and with no other way out, it detonated the explosives buried in advance and buried itself in a cave. It would rather die than become a human’s plaything.”

“What integrity...” Jiang Baimian echoed not-very-sincerely. She then exhaled and said, “Let’s form a team of two and search for other exits. This cave is so deep; who knows where it leads?”

At this point, she thought for a moment and said, “According to Little Red’s information, this white wolf’s abilities are similar but different from Bewitchment. It’s very likely that there’s a limit to the number of targets. It’s closer to the manifestation of holding a candle to the devil.

“Yes, the Ruin Hunters have been following it during this period of time. What have they been eating and drinking...? Did they rely on hunting? With so many people, they have to hunt every day to fill their stomachs. How does such a huge commotion escape the notice of a powerful hunter like Wang Fugui?”

She believed that the remaining ‘attendants’ might provide some useful clues, so she informed Long Yuehong through the walkie-talkie.

After they split up to find the other exits, the extended distance would render the walkie-talkies unusable.

...

After chatting for a while, Roen made a request. “Can I release a signal flare and request help from the advance base camp? It’s mainly to get medical treatment. Although my injuries aren’t serious, the others need it very much.”

He was considered one of the relatively lucky ones. A bullet had only grazed his ribs back then, and he suffered a light injury. He then escaped the abnormal state due to the intense pain and the white wolf’s distance. He quickly lowered his weapon, laid on the ground, and assumed a surrendering posture.

Long Yuehong thought of his team leader’s instructions and nodded. “Alright.”

With the military exoskeleton, he wasn’t too afraid that the reinforcements from the advance base camp would have any ill intentions. Even if he couldn’t defeat them, would it be a problem for him to escape?

After Roen released the signal flare, he felt the ground tremble. He looked at the source of the boom in confusion.

This quickly settled down, and Long Yuehong casually asked Roen, “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” Roen looked confused.

Long Yuehong then glanced at the injured and corpses on the ground. After a moment of silence, he asked, “Don’t you hate us?”

“Hate?” Roen laughed. “In such a situation, I would also attack clearly abnormal enemies. Do I have to consider their emotions? Heh heh, those who are still alive should thank you. There’s no question about hate for those who are dead. As for the deceased’s companions, I’m not sure either. My companions were either eaten by the white wolf or died in the mountains.”

Chapter 410: Source of Food

Long Yuehong looked at the corpses and injured on the ground and realized that Bob’s companions were also dead. He didn’t know if he should feel lucky or sad about this.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian’s instructions entered his ears through the walkie-talkie. Afterward, he immediately asked Roen, “When you followed that white wolf, what did you rely on to survive? I mean, what did you eat?”

The brown-haired, greasy, and dirty Roen recalled and said, “We’d help it hunt, and its leftovers were ours. However, there usually wasn’t much left. The prey we obtained each time was limited, and we had many people. Most of the time, we followed the white wolf into a cave. There’s a large amount of food in the cave’s depths, which comes from the Old World. There was canned food, spam, biscuits, and various kinds of food. Although they’ve basically expired, they can still be eaten. Nothing wrong happened...”

There’s a large amount of human food from the Old World in that cave? Long Yuehong became more and more confused.

This was too abnormal—or rather, too unnatural and strange.

He then asked, “Do you know how many exits there are in the cave?”

“Many. In any case, there’s more than one. Just the ones we’ve taken number three,” Roen replied thoughtfully. “They are located in different areas of the mountains. Heh heh, that cave is really huge. There might be a passage that can allow us to leave the mountain directly.”



Long Yuehong quickly reported this situation to his team leader.

He originally wanted to ask in detail where the other two exits were, but Roen was a Ruin Hunter who had just come to the North Shore Mountains, making him unfamiliar with the area. It was still possible to find the exits by letting him lead the way, but it would be difficult when describing it verbally.

Therefore, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others arrived earlier than the advance base camp's rescue team.

When Roen and the other lightly injured saw Bai Chen in a military exoskeleton and Genava in a black military uniform, they were dumbfounded and speechless.

The Old Task Force was decked out in a way that exceeded their imaginations!

They had been in an abnormal state in the prior battle and didn't have a deep understanding of the situation around them. Genava also didn't waste his time on them and went straight for the white wolf, so they had subconsciously ignored the robot.

As for the military exoskeleton Bai Chen wore, they imagined that she had given it to Long Yuehong.

This was still acceptable. It wasn't especially rare for Ruin Hunters or even bandits to obtain an old military exoskeleton model that had been decommissioned in First City.

Now, what they just saw were two military exoskeletons and a robot. Furthermore, the models weren't too old.

With such a setup, they could attack the advance base camp and easily occupy it! Of course, the premise was that they had come to a certain level of understanding with the few powerful lone rangers and reached a certain agreement.

"You can take off your equipment; conserve electricity," Jiang Baimian casually instructed. She looked at Roen and asked, "Are you willing to be hired to help us search for the other cave exit?"

Roen quickly nodded. "Yes, no problem!"

He would only dare to give such an answer even if he was asked to do it for free, much less be paid.

He then revealed a pained expression. “Can you let me recuperate for two days? My injuries still hurt when walking.”

“No problem. We have to rest and observe the situation.” Jiang Baimian expressed her understanding. Her eyes darted around slightly before she looked at Roen again and said with a faint smile, “You didn’t see the two military exoskeletons just now, right?”

Roen suddenly shivered and blurted out, “No! I didn’t see anything!”

In fact, Jiang Baimian didn’t care much about this matter. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been the one to warn Roen. Instead, she would’ve gotten Shang Jianyao to ‘persuade’ him.

In the advance base camp, it was no big deal to reveal the ‘secret’ of their two military exoskeletons. Would anyone dare to snatch them?

Even if someone had such thoughts, they would have to consider if they or their team had the ability.

As long as the powerful lone wolves weren’t the type that could restrain robots, they wouldn’t clash with the Old Task Force because of their greed.

Very few people could restrain robots. They also had to seriously consider whether the team that could obtain two military exoskeletons and had a robot following them had other hidden strengths or powerful backgrounds.

Thus, they would receive more respect and reverence from others if this matter were to be leaked.

There were only two things the Old Task Force needed to be vigilant about. The first was that the elite team from First City’s regular army had just entered the mountains and heard of this matter. The second was that the lone wolves could band together in pursuit of wealth.

Early warnings could be obtained for the former, and contact could be made with the latter through Wang Fugui.

After receiving Roen's repeated assurances, Jiang Baimian glanced at the other lightly injured people and considered letting Shang Jianyao do the job so as not to ruin her image and appear like a villain.

The next second, the lightly injured trembled and anxiously shouted, "I don't know anything!"

"I didn't see anything!"

...

The corners of Jiang Baimian's mouth twitched as she slowly exhaled.

She didn't specially deal with the deceased's surviving companions.

Being born in the Ashlands, were there a lack of such situations? With the Old Task Force's current strength, would they be afraid of revenge?

She then got her team members to cooperate with her and gave the injured further treatment to prevent them from failing to wait for medical help to arrive. Traversing the mountain paths was difficult after all, and it would take a while for those people to arrive.

When the advance base camp's rescue team arrived, the shocking scene of corpses strewn about and the soil dyed red reflected in their eyes.

Jiang Baimian realized that Wang Fugui and the self-proclaimed 'scared' Waite were among them. She quickly said, "We saved these people who were bewitched by the white wolf."

Wang Fugui's eyebrows twitched as he gave a thumbs-up.

Waite was first stunned before he searched for his missing companions. However, he only found two corpses.

He quickly found an acquaintance and asked about his other companions.

The Ruin Hunter—who had also been controlled by the white wolf—sighed and said, “They were all eaten by the white wolf.”

Waite’s expression sank again, and he didn’t say anything else.

When cleaning up the scene, apart from taking away their weapons and items, the injured left everything else to the Old Task Force. The advance base camp’s rescue personnel did the same.

They were considered Jiang Baimian and the others’ war spoils.

...

After returning to the advance base camp, Jiang Baimian didn’t participate in the treatment of the injured. She gathered her team members and discussed the situation at the parking lot.

“I can now understand why Waite was able to escape back then.” Jiang Baimian sighed and said, “That white wolf can only Bewitch—or rather, control a limited number of people each time. Yes, but the total number seems large. It’s almost the size of a small army of servants.”

Long Yuehong deliberated and said, “According to Roen, he seemed to be Bewitched but not entirely. He didn’t have a strong sense of possessiveness and—uh, desire to mate with the white wolf. Instead, he expressed his submission to its charm.”

“Maybe it’s a form of mind control.” Shang Jianyao touched his wig. “Unfortunately, I’m not bald; otherwise, I could’ve resisted it.”

Jiang Baimian couldn’t understand his train of thought this time and nodded. “Fortunately, we discovered it early. It seems like our preparations were a little off.”

Their enhanced understanding gained through Inference Clowning was focused on not being attracted by the white wolf.

Bai Chen quickly added, “In addition, there are survivors who say that they chose to work for and curry favor with the white wolf because they liked it very much.”

Jiang Baimian muttered to herself, “Maybe it has both Bewitchment and Control? Just like human Awakened, it has more than one ability?”

Nobody could answer her.

Only Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “What a waste!”

These two abilities overlapped too much.

After speculating about the white wolf’s situation, Jiang Baimian raised the biggest question. “That cave is very large, so the other exits might be a few kilometers or even more than ten kilometers away. There’s also a large amount of human food stored inside. Does that ring a bell?”

What? Long Yuehong couldn’t think of an answer.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao smiled and said, “Company.”

Almost at the same time, Bai Chen said, “Underground Ark.”

“Yes.” Genava agreed.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Could the cave be a shelter or secret base that humans created for themselves before the Old World was destroyed? Where will its other exits lead...”

With this guess, Jiang Baimian immediately had a new idea. She thoughtfully continued, “Could it be that the white wolf isn’t a naturally mutated creature but a product of an experiment?”

The experiment might’ve happened in a secret base in the deepest depths of the cave or connected to one of the caves’ exits.

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao opened his mouth and replied, “Howl!”

Jiang Baimian's expression froze for two seconds before she understood what this fellow meant: The white wolf gave a similar feeling to the monster in Swamp Ruin 1's secret laboratory.

"Phew. Based on Swamp Ruin 1, this might be related to the Old World's destruction." Jiang Baimian gradually became excited as she spoke.

This was the Old Task Force's primary mission.

Team Leader, you are terrifying this way... Long Yuehong felt his innards tremble inexplicably when he saw Jiang Baimian's excitement.

Genava also seemed to have a sense of mission. He moved his metal neck and said, "When Roen recovers, we'll find the other entrances."

Jiang Baimian was just about to respond when she suddenly realized that someone was approaching.

The person was thin and black. He wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt and dark-blue canvas pants with traces of sewing—Wang Fugui.

Wang Fugui came to the Old Task Force and smiled casually. "Do you want me to help deal with the items you obtained? I don't think they're of much use to you."

Before Jiang Baimian could respond, Shang Jianyao looked at Wang Fugui sympathetically. "Don't you have any clothes to change into?"