

# Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 41: Plan - Read Embers

## Ad Infinitum Chapter 41: Plan

### *Chapter 41: Plan*

Jiang Baimian seemed to be considering this problem. She smiled and put on a chill front. "It's nothing too difficult. How about this? I'll wear the exoskeleton and use its comprehensive warning system and my own acuity toward electric signals to give Jingfa a surprise.

"If we take him by surprise, we might be able to injure him seriously."

"He's an Awakened." Shang Jianyao pointed out the problem.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. "I'm not stupid. I've already suffered a setback, so how can I not consider such factors? I'll try my best to maintain a distance of more than 50 meters. This should exceed the limits of Jingfa's Hungry Ghost Realm. Otherwise, he wouldn't have used the ability only after he pounced from the tree. At this distance, my hit rate isn't low, even if I'm using a grenade launcher."

Shang Jianyao and the others pondered for a moment before accepting Jiang Baimian's proposal. However, Bai Chen quickly raised another question. "Who will drive after you swap seats with Shang Jianyao? Who can guarantee that they can avoid Jingfa's long-range attacks in advance?"

Jiang Baimian hissed. "That's indeed a problem. I'll think of a solution..."

Shang Jianyao fell silent for two seconds before taking the initiative to say, "Let me do it."

Jiang Baimian considered this suggestion and muttered to herself, "If you are the one doing it, the plan needs to be changed. Compared to Jingfa, you have virtually zero experience. If I were to assign the task of surprising and seriously injuring Jingfa to you, I'm worried that it will put a great burden on you and stress you out. It will result in you making mistakes in judgment and making mistakes at critical moments.

"Oh... How about this? Since Jingfa wants to play hide and seek with you, lead him far away. We will take this opportunity to drive the car to a place where people often come and go in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. There are many vehicle marks and footprints there. It can effectively hide our tracks, preventing Jingfa from finding us or catching up to us.

"Don't speak... This raises another problem. You definitely won't be able to find us after you shake off Jingfa's tail. That distance is definitely beyond the walkie-talkie's effective

range. Let me think. Hmm... Got it. Let's rendezvous at a relatively famous spot in the wilderness.

"Bai Chen, is there any landmark nearby?"

Bai Chen observed her surroundings and looked at the sky. "The only landmark nearby is the steelworks factory ruins. But if we are heading for places where people often come and go, we will be driving straight toward Yuelu Station based on the direction we are heading in."

"Yuelu Station?" Jiang Baimian frowned slightly. "How long will it take?"

"At this speed, it will take about a day and a half to get there. However, we definitely won't be able to drive this fast the entire way." Bai Chen gave a rough estimation.

Previously, the Ruin Hunter named Harris Brown and his companion—who relied on bicycles to traverse the trails—had also taken more than a day to reach the steelworks factory ruins from north of Yuelu Station.

Normally, it was impossible to reach the steelworks factory quickly by car. However, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and company had already been driving at full speed toward Yuelu Station for quite some time under Jingfa's pursuit. Furthermore, the jeep was definitely faster than bicycles. The Old Task Force's destination happened to be Yuelu Station, so they had no intention of continuing north.

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. "If we use Yuelu Station as a rendezvous point, we can also attempt to forge some traces that point north. It will definitely be for the best if we can successfully get rid of Jingfa.

"If not, we can use this opportunity to lure him north, getting him involved in the unknown and making him slam head-on with the dangerous-sounding abnormality. After that, he probably won't be able to catch up to us, even if he has the ability to escape."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian's already loud voice became louder as if her excitement of tricking Jingfa was getting to her.

Shang Jianyao listened quietly and raised his hand like he did in school. "I have a question."

"What?" Jiang Baimian looked puzzled. She felt that she had made herself very clear.

Shang Jianyao spoke in a slightly depressed voice. "I don't know Yuelu Station, nor do I know how to get there."

"..." Jiang Baimian was momentarily speechless. After a few seconds, she mocked herself. "I forgot that you are a newbie who has come to the surface for the first time..."

“This means that you’ve done well! If it weren’t for the fact that I have to focus on driving, I would give you a thumbs up!”

After forcefully explaining her slip up, Jiang Baimian sighed. “I heard that there were many usable satellites in the sky before the Old World was destroyed. This enabled people to determine their destination easily, allowing them to skillfully choose the most suitable route to their destination, even if they had never been there.

“Well... I’ll wear the exoskeleton. When the time comes, I’ll continue driving. I’ll get out of the car to lure Jingfa away after we avoid his first wave of attacks. Bai Chen will take the opportunity to climb into the driver’s seat and control the car.”

“What if Jingfa launches an attack while you are wearing the exoskeleton?” Bai Chen thought of a possible flaw in the plan.

Jiang Baimian was rendered speechless.

Bai Chen looked at the rearview mirror and wore her usual calm expression. “I’ll get off the car too. I’ll lead the way for Shang Jianyao. An exoskeleton device can only carry a short person like me. It shouldn’t affect his mobility and reaction speed much.”

“I’ve said it before. You’re not short but petite. Your height is considered above average for people in the wilderness. I’ve seen plenty of nomads who are less than 1.6 meters tall.” Jiang Baimian casually refuted Bai Chen before nodding. “I won’t harp on how dangerous this matter is. Since we are born in the Ashlands and have come to the surface, we are expected to take the corresponding risks when the time calls for it. If I’m required to take the risk, I won’t pass the responsibility to you.”

She exhaled and reminded Bai Chen, “Remember to bring some food.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian suddenly shut her mouth and even released her right hand—which was on the steering wheel. She raised her hand and pointed at the compressed biscuits and energy bars in the armrest compartment. She then pointed at her mouth and puffed her cheeks.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were rather confused. They were just about to ask when they saw Bai Chen turn her head and shoot a glance at them.

The two of them stopped talking at the same time.

Although Bai Chen didn’t understand what Jiang Baimian was trying to express, she could tell that her team leader was unwilling to discuss this topic any longer or even have a conversation.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian gripped the steering wheel again and said, “Shang Jianyao, you have to consider how to deal with Jingfa’s Hungry Ghost Realm. It will be

troublesome if he stops playing hide and seek and suddenly approaches you. It will be bad if he narrows the gap to within the effective range of his powers.”

“I will properly...” At this point, Shang Jianyao paused for a moment before nodding heavily. “Think about it!”

After answering, he quickly said to Bai Chen, “There’s no time to lose. Let’s bring the food along and get ready to alight. You can also eat a little now. You might not be able to stop and have food for a long time after that.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen picked up the food in the armrest compartment and gave half of it to Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao opened a bag of compressed biscuits and stuffed the food into his mouth.

Less than a minute later, Jiang Baimian suddenly jerked the steering wheel so that the jeep could avoid the laser fired by Jingfa.

Without needing to be instructed, Shang Jianyao opened the door and pounced out of the jeep. This time, he didn’t roll down using the momentum. He jumped with all his might instead.

With a sizzling sound, a laser penetrated the ground.

If Shang Jianyao had rolled down like before, he would have been hit by the laser. Even if the exoskeleton were armored in places, he would not have been spared.

Right on the heels of that, Shang Jianyao exerted strength with his knees, propping up the auxiliary joints. He jumped more than 20 meters away and rushed toward the distant Jingfa.

Like the previous few times, Jingfa immediately retreated, distanced himself, and circled around Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian took the opportunity to slam on the brakes and slow down the car, allowing Bai Chen to roll from the passenger seat to the ground uninjured.

Amidst the rustling, Bai Chen closed the door behind her and used the momentum to roll before hiding behind a low shrub.

The jeep instantly accelerated again as it headed for the main road that people often passed by in the Blackmarsh Wilderness.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who had chased after Jingfa—returned to the vicinity. Covered in an iron-black metal skeleton and a small number of armor plates, he pointed at the powerpack behind him and signaled for Bai Chen to sit there.

Bai Chen jumped out of the bushes and used the exoskeleton's auxiliary joint as a 'ladder' and a 'handle.' She climbed onto the powerpack in two swift movements. This made her much taller than Shang Jianyao even though she was sitting.

Compared to carrying Bai Chen with one hand, doing this allowed for minimal obstruction to the exoskeleton's mobility and aiming.

Next, they had to chase after Jingfa and drive the mechanical monk further away. They had to play hide and seek with him and buy time for Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong to escape Jingfa's pursuit.

Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a metal helmet—ran two to three steps. Without anyone attacking him, he actually took the initiative to jump and roll.

Bai Chen shrunk her body and tightly gripped the metal bone on the exoskeleton's shoulder to prevent herself from being thrown off. She knew that Shang Jianyao was trying to make sure they worked well together before Jingfa counterattacked.

After tumbling a few times, Shang Jianyao—who was wearing the exoskeleton—strode forward and chased after the mechanical monk in the red kasaya, thanks to the comprehensive warning system's long-range vision.

The red light in Jingfa's eyes flared as if he had become unstable due to him catching sight of a woman. His metal joints bent, and he bounced up, jumping to the side.

He did not go completely crazy. He continued carrying out his original strategy. After all, his hatred for women came from the psychological distortions caused by his body, not the price an Awakened had to pay. Hence, he had a certain level of self-control.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao—who still had grenades hanging from him—didn't return like before. He continued chasing after Jingfa in an attempt to close the distance.

After a few minutes of pursuit, Bai Chen—who was on the powerpack—suddenly bent down and said in a deep voice, "That's not right. Jingfa is circling towards the jeep! He wants to bypass us and continue chasing after Team Leader and Long Yuehong!"

#### *Chapter 42: "Liar"*

It was not that Shang Jianyao and the others had never thought of Jingfa responding in such a manner. However, they believed it impossible for Jingfa to determine their intentions immediately. They believed that Jingfa would need to complete a few more rounds of hide and seek before he would realize what was happening.

To their surprise, the mechanical monk—Jingfa—had immediately grasped their core intention. It was as if his mind-reading ability had no limits.

Shang Jianyao did not ask Bai Chen what to do and handled it according to the worst situation he had expected:

By expelling Jingfa from the inner circle around the tire tracks to the outer circle, Shang Jianyao hoped to hold out a little longer so that the jeep could enter the commonly traversed area in the Blackmarsh Wilderness.

The inner circle's diameter and size were definitely smaller than those of the external circle; thus, it could effectively reduce the exoskeleton's lacking reaction speed and fluidity when facing a real 'intelligent' robot.

Just like that, a human covered in an iron-black metal skeleton and a mechanical monk—which had an iron-black metal skeleton to begin with—ran crazily in the wilderness, the forest, and the swamp's edge. They jumped and ran in this pursuit without considering their energy expenditure.

During this process, Shang Jianyao tried to fire the grenade launcher and electromagnetic weapon several times. However, Jingfa changed directions in time and distanced himself from them. Jingfa had no intention of engaging in an all-out battle.

Shang Jianyao—who was driving the exoskeleton at maximum capacity—watched the electric charge decrease bit by bit. He watched as the distance between him and the jeep's estimated location shrank bit by bit. Although he was anxious, he couldn't do anything about it.

If Jingfa had chosen to close the distance and engage in a fierce battle with him, Shang Jianyao could have acted on the spur of the moment and risked his life. However, the current developments made him feel like he had contracted a chronic terminal disease that medicine was useless against. He felt like he was walking toward death one step at a time.

"Don't be impatient." Bai Chen couldn't do anything while Shang Jianyao was running and jumping at high speeds, but she acutely sensed Shang Jianyao's change in condition.

Jiang Baimian did not give her the grenade launcher, nor did Bai Chen mind. From her point of view, Jiang Baimian was guarding against the mechanical monk, Jingfa, in case he circled the exoskeleton and headed straight for the jeep. Furthermore, Bai Chen's current role was to lead the way, not to fight.

Shang Jianyao did not respond, but he clearly reduced the number of times he left the inner circle. He also didn't feel as anxious any longer.

At the same time, the jeep's tire tracks continuously changed direction in the area. It was obvious that the jeep had made many sharp turns. This made it difficult for Jingfa to rely on his judgment of the tracks to lock onto the vehicle's driving direction. He had no choice but to approach the inner circle to search for the car's final traces.

This gave Shang Jianyao an opportunity. He raised his left arm and fired a grenade in a certain direction according to the precision aiming system.

Jingfa—who had just finished changing directions—looked like he had no way of dodging the attack.

The red light in Jingfa's eyes lit up. The metal joints—such as his ankles and knees—bent in an inhuman way. Jingfa forcefully changed directions and leaped into the air.

Boom!

The grenade exploded like red, blooming fireworks. However, its burgeoning shockwave was slightly slower than Jingfa; hence, it failed to engulf the mechanical monk.

Just as Shang Jianyao felt vexed that he had not seized the opportunity, a grenade shot out from a nearby tree!

It was aimed at Jingfa—who was in midair—and had expended all his momentum.

Jingfa's blinking red eyes subconsciously looked over and saw the ponytailed Jiang Baimian holding a grenade launcher, decked out in a gray camouflage uniform.

The Old Task Force's team leader did not leave with the jeep but hid on a tree!

Upon seeing that it was impossible for him to dodge the grenade, the metal lids on Jingfa's back and feet opened, revealing deep, pitch-black, fist-sized holes.

With a sizzling sound, white gas spewed out of the holes, pushing Jingfa through the air horizontally.

Rumble!

The highly explosive grenade exploded not far away from the mechanical monk. The surging shockwaves tilted Jingfa's body, making it difficult for him to maintain his balance.

Although Shang Jianyao didn't understand why his team leader would bizarrely appear here, he didn't squander this opportunity. He had already raised his right arm and, using the precision aiming system, aimed the exoskeleton's electromagnetic weapon at Jingfa—who had lost his balance in midair and was temporarily unable to produce any more thrusting gases.



Just as Shang Jianyao was about to pull the trigger, he and Bai Chen suddenly saw illusory figures that were holding up their stomachs and crazily devouring the soil. This made them believe that they were starving.

Hungry Ghost Realm!

Through his jump and horizontal movement, Jingfa had reduced the distance between him and the exoskeleton to about 20 meters!

Bai Chen anxiously reached into her pocket and took out a compressed biscuit and an energy bar. This resulted in her losing her balance and tumbling to the ground from the exoskeleton's powerpack. However, this did not stop her from crazily tearing open the packaging and stuffing the food into her mouth.

But Shang Jianyao did not do the same. In his chin area—which wasn't covered by the metal helmet—Shang Jianyao revealed the scene inside when he opened his mouth.

A compressed biscuit had swelled up from soaking in his saliva and filled most of his mouth.

Shang Jianyao constantly chewed and swallowed the biscuit to calm his self-imagined hunger. This prevented him from retracting his hands to search for food!

Before leaving the jeep, he used the excuse of eating to stuff a small piece of compressed biscuit into his mouth. However, he did not swallow it because he wanted to buy a second or two under the Hungry Ghost Realm's influence!

Taking advantage of this fleeting opportunity, Shang Jianyao crazily swallowed the biscuit in his mouth and revealed a twisted smile as he pulled the trigger.

Amidst sizzling electric currents, a bullet—wrapped in a silver-white electric arc—crossed over 20 meters at an indescribable speed and accurately struck the iron-black metal in front of Jingfa's chest.

Bang! Bang!

Almost at the same time, a clear fist-sized depression appeared in front of Jingfa's body.

In the depression, the iron-black metal cracked and fell off, revealing the hidden wires and components.

Cracks spread out like radiation around the depression, akin to a spider web.

With such a wound, the electromagnetic weapon's kinetic force sent Jingfa flying away like a kite.



At this moment, Jiang Baimian—who was on the tree—had already lowered the grenade launcher. She pulled her left arm back and threw out a metal rod wrapped in countless silver-white electric currents.

Clang!

The lightning dragon-like metal rod stabbed into the depression in front of Jingfa's body, bringing the mechanical monk down from midair and 'impaling' him into the ground.

With a thud, electric arcs bloomed in Jingfa's body like countless blooming flower petals as they traced the components and wires in the depression.

The monk's mechanical body stiffened, and his eyes lost their red glow as if he had turned to stone.

The Hungry Ghost Realm's effects—which enveloped the surroundings—vanished.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao quickly changed directions and pointed his electromagnetic weapon at Jingfa's head.

Before he could aim, the red glow in Jingfa's eyes lit up again. Jingfa's entire metallic skeleton suddenly jerked, jumping into the distance with the metal rod and the sizzling silver-white electric current.

The mechanical monk then changed directions repeatedly and ran off without even turning back.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian picked up the grenade launcher again. She couldn't hide her disappointment and loudly said, "He really has an emergency backup system and a redundant body structure!"

Shang Jianyao wanted to respond to his team leader, but his throat and mouth were filled with the 'remains' of the compressed biscuits. He choked until his eyes almost rolled back, and he couldn't speak.

On the other hand, Bai Chen didn't swallow the entire energy bar in one mouthful. After swallowing the rest of the energy bar in her mouth, she asked loudly, "Should we give chase?"

She was asking on behalf of Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian looked in the direction of Jingfa's disappearing figure and shook her head. "It's too late. Besides, he's only focused on escaping this time. This will make him much faster than the exoskeleton."

With that said, she gently jumped down from the tree and walked towards Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao. She then consoled them. “However, it doesn’t matter. He has already been seriously injured by us. The emergency backup system and the redundant, segregated body structure must only have basic functions. Otherwise, it won’t fit.

“To put it simply, it’s impossible for Jingfa to continue chasing after us until he repairs himself. He probably can’t use his weapon systems or the listening system anymore.”

Bai Chen heaved a sigh of relief. “We have plenty of time to escape his pursuit then.”

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao finished swallowing the compressed biscuits in his mouth and blurted out a question. “Team Leader, why are you here. Aren’t we meeting at Yuelu Station? Where’s the jeep?”

Jiang Baimian smiled when she heard that. “The previous plan was a lie.”

Her eyes curled from her smile. “How can I deceive Jingfa if I don’t deceive all of you?”

“...” Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen were momentarily stunned.

Jiang Baimian held the grenade launcher and looked around. “From the fact that Jingfa could ‘sense’ the female voice from the door to the steelworks factory’s blast furnace, I suspected that his listening system was stronger than we imagined. This point was later reflected to a certain extent in several areas, strengthening my suspicions.

“For example, why did he dare to go around in circles, appearing to engage in a battle of attrition? What if we had more than one spare battery?”

“For example, why did he choose the passenger seat when he first attacked us? Why didn’t he choose the more important driver’s seat? He doesn’t know us, so how did he know that I’m the team leader—the one who poses the most threat? Bai Chen and I had already discussed in advance what to do when Jingfa attacked the driver’s seat. The moment I raised the grenade launcher, she would lower her body and allow the grenade to pass through the driver’s seat, fly out the window, and shoot at the target. However, this plan wasn’t used in the end.

“With this suspicion, I deliberately led you into a discussion and formulated a plan to meet at Yuelu Station to see if Jingfa would fall for it. In fact, sooner or later, he would’ve discovered that your goal is to stall for time through your performance so that the jeep will have time to escape his pursuit even if he didn’t ‘hear’ our discussion or fall for it.

“Therefore, after making a few consecutive turns here, I quickly parked the car and hid in a tree not far away. I also got Long Yuehong to continue driving forward and instructed him to stop ten minutes later to wait for us.”

### *Chapter 43: Invitation*

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen gradually came to a realization as they listened to Jiang Baimian's explanation. They had actually discovered many of the hints, but they didn't delve too deeply into them.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. "That's not right? Shouldn't you have long guessed that there's a problem with this plan? When I didn't speak and used my actions to hint at you to put a biscuit in your mouth to resist the Hungry Ghost Realm, didn't you comprehend it rather quickly?"

"I didn't make a sound when it came to such an important matter. Furthermore, I didn't even lower my voice when formulating the plan. You should have sensed something amiss. You could even guess that what I said back then might not necessarily be the truth."

Shang Jianyao didn't think before saying, "I thought you were afraid that I would end up memorizing the corresponding content if you explained using your voice. This might've led to difficulty in avoiding Jingfa's mind-reading ability. After all, we don't know how wide the range of this ability is.

"By converting them into actions and images, there is a process of interpretation. Even if Jingfa can see that scene in my heart, he might not be able to understand the true meaning."

"...You read too much into it," Jiang Baimian commented.

Bai Chen echoed Shang Jianyao's words. "I also thought that you didn't make a sound because of your understanding of Awakened. Although I've never heard of cases of an Awakened being capable of 'hearing' discussions about their powers and strategies to deal with them, I couldn't rule out this possibility. I'm definitely not as knowledgeable in this regard as the large factions."

"...Your thoughts are even more complicated than his." Jiang Baimian laughed and praised herself. "Could it be that my performance was really flawless?"

"I just didn't expect you to lie to us. Hence, I didn't think in that direction," replied Shang Jianyao immediately.

Bai Chen nodded in agreement.

Jiang Baimian looked around and changed the topic with a smile. "Therefore, coming out for training will allow you to accumulate experience quickly. It will also help develop the tacit understanding amongst ourselves. In short, regardless of what decision I make, all of you must believe that I will definitely not screw you up.

“Let’s go and meet up with Long Yuehong.”

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen had already completely figured out the situation and learned a lot from it.

Jiang Baimian looked in the direction Jingfa had fled in and sighed. “Unfortunately, we weren’t able to destroy Jingfa’s body and obtain the bionic chip inside. The corresponding technology is definitely worth studying. It can help the company overcome many obstacles. Besides, the Monks Conclave most likely has a certain level of understanding regarding the Old World’s destruction. Eternals were one of the most important projects before the Old World’s destruction. It won’t be easy for someone to inherit this inheritance.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian shook her head without Shang Jianyao’s reminder. “Haha, this is all my beautiful fantasy. If Jingfa’s body was actually destroyed, I wouldn’t have dared to take his bionic chip. An Awakened’s abilities are strange and terrifying. Bringing the bionic chip that bears his consciousness with me is equivalent to suicide. Things are already good enough. Things are already good enough.”

She then turned to look at Shang Jianyao. “Let’s go.”

Shang Jianyao looked at the tire tracks, silently turned around, and squatted down. “You sure are meticulous. You didn’t let us run on our own. I wouldn’t have been able to keep up with the exoskeleton.”

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction and sat on the powerpack, leaving Bai Chen half the space.

After the two of them sat down and gripped the metal skeleton’s shoulders, Shang Jianyao straightened his body and strode forward. Amidst the slight sound of metal grinding, he followed the car tracks.

He didn’t run at full speed, so his footsteps weren’t loud.

About 15 minutes later, Shang Jianyao left the sparse forest and arrived in a grayish-black wilderness. This was a world of rocks and weeds. The soil was relatively hard, and the tire marks were light and numerous, making it difficult to tell them apart.

Using the comprehensive warning system, Shang Jianyao saw a jeep very far away. Its side wheel had sunken into a pool-sized quagmire. The entire vehicle was tilted, seemingly about to sink at any moment.

However, two ropes connected it to a wild-looking gray SUV.

The gray SUV’s engine buzzed as it tried to pull the jeep out of the quagmire.

Long Yuehong stood by the car with his assault rifle slung over his shoulder, chatting happily with a man and a woman.

“How is it? Do you see the jeep? I sense quite a number of people over there.” Jiang Baimian pressed down on the exoskeleton’s shoulder and stretched her neck to look into the distance where Long Yuehong was.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “I see it.”

“Is Long Yuehong alright?” asked Bai Chen when she saw that Shang Jianyao’s pace had clearly slowed down.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “He’s fine. He has even made a few friends.”

Jiang Baimian chuckled and said, “Let’s go take a look.”

Shang Jianyao accelerated and ran toward the jeep.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Shang Jianyao deliberately increased his footsteps’ loudness so that Long Yuehong and the man and woman beside him could hear him from afar.

The man, woman, and Long Yuehong almost simultaneously turned their heads to look over.

The moment they saw an iron-black military exoskeleton approaching, the man and woman’s expressions changed. They did not hesitate to roll back and return to the gray SUV’s vicinity.

At this moment, the jeep had already been dragged out of the small swamp by the gray SUV.

Long Yuehong smiled and took a few steps forward. “How is it?”

After shouting, he recalled something and quickly turned his head to shout at the gray SUV, “Don’t worry; they’re my companions!”

“Who are they?” Shang Jianyao had already arrived.

Both the people inside and the man and woman outside the gray SUV were highly nervous and vigilant.

Long Yuehong quickly replied, “I wasn’t familiar with the road and ended up driving the car into the quagmire. After they discovered my predicament, they offered help. They’re very friendly!”

Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen looked at each other and chortled softly. “This doesn’t seem like something ordinary wilderness nomads would do…”

With that said, she patted Shang Jianyao’s shoulder. “We should also show our friendliness.”

Shang Jianyao immediately stopped when he heard this.

After Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen jumped off the powerpack, picked up their respective guns, and prepared themselves, he walked to Long Yuehong’s side and shouted, “Help me take off my exoskeleton.”

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao was indeed removing the exoskeleton, the people in the gray SUV clearly heaved sighs of relief.

They discussed for a moment and agreed to let the man and woman—who had been conversing with Long Yuehong—walk over again.

The man looked to be in his thirties. He had a square face, and his skin was rough and weathered. He had black hair and brown eyes. He wore what the Old World called a formal suit, and he stood up straight. Of course, the formal suit had definitely been modified to make it easier for him to move.

Unlike the wilderness nomads that Shang Jianyao and the others had previously encountered, his clothes didn’t appear tattered despite being old and patched up.

The woman was in her twenties, and she was also black-haired and brown-eyed. She wore a military-green camouflage uniform. Her facial features were not bad, but her face was completely expressionless, giving off an ice-cold feeling. At the junction of her neck and clothes was a faint bluish-black tattoo.

The man and woman each carried an automatic rifle on their backs and held black pistols. They stopped when they were four to five meters away from Jiang Baimian and the others.

“Thank you for your help!” Jiang Baimian shouted.

“This is what any moral person should do,” replied the man in his thirties calmly.

Jiang Baimian immediately smiled. “In the Ashlands, morality is a luxury—no, a rarity.”

“We can’t abandon morality just because the Old World is destroyed.” The man was a little proud of his persistence in morality. Then, he asked loudly, “Are you guys also going north of Yuelu Station?”

“Are you guys going to look for someone?” Jiang Baimian’s eyebrows twitched. “How may I address you?”

The man frankly replied, “Wu Shoushi, an Intermediate Hunter.”

He paused and said, “It seems like you still don’t know that an Old World city ruin was discovered north of Yuelu Station. It has never been discovered before.”

A city ruin that has never been discovered? Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen couldn’t help but look at each other.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly. “How do you know?”

“Something abnormal happened deep in the swamp two nights ago.” Wu Shoushi looked at his companion and didn’t hide anything. “Someone entered the city ruin and discovered many things. They modified a radio transceiver from there and informed Weed City’s guild.

“You should know what an undiscovered city ruin means.” Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and the others to answer, he answered his own question. “Danger and opportunity! The items, information, and secrets there are enough to satisfy thousands of Ruin Hunter teams several times over. You don’t have to worry about people killing each other for them.

“In contrast, the dangers inherent in city ruins are more direct and terrifying. Having more companions means having additional strength to resist them.”

#### *Chapter 44: Next Destination*

Toward newly-discovered city ruins, Ruin Hunters were more inclined to form an alliance and explore it together because they didn’t know if the Heartless within had experienced any mutations. They also didn’t know about the other latent dangers.

They wouldn’t be wary of each other, nor would they try their best to eliminate their competitors. After all, such city ruins had plenty of resources that were sufficient to satisfy everyone. They didn’t need to snatch from each other.

Among Ruin Hunters, such an endeavor was called ‘reclamation.’

Jiang Baimian was not surprised by Wu Shoushi’s invitation. She first looked back at Shang Jianyao and the others before smiling. “We have other matters to tend to.”

Without waiting for Wu Shoushi to speak, she said, “I heard that there are many anomalies north of Yuelu Station. In addition to the late-night roars that you should know about, some people have also inexplicably died. There were no visible wounds, but their faces were either warped or smiling. It’s supposedly very strange.”



She relayed the information she had obtained from Harris Brown to Wu Shoushi and the others as a form of repayment for helping them drag the jeep out of the quagmire.

After hearing that, Wu Shoushi turned his head to look at his wooden female companion. "Ruxiang, what can you tell from that?"

The woman in the military-green camouflage uniform shook her head. "Impossible to determine."

Wu Shoushi nodded indiscernibly and looked at Jiang Baimian. "Thank you for the warning. We will take note. However, such an opportunity might only appear once in several years. Furthermore, there will only be fewer such opportunities in the future. We definitely can't let this opportunity go. In the Ashlands, you have to strive for as much as you can. Otherwise, the only difference is just whether one dies a few years earlier or later."

After expressing his firm will, Wu Shoushi saw that Jiang Baimian only smiled and didn't comment. He immediately understood that Jiang Baimian really had no intention of exploring the new ruin.

"Then, let's continue on our way. Pray we meet again." Wu Shoushi politely bade farewell and returned to the gray SUV with his companion.

"Pray we meet again." Jiang Baimian waved her hand.

'Meeting again' was one of the best wishes in the Ashlands. In a situation where anyone could die from hunger, disease, attacks, and natural disasters at any moment, meeting again was definitely something rare and precious.

After watching the gray SUV drive off, Jiang Baimian turned around and sighed. "What a pity... We can definitely find a lot of precious first-hand information in an undiscovered city ruin."

Bai Chen looked north and subconsciously asked, "Are we really not going?"

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, "Do I look like the kind of person who would say one thing and do another thing?"

As soon as she finished speaking, she saw Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong looking at her with strange expressions.

"Haha." She laughed dryly. "That's a battle tactic, understand? A battle tactic."

Before the three team members could speak, she teased Bai Chen. "Why? Is the wilderness nomad blood that burns in your body urging you to go?"

Bai Chen fell silent for a second before bowing her head slightly. "It's mainly a force of habit, I guess. As long as one knows about such matters, every wilderness nomad will not let go of an opportunity. Compared to freezing to death in the winter due to a lack of clothes and food, there's still hope when taking risks."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and looked at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. "If our Old Task Force had been established for more than six months and had completed several missions, I would've definitely revised our plan and circled to the north of Yuelu Station."

"However, we have two rookies who have just come to the surface. The abnormalities and dangers there are obvious. It's impossible for me to take these two rookies on an adventure and use their lives to pave the way for my hopes."

Shang Jianyao quietly listened before suddenly saying, "You previously said that my performance was good, making you forget that I'm a rookie who has just come to the surface."

"...What did you say? I didn't hear you clearly." Jiang Baimian's smile froze on her face.

Before Shang Jianyao could repeat himself, Jiang Baimian rubbed her ear. "In short, every member of our Old Task Force is a precious resource. I won't let you sacrifice yourselves casually."

After saying that, she ordered Bai Chen seriously. "Take a look at the map and confirm our current location. Although we aren't going to the newly discovered city ruin, we have to send this news back to the company. I have to find the nearest nomad settlement under our company that is equipped with a radio transceiver."

"Also, the information provided by Harris Brown and the information regarding Jingfa has to be sent back to the company."

"Alright." Bai Chen took out a relatively simple map.

It was only at this moment that Long Yuehong thought of asking something important. "Team Leader, have you guys settled Jingfa? Will he chase after us again?"

Jiang Baimian scoffed. "If he were going to come after me at any moment, would I still be standing here communicating with Wu Shoushi and the others here or chatting with you?"

Upon seeing Long Yuehong heave a sigh of relief, she changed the topic. "However, we haven't settled Jingfa yet."

Long Yuehong's body tensed up.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "We only injured him seriously, preventing him from catching up for the time being. By the time he repairs himself, we will have long escaped his pursuit range. The Blackmarsh Wilderness is so large that we almost don't have to worry about him finding us."

Long Yuehong relaxed and rubbed his stomach. "I feel a little hungry."

Lunchtime was quite some time ago. He had only stuffed half a packet of compressed biscuits into his mouth when he was influenced by Hungry Ghost Realm.

Jiang Baimian's eyebrows twitched slightly. "Why didn't you ask us about how we severely injured Jingfa?"

"I could roughly guess your real plan from the moment you alighted the car midway." Long Yuehong straightened his back. "As for the exact details, I can ask after lunch."

"A good student worth teaching." Jiang Baimian praised him in a tone that made her appear advanced in age. "You're smarter than I imagined."

Long Yuehong was overjoyed and subconsciously wanted to say a few humble words.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao deliberately asked, "Team Leader, you have always found him stupid previously?"

"..." Long Yuehong's expression collapsed.

Jiang Baimian coughed twice. "...Not really. The main reason is that he doesn't have much experience. It's already pretty good that he can react in time. No matter what, he has undergone genetic enhancement. His brain shouldn't be too bad."

Long Yuehong lowered his head and muttered to himself, "My grades are only average..."

Jiang Baimian tilted her head slightly and carefully differentiated the other party's words.

After a few seconds, she glanced at Shang Jianyao. "Sometimes, being too smart isn't necessarily a good thing. The chances of average people surviving are higher because they know how to follow orders and not take matters into their own hands. Besides, everyone has different strengths."

Long Yuehong took a deep breath and nodded slowly.

At this moment, Bai Chen had already confirmed their current location and pointed at the map for Jiang Baimian to see.

“Ha, the nearest settlement is actually in the north... We should be able to reach it in the evening or tomorrow morning...” Jiang Baimian looked at the map for a while.

“Fortunately, it’s still very far from Yuelu Station. There’s also a certain deviation in the direction. It won’t involve us.”

She casually closed the map and threw it to Bai Chen. “Let’s go. Our destination, Blackrat Town!”

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were unfamiliar with the Blackmarsh Wilderness, so they had no objections.

“Bai Chen, check the car’s condition. Long Yuehong, get some energy bars out of the trunk,” Jiang Baimian instructed as she walked to the jeep.

After Bai Chen and Long Yuehong carried out their respective tasks, Jiang Baimian slowed down, looked at the small swamp in front of her, and spoke to Shang Jianyao—who was beside her. “Why did you give a blow to Long Yuehong’s confidence? Be honest and share your true thoughts.”

Shang Jianyao also looked ahead, and the corners of his mouth curled up slightly. “I want him to leave the Old Task Force. He’s too much of a hindrance.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t respond and continued slowly walking toward the jeep.

After two seconds, she heard Shang Jianyao’s slightly deep voice ring out. “This is too dangerous for him...”

Jiang Baimian tilted her head slightly and smiled again. “I almost didn’t hear you clearly!”

She didn’t continue the topic from before and sped up before getting into the driver’s seat.

The jeep soon started moving again, heading north toward Blackrat Town.

After taking turns to finish lunch, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to ask, “What kind of place is Weed City? Where is it?”

In the passenger seat, Bai Chen turned her head and said, “It’s a city along First City’s border, at the edge of the Monk Wastelands.” Nôv(él)B\\jnn

“Monk Wastelands?” Long Yuehong acutely sensed something strange with the term.

Within Pangu Biology, the corresponding geographical textbooks were very crude since many people there probably would never reach the surface their entire lives. They only

briefly introduced the various large factions and labeled the most important terrain landmarks.

“It’s the area where mechanical monks are most active.” Jiang Baimian casually explained as she drove. “It’s said that the Monks Conclave’s headquarters hide the Eternal technology and the corresponding equipment in the Glazed Pure Lands. It’s somewhere in that wasteland.”

Bai Chen added, “This wasteland is located southeast of the Blackmarsh Wilderness. Anyone who wants to go to First City will pass by it as long as they don’t take a detour.”

After giving a simple introduction of the Monk Wastelands, Bai Chen continued the previous topic. “Weed City was originally a small faction in the Monk Wastelands. Later, First City expanded in the hopes of turning all the residents there into slaves.

“As a result, they fought a few battles, suffering casualties on both sides. Back then, First City had a conflict with other large factions. As such, it was impossible for them to reinforce the slave hunters here. They could only negotiate with Weed City and allow them to join First City as official citizens.

“Therefore, Weed City has a high degree of autonomy. It’s a place where Ruin Hunters are very active. The Hunter’s Guild branch there is also rather famous.”

After hearing Bai Chen’s description, Long Yuehong—who had eaten his fill—began to ask Jiang Baimian and the others about the exact details of how they dealt with Jingfa, drawing on their experience and information.

At the end of this conversation, he turned to look at Shang Jianyao. Long Yuehong couldn’t help but ask curiously and hesitantly, “What’s the name of the Awakened ability you used to make Jingfa suddenly friendly?”

He quickly added, “If it’s not convenient to answer, there’s no need to say anything.”

Shang Jianyao looked at the windshield in front of him and fell silent for a few seconds. “Inference Clowning.”

#### *Chapter 45: The Third Evening*

The sun gradually set in the west, and the horizon was golden-red. In the grayish-black wilderness, trees occasionally appeared, standing tall.

Long Yuehong looked at the few figures heading north and asked in confusion, “Why are some Ruin Hunters traveling purely on foot? Won’t they be unable to keep up with the previous batch of people?”

Ever since they separated from Wu Shoushi and the others and headed to Blackrat Town, they encountered several groups of Ruin Hunters heading north of Yuelu Station.

Some of these hunters had driven modified vehicles, some used motorcycles that constantly roared, some relied on bicycles, and others rode domesticated horses. Although there were all kinds of strange vehicles, they had some form of transportation.

Bai Chen—who was driving—glanced at them and simply said, “They’re all here to pick up the leftovers.”

“What do you mean?” asked Long Yuehong.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian carried out maintenance on her pistol. Without raising her head, she said, “They are deliberately walking because they do not wish to be the first to reach the city ruins. This way, the Ruin Hunters ahead can help them take the wrong steps and eliminate many dangers.

“Although this will also result in them losing the right to obtain first-hand information and the right to choose precious resources, it’s safer. As long as they don’t go too deep into the city center, they have a high chance of surviving. After all, it’s such a large city. Even if a large faction’s unit is ahead, they won’t be able to clear out everything in the periphery at once and guard all the roads leading to it.”

Long Yuehong came to a realization before having new questions. “But they won’t be able to carry much with them. Just carrying things on their shoulders will limit how much they can carry. It’s better not to go.”

Jiang Baimian looked up and chuckled. “From the looks of it, you really don’t have any concept of city ruins. There are many old vehicles and all kinds of spare parts there. As long as you know how to repair them, you can ‘prepare’ new transportation devices over there. Heh heh, that itself is one of the harvests.

“Actually, compared to the people who drive over by themselves, they will end up harvesting more—a lot more.”

Long Yuehong thought about it and realized that it was true.

Previously, Wu Shoushi’s Ruin Hunter team had a total of four people. They had driven a gray SUV. After they reached the city ruin after avoiding or resolving any danger, they could at most obtain three cars and four vehicles worth of supplies. Any more and they would not be able to take the spoils away.

If the four Ruin Hunters purely walked over on foot with their tents and weapons on their backs, they could at most obtain four cars and four vehicles worth of supplies.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and muttered to himself, "Isn't the main point of driving to save time traveling and maintaining stamina?"

Jiang Baimian holstered the United 202 pistol back on her belt and pointed at the group of people in the distance. "Yes. Hence, this group of people will definitely have to rest for more than a day when they arrive at Yuelu Station. In any case, they don't have to be in a rush."

She then looked around. "It's almost evening. It looks like we won't be able to reach Blackrat Town today. Let's find a spot like a hillock to camp at. We can leave at dawn."

"Alright."

"Alright."

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen replied one after another.

They found a small mound in the grayish-black wilderness before long, and they set up a tent with its back facing the wind.

Jiang Baimian looked at the bonfire and clapped her hands. Her eyes darted about slightly. "Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, your mission in the afternoon hasn't been completed yet!"

"Huh?" Long Yuehong was a little confused. It took him a few seconds to remember that he hadn't finished the mission in the steelworks factory ruins—find food with his own abilities and draw a layout of the steelworks factory ruins.

Long Yuehong quickly defended himself. "But our expedition was interrupted by Jingfa. We can't return now, and we have to go to Blackrat Town."

Shang Jianyao—who was beside him—didn't say anything and only smiled at Jiang Baimian as if he understood that his team leader was 'deliberately looking for trouble.'

Jiang Baimian looked around and smiled. "Therefore, I have to give you a different mission that you can complete now."

She then looked down at the black electronic watch on her wrist. "Complete a hunt before dark. There's no restriction on the prey's size."

With that said, she looked up and ordered Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "Show me the parts of the map that you have finished drawing."

Shang Jianyao immediately handed over the piece of paper that only had the hospital and radio station area drawn on it.



Jiang Baimian took it and unfolded it. Her expression immediately turned a little strange. "Why did you label a bathroom? It can't be used again."

Team Leader, what you said is very strange... Long Yuehong didn't dare voice out his thoughts.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "Being detailed and realistic are my requirements for drawing a map."

"You've previously drawn a map?" Jiang Baimian was a little curious.

"No." Shang Jianyao shook his head frankly.

"Then why the..." Jiang Baimian swallowed her last word and waved her hand. "Start your hunting."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong did not waste any time. They carried their assault rifles and walked to the top of the small mound to look around.

The weeds in the wilderness gently swayed amidst the evening wind, bouncing off the light from the grayish-black soil and various rocks.

Only a few dozen trees could be seen at first glance, much less active animals. This meant that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong couldn't even find a target.

"Which way?" Long Yuehong asked habitually.

Shang Jianyao looked at the stream around the mound. "Follow it and find the river. There should be fish there."

"That's right." Long Yuehong's expression relaxed. Long Yuehong then hesitated before saying, "But is this considered hunting?"

"Considering the goal, it definitely counts," Shang Jianyao replied casually. "The only problem is how far we have to go to find fish."

"...Why don't we hunt other animals while we're at it?" Long Yuehong suddenly had a strange thought. "Shang Jianyao, do you think you can use your Inference Clowning ability to lure prey over?"

Shang Jianyao sized up Long Yuehong. "First, you have to make them understand me. Second, you have to make them stop and listen to me."

"...That's true." Long Yuehong opened his mouth as if he wanted to ask something, but he didn't say anything in the end. He thought for a moment and said, "We can't hunt blindly. Let's consult Bai Chen first."

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao didn’t mind. He turned around and walked toward the jeep, which was near the bonfire.

Long Yuehong stared at his back and fell silent for two seconds before gently sighing.

After approaching the jeep, Shang Jianyao asked frankly, “Bai Chen, where will there be prey nearby?”

Bai Chen pointed at the sparse trees. “You can head there to take a look. There should be rabbits. You have to pay attention when distinguishing footprints and feces...”

She briefly talked about the trick to hunting rabbits before saying, “If you were an ordinary person, I would suggest setting up traps and using tools. However, you have a certain level of marksmanship. You just need to maintain your calm and not panic.”

“Okay.” Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao immediately felt a little anticipation.

...

An hour later, while the sun’s rays were weakening, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong returned to the bonfire with ashen faces.

The former held a grayish-white hare in his hand with blood dripping down.

Jiang Baimian—who was warming herself by the fire—stood up. “You guys took so long to capture only one rabbit?”

“Rabbits are too sensitive. They run fast and have many holes...” Long Yuehong wore a stumped expression.

Jiang Baimian smiled and finished the sentence for him. “Besides, too many people passed by the area today, startling the rabbits. Therefore, they are even harder to catch.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Long Yuehong hurriedly replied.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “We underestimated rabbits too much and thought that we could capture them easily.”

“Not bad. With the experience this time, it’ll be easier in the future.” Jiang Baimian pointed at the bonfire. “Remove its fur, drain the blood, and roast it.”

The rabbit was soon strung up on a relatively thick branch and was roasted over the crimson fire.

From time to time, Bai Chen sprinkled salt on the rabbit, making its surface gradually turn golden. It also gave off a fragrance that Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had never smelled before.

“It seems to be very delicious...” Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao said in unison.

Jiang Baimian smiled and shook her head. “I can only say that we’ll make do. There’s no oil for basting, no spices for sprinkling, and rabbit meat is relatively tough. Thus, just make do with it.”

“How extravagant,” replied Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong subconsciously. It was such a waste to use oil to baste the meat when roasting!

Jiang Baimian kept staring at the small rabbit and didn’t look up. “Sometimes, we can only finish a portion on the spot when we don’t have a container to hold the oil that seeps out. In the wilderness, you have to know how to adapt to the environment.”

Just as Jiang Baimian said that, she suddenly glanced at the side of the small mound. “Two people are coming over.”

Long Yuehong—who was guarding the surroundings—immediately raised his Berserker assault rifle’s muzzle.

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen looked over as well.

A few minutes later, they saw the two people.

It was a man-woman duo. The former was less than 1.8 meters tall and in his forties. He had long black hair and a very elegant beard that circled his mouth. Even though he was almost middle-aged, it was easy to tell that he used to be a handsome man.

The woman was about 1.7 meters tall, had blond hair, blue eyes, and deep facial features. She was very beautiful.

What they had in common was that they both wore loose, rarely-seen robes. One was black, and the other was grayish-blue. The latter had all kinds of strange and abstract symbols on its surface.

Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows and asked loudly, “What are the two of you doing here?”

The blond-haired, blue-eyed woman in the grayish-blue robe immediately stopped in her tracks. She wrapped her left hand around her right hand and raised it to her eyebrows before bowing. “The Celestial Worthy of Immeasurable for Blessings.”

She used a perfectly accented language of the Ashlands, not the Red River language that was expected of her appearance.

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "I don't know her well. I caught a whiff of the fragrance shortly after we met, so I came over to try my luck and see if anyone would be kind enough."

"But there's no way to be kind." Jiang Baimian calmly pointed at the small rabbit by the bonfire.

"Since we've encountered each other, isn't it good for everyone to have a chat?" The middle-aged man maintained his smile. "I'm not tooting my own horn, but everyone I've met has praised me for being knowledgeable."

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian signaled Shang Jianyao and the others to keep their guard up. She then smiled and said, "Alright."

#### *Chapter 46: Not Simple*

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian's answer, the middle-aged man with long black hair and loose black robes found a seat by the bonfire and casually sat down, appearing very carefree.

The woman with blond hair and blue eyes—who was wearing a grayish-blue robe—casually sat down as well. She didn't seem worried that Shang Jianyao and the others would harbor any ill intentions.

This confidence and attitude made Jiang Baimian unable to stop herself from laughing. "Do we look that harmless?"

Similar thoughts flashed across Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong's minds at the same time—These two people are clearly very confident!

"Wasn't a city ruin recently found? Everyone has something to look forward to, so why would anyone have the time to kill each other?" The middle-aged man stretched out his hands and warmed them by the bonfire. "How should I address you?"

Jiang Baimian returned to her original seat and frankly replied, "Jiang Baimian. We are from a particular faction and have come to the Blackmarsh Wilderness to complete certain missions."

She took the initiative to reveal a little information on her identity, but she didn't reveal it completely. She hoped to make the other party have some qualms. It was best if everyone spent the night in harmony and parted ways the next day.

The reason she agreed to let the two come to the bonfire to communicate was mainly that Shang Jianyao's Awakened abilities had limited range. It was definitely better to communicate at close range than at long range.

Even if the other party also had an Awakened, their main target would definitely be Jiang Baimian, who acted like a leader. This would then give Shang Jianyao a chance. Even if the other party could use a long-range ability similar to the Hungry Ghost Realm, Shang Jianyao—who would already be prepared—could still counterattack at this distance and carry out the corresponding influence.

"I can tell." The middle-aged man had no doubts about Jiang Baimian's identity. "Be it your looks, size, skin, clothes, or weapons, you don't look like wilderness nomads. Haha, only that young lady there makes me doubt myself."

He was referring to Bai Chen, who was roasting the rabbit.

Jiang Baimian was just about to reply with 'We're not young anymore' when the middle-aged man continued speaking.

"My name is Du Heng. I'm a historian and an antiquarian. I'm ashamed to say this, but I've always been a rookie, even though I've been in the Hunter's Guild for more than 20 years. I've only been promoted to Official Hunter recently. Sigh, I didn't take on many assignments. I mostly used their resources and news to complete my research. See? I am here the moment a city ruin—which has never been explored—is discovered."

He maintained a smile as he spoke, appearing very amiable. However, his answer made Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and company even more vigilant. They did not dare underestimate him.

An antiquarian and historian, who only seemed to have a pistol, actually dared to wander the Ashlands alone and explore a city ruin. Furthermore, he had lived until he was middle-aged—this in itself meant that he was definitely not simple.

The blond woman introduced herself. "My name is Galoran, a Daoist priest."

Although she could speak the Ashlands language, some of her pronunciations were still a little odd. This made Shang Jianyao and the others feel that something wasn't right.

With a faint smile, Galoran continued, "I came here because many people were walking this way. Hence, I came over to take a look."

"How random..." Jiang Baimian bluntly gave an evaluation.

Galoran replied with a smile, "Otherwise? Ever since the Old World was destroyed, many people have understood one fact: Although we humans call ourselves advanced creatures, we are like falling leaves in a gale when facing the world and fate..."

As she spoke, she pointed at the sparse trees in the distance. "I can only dance amidst the wind, unable to determine where I will land. Since I can't resist the machinations of fate, I might as well give up on such thoughts. I'll go where the wind takes me and change the way I view things. I'll experience the various sights along the way and search for the true way's existence through them. Then, I'll use this opportunity to distinguish reality and illusion and completely escape my shackles in the hopes of attaining eternal life.

"As the Daoist saying goes: humanity is governed by earth, and earth is governed by heaven; heaven is governed by Dao, and Dao is governed by nature's way."

Long Yuehong and the others were a little stunned when they saw such a beautiful blond-haired, blue-eyed woman speaking with confidence and composure in front of them.

They could understand every word that came out of the other party's mouth, but they were still confused when the words came together as a whole.

Finally, they could only conclude that her philosophy in life was: Adapt herself to the circumstances.

Jiang Baimian nodded seriously. "I think I understand."

Du Heng thoughtfully glanced at Galoran and pointed at the rabbit. "I saw two hares when I came over. This means that there aren't too few prey here. Why did you only capture one? There are so many people here..."

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's faces flushed red when they heard this question.

Jiang Baimian sized them up from the corner of her eye and shook her head with a chuckle. "Heaven has the virtue of protecting life."

Du Heng revealed a look of enlightenment. "Are you Monks Conclave's parishioners, or are you from the Crystal Consciousness?"

"No." Jiang Baimian casually explained, "We happened to encounter a mechanical monk from the Monks Conclave and had a conflict with him. We had a big battle."

Du Heng's mouth dropped open as he thought for a moment. "Does that monk wear a red kasaya?"

"Yes." Jiang Baimian didn't hide the truth.

Du Heng and Galoran sized up the four-man team again.

The former retracted his gaze and smiled. “You guys are pretty good. As far as I know, the probability of a Monks Conclave mechanic monk that wears a red kasaya being an Awakened isn’t too low.”

Galoran nodded in response, indicating that she had heard of similar talk.

“He is one.” Jiang Baimian confirmed their guess. She looked around, not letting her gaze linger on anyone. Then she asked with a smile, “The two of you seem to have a deep understanding of the Awakened?”

Since Du Heng had uttered ‘Isn’t it good for everyone to have a chat?’ and Galoran adapted to her situation, Jiang Baimian didn’t stand on ceremony. She began to ask for information that was definitely rare or unknown to ordinary people.

If the other party didn’t answer, she definitely wouldn’t force him. If they did, she would consider sharing a rabbit leg with them. After all, the four of them had no intention of eating their fill with such small prey. The main course still consisted of energy bars and compressed biscuits. If that really didn’t do the trick, they still had a few more cans of food.

Du Heng stroked his beard. “Gosh, that stumps me.”

As he spoke, he smiled broadly.

Before the blond female Daoist—Galoran—could speak, Du Heng smugly added, “However, I know several Awakened. They tell me that the Awakened are also seeking and searching for the New World in their minds. It’s no different to how everyone in the Ashlands is searching for the door to the New World in reality, hoping to stop starvation and the plague of diseases and abnormalities.

“Yes, the Monks Conclave calls the New World the Pure Lands.”

Shang Jianyao listened very seriously, seemingly coming to a realization.

At this moment, Galoran interrupted with a gentle expression. “There’s a chance that the Monks Conclave mechanical monks wearing red kasayas have already entered the Sea of Origins.”

Du Heng slapped his thigh and said, “That’s right, that’s right. The Sea of Origins! They mentioned this term.”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and thoughtfully asked, “Where will one reach after crossing the Sea of Origins?”

“I don’t know,” Galoran replied calmly.



Du Heng smiled and didn't answer, but he didn't express his ignorance.

Jiang Baimian thought for two seconds before asking, "Then, where do we enter the Sea of Origins?"

Galoran looked at the crackling crimson bonfire and said, "Everyone addresses that place differently."

At this moment, Du Heng interrupted with a smile. "The more common name is Star Cluster Hall."

Shang Jianyao's eyes flickered, but his expression did not change visibly.

"Is that so." Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "I've never come into contact with Awakened, so I don't know much about them."

With that said, she didn't give Du Heng and Galoran a chance to speak. She turned to Bai Chen and asked, "How's the roasting?"

"It's almost done." Bai Chen retracted the branch that skewered the rabbit.

"They are guests. Give some to the two of them," Jiang Baimian instructed.

Bai Chen knew how rare the information they had just heard was, so she didn't resist at all. After letting the roasted rabbit cool down, she tore off the rabbit's two hind legs and handed them to Du Heng and Galoran.

Bai Chen had wandered the Ashlands for many years, but this was the first time she had heard of the Sea of Origins and Star Cluster Hall.

Du Heng didn't stand on ceremony. He reached out to receive it, grabbed the tip of the femur, and ate it while hissing about how hot it was.

"Not bad; it's roasted perfectly..." As he ate, he praised the food vaguely.

Galoran was much more cultured than him. She pinched the protruding bone—which was not too hot—and nibbled off the rabbit meat.

At the same time, Bai Chen divided the remaining roasted rabbit into four portions and placed them in their lunch boxes.

Shang Jianyao took a bite and felt that the meat was indeed very dry. However, as he chewed, he found it more fragrant than the meat dishes offered in the company.

Long Yuehong was in charge of guarding the surroundings, so all he could do was watch helplessly. He couldn't enjoy the food immediately.

After finishing the tiny bit of rabbit meat, Jiang Baimian smiled when she saw Du Heng sucking his finger without any regard for his image. “Du... Sir, didn’t you say that you are a historian and that you are knowledgeable? Then, what do you know about the newly-discovered city ruin north of Yuelu Station? Do you know which city it corresponds to in the Old World?”

Du Heng took out a wrinkled handkerchief, wiped his hands, and chuckled. “I don’t know. Many of the Old World’s information was lost during its destruction, as well as during the Chaotic Era. This included many highly precise maps. However, I’m certain of one thing. There’s definitely something abnormal about the newly-discovered city ruin. It has great research value.”

“Why do you say that?” Jiang Baimian asked on behalf of Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong.

Du Heng looked up at the northern sky. “When the Old World was destroyed, many people living in the towns and villages around the city survived. However, no one has ever mentioned or attempted to explore the city ruins. Yes, this information was obtained from Ruin Hunters who later discovered the ruins.”

Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen agreed with this point. Tian Erhe from Moat Town was so young back then, but he still yearned to return to the city to find his parents.

“Such details imply that the city ruins are definitely not simple.” Du Heng gave another conclusion.

Just as he said that, a hoarse and desolate howl suddenly sounded from the north. “Howl!”

In the quiet night, it was as if a nightmare had descended.

#### *Chapter 47: Leave it to Nature*

Before the howl subsided, similar howls sounded from different parts of the Great Swamp. They echoed endlessly.

Du Heng listened for a while, and the smile on his face disappeared unconsciously.

After the dark Blackmarsh Wilderness quietened down, the middle-aged man—who called himself an antiquarian and historian—looked back at Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others.

“The situation over there is a little more troublesome than I imagined. It seems like I have to rush through the night.” As Du Heng spoke, he stood up.

Jiang Baimian didn’t stop him and said politely, “Be careful.”

Du Heng laughed and didn't respond directly. Before bidding farewell, he casually said, "Young lady, the literal meaning of your name, white cotton, always reminds me of the past. Back then, there were many cotton fields near my hometown. Every season or a little later, I would see countless small clouds landing on the ground. It was a beautiful scene."

Jiang Baimian stood up and smiled. "My father was a biologist who studied cotton enhancement. The month I was born was the season of the cotton harvest, so he gave me this name."

At this point, she protested with a smile, "Although you are indeed older than us, you shouldn't use the term 'young lady' on me."

Du Heng laughed. "I'm much older than I look, and I'm also older than you imagine."

He didn't delay any further and waved his hand with a smile. "Pray we meet again."

"Pray we meet again," Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others politely replied.

Du Heng waved his hand again and turned around. He circled around the mound and walked north into the dark wilderness—where the sun had already set, and the moon had yet to rise.

Jiang Baimian sat down again and looked at the blond Daoist opposite her. "Madam Galoran, what about you? Will you also be rushing north of Yuelu Station?"

Galoran smiled and replied, "There's no need to call me madam. On the path of seeking the true way, there's no difference between men and women. If you want to show your respect, I don't mind either. You can call me a Daoist priest."

"Of course. If you want to call me Little Lo, Little Ran, or Little Ga, that's fine. This is nothing more than a different scenery on my path towards enlightenment. There's no such thing as one being inferior or superior."

"That's pretty... pretty down-to-earth." Jiang Baimian thought for a long time before she finally came up with an appropriate adjective. "I can tell that you've learned the Ashlands language well."

"I didn't do it willingly." Galoran's answer exceeded Bai Chen and the others' expectations.

Galoran then explained with a smile, "The books regarding the Dao are all written in the Ashlands text. They lose their charm when translated into the Red River language. It will be impossible for the translated versions to give an accurate description."

With that said, she threw the finished rabbit bone to the ground and stuck two greasy fingers into her mouth. She sucked them a few times before casually wiping them on her clothes.

Such casual behavior—together with her beautiful but slightly noble bearing—left Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others a little dumbfounded.

Galoran took out a waterskin and drank two mouthfuls. When she saw the people opposite her staring at her dazedly, she chuckled and said, “Sometimes, we can’t even differentiate between reality and illusion. We can’t even ensure our basic survival, so why should we care about such trivial matters? It’s better to do as we please and leave it to nature.”

Having said that, she looked at the crackling bonfire and spoke with an indescribable smile. “Just like the nobles in the First City’s Senate. They were clearly nomads who had been struggling to survive in the wilderness for decades. Without a clean water source, they had to vie for their companions’ pee. Now, they insist on being polite and respectful. It’s basically all kinds of unnecessary and elaborate formalities.

“Heh heh, while lower-ranking citizens freeze to death from hunger in the city, they stipulate that a banquet requires one set of cutlery per dish.”

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen had never been to First City. They had only heard some rumors and were unable to continue the conversation.

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “It seems like you come from First City.”

The blond Daoist priest, Galoran, smiled. She didn’t confirm or deny the speculation.

Upon noticing the silence, Shang Jianyao changed the topic. “Daoist Galoran, what’s a Daoist priest?”

Galoran thought about it seriously. “It’s truly a little difficult to explain... Haven’t you guys encountered a monk before? You can treat Daoists as another type of monk. They belong to another religion and believe in a different Kalendaria from the monks.”

The veins on Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others’ foreheads twitched when they heard the word ‘Kalendaria.’

Shang Jianyao took the initiative to ask, “Which Kalendaria do you believe in?”

Galoran’s expression became serious. “Master Zhuang.”

“...” All the members of the Old Task Force found it a little difficult to speak.

After losing Jingfa's tail, Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao shared the information they had learned from the honest mechanical monk with Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen.

Among the information was a very important piece of information: The Monks Conclave believed that this world was only a dream of the former Buddha, Lokeśvara-Tathāgata—which was why it was filled with all kinds of pain. Lokeśvara-Tathāgata was the Kalendaria that represented the entire year and leap month. It had another famous name beyond the Monks Conclave.

The name was: Master Zhuang!

Galoran took in their slightly abnormal reactions, but she didn't ask any questions.

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian probed, "Did you join this religion while in First City?"

Galoran nodded. "Yes, the Eternal Time Sect."

A smile gradually appeared on her face. "Back then, my mother had just passed away. I also didn't get along well with the rest of my family..."

Shang Jianyao suddenly interrupted the Daoist priest's reminiscence. "Why weren't you sad when you mentioned your mother's passing? Instead, you smiled."

Galoran chortled and spoke in perfect Ashlands language. "Birth, aging, illness, and death are the laws of this world, just like spring, summer, autumn, and winter. They will always alternate in a cycle. Although my mother has died, she remains asleep between the heavens and the earth. She remains a part of nature. Perhaps one day, she will start afresh in a different form, just like how spring comes after winter ends.

"Since I understand this, why should I cry in grief? That energy is better served to reminisce."

Shang Jianyao wanted to retort, but he couldn't find any flaws in the other party's theory. He could only shut his mouth sullenly. He vaguely felt that Galoran made sense, but her views were too extreme.

Galoran was just about to continue the previous topic when a desolate howl sounded from north of Yuelu Station.

"Howl!"

This time, the howls became louder and more hoarse. It had clearly changed.

Galoran turned her head and smiled when she heard that. "It seems like I have to go there too."

She slowly stood up, wrapped her left hand around her right, and bowed. “The Perfected Man has no self; the New World is before us.”

She then patted her Daoist robe and drifted north.

Shang Jianyao gave a simple explanation as he watched the Daoist priest—Galoran—leave. “Perfect Man is another way of addressing the Kalendaria...”

Jiang Baimian had already stood up and was looking in the direction that Galoran and Du Heng had left in. Suddenly, she laughed. “Seriously, why didn’t they prepare a car? Why did they choose to walk? With their abilities, this shouldn’t be too difficult...”

Who wouldn’t have something to rely on if they dared to traverse the wilderness in the darkness?

Such people had no need to delay their arrival deliberately and wait for the first batch of Ruin Hunters to trigger most of the dangers.

“It might have happened too suddenly,” deduced Bai Chen from her perspective.

“Maybe it’s to maintain their image,” said Shang Jianyao, giving a perspective most people wouldn’t think of.

“I inexplicably find you making sense...” Jiang Baimian almost laughed. “I’m referring to the historian named Du Heng. As for Galoran, she said it herself: it’s naturally better to walk if one wants to see the various sights on a journey.”

Without waiting for her team members to speak, Jiang Baimian pretended to be serious and said, “What confused me the most was another question.”

“What is it?” asked Long Yuehong—who was in charge of guarding the surroundings—nervously.

Jiang Baimian could no longer hide the smile on her face. “Shang Jianyao, why didn’t you participate in the ‘chorus’ like you previously did?”

She was referring to the first time Shang Jianyao howled when they heard the anomaly in the swamp’s depths.

Shang Jianyao glanced at his team leader and said seriously, “You’re so childish.”

“...” Bai Chen and Long Yuehong almost laughed out loud, while Jiang Baimian was rendered speechless. She could only scratch her ear and say, “Huh, what did you say? Seriously, can’t you speak louder? Forget it, forget it. Let’s eat.”

After taking the lead in finishing the compressed biscuits and energy bars and replenishing the waterskins, Jiang Baimian reminded them seriously, “We have to be more careful tonight. You heard the commotion just now.”

After Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong replied, Jiang Baimian smiled. “However, we need to rest when it’s time to rest. We still have a long day tomorrow. Also, we need to begin training your ability to find food. This doesn’t only refer to hunting and searching. You also need to distinguish which leaves, roots, and parts of a mutated animal can be eaten.

“You also need to determine how long it will take before a genetic agent injection is needed after eating certain foods. You also need to determine which soil can temporarily serve as food for one or two meals at most... Don’t think that the past few days was an adventure in the Ashlands. With sufficient food, it can only be called an armed tour!”

Long Yuehong felt a sense of fear when he heard this, but Shang Jianyao was eager to give it a try.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and added, “Also, don’t be confused by the different religions’ theories. Although it can indeed provide a certain level of spiritual comfort, it’s equivalent to escaping reality in an environment like the Ashlands. There are many latent dangers.”

Long Yuehong nodded and curiously asked, “Team Leader, are there many such strange religions?”

This was something rarely mentioned in Pangu Biology’s textbooks.

“Plenty. When people are in pain and despair, it’s very easy for them to give themselves up to religion.” Jiang Baimian chuckled. “From what I know, there are probably more than ten underground religions that can cause considerable harm in First City.”

After warning everyone, Jiang Baimian took over Long Yuehong’s mission and patrolled the surroundings. She also instructed her team members to do an after-action review of all their encounters today.

They did not encounter any accidents that night. Not long after dawn, the jeep began driving north.

Noticing that their destination was not far away, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—began introducing Blackrat Town to her team members. “The residents of Blackrat Town are actually a group of Subhumans.”



## *Chapter 48: Subhumans*

Subhumans? Upon hearing this term, words like 'vicious,' 'evil,' 'deformed,' 'dirty,' 'source of contamination,' and 'human haters' instantly appeared in Long Yuehong's mind.

Although he had never encountered Subhumans, the textbooks and the people around him all said the same thing.

Jiang Baimian seemed able to sense Long Yuehong's thoughts and sighed. "Subhumans and humans are essentially the same. At least there's no difference when it comes to reproduction."

Without waiting for Long Yuehong and the others to speak, she continued, "The people in Blackrat Town relied on catching and eating rats to survive the first winter after the Old World was destroyed. It is said that the rats in that area had gone crazy back then. All of them burrowed out of the ground, covering the mountains and plains. Some of them were covered in ulcers, some had red eyes, and some attacked the living beings around them indiscriminately.

"Uh... I'm going off-topic. Let's talk about the people in Blackrat Town. After the first winter, a large number of residents died because of the contamination in the area they lived in. They chose to depart and migrate here.

"Unfortunately, the nightmare didn't end there. Their bodies gradually mutated. Furthermore, perhaps it was because they had eaten too many mutated rats, but they actually became more and more like rats. Ha, I'm not an expert in this field, nor have I done any research. I'm just mentioning it in passing.

"In short, their hair turned black and plentiful. Their bodies are always hunched, and their nails have become harder and sharper... After several generations of reproduction, the current residents of Blackrat Town are generally less than 1.4 meters tall. They like to live in caves and are very good at digging. Correspondingly, their choice of food has become more varied. At the same time, they are afraid of strong sunlight. Hence, they can only move about in the morning, evening, and nighttime.

"They also have many good mutations. For example, they are very talented in machinery and electronics. Some of the Old World's appliances are already badly damaged. After fiddling with them for a period of time, they can make them barely usable. Of course, the premise is that there are the necessary wires and components."

At this point, Jiang Baimian exclaimed, "I almost forgot to remind you not to say the words 'Blackrat Town' in front of them. This is a name given to their settlement by some wilderness nomads. Its meaning is filled with discrimination, and the people in Blackrat Town are the kind of people with relatively high self-esteem. Within the company,

people don't have much hate for Subhumans, but we can't avoid the disdain, contempt, and aversion. Therefore, we have also used this term."

Bai Chen—who was driving—couldn't help but ask, "Then, why did the company rope them in?"

As a former wilderness nomad, Bai Chen had encountered the Subhumans' animosity and was attacked several times for no reason. Furthermore, some Subhumans had nightmarish appearances, so Bai Chen seriously lacked a good impression of Subhumans. Sometimes, she even treated them as dangerous creatures with intelligence.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before saying, "The residents of Blackrat Town don't have a deep grudge against humans. They usually treat themselves as normal people. If it weren't for their sensitivity and inferiority complex and the company's employees' bias against Subhumans, the company might have gradually absorbed them. They mightn't have treated them as peripheral vassals.

"Actually, they can't be considered vassals; it's more of a cooperative relationship. We will use weapons, ammunition, old clothes, and a certain amount of food to exchange for the valuable things they have gathered. At the same time, they will transmit important information about the Blackmarsh Wilderness to the company via radio. Yes, the company collects old clothes from you for similar transactions."

At this point, Jiang Baimian paused.

"The company will also recruit volunteers from Blackrat Town for certain experiments. In this regard, the residents of Blackrat Town are very enthusiastic. They are willing to give up everything in exchange for the chance of their descendants becoming normal people."

Jiang Baimian did not embellish her descriptions with her feelings, but Bai Chen still sighed with emotion when she heard that. "In the Ashlands, the company's bad reputation is always associated with its biological experiments. Before I came into contact with you, I heard many rumors. I was filled with fear for such experiments, afraid that I would be captured by Pangu Biology one day and be sent to a secret place to be a sacrificial lamb for diabolical experiments.

"I was afraid that I would be tortured to the point of having a mental breakdown, suffer from physical deformations, and become a monster. I was afraid that I wouldn't even be able to die as a human. To think the people of Blackrat Town actually volunteered for the experiments..."

After hearing Bai Chen say this, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong realized that the company had such an image in the eyes of outsiders. It was like the major antagonist in the stories aired on radio.

This was completely different from what they had known since they were young. They had always believed that the company was a utopia, while the outside world was filled with suffering.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "I can tell that you've been suppressing such fear in your heart for a long time. That's why you said so much in one breath."

She then raised her left arm and bent her elbow. "This electric eel-type biomechanical limb was the result of the experiment. Likewise for the genetic modification. How is it? Do you find it less terrifying after witnessing this with your own eyes?"

Bai Chen remained silent and did not answer.

"... Got it." Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. "You're even more scared after seeing me like this."

She exhaled indiscernibly. "You're right about one thing. Most of the volunteers don't enjoy a good ending..."

The atmosphere in the jeep became tense, and nobody spoke for a long time.

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao and grumbled jokingly, "Why aren't you joking at a time like this?"

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, "As a person determined to save all of humanity, I never joke about such topics."

"... That's true." Jiang Baimian sat up straight again. After a while, she pointed ahead and said, "Turn left and enter the mountains."

Upon arriving, they saw a stretch of mounds in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. Some of them could even be called hills, and Blackrat Town was located in the hills.

After driving along the bumpy road for a while, Jiang Baimian couldn't help but roll down the window.

"Seriously, the combined distance traveling up and down is greater than the distance we traveled. From a single trip out, we'll definitely have to repair the undercarriage chassis when we return..."

Amidst her complaints, Jiang Baimian suddenly shut her mouth. She tilted her head and carefully sensed for a while before she gradually frowned. "There's pitifully few electric signals coming from Blackrat Town."

The electric signals had already entered her perception range; it also meant that Blackrat Town was very close.

Shang Jianyao instinctively raised the Berserker assault rifle and placed it by the window. "Could it be a result of the abnormalities north of Yuelu Station?"

This place was not close to Yuelu Station, but it was not too far either. They were half a day's journey from it.

"Maybe." Jiang Baimian nodded, and her tone was clearly more solemn than before.

"Team Leader, do we need to wear the exoskeleton?" asked Long Yuehong calmly, no longer as shocked as he had been in the past few days.

"Yes." Jiang Baimian did not underestimate the unknown. She then instructed, "You'll be the one wearing it."

"Why isn't it Shang Jianyao?" Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

"Shang Jianyao needs to follow me into Blackrat Town. The exoskeleton can't enter. Uh, it can actually enter, but it won't be of much use," Jiang Baimian explained simply.

Shang Jianyao had no objections to this. He maintained his silence, highly vigilant against any anomalies that might suddenly appear.

After Long Yuehong wore the exoskeleton, the jeep continued driving.

Two to three minutes later, Jiang Baimian ordered, "Stop the car."

She then pointed at the woods and bushes ahead. "Blackrat Town is over there. Long Yuehong, take point."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong opened the door and alighted.

After the four of them entered the relatively dense forest, they walked for several minutes before they suddenly smelled a familiar scent.

It was the smell of blood!

"This is bad..." Jiang Baimian immediately muttered to herself as if she had already thought of a possible development. With a grenade launcher in hand, she quickened her pace and walked to the other end of the forest.

There was a grayish-yellow mountain wall. Trees and weeds hid a deep, dark cave, and an even thicker stench of blood effused from it.

"That's Blackrat Town," said Jiang Baimian in a deep but not low voice.

At a glance, Long Yuehong understood why the exoskeleton wasn't useful in Blackrat Town.

The entrance to the cave was only 1.4 meters high. No matter how one contracted and adjusted the exoskeleton, it could not reach this height. The cave's interior was clearly shorter as well.

Due to this, the person wearing the exoskeleton wouldn't even fit when they entered Blackrat Town—which was essentially a cave. Their combat strength would naturally be reduced.

Before they approached the cave, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian looked to the left simultaneously and saw two corpses under a tree.

The two corpses were very short. Their bodies had the tendency to curl up, and their clothes had been stripped clean.

Their nails were sharp and stiff, clearly yellowing. There was a large amount of black hair on their bodies. At a glance, they looked like giant rats that resided in a seriously polluted region. However, the hair wasn't dense. Through them, one could see the rather pale skin below.

The two corpses had wide eyes and lingering expressions of horror and hate. Their bodies and surroundings were dyed with blood, looking no different from normal humans.

Frankly speaking, apart from having thicker hair, a shorter figure, strange nails, and slightly paler skin, Shang Jianyao didn't think that the two dead residents of Blackrat Town were fundamentally different from him.

This was not the first time Long Yuehong had seen corpses. Although he was still a little scared, disgusted, and didn't want to look at them directly, he could control himself.

He hissed. "Don't tell me they're all dead..."

Jiang Baimian subconsciously turned her head and looked at the deep cave. For a moment, she didn't have the courage to enter. She looked like she was able to imagine the scene inside.

At this moment, Bai Chen—who had crouched down to examine the corpses—looked up and said in a deep voice, "They died from gunshots."

Jiang Baimian narrowed her eyes slightly and muttered to herself, "Who could have done this...?"

With that said, she took a light breath and walked towards Blackrat Town's entrance.

Without needing to be instructed, Shang Jianyao followed closely behind her.

*Chapter 49: On-Scene*

Jiang Baimian stopped when she approached the cave entrance. She turned around and ordered Long Yuehong, who was wearing the exoskeleton, “Stay and guard this place.”

She thought for a moment and added, “Look beyond the woods more often. If the jeep is lost, Bai Chen and I will be fine, but the two of you will have some ‘enjoyment’ awaiting you. There are many things that humans can accept and adapt to if things progress in difficulty one step at a time. However, if it becomes hellishly difficult all of a sudden, most creatures will break down.”

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong was not disappointed that he could not enter Blackrat Town. Instead, he heaved a sigh of relief.

From the deaths of the Blackrat Town residents outside, he seemed able to foresee the tragic situation in the cave. He suspected that it would deal a strong blow to his mind, leaving behind psychological trauma that needed treatment.

After giving Long Yuehong instructions, Jiang Baimian turned around, bent down, and walked into the 1.4-meter-high hole.

Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao each held their weapons and followed behind, one on the left and one on the right. However, one had to bend his back while bending his knees greatly, making it a little difficult to walk. The other walked with relative ease.

They did not observe the situation outside before entering as taught in training manuals. Instead, they trusted their team leader’s sensitivity to weak electric signals.

In this regard, Jiang Baimian had already demonstrated sufficient reliability.

The cave entrance was still illuminated by the daylight, barely allowing them to see their surroundings. But the deeper they went, the darker it became. It became so dark that they couldn’t even see their fingers.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian took out a flashlight—which had a silver-white outer shell and a clear granular feel. She then pushed the switch on.

A yellowish light beam shot out, illuminating a certain area ahead. Coupled with the natural light from the entrance, Shang Jianyao could vaguely see the scene in front of him.

This cave was still considered wide. The deeper parts were still covered in darkness, making it impossible to see the end.

The stone pillars—which had originally formed naturally—had mostly snapped. Covering the ground were many rocks, moss, and dust that fell from the ceiling.

Centered around the spot illuminated by Jiang Baimian's flashlight were traces of scorch marks on the ground, which radiated outwards.

In the innermost potholes closest to the flashlight's origin, there were no intact corpses to speak off—only countless charred pieces of flesh and blood mixed in with the rocks and soil.

In the middle circle of potholes, short corpses lay prone. Their bodies were charred black, and they were dismembered in many areas. Their deaths were tragic.

As Jiang Baimian moved the flashlight, Shang Jianyao saw what had happened beyond the central circle and near the cave's rock walls.

Corpses of Blackrat Town's residents laid on the ground in various states. However, their bodies were basically intact. There were only certain burn marks. In addition, some thick black hair remained.

Some corpses did not have any obvious external injuries, while some had terrifying bullet wounds on their backs and chests. Many of them were also shirtless.

In the cave that Shang Jianyao's gaze landed on—apart from small pieces of porcelain, clay bowls, and mud bowls—nothing was left behind.

There was no need for anyone to explain such a scene. Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen instantly understood a fact: Blackrat Town had been massacred.

Jiang Baimian silently looked around and sighed. "It might be a thermobaric round fired from a shoulder-held, man-portable combat weapon... Those who didn't die on the spot were killed with an additional shot. Very professional."

The thermobaric round was a combination of high explosive rounds and fuel-air explosives. They were mainly used to kill enemies in cramped spaces such as caves and underground bunkers.

After a thermobaric round exploded, it would exhaust the surrounding oxygen and release a large amount of energy, producing a rapidly expanding fireball. This fireball would be accompanied by a high-pressure shockwave that swept through the tight space, killing the enemy and destroying equipment with maximum impact.

For Blackrat Town—which only had a 1.4-meter-high entrance—it was clearly not a wise choice to rush in and fight the residents, who were accustomed to such an environment. The best solution was to fire thermobaric rounds and various explosives directly inside.



Bai Chen tried her best to calm down and replied simply, “Not many teams have such explosives; not even some large factions.”

Although she was formerly an experienced wilderness nomad and was accustomed to fighting and killing, this was the first time she had seen a town—a settlement—get massacred.

The corpses and ground meat that covered the ground filled her with indescribable shock and horror, even though they were Subhumans.

In any case, apart from their height, nails, and body hair, the residents of Blackrat Town were almost no different from normal humans.

Bai Chen had actually seen settlements that had been massacred, but she had seen the devastation a long time after the tragedy had happened. Apart from a small number of bones and dilapidated houses—which were already uninhabited—there were little traces of anything left.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “Take out your flashlights and split up to search for clues. Maybe, just maybe, there are a few survivors?”

Shang Jianyao immediately removed the flashlight and the standard Ice Moss pistol from his belt. He used one hand to illuminate the area and held the gun with the other as he walked to the edge.

He didn’t believe that there would be any survivors at the center of the explosion or its surroundings.

As he examined the corpses, Shang Jianyao saw a woman curled up with her back facing him.

This woman still had clothes on. Her hands and feet were folded as if she was tightly hugging something and pressing it under her.

The corpse’s thick black hair could be vaguely seen on its back. There was a wound where dark-red blood had congealed. It was obvious that someone had shot the woman to ensure she was dead.

Shang Jianyao—who was already bending down—squatted down and used the flashlight as a pole to flip the Blackrat Town resident’s corpse over.

As the beam of light shook, Shang Jianyao saw a little girl.

She was wearing a very old but relatively clean white dress. The adult woman tightly wrapped her arms around this little girl. At first glance, she didn’t appear to be injured at all.

Shang Jianyao placed the flashlight on the ground and tried to check the little girl's condition, but he couldn't pry apart the adult woman's hand.

After giving up on this instinctive attempt, Shang Jianyao saw that the little girl's face was purple. There were traces of dark-red blood flowing out from the areas that were tightly pressed against the adult woman's chest and abdomen.

He then used his finger to see if the little girl was breathing and felt her temperature.

A few seconds later, he slowly retracted his palm.

After he had flipped over the two corpses tightly hugging each other, Shang Jianyao quickly discovered a depression that extended deep into the juncture between the cave's walls and ground with his flashlight. There were obvious fingernail scratches on the depression.

Upon seeing this depression, Shang Jianyao seemed to see what happened back then: During the enemy's attack, a woman from Blackrat Town was anxiously using her talent at digging to create a refuge space for her child.

Unfortunately, she wasn't faster than a bomb.

Shang Jianyao reached out to touch the depression and realized that there was a small naturally-formed hole. There seemed to be a cold, unknown object in the hole.

Shang Jianyao took it out.

With the flashlight's help, he realized that this item was a black, rectangular object—which was slightly longer than his middle finger.

Above this item was a mini display that resembled liquid crystal. In the middle were a few buttons, and below them was a speaker covered by mesh.

Shang Jianyao had studied electronics in university, so it was naturally not difficult for him to determine what this broken, old object was.

This was a recording pen from the Old World, a recording pen that had been repaired and modified by Blackrat Town's residents.

Perhaps it had fallen into the depression previously, or maybe it was because it was quite far from the explosion's center and was blocked by a body, but there were no signs of damage on the electronic equipment.

Shang Jianyao crouched on one knee and studied the object for a while before pressing a certain button.

Amidst gunshots and all kinds of chaos, a young voice asked in fear and confusion, “Mommy! Mommy, why are they killing us?”

A slightly hoarse and trembling voice replied, “Because we’re Subhumans.”

The young voice asked, “What’s a Subhuman?”

The slightly hoarse voice fell silent for a few seconds before it replied, “T-they are people who are sick.”

The young voice became even more confused. “But Mommy, are they going to kill us just because we’re sick? I-I know how to fix electronic equipment. I’m very useful...”

The gunshots suddenly closed in as if the enemies had arrived at the cave entrance. The sound of an object crashing to the ground was heard immediately after, and the recording stopped.

Shang Jianyao listened in silence before casting his gaze at the two corpses again.

Be it the adult woman or the girl, their faces didn’t have thick black hair. There were clear signs of shaving, and they looked clean. This was the same for many female employees of Pangu Biology.

This recording was rather loud. Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen—who were walking in different directions deeper inside—heard it relatively clearly.

They also became abnormally silent. Nobody spoke or moved for a long time.

After a while, Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled. “Continue searching for clues.”

Shang Jianyao solemnly placed the recording pen in his pocket. He then picked up the flashlight and stood up with his back bent.

As the beam of light swept the area, he saw some words on the cave wall.

These words were in the Ashlands language and had clearly been around for many years. Many parts of the words had long become indistinct, so they clearly weren’t left behind by Blackrat Town’s residents when they were attacked.

Shang Jianyao swept the flashlight over and carefully read the words for about ten seconds before finally recognizing a few words.

“...I was here...”

“...Jin and... forever together...”

At this moment, Jiang Baimian seemed to have seen something similar. She waved the flashlight and sighed with emotion. "This seems to be a scenic spot before the Old World was destroyed? Who would be willing to come somewhere this cramped?"

After saying that, she stared at the rock wall for a long time.

After a while, Jiang Baimian finally looked away and searched for any possible clues.

About ten minutes later, the three of them met at the cave entrance, where there was natural light.

Jiang Baimian said regretfully, "The people of Blackrat Town had previously dug out two escape routes. Unfortunately, the thermobaric round or other similar explosives are just too fast."

"The attackers didn't leave behind any clues," Bai Chen replied.

Jiang Baimian shook her head. "It's not that the attackers didn't leave any behind, but that they had deliberately spent some time wiping away the clues after the battle ended."

#### *Chapter 50: Clues*

Translator: CKtalon

Seemingly in thought when he heard this, Shang Jianyao said, "Ruthless, swift, and clean. Was this a premeditated act of vengeance?"

In his opinion, it might not be revenge, but it was definitely premeditated and targeted.

Jiang Baimian looked at the sunlit cave entrance and thought for a moment. "Not necessarily. It's also possible that Blackrat Town's residents had their cave exposed due to some reason. Whether it's their Subhuman identity or the weapons, ammunition, and food for winter that they had exchanged for from the company, it's enough to attract strong malicious intent.

"The attackers probably didn't think of hiding their identities or eliminating traces in the beginning because having a thermobaric round is a relatively obvious characteristic. Perhaps, they discovered the radio transmitter while searching for supplies after the battle. Only then did they suspect that Blackrat Town had established a connection with a major faction and was a vassal. Then, they hastily cleaned up the battlefield in order to prevent any vengeful retaliation."

Bai Chen couldn't determine if the matter was premeditated or if it had happened by chance. She could only give a relatively obvious conclusion from her point of view. "Let's not consider the motives first. What we can barely confirm now is: First, the

attacker's team has an above-average level of order. Otherwise, it would be impossible for them to clean up the battlefield so thoroughly without leaving us any clues. This basically eliminates the possibility that they were a mixture of bandits that came together at the last minute.

“Second, the fact that they have a thermobaric round and individual combat weapons means that the attacker's team is above-average in strength. They won't be too unknown.”

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao seemed a little confused, Bai Chen added, “In the Ashlands, there are very few teams that hide their strength. Only by fully displaying one's strength can they leave their followers and their enemies around them in awe; thus, allowing them to monopolize sufficient resources.

“In this regard, perhaps only large factions, lone rangers, and teams of a few people are exceptions. However, the vast majority of the former were established one bullet and one gun at a time. Only when their strength reaches a certain level will they carry out some strategic concealment. As for the latter two types, they typically do not hide their strength during battles. They will only effectively do some concealment when there are fewer witnesses.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged Bai Chen's words. “In addition, we can deduce one detail from the current situation: The attackers are at least 20 strong, no—more than 30. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to finish off the guards on the outskirts of Blackrat Town so quickly. They also wouldn't have been able to make Blackrat Town's residents voluntarily retreat into their caves without attempting to counterattack and only consider using the backup tunnels to retreat.”

Shang Jianyao couldn't help but nod. This reasoning seemed simple, but he had failed to come to such conclusions.

With Blackrat Town's 200 to 300-strong population and the various weapons provided by Pangu Biology, they could've easily counterattacked if the number of attackers was lacking, even if the other party was relatively well-equipped.

“Yes.” Bai Chen looked at the area that was not illuminated by the flashlight. “From the gunshot wounds on some of the corpses, the attackers' weapons are relatively varied. It's almost impossible to eliminate a large faction's army. Of course, it might be possible that the attacker delivered a second shot to create such an illusion. But a large faction's army is not afraid of revenge, so they have no need to do so.”

Shang Jianyao gradually got used to such discussions and began to join in. “We can also exclude slave hunters. To them, the most valuable thing is the population. Slaughtering everyone in Blackrat Town isn't their style.”

Jiang Baimian casually said, "That's right. Even Subhumans can mine, especially Blackrat Town's residents; they are good in this regard. Even if one can't get over their psychological bias and are afraid of infection or mutations, they can still be segregated from ordinary mining slaves. They can be divided into individual teams and be monitored from a distance with long-range weapons."

She then asked, "Is there anything else?"

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, "The attacker's team might not have more than 30 people—I mean core members. They can completely surround dozens of vassal members with seven to eight core members. In any case, it doesn't matter as long as they appear mighty. After the battle ends, these seven to eight core members can either do the wiping of traces themselves or supervise others. This can also achieve very good results."

Jiang Baimian nodded in satisfaction. "We can't rule out that possibility. After combining what was said before and considering the conversation in the recording pen, we can preliminarily outline some of the attackers' characteristics.

"The first possibility is that they are a human team consisting of more than 30 people. They have a reputation and are ruthless and experienced. They have relatively powerful equipment, such as thermobaric rounds and individual combat weapons. They don't belong to or aren't affiliated with large factions. At present, they aren't lacking in food.

"The second possibility involves less than ten core members and a large number of vassal members or teams that they were cooperating with."

After summarizing, the corners of Jiang Baimian's mouth curled up slightly. However, there was no hint of a smile. "For the first possibility, although there are many similar teams in the Ashlands, there definitely aren't many of them. The ones nearby and those who have been around recently aren't unknown. As long as we have more contact with the wilderness nomads and Ruin Hunters around us, we should be able to filter out the main suspects quickly. Then, we can investigate them one by one.

"The second possibility is that they consist of vassals and cooperative teams. This means that there are many things that can't be truly kept confidential. Word will get out with so many people. Additionally, apart from the resources they will use for themselves, the remaining resources obtained will be traded away. These are all clues.

"Oh right! Later, search the area around this hill carefully. If it's the second scenario, we can't rule out the possibility that the seven to eight core members will kill their vassals and collaborators to keep this a secret."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian walked to the hole and muttered, "Seriously, why don't you guys discuss it outside? Don't you feel uncomfortable bending your backs and knees while talking here?"

Shang Jianyao was still slightly immersed in the shock of Blackrat Town being completely slaughtered. He didn't expect Jiang Baimian to have returned to normal—at least on the surface. He had no choice but to follow quickly.

After arriving outside and informing Long Yuehong of the general situation, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to ask, "Team Leader, what should we do next? Apart from searching the surrounding areas to see if there are any traces of silencing, that is."

Jiang Baimian looked back at the cave. "This is a major event. Isn't there an emergency flare in the car? Fire it to let the company know that something has happened here. Yes, we have to head somewhere higher. This way, the subsidiary factions in different areas will see the flare and send a telegram, even if the company's peripheral sentry posts fail to discover it due to the distance."

"This will probably attract many wilderness nomads, bandits, and Ruin Hunters over..." Bai Chen looked at Blackrat Town's entrance worriedly.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. "That's true. For those who want to stock up on winter food, this is good meat. It will be a great harvest if they wash, marinate, and dry them."

"Team Leader, you make it sound so scary..." Long Yuehong couldn't help but take a deep breath.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him. "I said that on purpose so that you and Shang Jianyao can get used to it as soon as possible. This is to prevent both of you from being incapable of recovering from the shock when witnessing such a scene with your own eyes. Heh, the chances of encountering such things in the Ashlands are not low."

She didn't say anything else regarding this. After some thought, Jiang Baimian said, "Let's do this. We'll go to the neighboring hill or the top of the hill and release a signal flare to lure the Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads in that direction."

"Blackrat Town is the company's only partner in this area. As long as it doesn't exceed the corresponding range, the emergency flare will make these scavengers think of Blackrat Town very quickly, no matter where it is fired."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian looked at Long Yuehong—who was wearing the exoskeleton. "Look for relatively larger boulders. Move them here and block the cave entrance. Oh right, we have to block the backup tunnels as well. This way, we can prevent wild beasts from coming over due to the smell and destroying the traces. It also prevents Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads from immediately discovering the cave when they search the area. Yes, it will be relatively difficult to remove the obstruction with the equipment they have, even if they discover it. As for the company, we have professional personnel."



Long Yuehong easily understood his team leader's words and began searching for boulders that far exceeded the human body's limits and required an exoskeleton to move.

After bringing the corpses outside the cave back to Blackrat Town, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others cleaned the traces of blood as they watched Long Yuehong—who wore an iron-black metal skeleton—transport the boulders over. They first blocked the backup tunnels before sealing the cave entrance.

“Alright, let's go back to the jeep and release the signal flare elsewhere.” Jiang Baimian stared at the pile of boulders for a few seconds before turning around to leave.

When she was about to get into the car, she paused and turned around. “After we release the signal flare, we'll find a hiding place nearby to camp at. After that, we have to stay here to prevent any accidents or the scene's destruction until the company's personnel arrive. In addition, we can also submit the information regarding the city ruins and the Monks Conclave.”

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen had no objections to this arrangement, believing that it was inevitable. Compared to the small mission of delivering a water filter chip that could last a few days or even half a month, things here were clearly more important.

“We'll probably have to wait two to three days.” Jiang Baimian smiled slightly. “It's just nice. We can train your survival skills in the wild.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong's response, Jiang Baimian went to the driver's seat, opened the door, and sat inside the jeep.

More than ten minutes later, Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong quietly stood on the top of a hill further south.

Jiang Baimian did not immediately fire the emergency flare carried by the Old Task Force with the grenade launcher. Instead, she waited until it became gloomy—when the clouds drifted over and blocked the sun—before pulling the trigger.

With a bang, a dazzling red light exploded in the sky like a blooming, bloodthirsty flower.