

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 51: Division - Read

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Chapter 51: Division

Translator: CKtalon

After firing the emergency flare, Shang Jianyao and the others drove the jeep back to the hill where Blackrat Town was. They set up camp in a hidden spot on the hillside. This way, they could monitor the small forest from above and see if any Ruin Hunters or wilderness nomads had gone over or approached the cave entrance.

After Long Yuehong—who had removed his exoskeleton—finished setting up the tent, he inquired loudly, unable to hide his confusion. “Team Leader, there’s something I don’t understand.”

“What is it?” Jiang Baimian was very happy to answer the rookie’s questions.

Long Yuehong frowned and said, “Why did that group of people have to attack Blackrat Town? With an Old World city ruin having been just discovered, they have a simpler way of obtaining more resources. There’s no need to attack Blackrat Town, which is relatively well-armed. Didn’t you say so yourself? The newly-discovered city ruin is a special environment where Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads can get along peacefully or even form alliances. After all, everyone hopes to have more helpers to deal with the dangers lurking in the ruins.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and smiled. “Good question. But even though that’s true, the exact situation still needs to be analyzed. In the past, I read an Old World book that talks about following existing principles, concepts, and situations to a tee. Behavior that doesn’t analyze changes, development, and the corresponding uniqueness is called making a dogmatic mistake.

“There are two main differences when we’re talking about Blackrat Town. First, we’ve just analyzed the situation. Either the attackers have at least 30 people, or they have seven to eight core, elite members with a large number of vassal members. Regardless of the possibility, they are definitely considered strong. In addition to the weapons and ammunition that can be determined from the scene, they are completely different from ordinary Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads.

“Second, as a Subhuman settlement, Blackrat Town’s residents will definitely not explore the newly-discovered city ruins when a large number of humans are rushing over. At most, they will gather information along the periphery. It’s impossible for them to become the cannon fodder that the attackers want.

“In such a situation, the attackers have every reason to cause such a tragic scene if they are confident that they can finish off Blackrat Town’s residents without suffering any to little losses. This will allow them to obtain considerable resources and make a harvest, even if the city ruins are too dangerous and the attackers don’t dare go close. Hence, it wouldn’t be a wasted trip for them.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong nod, Jiang Baimian added, “Furthermore, there are many additional possibilities. For example, the attackers could be filled with hatred for all Subhumans because of their past encounters. The attackers will kill Subhumans even at the cost of suffering losses.

“Another example is that they rushed here because of the strange howling north of Yuelu Station. They didn’t know that an Old World city ruin had been discovered there. One other scenario is that Blackrat Town is geographically closest to the northern area of Yuelu Station. The attackers were the first to sense something abnormal, so they sent someone to investigate—who obtained something that made the attackers willing to take the risk.”

Long Yuehong felt a headache coming on, but he had to admit that his team leader was right. Under the premise of unthorough investigations, there were indeed too many possibilities.

Jiang Baimian didn’t explain further. She looked around and thought for a few seconds before saying, “In the next few days, the two of us will form a team and take turns. The people in the camp are in charge of guarding the jeep and monitoring the cave’s surroundings. The people outside will search for any traces of silencing or any other clues nearby.

“Yes, I’ll team up with Long Yuehong, while Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao will form a team.”

“Why?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Because you’re relatively weak. Isn’t it obvious?”

“...” Long Yuehong looked a little listless as if he had been punched but couldn’t counterattack.

Indeed, the reason for the reorganization was not difficult to determine.

Shang Jianyao had shown his Awakened abilities, and he was sufficiently calm. Coupled with his physique, energy, agility, and talent—thanks to his genetic enhancement—his strength could be ranked between second or third in their Old Task Force. At close range, he was undoubtedly stronger than Bai Chen. After exceeding a certain range, Bai Chen—who was good at sniping and had plenty of experience—was still slightly better than him.

This way, the strongest person in the team, Jiang Baimian, would team up with the weakest—Long Yuehong. This would not only ensure the latter's survival, but it would also allow the two teams' strength to be on par.

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao's mockery, Jiang Baimian glanced at him and shook her head helplessly.

At this moment, Bai Chen—who was in charge of guarding the surroundings—interrupted. “Team Leader, there's actually no need. We won't be using the jeep for the next few days, so the solar charger can charge the backup batteries. This way, we don't have to worry about the exoskeleton running out of power too quickly and whether it can be used at critical moments.”

“That's true.” Jiang Baimian smiled at Long Yuehong and said, “Continue being in the same team as Bai Chen. Remember to wear your exoskeleton when you're out. Heh heh, with this arrangement, you've actually become the strongest in the team. The most important thing for a person is indeed still their equipment. I remember an ancient text saying: ‘The gentleman by birth is not different from other men; he is just good at borrowing the use of external things.’”

Long Yuehong quickly recovered from his shock and felt that his team leader's words made perfect sense.

Shang Jianyao was more concerned about another point. “Why haven't I learned that before?”

Bai Chen had never even heard of such a thing.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Extracurricular reading, extracurricular reading.”

Long Yuehong recalled Jiang Baimian mentioning that she had a biologist for a father—which meant that he was a D9-rank employee, who was just one step away from management. The treatment she received far exceeded his own.

Long Yuehong was immediately enlightened, and Shang Jianyao no longer had any doubts.

Jiang Baimian looked up at the sky and confirmed the sun's location. “It's still early. Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, stay in camp and monitor Blackrat Town. Shang Jianyao and I will go out and search for a while.”

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong and Bai Chen loudly replied at the same time.

Without any delay, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian left their hiding spots and walked toward the bottom of the hill. Like before, they each brought two pistols. One had an assault rifle slung over their shoulder, while the other held a grenade launcher.

After leaving the hill where Blackrat Town was and arriving at the hilly, densely-vegetated area, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, "Team Leader, why must we wait for company personnel to arrive and not take action ourselves to track down the attackers?"

Jiang Baimian slowed down, turned around, and said frankly, "For your safety."

"We have an exoskeleton and sufficient firepower. We can completely deal with the attackers. There won't be much danger," Shang Jianyao said seriously.

Jiang Baimian looked into his eyes and calmly replied, "I know you're angry."

She paused and quickly exhaled. "I am too, but bullets are blind. They won't avoid you just because you're handsome and a newbie. On the contrary, they prefer such people. Besides, how can you be sure that the attackers don't have the ability to deal with a military exoskeleton? They can already obtain thermobaric rounds, so I wouldn't be surprised if they have other powerful equipment."

"We can track and reconnoiter first. We can consider attacking after confirming the situation. If things don't work out, we can retreat and wait for the company's personnel." Shang Jianyao still didn't give up.

Jiang Baimian turned around and walked forward as she said, "Don't make tracking and reconnaissance sound so simple. In the Security Department, the employees responsible for reconnaissance are definitely one of the best in their corresponding teams.

"If you and Long Yuehong were sufficiently experienced, I would indeed like to give it a try. However, can you guarantee that we won't be discovered while carrying out reconnaissance and that the battle won't erupt on the spot?"

"In a mature team, it's not that nobody makes mistakes. Instead, the other members know how to make up for a mistake committed by one member. When you and Long Yuehong are able to quickly remedy any mistakes Bai Chen and I make, our Old Task Force can make such attempts."

At this point, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao, who had quickly caught up. "Weren't you just giving blows to Long Yuehong, trying to make him lose confidence and quit the Old Task Force when he fails the test? Aren't you worried that tracking the attackers will put him in danger?"

“Ah, I get it. What you’re thinking of doing is wearing the exoskeleton and charging straight at the attackers to carry out a massacre so that Long Yuehong can only watch.” As she spoke, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Don’t you want to save all of humanity? How can you take such a big risk at a time like this? If you die in battle, who will take on the sacred mission?”

“... Team Leader, don’t make yourself sound so dignified when you’re afraid of death.” Shang Jianyao was almost tricked. He then said seriously, “There will naturally be others to take over my mantle.”

“Uh... I’m not sure if you’re joking.” Jiang Baimian changed the topic and said, “I have to be responsible for the two of you. You and Long Yuehong are still unmarried and have yet to have children. It won’t be worth it if you die like this. Heh heh, it won’t be good for the company either.”

Shang Jianyao quickly asked, “Then, do you have children? Don’t you often take risks?”

Jiang Baimian glared at him. “No. Back when the central assignment was being carried out, I was lying in the hospital and could die at any moment. Later, I relied on being a volunteer and underwent genetic modification to survive. Heh heh, it would’ve meant death if I hadn’t done it, so I took the risk. I was still considered lucky.

“After that, I haven’t been part of the central assignment because the situation with genetic modification is still unclear. We aren’t sure if there are any latent problems, and further observation is required. I have to wait for the various experiments to provide more convincing data for things such as genetic stability.”

Jiang Baimian suddenly frowned. “Why am I telling you this? How can our situations be the same? Most of the time, I have a high chance of success despite taking risks.”

She didn’t want to continue the topic and changed the topic.

“Is it because...” She pointed at her head. “Is that why you gave up on the marriage assignment?”

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “Although I do have such problems...”

Without waiting for him to finish, Jiang Baimian asked in amusement, “You know it yourself?”

Shang Jianyao ignored her and continued, “But a large portion of my abnormal behavior is actually intentional.”

“Why?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao's eyes flickered as he turned his head to look into the distance. "I don't want a child, nor do I want a woman to worry about me."

Chapter 52: Lying In Wait

Translator: CKtalon

Jiang Baimian's mouth instinctively took the shape of an exclamation, but she quickly shut her mouth and didn't make a sound.

She cast her gaze ahead again and smoothly stepped over a bush. Then, she smiled casually.

"I keep having the feeling that I might have a hidden talent—one that makes people feel close to me. They will feel at ease when they are by my side, and they will be willing to share some of the worries that have built up in their hearts."

"It's not like there's anything that needs to be strictly confidential." Shang Jianyao didn't quite agree with Jiang Baimian, but he had escaped from the mood created by their earlier conversation topic.

"Haha, I'm joking." Jiang Baimian nodded as if she were in thought. "Actually, we have experienced two dangers together, and you exposed the secret of being an Awakened. Therefore, we have pretty good trust in each other. Have you heard of this saying? 'The way to quickly knit a closer relationship between two people is for them to share a small secret.' Also, we can be considered friends who have been through thick and thin."

The serious Shang Jianyao suddenly laughed. "How can you be sure that this trust was not created by me with my Awakened abilities?"

"..." Jiang Baimian thought about it carefully and realized that she couldn't eliminate the possibility. After all, the scene of Shang Jianyao shaking hands with the mechanical monk, Jingfa, left a deep impression on her. Besides, Shang Jianyao had said that the affected person could hardly rely on themselves to sense anything abnormal if he could create a perpetual loop of evidence around that person's social activity. Only when Shang Jianyao left the corresponding environment could one discover anything amiss.

"Haha, I'm joking," replied Shang Jianyao, mimicking Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian turned her head and rolled her eyes at him. "Did you know that I almost drew my gun?"

She retracted her gaze and muttered to herself, "Although you are indeed joking, I have to be careful of such situations... Can I set up a few logical validations?"

“Yes... The easiest way is to record key information on paper or in a chip every day and read it before sleeping. This way, one can immediately come to a realization if they notice incongruence before and after. I have to say, diaries are very useful.”

Shang Jianyao then added, “An Awakened’s ability is not omnipotent.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else and continued searching for clues in this hilly area with Shang Jianyao.

About an hour later, she looked around and said, “The surrounding area is just too large. The terrain is also complicated. It will take us half a month to complete an effective search on foot.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t speak because he saw a lingering smile on his team leader’s face. Obviously, she had an idea.

Indeed, Jiang Baimian looked at him and smiled. “Let’s go back to the hill where we released the emergency flare.”

Shang Jianyao’s heart palpitated as he vaguely grasped something.

Jiang Baimian continued speaking. “We’ll definitely encounter many Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads there. It’s a good opportunity to ask them for information and see if any large bandit groups or dangerous teams have appeared in the surrounding areas recently.”

At this point, she gave the same smile she had after she severely injured Jingfa. “If you are the attackers’ leader and see an abnormality occurring in the area where you previously carried out a huge operation and deliberately wiped away any traces, will you send some unrelated people to the area where the emergency flare was released to investigate? Anyway, a large number of Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads will definitely go over. No one will be able to distinguish them if they are mixed in.

“When the time comes, you can also prepare some countermeasures in advance if you can use this opportunity to figure out which large faction was behind Blackrat Town’s massacre.”

Shang Jianyao came to a realization. “They won’t send their core members over to investigate, nor will they use their vassals. The greatest possibility is that they will directly hire real wilderness nomads that are active nearby.”

This way, nothing would go wrong even if it was a trap. It was just like how nobody could find a drop of water that was intrinsically unique but didn’t superficially appear abnormal in a lake.

After Shang Jianyao figured it out, he asked in confusion, "Team Leader, you should have thought of this long ago. Why didn't we just stand guard over there?"

"How can those Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads possibly arrive so quickly? There's no point in waiting there. It's better to train your familiarity in clue-searching." Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her black electronic watch. "It's about time. Let's go over."

When they returned to the hill where the emergency flare had been fired, Shang Jianyao realized that their search direction was nearby. After the two of them changed directions slightly, they arrived at their destination in just ten minutes on foot.

In other words, Jiang Baimian did not think of such a problem at the last minute. She had long planned it. Even the search route was planned in advance.

After observing for a few minutes, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian found the best spot. They climbed a tree and monitored the few paths that led to these hills.

After about 15 minutes, Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads arrived one after another as they headed towards the hilltop.

They were all relatively careful. They kept a clear distance from each other, but they did not attack each other. After all, it was not certain if they would gain anything from the anomaly. It was foolish to start a fight.

After a while, Jiang Baimian patted Shang Jianyao's shoulder and pointed to the left. She didn't speak because she couldn't determine how loud her voice was. Therefore, she could only gesture.

Shang Jianyao looked over and saw two male wilderness nomads acting suspiciously.

Their exact age couldn't be determined from their appearance. The thing they had in common was that their skin was rough, dry, and tanned. Their hair was greasy and messy. It was unknown how long it had been since they last shaved their faces, but their skin was stained with all kinds of unknown marks.

One of them wore a tattered, dark-blue sweater. Inside was a shirt so greasy that it had hardened, its original color indeterminable. Draped over him were black clothes that didn't reach his waist, clearly not fitting. He wore army-green rubber shoes. Secured on his waist was a black pistol that shimmered with a metallic luster. In his palm was a long, thin knife.

Shang Jianyao felt that the knife resembled a watermelon knife in the textbooks.

The other person was tightly wrapped in an old, black cotton coat. Through the obvious holes, one could see that the cotton inside was compressed into a lump, black and tight.

He didn't seem to have a gun. Latched onto his waist was a sharpened dagger. In his hands was a baseball bat, and there was a dirty, extremely shriveled pocket on his shoulder.

"I-is there a problem?" Shang Jianyao asked in a low voice.

They looked almost no different from the wilderness nomads that had passed by previously, except that they were a little shabbier.

"I..." Jiang Baimian let out a sound, her tone clearly questioning.

Shang Jianyao immediately understood what his team leader meant and quickly said, "Slightly lower."

After two 'adjustments,' Jiang Baimian finally suppressed her voice to an appropriate volume. "Don't you think these two wilderness nomads' equipment is a little too terrible?"

"Isn't it normal for wilderness nomads to have poor equipment?" Shang Jianyao asked in response.

"Yes." Jiang Baimian didn't deny it. As she looked at the two nomads, she deliberated and said, "The point is that their actions are in conflict with their equipment. Under normal circumstances, wilderness nomads with only a small pistol and a few cold weapons won't dare to be the first to rush to an anomaly. In the event of a battle, they have virtually zero ability to protect themselves.

"For wilderness nomads like them, they will come back half a day—or even a day later—to see if they can pick up any leftover spoils. When the time comes, the opponents they will be facing will be about the same. They won't be completely defenseless."

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly. "This is similar to how many animals eat the rotten corpses left behind by ferocious beasts after a hunt. In other words, there's a chance that these two wilderness nomads were forced here by someone?"

Who would force two powerless wilderness nomads to investigate the anomaly for no reason?

Jiang Baimian was putting education into practice, and she smiled. "Yes. Can you make them friendly and get them to tell us the corresponding situation directly?"

Shang Jianyao looked at the two wilderness nomads approaching and frankly said, "It won't be a problem if there's only one. If the two of them are here, there's a high chance that they will validate each other's actions, causing the 'inference' to fail. If we split them

up, I can influence one of them first before getting the two together. I can then carry out the influence on the second one—this works too.”

Jiang Baimian gave an ‘OK’ gesture. “That’s simple. Swap guns.”

With that, she exchanged the grenade launcher for Shang Jianyao’s assault rifle.

The next second, Jiang Baimian suddenly jumped down and landed in front of the two wilderness nomads. After landing, she quickly raised her assault rifle and coldly pointed at the man in the tattered sweater—who had a pistol lodged at his waist.

Almost at the same time, she rotated her waist slightly and kicked out with her right leg like a sudden whip. This kick undoubtedly did not land, but it scared the man with the baseball bat into retreating and falling to the ground.

He looked at the assault rifle in Jiang Baimian’s hand and abandoned his companion without hesitation. He rolled, crawled, and stumbled into the distance, not daring to look back.

The assault rifle kept pointing at the man with the watermelon knife. He didn’t dare move.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao jumped down and smiled. “Don’t be nervous. We mean no harm.”

As he signaled for Jiang Baimian to lower the muzzle, he took advantage of the man’s confusion to say, “Look, you are here to search for information, and so are we. You are humans, and so are we. So…”

The man’s expression gradually changed before he finally smiled. “We are brothers!”

When he made this address, he subconsciously looked at Jiang Baimian. He saw that she had already put away her assault rifle and didn’t show any hostility. Therefore, he trusted his inference and judgment even more.

“Brother!” Shang Jianyao mimicked the other party and greeted him enthusiastically. “Who got you guys to come over?”

Chapter 53: Hyena

Translator: CKtalon

The man holding the watermelon knife sighed. “Don’t mention it. I was forced here by Old Bat. I kept telling him to wait one more day, but he wouldn’t listen!”

Jiang Baimian subconsciously wanted to ask who Old Bat was, but she rationally shut her mouth after opening it.

In fact, Shang Jianyao had planned on asking the same question. However, his logical inference told him that this would definitely damage their 'brotherhood' and leave the other party confused. Since they were brothers, how could he not know who Old Bat was?

He laughed. "Ah... Old Bat... Why is he in such a rush?"

"What can he do? Isn't it all because someone is rushing him!?" The man holding the watermelon knife and the black pistol rubbed his greasy hair and said with a frown, "Those guys kill people on a dime. Who dares to be cursory with them..."

"Those guys?" Shang Jianyao deliberately revealed a confused expression. "My last return wasn't that long ago, and something has already happened?"

Although he really wanted to ask who 'those guys' were, Shang Jianyao stayed patient.

The man holding the watermelon knife was stunned for a moment as if he didn't expect the brother opposite him not to have returned for quite some time.

A few seconds later, he sighed again. "It's a long story. Ever since Hyena and the rest came, we don't even have a nest to sleep in! Several elders froze to death at night."

When he mentioned Hyena, he instinctively looked around as if he was afraid of being overheard.

Hyena... Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at Jiang Baimian to see if his experienced team leader had heard of this nickname.

Jiang Baimian's expression darkened a little as she nodded thoughtfully.

"F*ck that Hyena's mother!" Shang Jianyao deliberately cursed.

The man with the watermelon knife seemed to want to curse as well, but he ultimately didn't dare. He said unhappily, "He doesn't have a mother."

At this point, the man—whose exact age wasn't discernible—recalled something and said, "I was only a teenager back then, and Hyena hadn't become a bandit yet. I heard that his mother was eaten by a bunch of Subhumans who came from nowhere."

Shang Jianyao's eyebrows slightly twitched as he blurted out a question. "Was it the Ratpeople?"

He learned from Jiang Baimian that Blackrat Town's residents were called 'Ratpeople' by the humans around them. This was also a term filled with discrimination.

"No." The man holding the watermelon knife shook his head. "That group of Ratpeople has been here for decades. They were here before I was born. They are good at harvesting and excavation. They can find and eat anything. They aren't the kind that wanders around."

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a few seconds before asking, "Why are Hyena and the others here?"

"T-they said that something was discovered at Yuelu Station. Old Bat asked, and Hyena's men weren't sure either. They've sent someone to investigate."

After the man with the watermelon knife said the word 'investigate,' he suddenly recalled his mission. He immediately wore a glum expression. "I wonder what's abnormal here. If I have nothing to report today, Hyena's men might throw me to feed the dog."

"Dog?" Shang Jianyao subconsciously asked.

The man with the watermelon knife spat. "Hyena raises a very fierce dog and treats it like his son! He also keeps saying that we're useless and that he might as well feed us to the dog since nobody can defeat his dog in a one-on-one battle."

After complaining, the man asked in anticipation, "Brother, what have you discovered here?"

"Nothing," Shang Jianyao replied truthfully. "The people who set off the fireworks previously have long retreated. Nothing was left behind!"

"Is that so... Then, why did they set off fireworks? Uh... Old Bat said it was some signal explosive?" The man with the watermelon knife looked like he wanted to return.

Shang Jianyao looked in the direction the baseball-wielding man had fled in. "Who knows? Just go back. If Hyena doesn't believe you, get him to send someone else to investigate. Oh right, I scared that brother just now. Catch up with him later and help me explain."

"Sure." The man holding the watermelon knife patted his chest. "When are you guys returning?"

"Soon, soon." The corners of Shang Jianyao's mouth curled up bit by bit. "Remember to tell Old Bat that we'll pay Hyena a visit soon."

“Visit...” The man holding the watermelon knife suddenly sensed that something was amiss, but he wisely gave up considering the matter when he saw the grenade launcher in Shang Jianyao’s hands and Jiang Baimian’s assault rifle.

He quickly turned around and waved his hand. “Pray we meet again.”

“Pray we meet again.” Shang Jianyao waved his hand enthusiastically.

After watching the man with the watermelon knife disappear at the end of the road, Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. “What? Are you still going to stand in the middle of the road, afraid that others won’t see you?”

There was no intact or formed path between the mounds and hills, but with more people traversing them, a trail naturally formed.

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian turned into a relatively obscure spot on the side of the hill.

Shang Jianyao followed and exchanged weapons with his team leader before asking, “Who’s Hyena?”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “He’s a relatively famous bandit leader in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. His main activity is usually around the White Knight’s territory. He became famous more than ten years ago. He wasn’t considered old back then. It’s still a question if he’s even 30 years old now.

“His band of bandits grew stronger bit by bit. In the beginning, there were three to four people and four to five guns. Now, there are 17 to 18 core members with plenty of firepower and good equipment. Some people suspect that Hyena controls an Old World arsenal, which is why they developed so quickly.

“If it weren’t for the fact that he doesn’t occupy a relatively good mine or field, he definitely wouldn’t have only 17 or 18 core subordinates. He could have expanded his forces to at least 200-300 people. This way, he can build a large settlement that he can call his own, one that’s similar to Weed City. Then, he can consider which large faction he wants to be roped into. From then on, he would have a guarantee or be a small faction with influence.

“Heh heh, it’s also possible that Hyena finds it too tiring to have hundreds or thousands of people under him and that it’s too troublesome to manage a city. Cities also have to suffer the wrath of large factions usually. It’s far worse than being bandits who can live a carefree life. That’s probably why they maintain their current scale.

“Ah, yes, his real name is Lin Li.”

Shang Jianyao listened carefully and concluded, “They’re very suspicious, and there are more people than we expected.”

They had nearly 20 core members and at least 100 vassal members.

“They even have armored vehicles, heavy machine guns, and rocket launchers,” Jiang Baimian added. “However, they probably don’t have any military exoskeleton equipment, bionic artificial intelligence armor, Gauss weapons, or plasma weapons. From the looks of it, even if the rumors are true, the arsenal held by Hyena only consists of common-grade weapons. There’s nothing of high-quality.”

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao remain silent, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “With our Old Task Force’s current strength, we do have a high chance of getting rid of this band of bandits if we launch a surprise attack. Those vassals won’t really risk their lives for Hyena as long as we don’t give him a chance to command his troops. However, with their members’ quality and equipment, we have to be prepared for at least half of us dying.”

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian turned her head to look outside their hidden spot. “Besides, there might not be a chance to launch a sneak attack. You actually let that wilderness nomad return just now. Aren’t you worried that he will sense something abnormal if he changes the environment? Aren’t you worried that he will report the matter and let Hyena guess that we have Awakened?”

“Otherwise? Kill him?” Shang Jianyao replied without changing his expression.

“How soft-hearted.” Jiang Baimian scoffed. “Me too. People hailing from large factions like us—who have never experienced the Chaotic Era’s various disputes—tend to be soft-hearted.”

She then said, “But if we really want to launch a sneak attack, we should’ve completely controlled the wilderness nomad, only releasing him after this matter is over. You should already have considered this. You have always been very vigilant about when your abilities are ineffective.”

At this point, Jiang Baimian laughed. “In conclusion, you’ve already given up on the idea of attacking the bandits by yourself. What a good friend!”

“We still can’t be sure that it’s Hyena’s group,” Shang Jianyao replied expressionlessly. “Let’s wait for the company to send the troops.”

“Good idea!” Jiang Baimian smiled and praised him.

Shang Jianyao looked around and suddenly frowned. He asked, “Team Leader, what kind of reaction do you think Hyena and his people will react when they hear the report?”

“I’ve never interacted with them before, so it’s very difficult for me to make a judgment. However, I can tell from the nickname ‘Hyena’ that these people are good at bullying

others with their numbers. They are good at tailing, tracking, and launching sneak attacks. Although they are ruthless and cruel, they are definitely not crazy or rash.

“Ah, I’m just saying. I can’t be sure, so I’ll have to verify it with Bai Chen later,” replied Jiang Baimian after some thought. “Anyway, there are only two scenarios. The first is to reverse search this area before the company’s troops arrive, kill us investigators, and erase the corresponding traces. However, the fact that the emergency flare was a trap itself has to be taken into account. Hence, there’s a possibility of them walking right into it.

“Second, immediately abandon the vassals that are entrenched here and move the core members away. They don’t have a lot of people and have sufficient transportation tools. They have also obtained a lot of supplies from Blackrat Town. Their movement definitely won’t be as draggy and slow as a large troop. Furthermore, there are too many areas where they can hide in the wilderness.

“After they figure out who the enemy is, they can migrate to other large factions’ territories and change their region of banditry.”

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao’s eyes light up, Jiang Baimian deliberately snorted. “Are you thinking that you will wear the exoskeleton and destroy them one by one if they dare to do a reverse search?”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, the tall woman with a ponytail smiled. “How can I give you such a chance? I will obviously be the one doing the honors!”

She then changed the topic. “However, I believe it’s more likely that Hyena and the others won’t have any reaction.”

“Why?” Shang Jianyao was rather puzzled.

Jiang Baimian restrained most of her smile. “The vassals—who were coerced—might not necessarily be loyal to Hyena. They can’t wait for a large faction to chase away Hyena. After all, the worst that can happen to them is being captured and enslaved. It’s better than being cannon fodder for Hyena. Besides, they have plenty of chances to escape if a fierce battle really ensues. If that Old Bat is smart, he will know what to report and what to hide.”

Shang Jianyao seemed to be in thought as he slowly nodded.

The two of them stopped discussing and continued observing their surroundings, but they didn’t discover anyone suspicious.

When it was almost time for lunch, they ended their operation and returned to the hidden camp on the hill.

The day passed uneventfully. In the middle of the night, Shang Jianyao—who was sleeping in the tent—was woken up by Long Yuehong. He carried the Berserker assault rifle and took over the night duty.

After patrolling the area, he cast his gaze down. He could directly see the forest and Blackrat Town's blocked entrance.

In the dim and extremely quiet night, a boulder around the cave suddenly dropped.

Chapter 54: Slap

Shang Jianyao's nerves immediately tensed up as he stared at Blackrat Town's entrance without blinking.

The boulders that sealed the cave were rather large. It was impossible to get them down with human strength alone!

Of course, there was one possibility—Long Yuehong had not properly placed the boulder when he used the exoskeleton to pile the boulders. This resulted in it slipping down bit by bit indiscernibly. Finally, after a long time, it lost its balance and fell to the ground.

Therefore, Shang Jianyao did not immediately react and continued observing.

Thud!

With a dull thud, the boulder smashed to the ground, sending reverberations through the entire forest.

Silence quickly returned after this commotion. Under the sparse stars, the night sky was as dark as before. But unlike before, a gap appeared in the pile of boulders blocking Blackrat Town's entrance, a gap that led to dead silence and darkness.

Shang Jianyao looked at the boulder for nearly a minute. He was just about to let out the turbid breath he had been holding in when he suddenly realized that a black figure was slowly crawling out of the hole at the spot where the boulder had fallen.

The night breeze blew, and the clouds in the sky moved, revealing a half-moon.

Bright light scattered and shone on the black figure, allowing Shang Jianyao to see this figure's general appearance. He was short, naked, and had thick, black hair growing on his face. His back was hunched, and the nails on his hands reflected a sharp cold light.

He was a resident of Blackrat Town!

Shang Jianyao's pupils suddenly dilated as if he didn't dare believe the scene in front of him. He wanted to take a step further to see who the other party was.

He, Jiang Baimian, and Bai Chen had seriously searched every corner of Blackrat Town, but they didn't find a single survivor!

The moonlight seemed to brighten a little, and Shang Jianyao barely saw the figure's face.

Half of the figure's face had been torn away by bullets, while dark-red blood and milky-white brain matter dotted its surroundings.

With Shang Jianyao's general knowledge of things, such a person could not be considered alive.

At the same time, black shadows seemed to be surging in the gap on the rockpile.

"F*ck!" Shang Jianyao couldn't help but curse. He instinctively released his right hand from the pistol grip, raised it, and slapped his right face.

He suspected that he was dreaming.

Slap!

The right side of Shang Jianyao's face immediately swelled up, and the marks of five fingers could be vaguely seen on it.

Intense pain and buzzing sounds entered Shang Jianyao's mind at the same time, making golden points of light appear in front of him one after another.

But he was still in the same spot. In front of him was still the Blackrat Town resident—who had crawled down from the gap in the rockpile—as well as another black figure that followed closely behind.

Shang Jianyao did not rashly fire because he knew that his knowledge and experience were insufficient to support him in making the right choice in such a situation. Therefore, he wanted to request Jiang Baimian's help, hoping to see if the Old Task Force's Team Leader had any idea what to do in such situations.

He was also prepared to wake Bai Chen and Long Yuehong up. This way, they could still drive away and escape if they couldn't deal with the anomaly in Blackrat Town.

Shang Jianyao had just turned around when he saw Jiang Baimian's figure appear beside him. He didn't even have the time to shout.

Shang Jianyao was delighted. He was just about to report the situation when his gaze suddenly froze, and his words were stuck in his throat.

Under the cold moonlight, thick black hair—visible to the naked eye—grew on Jiang Baimian's beautiful face like bamboo shoots sprouting from the soil.

The muscles on Shang Jianyao's face twitched slightly, and he couldn't help but overreact.

He pounced backward and did two rolls before arriving at the front of the jeep. Right on the heels of that, he bent down, jumped to the other side, and crouched under the side mirror.

This way, he could use the front of the car as 'defense.' At the same time, he could open the door and sit in the driver's seat at any time.

"Something happened!" he shouted, attempting to wake Long Yuehong and Bai Chen up. After shouting thrice, Shang Jianyao took two steps forward, straightened his upper body, and prepared to open the car door.

It was only then that he realized he didn't have the car key.

When handing over the night duty earlier, Bai Chen had given Jiang Baimian the key, not him.

Before Shang Jianyao could think of a solution, Jiang Baimian's voice sounded from afar. "What happened?"

The next second, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen's voices sounded from the tent. "What happened?"

Their voices were of different volumes, but their tones were no different from Jiang Baimian's.

Shang Jianyao's body suddenly trembled, and his forehead broke out into a cold sweat. He forced himself to calm down and silently calculated the distance between him, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen.

A smile unknowingly appeared on his face, a smile that he couldn't control.

Shang Jianyao immediately straightened his body and prepared to stand up to use his Awakened abilities. At this moment, he saw his reflection in the side mirror.

His right cheek was red and swollen, and he wore an inappropriate smile...

Shang Jianyao's heart suddenly palpitated. He bent down again and took out the fountain pen and a piece of paper that he used to record notes with. He then lowered his head and used his thigh as a cushion. After the pen cap free-fell to the ground, he quickly wrote: "If I can still see this passage later, it means that it's not a dream."

As he wrote, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen's voices approached. "What happened?"

Shang Jianyao became more and more anxious as he wrote. The more he wrote, the messier it became, but he still managed to barely finish the sentence. He then casually stuffed the paper back into his pocket, straightened his upper body, and stared at his reflection in the rearview mirror again.

His eyes instantly turned deep.

As he listened to the approaching footsteps, he quickly organized his thoughts and tried saying, "It was late at night at this time yesterday, and it's also late at night at this time today. We slept in the wilderness at this time yesterday. Today, we are also sleeping in the wilderness. I was dreaming yesterday at this time, so at this time today..."

Shang Jianyao stopped conversing with himself in the mirror. His expression was blank at first, but it gradually became certain.

Just as Jiang Baimian reached the other side of the jeep, Shang Jianyao came to a realization. "So, I'm also dreaming today!"

Just as he said that, it was as if countless stars had exploded in his mind. His strong self-awareness pulled his consciousness through all kinds of illusory scenes.

Gasp! Nôv(e)B\jnn

Shang Jianyao sat up and exhaled the turbid air he had been holding in his chest. He quickly looked around and realized that he was still in the tent—in his sleeping bag.

As this thought flashed in his mind, Shang Jianyao pulled his hands away. He exerted strength with his body and quickly left the sleeping bag like a cheetah, suddenly jumping to the other side of the tent.

It was where Jiang Baimian slept.

In the dim darkness, Shang Jianyao could barely see anything. However, he could hear Jiang Baimian's rapid and erratic breathing as if she had just completed a five-kilometer-long cross-country run.

"Wake up! Wake up!" He relied on the sounds to grab Jiang Baimian's body and shouted as he shook her.

This commotion attracted Bai Chen and Long Yuehong's attention. One of them stayed in the periphery to prevent any accidents. The other leaned toward the tent and asked loudly, "What's wrong?"

Shang Jianyao didn't answer and continued shaking Jiang Baimian violently.

Finally, Jiang Baimian said, "Stop... Stop! I'm getting dizzy!"

Shang Jianyao immediately heaved a sigh of relief and straightened his body.

At this moment, Bai Chen had already pulled open the tent's entrance.

With the moonlight shining in from the outside, she saw Shang Jianyao squatting beside Jiang Baimian's sleeping bag, breathing heavily. Jiang Baimian was curled up in the sleeping bag, sitting with a confused expression.

"What anomaly did you discover?" Bai Chen asked calmly.

Shang Jianyao blurted out an answer. "I had a nightmare..."

He couldn't help but pause. He felt like he was speaking like a child that sought an elder's comfort because of a nightmare.

Upon seeing that Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen did not mock him or attempt to interrupt, Shang Jianyao eased up and continued speaking. "A very realistic nightmare. I couldn't wake up even when I slapped myself in the dream. I clearly felt intense pain, but I just couldn't wake up. It wasn't until I used my Awakened ability to enhance my judgment and knowledge of the dream that I completely woke up.

"In the dream, Blackrat Town's residents had become zombies, and thick black hair grew on your faces."

Zombies were concepts often mentioned in the radio stories.

Jiang Baimian no longer felt confused. Her expression gradually turned solemn as she nodded slightly. "I had a nightmare too. I dreamed that I was doing research in a laboratory. All of you were my assistants..."

At this point, Jiang Baimian was suddenly speechless.

After just a few seconds passed, she continued, "That dream was very realistic. Due to some details, I also suspected that I was dreaming. I quickly stabbed myself with the needle and felt the same pain as I would normally feel. This dispelled my doubts. Then, an accident happened in the laboratory next door. Toxic gas leaked and spread across the entire floor.

“I was crazily running toward the exit with you guys in an attempt to escape the company before the toxic gas spread when Shang Jianyao woke me up.” As she spoke, Jiang Baimian raised her left hand and moved it to the area illuminated by the moonlight.

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen—who had come closer—saw a red dot the size of a needle hole between her hand’s thumb and index finger. It was slightly swollen.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Shang Jianyao’s face. As expected, she found the swollen spot with five finger marks.

“I didn’t bring any needles with me...” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “This isn’t caused by sleepwalking.”

As she spoke, she stretched her left hand toward the five-fingered mark on Shang Jianyao’s right face and gestured across the air. “This wasn’t my work either.”

Bai Chen traced Jiang Baimian’s palm and looked at it seriously. “There’s no way to eliminate the possibility completely. The swelling is too obvious, and the fingerprint is a little smudged. Hence, there can be some differences when making comparisons. Besides, the length of your fingers is about the same.”

“If I really hit him with my left hand, would his face still have any teeth left?” Jiang Baimian’s left finger emitted an electric current.

Her left arm and left hand were part of the electric eel-like biomechanical limb. One of its characteristics was immense strength.

Bai Chen agreed with this, and Shang Jianyao was speechless.

He was just about to describe the scene he saw in his dream in detail when Jiang Baimian suddenly frowned. “Did you guys make any connections?”

Chapter 55: Suspicion

Translator: CKtalon

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian’s question, Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen instinctively looked at each other. However, they only saw the same confusion on each other’s faces.

Jiang Baimian propped herself up with her hands and sat up a little straighter. “Do you remember the information provided by the Ruin Hunter—Harris Brown—the bald guy?”

Jiang Baimian clearly had a good memory.

As the person involved, Shang Jianyao immediately recalled something. “Is it the warning about how humans abnormally died north of Yuelu Station?”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded solemnly. “Back then, Harris Brown said that they discovered a few corpses that recently died. There were no visible fatal wounds, but their expressions were one of pain, fear, or strange smiles.”

Bai Chen came to a realization. “Team Leader, are you saying that those people died in a dream—no, a real dream?”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Think about it. I only stabbed myself in the dream, yet a corresponding red and swollen spot appeared in reality. Upon careful inspection, there is also no needle hole. Similarly, Shang Jianyao slapped himself in his dream. In reality, he also obtained a five-finger mark that swelled on his face.

“If—I mean if— a bullet hits a vital spot, one inhales a toxic gas that makes one wear a strange expression, or one suffers a sudden shock while climaxing in a dream like this, what kind of result will one have in real life?”

“They will die without any visible fatal injuries...” Shang Jianyao replied in a deep voice.

The five-fingered mark on his face was very likely a result of over-stimulation. It would subside very quickly, but once his heart stopped beating, it would never recover.

Before he could finish his sentence, Shang Jianyao suddenly stood up and returned to his sleeping bag. He put on his coat and slung the Berserker assault rifle over his shoulder. As he switched the safety off, he strode out of the tent.

Long Yuehong—who was in charge of guarding the area—quickly asked, “What happened?”

Shang Jianyao looked up at the rock wall behind him and looked around. “Did you discover anything suspicious? Or did you discover any abnormal phenomena?”

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and shook his head firmly. “No. Very few wild animals passed by. Even so, they are considered normal.”

As he spoke, Long Yuehong saw the swelling on Shang Jianyao’s right cheek and the relatively obvious five-finger mark under the bright moonlight.

“Uh...” He suddenly didn’t know how he should inquire. His gaze turned a little strange.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian was already dressed. She came out with her weapon, and Bai Chen followed closely behind.

“Any discoveries?” Jiang Baimian asked with a slightly solemn expression.

“No,” Shang Jianyao replied solemnly.

Jiang Baimian ignored Long Yuehong’s wandering gaze as she patrolled the area and sensed the various electric signals around her.

“There’s indeed nothing abnormal.” She walked back to Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen’s side and heaved a sigh of relief. “It seems like we won’t be affected as long as we don’t sleep.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s confusion, Jiang Baimian highlighted the encounters she and Shang Jianyao had experienced.

Long Yuehong felt like he was listening to a story on a radio broadcast. While feeling scared, he found it unbelievable. Frankly speaking, if not for the team leader’s testimony, just based on Shang Jianyao’s words, he definitely would’ve said, “Stop joking. This isn’t funny at all! Talk to the Order Supervisors. Let’s see if they believe you!”

Order Supervisors were responsible for Pangu Biology’s internal order. They were in charge of everything—be it fighting or harming others.

In the Indoor Ecosystem Zone, there was an Order Supervisory PIC on each floor. Beneath the PIC were three Order Supervisory heads. Under each head were a few Order Supervisors.

Ranked higher up, every 10-20 floors was a sector. Each sector had an Order Supervisory Bureau. Above the Order Supervisory Bureau was the Order Supervisory Department—which came under the Board of Directors.

After hearing Jiang Baimian’s description, Long Yuehong subconsciously asked, “That can’t be true, right?”

After asking this, he quickly shut his mouth and stopped waiting for an answer.

Since Shang Jianyao could get the mechanical monk, Jingfa, to shake his hand and bid him farewell, it did not seem unacceptable that a monster could make people mysteriously die in their dreams.

It had to be said that Long Yuehong increasingly felt that this world was much more magical than he had previously imagined after leaving the company and coming to the surface.

Jiang Baimian turned to look at Shang Jianyao. “Could it be an Awakened? Maybe it’s a Subhuman or animal that has mutated? They might have similar abilities.”

“Apart from my own abilities, I know as much about the Awakened as you do.” Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at Bai Chen, hoping that this lady with abundant Ashlands survival experience could give him an answer.

Bai Chen shook her head, indicating that she had never encountered such an abnormality. “If not for that, an experienced Ruin Hunter like Harris Brown wouldn’t have hastily retreated and not dare go close.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a few seconds before looking at Shang Jianyao. “I’m a little curious. How did you escape that dream? Yes, as you said, you relied on your Awakened ability. However, I hope to know some details. This might give me some inspiration.

“If you think this is your secret, I’ll get Bai Chen and Long Yuehong to patrol the borders. As for me... Uh, I should be trustworthy, right?” As she finished speaking, Jiang Baimian was truly unable to find a reason. She was also unwilling to use her current situation to force an answer out of Shang Jianyao, so she could only use such a trick.

“It’s nothing,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly. “I used the Inference Clowning ability you’ve seen before. Earlier, I didn’t wake up after I slapped myself, so I preliminarily ruled out the possibility of a dream. I wanted to snatch the car and leave, planning to return after dawn to see if all of you had returned to normal.

“In the end, I saw myself in the side mirror when I stood up. I then wondered if I could use my Inference Clowning ability to influence and make myself believe that this was a dream. If it really were a dream, it would be equivalent to me seeing through reality and the illusion. It would enhance my self-awareness in this regard, giving me a high chance of waking up directly.

“I also wrote a hint for myself if it wasn’t a dream...” At this point, Shang Jianyao recalled the arrangement in his dream. He quickly reached into his pocket and took out the few pieces of paper used for taking notes.

Apart from an incomplete map depicting the steelworks factory ruins’ layout and the bathroom label, the rest of the paper was blank. There were no hints.

“As expected...” Shang Jianyao let out a long sigh of relief and continued. “After I finished writing the hint, I used my Inference Clowning ability to make myself come to the conclusion that I was dreaming based on unrelated conditions. This also enhanced my judgment and cognition, helping me to escape the dream.”

Jiang Baimian’s emotions stirred when she heard that. “How ruthless. You even deceived yourself.”

“...” Long Yuehong almost laughed out loud. It took him a great deal of difficulty to stifle his laughter.

“...” Shang Jianyao didn’t expect Jiang Baimian to make such a ‘comment.’ He almost forgot what he wanted to say.

He paused and said, “I’ve never done such an experiment before. I thought I could give it a try after I saw my reflection in the side mirror. Besides, there are two conditions for Inference Clowning: One is to use obvious facts to make the target come to an almost irrelevant conclusion that’s beneficial towards me. The other is to use worthless conditions to make the target come to an illogical but accurate judgment.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Not bad. From the looks of it, this matter has helped you grasp your abilities one step further and broadened its boundaries.”

Shang Jianyao was just about to say something when he suddenly revealed a pondering expression.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Bai Chen. “What do you have in mind?”

“It’s best not to sleep tonight before we are certain that the anomaly isn’t present. At dawn, immediately drive south. With your energy, it shouldn’t be a problem for you to go without sleep for half a night.” Bai Chen gave a very serious and careful suggestion.

Long Yuehong subconsciously pointed at Blackrat Town’s entrance and asked, “What should we do here?”

“What else can we do? We have to ensure our own safety first,” Jiang Baimian replied without hesitation. “Besides, the dream anomaly doesn’t only target us. There should be people who are affected among the Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads in the vicinity. Their strange deaths will temporarily turn this place into a forbidden zone; its terrifying existence will spread through word of mouth. No one will dare come here for a while.

“Heh heh, if someone can’t even receive such news and enters without knowing anything, I don’t think they have the ability to find Blackrat Town’s entrance and move the large boulders that block the cave.

“When the corresponding effects subside, the company’s personnel will most likely have arrived. When the time comes, they will definitely send a signal flare if they don’t find us.”

Long Yuehong had no further objections, and the four of them waited until dawn.

They then took turns driving south.

When it was almost noon, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—turned her head and said to Shang Jianyao, “Try sleeping and see if there are any anomalies in the dream. Don’t worry; I’ll keep an eye on you. I’ll shake you awake if anything goes wrong.”

“I can wake up by myself,” Shang Jianyao muttered confidently.

“Huh?” Jiang Baimian tilted her head. Her smile didn’t diminish at all. In fact, it became even more obvious.

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything else. After some thought, he raised his right hand and massaged his temples. He then closed his eyes.

...

Cold, pitch-black metal walls stood tall as they surrounded a spacious hall.

High up in the hall’s indiscernible ceiling was a swath of darkness.

In the darkness, countless resplendent points of light were densely packed together. They slowly rotated as if they formed galaxies.

In the middle of the hall, starlight scattered and condensed into a large, blurry figure. The figure’s hands were spread out, maintaining a strict symmetry as if it was simulating a balance scale.

“Three favors for one price,” echoed hollowly in Shang Jianyao’s ears.

Shang Jianyao stared at this scene for nearly ten seconds before saying three words in a deep voice: “Star Cluster Hall...”

He didn’t say anything else. He passed by the blurry figure and arrived at the hall’s innermost part before stopping in front of the heavy, grayish-white stone door.

Chapter 56: Meeting Up

Facing the heavy stone door embedded in the black metal wall, Shang Jianyao silently took a deep breath. He leaned forward and pressed his hands against it.

The three indentations above the stone door lit up one after another as if stars were falling from the sky.

Within the three ‘stars,’ illusory words tumbled, appeared, and quickly froze. They were: ‘Inference Clowning,’ ‘Corny Person,’ ‘Hands Immobility.’

Shang Jianyao focused slightly, and the blob of white light representing Inference Clowning suddenly lit up, becoming brighter and brighter.

Almost at the same time, the grayish-white stone door trembled slightly. Amidst cranking sounds, it constantly retreated bit by bit.

In just a few seconds, the grayish-white stone door—which had stumped Shang Jianyao for many days—opened completely.

Shang Jianyao then retracted his hands and inserted them into his pockets. He quietly stood in place and stared at the area behind the stone door.

A silver-white metal staircase silently stood there. It stretched upwards and had no end in sight. On both sides of the staircase was boundless darkness—so deep that it seemed capable of engulfing the entire world.

“As expected...” Shang Jianyao muttered. He took his hands out of his pockets and strode forward. Without any hesitation, he passed through the door and stepped onto the staircase.

One step, two steps, three steps...

Although he couldn't see the staircase's end, he still walked steadily and firmly. He didn't hesitate or appear rushed. During this process, only his footsteps echoed in the surroundings. Apart from that, there was no other sound.

This overlapped with the darkness on both sides, producing indescribable fear.

After walking up for an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao finally saw another splash of color amidst the darkness.

It was a grayish-white stone door similar to the one from before. It was still embedded in black metal walls—where the ends couldn't be seen. There were also three grooves on it.

If not for the change in the situation under his feet and the lack of 'star clusters' around him, Shang Jianyao would have thought that he had returned to the original hall.

He thought for two seconds before speeding up, running, and skipping toward the new stone door. He then turned his body slightly, placed one hand in his pocket, and pressed against the door with the other.

Just as he had expected, white light rose from the grayish-white stone door's three grooves one after another, condensing into an illusory star.

In the 'star,' countless words tumbled. Before long, they settled down. They were the same: 'Inference Clowning,' 'Corny Person,' 'Hands Immobility.'

Among them, the white light representing Inference Clowning was much brighter than the other two. Unfortunately, the grayish-white stone door only trembled slightly this time. It did not swing back.

Shang Jianyao gently pushed with one hand before he gradually exerted strength with both palms. His back bent as if he wanted to press his entire weight against the stone door.

The heavy stone door didn't budge much, and the gap didn't widen.

Shang Jianyao retracted his hands and straightened his body. He looked at the rather bright Inference Clowning, the slightly dim Corny Person, and Hands Immobility. He then nodded thoughtfully.

After the three balls of white light dimmed and vanished, Shang Jianyao's figure became blurry.

He really fell asleep.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao suddenly felt his body shake. He instinctively opened his eyes and saw Jiang Baimian's black and straight eyebrows—as well as her bright and spirited eyes.

“What did you encounter?” Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that Shang Jianyao had finally woken up.

Shang Jianyao thought about it seriously and replied, “I slept very soundly.”

Jiang Baimian's eyebrows twitched as if she had used a lot of strength to restrain herself. Long Yuehong—who was sitting on the left in the backseat—burst out laughing.

Bai Chen—who was in charge of driving—stepped on the accelerator harder. The jeep swooshed faster, almost leaving the ‘main road’ that didn't have much junk.

Phew...

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled. “It seems like we've escaped the area with the anomaly. Bai Chen, find a relatively obscure place nearby for parking.”

She then cast her gaze at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong in the back row. “We'll camp here for the next few days. After lunch, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen will get some sleep. Shang Jianyao and I will be in charge of guarding and patrolling. Before the company's troops send out a signal, you will be trained in wilderness survival around here.”

“Yes, Team Leader.” Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had no objections.

...

A day later, in the Old Task Force's camp.

Long Yuehong—who had just eaten lunch—took out a fruit, slightly bigger than a marble, from his pocket. It was covered in a grayish-green hard shell.

He then bit open the shell with his teeth, revealing the tender, white, and plump flesh inside.

Long Yuehong sucked the juice that spurted out before sucking the flesh out and chewing it.

“How delicious...” Long Yuehong praised sincerely after swallowing the fruit. Over the past day of training, his greatest harvest had been getting to know this food called Rawfresh Fruit.

This fruit came from a type of drought-resistant, hard-leaf shrub that grew in many areas. It didn’t take long to grow and could be preserved for a long time. It also didn’t have any toxins. The only problem was that it produced very little fruit. A shrub would only have a few Rawfresh Fruit, making them unusable as a staple. No one would deliberately gather them.

According to Bai Chen, these were many wilderness nomads’ best childhood memories.

Shang Jianyao also had Rawfresh Fruits in his hands. He was stuffing the last clump of tender white flesh into his mouth. This wild fruit’s flesh was not as soft and dense as he had imagined. Instead, it was a little like an apple and had a crisp texture.

The taste was slightly sour, but the sourness did not hide its sweetness. It energized one the more they ate.

After chewing and swallowing the thin seeds hidden in the flesh, Shang Jianyao clapped his hands and stood up.

Jiang Baimian was just about to announce the start of afternoon training when she suddenly saw three fireworks explode in the northern sky. One yellow, one green, and one blue.

“The company’s signal flare...” She frowned and muttered to herself loudly, “Aren’t they a little too fast?”

“Could it be a sham?” Bai Chen thought of a possibility.

Jiang Baimian took a closer look and shook her head. “This is the company’s special signal flare. Outsiders can’t fake it. Besides, the color sequence is also right. Maybe a team from the Security Department happened to be training nearby and went there directly? Or maybe the company had long noticed the anomaly north of Yuelu Station when we first heard the roars that night?”

Shang Jianyao suddenly smiled after hearing that. "Why don't we first send Long Yuehong over to confirm it?"

"Why me?" Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

"I can only command you." Shang Jianyao was very calm.

Long Yuehong glanced at him disdainfully.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "Shang Jianyao makes sense."

Long Yuehong's face turned slightly pale.

Jiang Baimian continued speaking. "Let's return to Blackrat Town first. Once we're nearby, we'll get someone to wear the exoskeleton and do some scouting."

Long Yuehong immediately calmed down when he heard that the scout was going to wear the exoskeleton. He slapped his forehead and muttered, "How could I forget this..."

Jiang Baimian tilted her head. Although she didn't hear him clearly, she could roughly guess what Long Yuehong would say. She smiled and retorted, "Do you think you can take on the scouting mission? How many Security Department employees do you know? When we get there, I'll definitely be the one doing the scouting."

With that said, Jiang Baimian strode towards the jeep, leaving behind only a light sentence. "Pack up."

...

When it was almost evening, the Old Task Force returned to the hilly area where Blackrat Town was located.

After Jiang Baimian scouted with the exoskeleton suit, confirming that the people who had released the signal flares were from Pangu Biology.

After putting away the exoskeleton, Bai Chen drove Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong to the bottom of the hill.

There were more than ten Pangu Biology employees in grayish-black uniforms. They carried standard Berserker assault rifles and blocked the path from different directions.

Bai Chen stopped the jeep according to a given gesture.

Jiang Baimian opened the door first and walked over. On the way, she took out a red, rectangular name tag with gold letters on it and wore it on her chest.

On the name tag, the words 'Pangu Biology' reflected the setting sun and shimmered.

Two armed members wearing the same nameplate came forward. One of them held an electronic device with a screen, while the other asked, "Electronic card number."

"02310162155," Jiang Baimian skillfully uttered a string of numbers.

The Security Department employee with the equipment in hand inputted this string of numbers and pulled out Jiang Baimian's information. He quickly compared the photos and characteristics before raising his hand to give a salute. "Good evening, Team Leader Jiang."

After Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen verified their employee electronic card numbers, the two Security Department employees opposite them made way.

"Which company are you from? How did you arrive here so quickly?" questioned Jiang Baimian casually.

The Security Department employee who had just asked for the electronic card numbers replied, "We set off after we received news that something abnormal had happened north of Yuelu Station. We only saw your emergency flare on the way."

The employee holding the electronic device added, "We're from the 23rd Company."

Jiang Baimian was not surprised by their answer and felt relieved. "How many platoons did you send?"

"The entire company is here. We drove armored vehicles." The Security Department employee opposite her didn't hide anything.

"Not bad." Jiang Baimian smiled.

Within Pangu Biology, the Security Department was in charge of external missions. The basic unit was the combat platoon.

Every combat platoon had 20 to 30 people. There was a platoon commander (D7) and a deputy platoon commander (PC), ranging from D4 to D6.

In order to make it easier to command, a combat platoon was further divided into three to four sections. Each section had a section commander (SC), either a D4 or D5.

Likewise, three combat platoons formed a company. Along with the addition of auxiliary personnel, a company had about 100 people. The officer commanding (OC) was generally D8.

Above a company was a battalion, numbering between 400 to 500 people. This was the Security Department's largest force. The corresponding commanding officer (CO) was a D9.

If a large-scale war broke out, a few battalions formed a unit, temporarily forming a brigade. It would be commanded and managed by different brigade commanders (M1-level management). Big Boss's personal guard, the brigade directly under management, and the brigade that guarded important projects were common exceptions. Furthermore, they had fewer people than real brigades.

In other words, a company was considered one of the Security Department's cornerstones.

"Where's your OC?" Jiang Baimian asked.

The employee holding some electronic equipment opposite her replied honestly, "In Blackrat Town."

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Take us to him. We have important information."

Chapter 57: Exchange of Intelligence

Shang Jianyao and the others met the 23rd Company's OC outside Blackrat Town. He was in his thirties and wore a grayish-black uniform with a name tag with two stars.

"Wang Beicheng." He offered his right hand to Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian also stretched out her hand and shook it. "Jiang Baimian."

"I've long heard of your reputation." Wang Beicheng smiled and retracted his hand. He was about the same height as Shang Jianyao. His facial features were considered handsome, but his entire body was tanned and gave off a rugged feeling.

"I hope it's mostly good," said Jiang Baimian humbly. She then introduced Shang Jianyao and the others. "These are members of our Old Task Force."

Wang Beicheng was not arrogant at all. He greeted Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong one after another.

He then cast his gaze at Jiang Baimian again. "To be honest, we were all surprised when we heard that you applied to establish a new Old Task Force. This is one of the most dangerous missions, so there's no need for you to do something like that."

Long Yuehong's face involuntarily turned a little pale when he heard 'one of the most dangerous missions.'

Jiang Baimian smiled. "This is my personal pursuit. There are still some idealists above the Ashlands."

"Sometimes, your purity leaves me envious." Wang Beicheng smiled and sighed. "Unfortunately, people like us have wives and children. We can't be willful anymore."

Their small talk ended there.

Jiang Baimian began to talk about her experiences, hoping that the colleague opposite her could obtain useful information from her recount.

She first mentioned how she had heard the howling the first night they camped out in the wilderness and had suspected that something abnormal happened north of Yuelu Station. She then skipped the battle involving the wilderness bandit wearing an exoskeleton. She didn't even mention anything related to Moat Town. She only mentioned that she had encountered a Blackmarsh Iron Snake midway and successfully killed it. The Blackmarsh Iron Snake's skin was on the jeep's roof; one couldn't miss it.

After describing the 'initial plot,' Jiang Baimian directly talked about the trip to the steelworks factory ruins. She repeated the information provided by the bald Ruin Hunter, Harris Brown. Apart from using different words, there was no reduction in the content.

Wang Beicheng listened attentively. The polite smile on his face gradually disappeared.

Jiang Baimian then changed the topic to the mechanical monk, Jingfa.

In the beginning, she truthfully recounted Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Jingfa's conversation, emphasizing Jingfa's mind-reading ability—which was suspected to be an Awakened ability.

But when Jingfa caught up to her and used his Hungry Ghost Realm abilities to control the four of them, Jiang Baimian secretly concealed Shang Jianyao's performance. She only said that she had determined Jingfa's hatred for women not because of the Eternal technology, but because his lustful nature and physical condition were incompatible. This resulted in him having a warped mental state.

Jiang Baimian then said that she deliberately angered Jingfa and made him start unleashing uncontrollable violence. She then seized the opportunity to insert her left index finger into a certain socket on Jingfa's neck. She used the high-voltage electric current stored in the electric eel-like prosthetic limb to destroy his main control system and body structure.

Here, Jiang Baimian had deliberately modified the facts. She did not mention that she had only wanted to hack into the mechanical monk's internal information network and

directly control him because she was worried that Jingfa had an emergency backup system and redundant body structure.

She then skipped the middle process and grafted on the subsequent outcome. As Jingfa had an emergency backup system and a redundant body structure, he still managed to escape from the jeep after suffering heavy damage. Thus, he was not destroyed on the spot.

“If it were me, I might not have as good a result as you guys even if I led a combat platoon.” After hearing about the mechanical monk, Wang Beicheng couldn’t help but sigh with emotion. “Combat robots coupled with real human intelligence and Awakened abilities simply make him a killing machine.”

“This was also a result of pressure. Otherwise, we would have been violated and tortured to death by the mechanical monk. How can that be justified?” Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. “After we escaped Jingfa, we wanted to come to Blackrat Town and use the radio transceiver here to transmit the information we obtained to the company. On the way, we encountered two strange people while camping out in the wilderness. One of them was Du Heng, who called himself an antiquarian and a historian. The other came from First City. Her name is Galoran, and she called herself a Daoist priest...”

Her focus was not on how strange the two people were but on obtaining some information regarding the Awakened.

After that, the Old Task Force arrived in Blackrat Town and realized that it had been massacred. Therefore, they searched the scene and launched an emergency flare.

Jiang Baimian didn’t hide the results of her investigation and pointed out her suspicions regarding the Hyena bandits.

Towards the end, she talked about her real nightmare. However, she did not mention how Shang Jianyao had relied on his Awakened abilities to break free. She only talked about their good luck. It happened to be a change of shifts. Long Yuehong and Bai Chen realized that something was amiss and woke them up in time.

Finally, she related her real nightmare to the anomaly north of Yuelu Station and shared her guesses.

“This does resemble an Awakened’s ability...” Wang Beicheng—who was nearly a generation older than Shang Jianyao and the others—recalled what he had seen and heard. He hesitated and said, “When I was young, I followed a battalion and participated in a major transaction between large factions. I chanced upon a sect called Dawn’s Morning Star. They were afraid of dreams but also used them. Back then, the parishioner I conversed with was an Awakened. He called himself a Dream Guardian and believed that he was fighting for the sake of preventing people from being

swallowed by nightmares. The nightmare he described is a little like what you described.”

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others looked at each other and asked Wang Beicheng, “He didn’t show you his abilities?”

“No.” Wang Beicheng shook his head. “This might have something to do with me being more vigilant.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and inquired, “Which Kalendaria do they worship?”

Wang Beicheng already knew that Shang Jianyao and the others had obtained information regarding the Kalendaria from the mechanical monk, Jingfa. Therefore, he didn’t hide anything and frankly replied, “It’s Dawn. A deity who rules over February.

“They say that this Kalendaria is the light that illuminates a dream.” At this point, Wang Beicheng looked at the already dark sky. “Any other information?”

“No.” Jiang Baimian smiled slightly. “I’m thirsty from all the speaking.”

Wang Beicheng laughed. “I’ll skip the pleasantries. It’s almost night. Find a place to camp and rest. As for me? I have to arrange for a few reconnaissance sections to go out and gather information based on the information you provided. I can’t waste any time.

“Ah, right. It’s best to sleep under the watch of your companions on night duty. This way, you can be woken up in time if anything abnormal happens.”

Wang Beicheng didn’t mention how uncomfortable it would be to sleep in such a fashion. In the Ashlands, such matters weren’t a problem at all. Every experienced person knew that survival was better than shame or embarrassment.

“Don’t worry; we have experience.” Jiang Baimian waved her hand and bade Wang Beicheng farewell with Shang Jianyao and the others before returning to the parked jeep.

After they found a place and finished setting up the tent, Long Yuehong finally couldn’t suppress his confusion and asked, “Team Leader, why did you hide the matter regarding the exoskeleton?”

Their internal consensus was to hide Shang Jianyao’s secret, so there was no need to elaborate on it.

Jiang Baimian replied casually, “There’s too much to say. There’s no need for that. It might even end up involving Moat Town.”

Bai Chen—who was less emotional—asked in concern, “Didn’t we already discuss reporting Moat Town? However, we said we wouldn’t mention the exact location and only talk about how we encountered their hunting team in the wilderness.”

Jiang Baimian laughed. “There’s no rush. This will have to wait until we return to the company. That’s when we report it following procedures. Also, what’s the use of telling Wang Beicheng’s team? It will only increase the risk of information leaking.”

“It won’t be a problem even if it’s leaked, right?” Bai Chen didn’t understand.

Jiang Baimian sighed and pointed at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong with a smile. “Tell me about the employees’ attitude towards wilderness nomads.”

Shang Jianyao—who was in charge of guarding the area—didn’t hide anything. “We are a little xenophobic. We are afraid that taking in too many wilderness nomads will result in a resource reduction in all aspects.”

Long Yuehong glanced at Bai Chen and spoke softly. “That’s right. Although we are lacking in manpower, everyone thinks that we can continue living like this. There will be more and more newborns in the future. There’s no need to take in a large number of wilderness nomads.”

Jiang Baimian then waved her right hand at Bai Chen. “You heard that, right? If we are only sporadically taking in the best wilderness nomads like you and using your experience, knowledge, and abilities, the employees won’t object. They might even find it highly understandable. However, it would be unacceptable if we were to take in all the wilderness nomads in an entire settlement at once.

“Although the Security Department’s combat platoons and companies—who are active outside—might have feelings of sympathy after knowing about the various settlements’ situations, they are still humans. They also have parents, wives, and children living in the company. They are also affected by all kinds of commentary.

“If they leak the news of Moat Town to their relatives and friends before the Board of Directors makes a decision and there is public opinion on this matter, it’s very easy to end up with negative effects.”

Bai Chen was still a little confused. “Can an ordinary employee influence the Board of Directors’ decision?”

From her point of view, such high-ranking personnel would not be affected by the low-ranking masses’ public opinion.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Currently, you’re still more accustomed to the wilderness nomads’ ways. You aren’t used to some of how things work in the company. Pangu Biology might not be small, but it’s not big either. Which board member doesn’t have

relatives and friends who are ordinary employees? Besides, internal stability is imperative. This will directly affect the combat platoons and companies' status and position. Nôv(e)B\jnn

"If there is negative public opinion, the plan's details will definitely be different, even if the Board of Directors insists on taking in all of Moat Town. Whether they are given official employee treatment or treated as a peripheral vassal force, there will be divisions to a certain extent. Whether they directly send people to manage it or have it be like Blackrat Town means big differences."

Bai Chen didn't say anything else. She lowered her head slightly and thought carefully about Jiang Baimian's words. In her experience as a wilderness nomad, those in power and status had absolute say.

At this moment, Long Yuehong muttered, "But I still think that's just one reason."

As he was already used to it, he did not lower his voice when muttering to himself.

"Maybe Team Leader is afraid that Wang Beicheng will take our exoskeleton for his use." Shang Jianyao deliberately glanced at Jiang Baimian and smiled.

Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows slightly. "I'm afraid of him?"

Chapter 58: Cause

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen's response, Jiang Baimian chuckled. "We aren't under his command, and he doesn't have temporary war authorization. He's just a little higher than me in rank, but he hasn't reached management level either. Why should I be afraid of him?"

"In other words, we can ignore Wang Beicheng even if he forcefully conscripts us to participate in the subsequent matters as an OC?" Bai Chen was still adjusting to the detailed rules inside Pangu Biology.

Not to mention her, even employees like Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong—who had just graduated to join the Security Department—did not know anything about the power hierarchy in such situations.

"That's right." Jiang Baimian smiled and replied, "We are a special team that directly comes under Deputy Minister Xenny. Even a battalion's CO—who's also part of the management—can't order us around without the temporary war authorization given by the Board of Directors."

Xenny was one of the Security Department's deputy ministers. Her rank was comparable to that of a brigade commander. They were both ranked M1. The Security Department's brigade commanders and deputy ministers focused on different things.

There was no difference in rank. Sometimes, some brigade commanders would take on the role of deputy minister.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong were no strangers to Xenny. This was not only because the lady was their immediate superior's immediate superior, but it was also because she was very famous. She was one of the few Red River people in Pangu Biology. Be it her name, characteristics, eyes, or hair color, she was different from most of the employees. In addition, she was a deputy minister who had been gradually promoted in the Security Department's civilian staff system. She was an exception among exceptions.

The Security Department's civilian staff system was not open to new employees during their first participation in the job allocation unless they were very talented and were designated to be nurtured before entering university.

Xenny was one of those talents.

Shang Jianyao listened attentively and calmly raised a question. "Can the minister command us?"

"..." Jiang Baimian's smile became forced. "Of course."

Upon hearing this, Bai Chen roughly understood the Security Department's power hierarchy and asked, "What if Wang Beicheng insists on conscripting us? Forcefully?"

"Who cares?" Jiang Baimian replied without hesitation. "When the time comes, I'll leave directly. Will he be able to stop me?"

"Aren't you afraid that he will use force?" questioned Bai Chen.

Jiang Baimian's expression immediately became a little interesting. She looked at Bai Chen's petite face seriously and said with a smile, "You have to remember that this is a large faction's army, not a team formed by wilderness nomads. Even if Wang Beicheng really dares to go crazy, his employees won't dare!"

"Every employee in the Security Department knows the consequences of attacking a colleague for no reason very well. Ten years of imprisonment for forced labor is the minimum, while the death sentence is the worst punishment. Banishment of the entire family is even possible."

"Can't he frame us, harm us, silence others, and keep it a secret?" Bai Chen raised a question.

"That just makes the crime worse." Jiang Baimian turned her head to glance at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. "The main question is: Who will go along with Wang Beicheng's madness? We came out to risk our lives, and we are loyal to the company."

It's a company that can provide our families and us a stable life and basic supplies. Can Wang Beicheng guarantee that?

"What additional things can he provide? At most, it will be an opportunity for promotion and a deviation in the war spoils' distribution. However, this is nothing compared to the serious consequences after the matter is exposed. Even if people are blinded by greed, how many opportunities can Wang Beicheng provide? Can it cover his entire company's 100-plus people?"

"If he and five to six of his trusted aides are the only ones here, I really do need to worry. But with dozens to a hundred people in this area, how is he to frame us and silence others to keep it a secret? Once a few people regret their actions and secretly report the matter to redeem themselves, the entire matter will be exposed. The consequences will be dire.

"Besides, this madness will only be because of pride. Who would be willing to do such a thing?"

Bai Chen nodded slowly. "Indeed. Word will get out. It's not like he can just leave his trusted aides behind and kill everyone else."

If only a few people from a company returned, the problem would be written all over their faces.

Furthermore, under circumstances where both parties had similar weapons, it was still uncertain who would be the one to silence the other in the matchup of a few people against a hundred.

"Even Wang Beicheng's trusted aides might not dare to engage in his madness." Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, if I ask you to beat up Wang Beicheng in front of many people, would you dare?"

Long Yuehong fell silent for a few seconds before answering weakly, "I'm not his match..."

"If you are his match, would you dare?" Jiang Baimian asked in amusement.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao nodded solemnly. "I dare! There's no need to assume. When we return to the company, I'll beat up Wang Beicheng!"

"Heh..." Jiang Baimian scoffed.

When they returned to the company, any fight would be a 'brawl.' Order Supervisors usually would step in to mediate and send both parties home. If it was slightly more serious, they would be locked up for up to half a month, and they would be fined a

month of contribution points. Furthermore, to prevent the punished from starving to death, they will humanely split the fine over a year.

As long as they didn't cause any harm to the other party, the worst outcome of such a brawl would be being transferred to a bad position in the company. However, there were almost no jobs in Pangu Biology that were more dangerous than that of Old Task Force members. There weren't many equally dangerous jobs.

As Shang Jianyao and the others rushed to speak, Bai Chen suddenly interrupted. "What did Wang Beicheng do wrong?"

Why did they start a serious discussion on whether they should beat him and how they should do it?

"Uh..." Jiang Baimian fell into deep thought.

"..." Long Yuehong realized that his impression of Wang Beicheng had inexplicably worsened after their discussion. He could be described as a great villain.

Only Shang Jianyao replied seriously. "His mistake is his inability to sing well."

Bai Chen subconsciously asked, "How do you know?"

Shang Jianyao nodded. "A guess."

"..." Bai Chen realized that it was her fault for seriously discussing a problem with Shang Jianyao because she never knew when he was joking or 'acting up.'

"Alright, alright." Jiang Baimian clapped her hands. "It's time to prepare dinner. Oh right, Shang Jianyao will sleep first later. We'll see if he will enter a real nightmare."

After giving the instructions, Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and added, "To be honest, I'm still quite afraid that Wang Beicheng will know that we have a military exoskeleton. Normally speaking, there might only be a few such advanced pieces of equipment in every battalion. Furthermore, they might be concentrated in a certain company or platoon. Wang Beicheng and the others might not have such equipment."

"Weren't you unafraid?" Long Yuehong didn't understand why his team leader had changed her mind.

Jiang Baimian laughed self-deprecatingly. "I'm not afraid that he will use it by force. I'm afraid that he will beg me bitterly. Their subsequent actions will definitely be much more dangerous than ours. Logically speaking, we should lend them the exoskeleton. Sigh, I'm a soft-hearted person."

“Besides, such equipment has to be handed over when we return to the company. It will be centrally distributed by the higher-ups. It can’t belong to us.”

“Then, we can lend it...” Long Yuehong was even more confused.

Jiang Baimian glanced at them. “I’m doing this to guard against any accidents. I’ve finally noticed that our field training hasn’t gone smoothly. We encountered a seemingly ordinary bandit group that ended up having an exoskeleton. We took the most normal path and actually encountered the swamp’s corruption with the Blackmarsh Iron Snake lurking around. We went to the steelworks factory ruins for training and ended up encountering the mechanical monk, Jingfa.

“We came to Blackrat Town to borrow a radio transceiver and found a massacre. We were waiting for the company to send troops over, but we ended up encountering an anomaly and fell into a real nightmare... Also, of all times to be discovered, a newly-discovered Old World city ruin was found north of Yuelu Station...

“In summary, we might be unlucky. Who knows what other accidents might happen later? Therefore, we have to keep the exoskeleton with us to enhance our team’s strength.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Long Yuehong agreed with her deeply, and Bai Chen couldn’t help but nod.

No matter what, their lives were more important!

Shang Jianyao opened his mouth and was about to say something when Jiang Baimian glared at him.

“You don’t have to say anything!” Jiang Baimian then laughed. “If it’s not too important.”

Upon seeing that Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything, Jiang Baimian deliberated and said, “At the same time, I’m also covering for Shang Jianyao by concealing the matter about the exoskeleton and Moat Town.”

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, “We can’t hide these two matters for long. It has to be written in the report when we return. If we hide it now, even if Wang Beicheng and the others have doubts, they will come to a realization when they return and ask about it. Hence, this is what we are hiding. I never expected you guys to have such reservations...

“This way, they won’t think that we have other secrets. With the two corroborations, the company will no longer suspect anything.”

“Is that so...” Long Yuehong found it impressive, but he couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao nodded thoughtfully.

The night passed uneventfully. The anomaly had seemingly left the area.

After breakfast, they waited for Wang Beicheng’s adjutant and were invited to Blackrat Town.

Wang Beicheng wore a grayish-black beret and spoke to Jiang Baimian with a serious expression. “Several reconnaissance sections have already sent feedback, emphasizing two key points: First, more than ten members of the Hyena bandits and their vassals mysteriously died two nights ago. They couldn’t figure out the reason. This scared Hyena, causing him to abandon his vassals the morning before yesterday and bring only 12 or 13 core members north to the newly-discovered Old World city ruin.

“Second, the newly-discovered Old World city ruin is less than 50 kilometers away from here.”

“That close?” Jiang Baimian was slightly surprised.

Wang Beicheng glanced at the northwestern sky. “Previously, it was only said that it was north of Yuelu Station. Actually, it’s not north, but northeast. It’s not too far from here.”

“No wonder...” Jiang Baimian muttered after hearing that. It’s no wonder that the real nightmare anomaly would ‘spread’ to Blackrat Town.

“We have to set off immediately. Are you in need of any assistance?” Wang Beicheng asked.

“No.” Jiang Baimian sincerely wished him well. “Pray we meet again.”

“Pray we meet again.” Wang Beicheng waved his hand and began to gather the troops before heading northwest.

After watching them leave on various vehicles—including armored ones—Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. “Let’s set off as well. We shall head to our original destination. I finally don’t have to worry about the Old World ruin’s first-hand information and the two rookies’ safety!”

Chapter 59: A Mood “Regulator”

Just as Jiang Baimian was reflecting on how the trouble had finally passed and how they could embark on their original journey, a slightly deep and masculine voice sounded.

“Jiang Baimian thought that things were over when she said those words, but little does she know that things are far from over. The waves of fate are pushing her to a completely different crossroad...”

Jiang Baimian turned her head in surprise and looked at Shang Jianyao. “... Why did you suddenly say that?”

Shang Jianyao had a serious expression. “I happened to think of this sentence. Perhaps I sensed the heavens’ will.”

While Jiang Baimian was confused, Long Yuehong hesitantly said, “I think I’ve heard that before... Yes, in the radio programs from before!”

Shang Jianyao had only changed the names! Nôv(el)B\\jnn

The radio station under Pangu Biology’s Entertainment Department did not only do Newspoint. There were also programs like Bedtime Music and Random Stories. It was one of the few spiritual pleasures that employees enjoyed.

Shang Jianyao’s serious expression instantly vanished as he revealed a sunny smile. “Don’t you think that this line perfectly matched the scene from before?”

Jiang Baimian laughed involuntarily. “You are now doing voice-overs? Hmm... Not bad. It looks like everyone’s in a good mood.”

As she swept her gaze across, she saw Bai Chen’s expression turn a little confused.

The petite lady stood there, not knowing how to join the conversation.

“Are you a little lonely? Do you feel like an outsider?” Jiang Baimian asked directly with a smile.

Bai Chen’s expression changed a few times, and she instinctively pursed her lips. “I’m an outsider to begin with.”

As Bai Chen was not an official employee yet, and certain news on the radio could not be leaked, there were no corresponding circuits linked to the residential area where she lived.

This made her a little confused about the topic at hand.

If not for the fact that she had seen radio loudspeakers used for issuing orders in certain settlements and had heard the time announcement on the Security Department’s floor, she might not have understood the meaning of the word ‘radio.’

Just like how many Ruin Hunters knew that a collapsed building in the steelworks factory ruins was once a radio station, they did not know what a radio station was.

“You can’t say that. Many of the company’s high-ranking employees—and even some from management—were wilderness nomads. When you become an official employee, you can participate in the marriage assignment. When the time comes, we will all be family.” Jiang Baimian consoled Bai Chen as if she was prepared.

“Besides, which do you think is deeper? Our friendship, or the friendship between the board members—which I’ve never interacted with—and me? After experiencing life and death together, we are sisters with different parents. How can we be considered outsiders?”

“What about us?” Shang Jianyao quipped.

“The two of you?” Jiang Baimian seriously pondered for two seconds. “We can’t say that you are siblings with different parents for the time being. What if one of you is matched to Bai Chen in the future?”

Having a wilderness nomad senior who had joined Pangu Biology tell her about the central assignment, Bai Chen couldn’t help but size up Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong. Her expression didn’t seem too happy.

“I understand. You feel a little inferior.” Shang Jianyao seemed to understand Bai Chen’s apprehensions.

Despite Bai Chen’s experience, knowledge, and self-restraint, the muscles on her face slightly warped at this moment. She didn’t know if she should snap back in anger or laugh in exasperation.

Jiang Baimian mocked Shang Jianyao impolitely. “Forget it. What kind of person will like you? Uh, if you were a mute with disabled limbs, there might be more people who like you.”

She wasn’t that careful when facing Shang Jianyao. After spending the past few days together, she had already come to the preliminary conclusion that Shang Jianyao was rather strong mentally and wouldn’t be truly affected by such words.

On the contrary, she couldn’t say that to Long Yuehong.

As a team leader, Jiang Baimian had always understood that people were different. Different people needed different handling methods.

This was also one of the reasons why she was popular in the Security Department.

Long Yuehong—who had felt a little inferior due to Bai Chen’s inspection and subsequent change in expression—was amused by Shang Jianyao. The haze that had just surfaced in his heart vanished instantly.

Bai Chen turned her head and said to Long Yuehong, “Sorry. I was just imagining the scene of you two being my husband. I found it a little strange and unfamiliar. I didn’t mean anything else.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Long Yuehong quickly replied.

Jiang Baimian smiled and asked, “What if it doesn’t feel strange?”

“Then, I’ll find an opportunity to sleep with him,” said Bai Chen casually.

“Huh?” Long Yuehong was shocked.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian raised their eyebrows in unison.

Bai Chen suddenly felt like laughing for some reason. “This is very common in the Ashlands. Try your best to sleep with someone you like as soon as possible. If you wait until the next day, he or you might die from all kinds of problems. Team Leader, I always thought you were an experienced person, but...”

“Haha.” Jiang Baimian laughed dryly. “My focus isn’t in that direction.”

Jiang Baimian then revealed a pondering expression. “This is something that should be recorded. This is a human culture that arose in the Ashlands due to the harsh environments after the Old World was destroyed.”

After such a ‘discussion,’ Bai Chen inexplicably felt like the distance between her, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao had decreased significantly. She really felt like a comrade-in-arms who could live and die together.

When she was a wilderness nomad, she had experienced life-and-death situations with many people. But most of them were a result of the environment and situation. There was no friendship between the two parties. When they escaped danger, they would even shoot each other in the back.

Therefore, although she had faced danger many times with Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong, she only admired Jiang Baimian’s qualities, feared Shang Jianyao’s abilities, and pitied Long Yuehong’s forced growth. She still maintained a considerable distance from them psychologically.

While Bai Chen was sighing with emotion, Jiang Baimian suddenly cast her gaze at her and smiled. “How is it? Does it feel like you’re really a member of a team now?”

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian's bright smile, Bai Chen couldn't help but close her eyes. "Team Leader..."

She didn't expect Jiang Baimian to be able to grasp her mental state so accurately.

Jiang Baimian laughed. "As a team leader, apart from improving each of your abilities, I also have to pay attention to your psychological problems. Don't underestimate me just because I'm mainly teaching those two rookies—no, a jerk and a rookie. In fact, I've always been paying attention to your feelings and performance. For a long time to come, we will face countless dangers together. We need to give our backs to each other for protection. Our relationship must be deeper than that of biological sisters.

"I previously said that I would do my best to ensure my team members' survival with every decision I make. I wasn't only saying this to Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao, but also to you."

Bai Chen remained silent. She pursed her lips and looked at Jiang Baimian, not saying a word for a long time.

"Unfortunately, Team Leader, you're a woman. Otherwise, I would have slept with you tonight." It was not Bai Chen who said this, but Shang Jianyao—who had deliberately heightened his pitch.

Bai Chen turned around in surprise to look at this fellow that never acted according to convention.

"Helped you with the voice acting." Shang Jianyao nodded sincerely.

"I didn't have such thoughts!" Bai Chen blurted out a retort, her face clearly a little flushed.

"Just take it that way." Shang Jianyao tried his best to persuade her.

"Shut up!" Jiang Baimian finally couldn't help but roar in exasperation and amusement. "Can't you be a little more serious?"

Shang Jianyao's eyebrows twitched. "I'm very serious most of the time. A small portion of the time, I'm helping to liven up the mood. There are rare instances when I really can't control myself. I have a doctor to prove it!"

He sounded full of confidence.

"Thank you!" Jiang Baimian slightly gritted her teeth as she replied.

After the incident with the mechanical monk—Jingfa—Bai Chen and Long Yuehong could now guess why Shang Jianyao's occasional train of thought would deviate. They didn't answer the question and let it pass.

After 'thanking' him, Jiang Baimian grumbled at Shang Jianyao. "Seriously, you've washed away Bai Chen's feelings."

"..." Bai Chen was at a loss whether to laugh or cry as she glanced at her team leader, not wanting to continue the topic. Don't talk about feelings! How embarrassing!

Jiang Baimian smiled to herself when she saw that the mood had returned to normal. She waved her hand and said, "Let's go; time to set off!"

As they had already arrived at the hilly area where Blackrat Town was, they did not return to the steelwork factory ruins. Instead, they directly headed southeast—in the direction of Qifeng Town.

It was rainy in autumn. When the jeep drove until almost noon, the clouds became thicker, and the sky turned darker. Rain pattered down in the wilderness.

The rain wasn't heavy, but it produced a hazy, blurry feeling out of nothing. This caused Bai Chen's field of vision to shrink suddenly.

Before long, the jeep arrived at a rather wide and seemingly deep river.

It was called 'Green River' because some green algae-like organisms perennially grew at the bottom of the river. It was the mother river for many creatures in the Blackmarsh Wilderness.

At this moment, the bridge over the green river—which had been in disrepair for many years—had already been broken. Most of its sections had fallen into the water.

"It looks like it was blown up..." Jiang Baimian examined it carefully and made a preliminary judgment. "Let's head downstream and take another bridge."

Just as she said that, she saw a person walking out from behind a certain bridge.

In the dense, misty rain, this person wore a black trench coat and a pair of identical gloves. He was about 1.8 meters tall, and his hair was neatly combed back. He carried a long, slightly strange silver rifle on his back. He held a black umbrella in one hand and walked toward the slowly approaching jeep with his other hand hanging down naturally.

Although they hadn't seen the other party's face clearly, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others suddenly couldn't take their eyes off him.

Bai Chen—who had wanted to turn the steering wheel—subconsciously stopped moving and stepped on the brakes.

The person came close before long, revealing a handsome face with black hair, golden eyes, sharp eyebrows, starry eyes, and distinct edges and corners.

He knocked on the driver's seat window and smiled. "I've finally shaken off that enthusiastic monster. Can you guys give me a ride?"

Chapter 60: Destination and Intent At Odds

"Alright."

"Sure."

"No problem."

"Get in the car."

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, Jiang Baimian, and Shang Jianyao almost spoke in unison without any hesitation.

The young man in a dark shirt and trousers—with a black trench coat draped over him—went around the front of the car, came to the passenger seat, and opened the door.

He smiled faintly at Jiang Baimian. "Can you go to the back row?"

"No problem. Have a seat. Have a seat." Jiang Baimian stood up enthusiastically and made way.

After the man removed the silver rifle on his back and sat in the passenger seat, she bent down slightly and smiled obsequiously. "How should I address you?"

The black-haired, golden-eyed man frowned indiscernibly. "Qiao Chu."

"What a beautiful name." Jiang Baimian was not stingy with her praise.

"Heard that? Compare that with your name." Shang Jianyao turned his head to verbally deal Long Yuehong a blow.

Long Yuehong didn't mind at all and echoed, "Yeah, yeah."

Amidst their exclamations, Jiang Baimian opened the backseat door and said to Shang Jianyao, "Squeeze toward the middle."

Before she could finish her sentence, Jiang Baimian corrected herself. “No, come down first. I’ll sit in the middle.”

Seeing that Shang Jianyao was unwilling, Jiang Baimian emphasized, “I’m the team leader!”

Shang Jianyao reluctantly alighted from the car and watched Jiang Baimian sit in the middle.

Upon hearing the term ‘team leader,’ the black-haired, golden-eyed man—Qiao Chu—subconsciously turned his head and glanced at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian seemed to have been waiting for this very moment. Her eyes met his, and she smiled sweetly.

Qiao Chu didn’t say anything else and retracted his gaze at an adequate speed.

Jiang Baimian did not appear disappointed. She leaned forward and held her chin with one hand. It was difficult for her to look away as she admired Qiao Chu’s side profile.

After Shang Jianyao sat down again, he realized that he could only see the back of Qiao Chu’s head because of his position. Furthermore, his gaze was blocked by the seat’s headrest in front of him from time to time. Unconcealed disappointment immediately appeared on his face.

Qiao Chu looked at the broken bridge in front of him and suddenly asked, “Do you guys have anything to eat?”

“Yes!” Bai Chen quickly turned around and opened the armrest compartment.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Jiang Baimian retracted her hand that was holding her chin and frantically searched for food in her pocket. Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong straightened their bodies and turned behind, attempting to get some braised beef canned food for Qiao Chu.

Without a doubt, Bai Chen was the first to pass Qiao Chu a small bag of compressed biscuits and an energy bar.

“That’s enough. Have some food too. I don’t think you’ll be resting for lunch. You’ll have to take turns driving.” Qiao Chu took the food and issued the order like a leader.

Shang Jianyao and the others had no objections.

After finishing the biscuits and energy bar—as well as the water in the waterskin—Qiao Chu put away the items. After waiting for a while, he turned his head and said to Bai Chen, “It’s time to set off. Drive towards the hilly area in the northwest.”

“Alright.” Bai Chen agreed after having her lunch, but she didn’t look away.

Qiao Chu stretched out his left hand and patted Bai Chen’s right arm with a gentle smile. “Drive carefully.”

“Alright!” Bai Chen was flattered. She immediately sat up straight and started the jeep.

Qiao Chu turned to look at the backseat and smiled. “I’m going to take forty winks. Pay attention to your surroundings and wake me up when we reach the hilly area.”

“Alright!” replied Jiang Baimian and the others in unison.

Qiao Chu didn’t say anything else and turned his head back.

The smile on his face quickly vanished, and his gaze became abnormally cold. He then took out a sky-blue box from his pocket and snapped it open.

Inside the box was a small mirror.

Qiao Chu stared at his reflection in the mirror, raised his right hand, and seriously combed his hair. After repeated inspection, he slowly put away the mirror box, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

In the evening, the jeep returned to the hilly area where Blackrat Town was located.

Wang Beicheng’s 23rd Company had already left by then.

Without a reminder, Jiang Baimian and the others turned into human alarm clocks and woke Qiao Chu up when they arrived.

Qiao Chu looked at the darkening sky. “We’ll rest here for the night and continue heading northwest tomorrow morning.” Nôv(el)B\jnn

“Alright.” Bai Chen found a familiar camping spot and stopped the jeep.

The four of them then rushed to set up the tent and light a bonfire. They then took out a few military canned food from the trunk.

“You guys sure have plenty of supplies...” Qiao Chu sat in the passenger seat with the door opened. He leisurely watched Shang Jianyao and the others busy themselves.

Before long, Shang Jianyao jogged over and volunteered. “I’ll get some water over there.”

Qiao Chu traced the direction Shang Jianyao pointed in and looked at the clean water source. He thought for a few seconds and said, "There's no need. Our water can last a few days."

Shang Jianyao did not insist and asked with a smile, "Yes, yes. It will take a while for the canned food to heat up. Do you need me to sing a song for you?"

"..." Qiao Chu sized up Shang Jianyao with a doubtful gaze for two seconds. "There's no need."

"What about a Gold Coast hula dance?" asked Shang Jianyao.

Qiao Chu frowned and said, "There's no need. I want some time to myself. Call me when the canned food is heated up."

"Alright!" Shang Jianyao replied enthusiastically.

After he turned around and walked to the bonfire, Qiao Chu took out the sky-blue plastic box again and opened it.

As he looked at his reflection, Qiao Chu's expression changed a little. He sighed softly. "Sigh, how troublesome..."

Just like that, the night passed quietly. The sun rose in the Blackmarsh Wilderness's east once again.

After breakfast, Jiang Baimian finally used her team leader's authority to snatch the role of driving after a secret competition. Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen could only squeeze in the back row, aggrieved.

Qiao Chu flipped his wrist and looked at his mechanical watch. He then relied on the compass on the watch to determine his location.

"Drive in that direction. Don't stop." He pointed northwest.

Jiang Baimian did not question him. She drove the jeep and circled around the hilly area before heading straight toward the direction Qiao Chu had pointed out.

As time passed, the surrounding terrain became increasingly flat. The soil also became darker and muddier. In the end, mud was the only thing to see, and the harder paths became fewer and fewer.

They were heading deeper into the swamp.

Compared to Bai Chen, Jiang Baimian lacked experience in this regard. She almost drove the car into the bottomless mud twice. Thus, she had no choice but to give up the driver's seat and return to the middle of the backseat.

Bai Chen drove the jeep seriously and laboriously like a child awaiting an adult's praise.

The jeep undoubtedly slowed down significantly. It did not cover more than 30 kilometers even when noon came. All kinds of plants could gradually be seen growing in the surrounding swamp.

Compared to normal plants, their colors were either dim or bright. They looked rather strange.

Jiang Baimian still remembered her duty as a team leader and casually reminded Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "Seeing such abnormal plants gather means that we have entered a polluted zone. However, the plants here aren't grotesque or dangerous enough. The level of pollution shouldn't be too high.

"In such an environment, ordinary people can also move about. However, it's best not to exceed three days if you do not have protective equipment. People who have undergone mature genetic modifications can last about ten days. But the premise is that one has food and water prepared."

Qiao Chu turned his head again and glanced at Jiang Baimian. However, he quickly retracted his gaze and pointed to the side. "This way."

"But..." Bai Chen subconsciously wanted to suggest something.

The routes she chose were those with relatively lower pollution levels and were suitable for driving. If she rashly changed course, she might encounter swamps that had expanded beyond their edges. She might even sink the vehicle and people on board.

"Go this way," Qiao Chu emphasized again.

"Alright." Bai Chen chose to listen.

After the vehicle changed course and entered an area that Bai Chen was not familiar with, the jeep slowed down significantly. Bai Chen needed to determine the road's situation based on her experience as she drove.

After about 25 minutes, everyone in the car finished their lunch. They were about to get Jiang Baimian to replace Bai Chen when the scene in front of them suddenly changed.

In the endless dark swamp, thick vines with rotten soil drilled out from the bottom, forming a low 'forest.' They were greenish-black in color, and each of them was as thick as an ordinary python. Their surfaces had countless red spikes.

These strange vines intertwined together and covered every area visible to the naked eye in front of the jeep. Apart from the dark swamp itself, everything else became an embellishment to serve as contrast. Even the sky seemed to have turned gloomy, gray, and depressing because of the cover provided by the low 'forest' or other problems.

Upon seeing this spectacular but terrifying scene—be it Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, or Long Yuehong—they all felt an indescribable sense of shock.

Amidst their shock, a question arose in them almost simultaneously: "Why are we here?"

At this moment, the corners of Qiao Chu's mouth curled up as he revealed a gentle smile. "There's no need to be nervous."

Qiao Chu's voice and words immediately dispelled Shang Jianyao and the company's doubts, making them look at Qiao Chu with infatuation.

Qiao Chu sat up straight and began seriously instructing Bai Chen on how to drive and where to drive.

As she stared at the python-like, greenish-black, and slightly red vines brushing past outside the window, the five fingers on Jiang Baimian's left hand twitched.

She instinctively took out a pen and paper from her pocket and recorded what she saw.

Shang Jianyao alternated between looking at the back of Qiao Chu's head and sizing up the vines. He kept having the feeling that grave danger was brewing.

At that moment, he felt a gentle bump on his left arm.

Shang Jianyao subconsciously turned his head and saw Jiang Baimian tilting the paper in her hand over.

He focused his gaze and saw that the white paper faithfully described the current scene. In addition, there was a strange sentence at the end: "...There's actually such a seriously abnormal area deep in the swamp. However, the chip in my left arm miraculously tells me that the radioactive fallout here isn't too serious. Perhaps the pollution has already weakened over time?"

"... Those vines are covered in red spikes as if they have just sucked blood..."

"...The chip in my left arm tells me that my current location is completely opposite to my destination in the south, Qifeng Town..."