

## Ad Infinitum 571

Chapter 571 - Data

"That recording pen?" Jiang Baimian asked in response. "It might not be from the Monitor domain. To be honest, from the way it can affect a group of people and make them sincerely believe in Monitor, the power it contains should be closer to your and Wu Meng's Thought Implantation."

"That's right, that's right." Long Yuehong thought so too.

Shang Jianyao smiled and replied, "I can only say that the probability of it being Thought Implantation is relatively high, but we can't rule out other possibilities.

"Besides, after obtaining it, I can gain a deeper understanding of the Naturalism Church and Monitor through the stored content. It aids in my preparation for the exploration of other psychological trauma contained in Room 522. On the other hand..." At this point, Shang Jianyao's smile became brighter. "Isn't it equivalent to an item itself, no different from the Six Senses Beads or the Life Angel necklace? When the time comes, I can still transfer the aura contained in it to the Mind Corridor if I encounter trouble."

Upon seeing Shang Jianyao's smile and hearing his answer, Jiang Baimian inexplicably felt that this fellow's actions were a little familiar.. However, she couldn't figure out why.

This style of squeezing dry every item's value and killing many birds with one stone... Long Yuehong secretly hissed as his gaze moved back and forth between Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao a few times.

After a brief silence, he raised a question. "Without Old Ge now, aren't you afraid that you'll be affected by the power contained in the recording and become a die-hard member of the Naturalism Church, a pious believer of Monitor?"

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment. "I wonder what the Naturalism Church's Holy Communion is..."

Long Yuehong could completely understand his hidden meaning.

If it was good, it was something worth considering. As for stripping naked and returning to the embrace of nature, most Shang Jianyaos probably didn't mind.

"Whoa, you are actually considering it?" Jiang Baimian gave a good-natured snide and helped him answer Long Yuehong's question. "He's already a Mind Corridor-level Awakened and has considerable resistance to such effects."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian dragged out a long grunt. "Of course, this also depends on the level of the Awakened who made the recording. Typically, the effects from those who have explored the Mind Corridor's depths will weaken after all the transferring. The influence on Hey will definitely be weakened. At best, he'll have the urge to run around naked but be able to control himself in a jiffy. If it were Wu Meng—who's a poisonous sore—or an Awakened that has already entered the New World, the residual effects wouldn't be insignificant. Hey might become a Monitor believer for a period of time."

"That's still too dangerous. We have no way of knowing what the situation is, nor can we avoid the effects." Long Yuehong voiced his thoughts.

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian chuckled. "Don't worry. We'll definitely know in advance. The company has obtained that recording pen for more than half a year. With the big shots' strength, how can they not have figured out the exact details?"

"That's true..." Long Yuehong was convinced.

Jiang Baimian then looked at Shang Jianyao. "Quickly finish up your application. There's still training."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao was rather excited.

As she waited, Jiang Baimian walked back to her desk and sat down.

She flipped open a black notebook and looked at the simple map drawn on it, including the direction of the bends and the room door.

This was her route to the training room.

After a period of adaptation, Jiang Baimian realized that her 'directionally challenged' problems weren't as serious as what she had experienced on the first day.

On the one hand, she wasn't used to it back then. She was used to making instant judgments and reacting quickly, so she didn't slow down to think and distinguish. On the other hand, she had always relied on the auxiliary chip in her biological prosthetic limb. This seemed to worsen her 'directionally challenged' severity.

Considering Shang Jianyao's 'experiment' and Jingfa, Jiang Baimian theorized: "Not only will the paid price cause the corresponding damage, but it will also bring about cognitive abnormalities. This includes signs of cognitive deformities and cognitive abnormalities. Therefore, the corresponding abnormalities will deepen if one excessively relies on technological assistance in their cognition processes. This is a psychological effect that involves the subconscious. In comparison, drawing a map and stopping to study it more won't cause such a huge psychological reaction. The effects will be alleviated significantly."

Due to this, Jiang Baimian believed that as long as she persisted in constantly adjusting her mental state, the auxiliary chip could replace the hand-drawn maps she was relying on by the time the price worsened.

The mechanical monk—Jingfa—was a hopeless case because there was a vicious cycle in him. With accentuated desires, he switched to a robot body in an attempt to escape the price, only to result in the desire remaining with no way of venting it. The more desires he had, the more mentally perverse he became.

In short, Jiang Baimian could still tolerate the current aspects of being directionally challenged.

Right... The only problem is that I need to write up more plans before leaving home every day. It's better to go slow, think more, and observe more on the way. I'm just going to work, but it's like I'm out on a grand adventure.

This isn't a big problem.

Haha.

...

After finishing their morning training, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong took a shower and returned to the Old Task Force's office.

Jiang Baimian flipped her wrist and looked at her watch. "Let's visit Little White first before returning for lunch. How about that?"

"Alright." Long Yuehong immediately agreed.

Shang Jianyao clearly had no problems either. He had already stood up, picked up his tactical backpack, and tried to stuff in the small speaker on the table.

"Why are you bringing it?" Jiang Baimian was perplexed.

Shang Jianyao explained seriously, "We can't enter the ward now and can only look through the window. No matter what we say, Little White won't be able to hear us. It's better to dance for her and make her happy. Isn't that so? Do you want to do it together?" Shang Jianyao directed the latter two questions at Long Yuehong.

"Uh..." Long Yuehong hesitated.

"You are actually entertaining him? Could it be that you are affected by his Thought Implantation?" Jiang Baimian was amused. "Little White is still in the ICU. Aren't you afraid that she will 'rupture' her wound from laughing too much when she sees you dancing?"

Long Yuehong came to a realization. "That's right!"

Shang Jianyao smiled. "There's no need to use my abilities on him."

As he spoke, he began to chant. "Sigh, I'm only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My looks are average, and my grades are average..."

As Long Yuehong gritted his teeth, Jiang Baimian stopped Shang Jianyao from continuing. "Give me two minutes. I'll see if there's any new mail."

She returned to her desk, switched on the computer, and opened the intranet.

In an environment with a shortage of energy, Pangu Biology's employees had long developed the habit of switching off electrical appliances at all times once they were away.

After taking a few looks, Jiang Baimian sighed and said, "There's a Heartless outbreak in the Production Zone. The patient comes from the 400th floor."

This was the continuation of the Heartless outbreak.

Long Yuehong fell silent for a moment before recalling Bai Chen's previous question. He quickly asked, "Team Leader, has the company's Heartless outbreaks increased this year?"

"I don't think so..." Jiang Baimian recalled and said, "I'll check the data and confirm it."

She quickly gained something. "It's higher than last year, but it hasn't reached the twenty-year all-high."

As she spoke, Jiang Baimian projected this portion of data and picked up the laptop beside her.

She was now using a desktop computer assigned to the Old Task Force's team leader.

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian do this, Long Yuehong asked in confusion, "Team Leader, what's wrong?"

Jiang Baimian casually replied, "I previously got Old Ge to program something that can be used to analyze data. Since we're already discussing the frequency of outbreaks, I want to see if there's any floor or group with a higher incidence rate than the others."

This was something she just came up with.

In this regard, Pangu Biology didn't provide the corresponding data analysis.

When Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong crowded around her, Jiang Baimian inputted the data into the program and clicked on 'Start.'

Soon, all kinds of data comparisons were presented in a direct manner.

Jiang Baimian glanced at it and suddenly frowned.

"There's a problem?" Long Yuehong was alarmed.

"Is there a problem?" Shang Jianyao was rather excited.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "There's a correlation that stands out."

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong to ask, she continued, "Ever since the New Calendar, the annual incidence rate of non-management employees has fluctuated between 0.003% to 0.005%. Among the levels, two Heartless cases happened in the luckiest floors over the years.

"It doesn't happen at the management levels every year. In the past 47 years, it only happened in one year. It involved one floor and two patients. There were zero occurrences in the other levels.

"Even if we eliminate factors like the differences in numbers, this still seems abnormal."

"This..." Long Yuehong's mind was a little blank. He didn't know how to process the information.

Jiang Baimian continued, "There's also another anomaly. The male incidence rate is almost double that of women, and the male-to-female ratio is clearly not that much disparate."

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. "Because someone is protecting the management levels? Then, why are the female incidence rates lower?"

Long Yuehong didn't understand either.

Jiang Baimian thought for a while before slowly saying, "To guarantee fertility?"

Long Yuehong's eyes widened. "In a situation where the protection can't completely cover the area, the ability to procreate is the number one criterion?"

Sigh.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and said, "This is only a guess..."

As they lacked more clues, the Old Task Force's discussion came to an end. They packed their things and headed to the research institute on the 12th floor to visit Bai Chen.

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Two days later, Shang Jianyao received a reply regarding his application.

He looked at the email and shouted at Jiang Baimian, "I can receive the Six Senses Beads and the original copy of the medical record today, but not the recording pen. It says that it has a very strong mind control effect. If we have to listen to it, they can only provide a cleaned version that has the corresponding power filtered out."

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before smiling. "That works too. Let's hear what the Naturalism Church's teachings and philosophy are."

Long Yuehong secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

This was for the best. They wouldn't be taking any risks.

Chapter 572: Photos

A silver-white recording pen with old and mottled patterns appeared on Jiang Baimian's table in the afternoon.

She looked up and asked Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong, "Shall we listen now?"

Shang Jianyao—who had already stored the Six Senses Beads in his tactical backpack—thought for a few seconds and said, "Wait, let's close the door and turn off the lights first."

"Do you think this is a horror tale?" Jiang Baimian naturally wouldn't agree to such a lame request.

Long Yuehong nodded in agreement.

“It gives a sense of ritual,” Shang Jianyao tried his best to explain.

“We’re all in this together, so cut us some slack.” Jiang Baimian patronized him as she switched the battery and pressed the recording pen’s relevant button.

After some static sounds, a female voice—which didn’t sound special—sounded. “Ever since humans were born, they are constantly affected by nurture and gradually forget their true appearances. Our souls are like a sponge that has absorbed too many harmful things. They become heavier and weaker before finally sinking into this gray world forever, never to escape. This is the origin of the Heartless disease.

“To escape all of this and enter the New World, humans have to return to their original and strongest state. For this, we have to find our natural preferences and inclinations. We have to give up on our facades and return to nature...

“The Kalendaria, Monitor, has always been watching us, deciding if we’ve done enough to open the door to the New World for us...

“There are no masks in front of Monitor. Who you originally are will tell you the answer. Humanity came to this world naked, should live naked, and depart this world naked.”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and sighed with emotion. “The philosophies of these religious organizations are quite capable of filling up gaps in their theories. But without additional powers, such an explanation violates most of humanity’s understanding. It’s impossible to be accepted and spread immediately.”

“That’s right.” Long Yuehong felt that a human definitely wouldn’t be convinced by such words as long as they weren’t in a tough situation or a rather confused state.

Even if the corresponding matter happened, it was most likely because many people around the target had already joined the Naturalism Church and were constantly instilling the teachings into them.

Shang Jianyao didn’t say a word. His expression was rather solemn as if he were considering the problems hidden in those words.



“What’s on your mind?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged it. “I’m thinking that this religion isn’t suitable for Icefield. The weather there is very destructive to people who don’t like to wear clothes. Therefore, they should improve the teachings to solve the problem of localization for different areas.”

Jiang Baimian smiled. “You need to read more. When you reach Icefield, take off your clothes and run around. You will discover a different kind of satisfaction. This is akin to how many people in the Old World like to swim in lakes during winter. Not only can you strengthen your body as long as you don’t overdo it, but you can also enjoy the spiritual enjoyment of breaking through all kinds of restrictions and defeating difficulties. It’s very easy for it to be exploited by religion.”

Smack!

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “I’ll let Little Red try it out when there’s a chance.”

“Why not yourself?” Long Yuehong immediately asked.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “I’m strong, so the effects wouldn’t be obvious. Only you are 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. Your looks are average, and your grades are average...”

Long Yuehong regretted bothering with this fellow.

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495th floor, Zone B, Room 196.

After Shang Jianyao listened in to Newspoint, he held the Six Senses Beads and the original copy of the medical record in one hand and the Life Angel necklace in the other before entering the Mind Corridor.

Just as he stepped out of Room 131, he transferred the auras in the two items inside. They remained in their original forms.

As for the original medical record, it was an ordinary item. Shang Jianyao could only materialize one copy according to his memories.

He then wore a yellow monk robe and a red kasaya. His face suffused an iron-black color, and his eyes lit up with a red glow.

This time, the Life Angel necklace paralyzed his left leg. Therefore, he did the same as before—moving this leg to the back of his butt and getting the original stump to ‘grow’ another leg.

The price of the Six Senses Beads—which directly affected the mind—wasn’t that easy to avoid. No matter what Shang Jianyao—who had the Buddhist title, Redemption—did, the red glow in his eyes was like flames that burned brighter and brighter.

“Woman! Woman!” he roared with a hushed tone.

“You look very strange.” Shang Jianyao then stroked his chin. “You give me a familiar feeling.”

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao didn’t hide anything. “As a half-mechanical monk, Zen Master Jingfa is my only reference. Master Jingnian’s price isn’t increased desire.”

“Of all people, you must learn from that pervert!” The frank and honest Shang Jianyao reprimanded his peer.

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao spun the Six Senses Beads. “Buddha is merciful. After all, there are no real women here.”

“It’s better not to chant a Buddhist proclamation in your current state.” The honest Shang Jianyao looked down at his crotch.

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao casually said, “That’s simple.”

The next second, he mechanized his groin and turned it into an electromagnetic cannon that could fire bullets.

The muzzle passed through the cloth and stretched out. It was black and shimmering with a metallic luster.

“How’s this? I’ve always been an advocate of the superior firepower theory,” the cyborg monk Shang Jianyao asked his peers smugly. “Buddha is benevolent; superior firepower can redeem people.”

“I knew you were an indecent monk.” The honest Shang Jianyao sighed.

At the end of the day, Zen Master Redemption wasn’t a monk who truly believed in Subhuti. No matter which personality Shang Jianyao had, there was no such thing as pious faith.

The cyborg monk was a manifestation of Shang Jianyao’s romanticism toward machinery—a fusion of compassion and serenity.

When the Six Senses Beads’ negative price caused the latter two to deteriorate sharply, the former became stark.

The addition of a cannon didn’t affect the cyborg monk Shang Jianyao at all. He dragged the leg behind his butt and found Room 522 before walking in.

Shang Jianyao smoothly arrived at Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company thanks to his prior experience. He expended very little mental energy.

He gave up on the first floor, which he had already explored. He kept the electromagnetic cannon out and walked up to the second floor.

On the way, he felt the baffling, unknown gaze again.

If it weren’t for the fact that Zen Master Redemption was the one currently controlling the ‘body,’ the Shang Jianyao that liked novelty, singing, and dancing would’ve definitely danced for the hidden watcher and invited them to join in on the fun.

Perhaps it was because he had arrived on the second floor much earlier than before, but Shang Jianyao didn’t discover the female figure at the end of the corridor despite shaking his flashlight vigorously.

He could only check the many rooms here in an orderly manner, only to realize that they were mainly offices with plenty of old documents.

Unfortunately, the owner of Room 522 didn't read the corresponding content back then. After Shang Jianyao picked a document up, he realized that the text was incoherent or just nonsense.

When he came to the end of the corridor, Shang Jianyao heard light footsteps.

The red light in his eyes flickered a few times before he switched off the flashlight in his hand.

Right on the heels of that, even the red light extinguished.

Shang Jianyao shrank into the darkness. He crouched down, his back quietly pressed against the wall.

He was skilled as if he were playing hide and seek when he was young.

Before long, a figure came down from another flight of stairs at the end of the corridor and entered the room in front of Shang Jianyao. Then, rustling sounds constantly came from the window facing the street.

Shang Jianyao patiently waited until all the sounds stopped before slowly getting up and approaching the area.

With his destination inches away, he suddenly leaped up, raised his left hand—which was holding the flashlight—and flicked the switch.

A yellow beam of light shone in, reflecting many figures.

Sitting cross-legged on the guest sofa in the middle was the professional woman Shang Jianyao had previously encountered.

She wore the same clothes. At first glance, she looked to be in her twenties. Upon careful inspection, she was in her late thirties.

At this moment, she was sitting cross-legged with her eyes half-closed. Her hands were on her knees, and she looked a little solemn.

Around her, four to five humans in tattered clothes sat in the same posture. A few rats and a pile of cockroaches quietly circled them as if they were also immersed in the tranquil atmosphere in the room.

As Shang Jianyao's flashlight shone in, the woman opened her eyes and yelped. She then stood up and ran to the window at an extremely fast speed.

After that, she jumped out and climbed up. She was as agile as an ape, but her eyes weren't turbid—only bloodshot.

The humans sitting around her reacted simultaneously. They either jumped up or pounced to the side, displaying good physical fitness and reaction speed.

With the help of the flashlight, Shang Jianyao realized that their expressions were warped, their eyes were turbid, and their mouths were half-open. There was also flesh between their teeth.

Heartless!

The humans sitting there quietly were all Heartless!

As the rats and cockroaches scurried around, Shang Jianyao used Limbs Immobility.

The Heartless fell to the ground one after another amidst heavy thuds.

Shang Jianyao walked to the window and looked out. "It seems like there are Heartless here, but why aren't the ones outside coming in?"

The next second, he was surprised to discover that he was on the third floor, not the original second floor!

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and searched for a reason with his peers. “Like the last time I came in, the room owner encountered the woman on the second floor and scared her away. They then encountered her again on the third floor and saw such a scene? As I chose to hide and didn’t scare off the woman, what happened next is no longer in the room owner’s experience. Their subconscious had no choice but to change the floor and fill it in with the scene they saw?”

“Most likely.” The timid Shang Jianyao agreed before his peer that liked to retort could.

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao looked around and realized that there was an employee introduction board on the wall near the door with photos pasted on it. He raised the flashlight and examined them one by one until he found the photo of the woman from before.

She was young and beautiful in the photo.

“Liu Lu, sales manager, Iron Mountain City resident...” Shang Jianyao quickly read the introduction and didn’t find anything worth paying attention to.

His gaze moved again.

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao suddenly exclaimed.

A photo was missing from a corner of the employee introduction board.

Chapter 573: “Returning” to the Beginning

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao directed his blinking red eyes to a corner of the employee introduction board and carefully observed it.

He quickly realized that there were traces of adhesion here—scattered in five places.

When these five places were combined, they were about the size of the other photos. In other words, there was once a photo in the corner of the employee introduction board. However, it was unknown if it had been torn off or if the glue had gradually failed after so many years, causing it to fall and be carried away by the wind.

Shang Jianyao stood up, held the flashlight, and shone it on the floor. He searched seriously, but he didn't find the missing photo.

Based on the traces left behind, he preliminarily determined that the photo in the blank spot had been torn off.

“Why was it taken away? Is it related to the hidden gaze?” Shang Jianyao looked around and felt that this wasn't caused by the Heartless.

Ignoring the fact that the Heartless were interested in things other than food, clothes, and weapons, it was unlikely that they didn't leave behind any clues given their lack of intelligence.

“No, we can't rule out that possibility.” Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and retorted himself. “Do you still remember the situation after Swamp Ruin 1 lit up? That old lady was clearly a Heartless, but she had memories of home, would flip through her photo album, tidy up her room, and clear out the trash. This is one of the Buddhist faith's five Great Holy Lands. It's very normal for there to be a similar uniqueness.”

There was no effective conclusion coming from an empty confrontation. The Shang Jianyaos didn't waste too much time on this matter, and they shone the flashlight beam at the Heartless—who had their limbs restricted and had difficulty moving.

He scanned their faces one by one and compared them to the employee photos on the wall. However, none of them matched.

This meant that the existence of the professional woman wasn't a common phenomenon but a special situation. This made the problem with her and the missing photo even more confusing.

The cyborg monk Shang Jianyao considered for a moment and decided to be benevolent. He gave up on killing the Heartless and walked back to the aisle with his flashlight and silencer-equipped Ice Moss.

He was just about to observe his surroundings and decide where to go next when his body suddenly turned cold and stiff. It was as if a cold wind from the depths of Icefield blew over, freezing him in place.

It wasn't only his body that was frozen—his thoughts were also frozen!

Shang Jianyao stared blankly ahead and allowed his body to spin half a circle before facing the wall. He then abruptly exerted strength and slammed his forehead into the wall.

Thud!

Shang Jianyao lost consciousness and fainted.

After an unknown period of time, he slowly woke up and realized that he had returned to the entrance of the psychological trauma—the place where he had smashed a Heartless to death with a billboard.

“A bug?” Shang Jianyao expressed his confusion.

He believed that he had been attacked and was almost defenseless. The consequences of such a situation couldn't be anything but two: One, his 'death' here was equivalent to having his mind trapped in this psychological trauma. In reality, he would become a vegetable or die on the spot.

Two, his injuries weren't fatal. He barely recovered and relied on the items on him and his Awakened abilities to escape Room 522. However, he would be left with serious mental problems.

Of course, this was considered normal development. Considering that he had ten of himself, Shang Jianyao believed that there was another outcome: One of the Shang Jianyaos died on the spot, creating an opportunity for the remaining nine Shang Jianyaos. They sacrificed a few after that, and the rest finally escaped Room 522 and returned to the corridor. This would cast an indelible psychological trauma on him in reality, producing almost incurable repercussions.

None of the situations happened. After the Shang Jianyaos fainted, they returned to Room 522's entrance safely. Apart from having a slight headache and a swollen forehead, there was nothing special.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. “This matter is filled with bizarreness. Let's end it here today. We'll discuss it with Big White tomorrow.”

The calm and rational him felt that his previous encounter seemed more like... a warning?



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495th floor, Zone C, Room 11.

In the dead of night, the wide-eyed Long Yuehong had difficulty sleeping.

After being in bed for quite some time, he felt a little thirsty. He got off the bed, picked up his porcelain cup, lifted the lid, and gulped it down.

Coldness spread from his throat, turning into streams that drilled into his stomach.

This made him even more awake.

Pangu Biology's nights were especially cold. It was inevitable that the water would cool down if it was left there for too long. Therefore, thermos mugs were an integral part of many families. Of course, it was also a choice to drink as and when from a thermos bottle when one couldn't afford or obtain a thermos mug. However, Long Yuehong still developed the habit of drinking cold water—even at night—due to his youth and vigor.

Upon seeing that there was no more water in the mug, Long Yuehong walked out of the room with the porcelain mug and headed for the green plastic thermos bottle on the dining table. At this moment, he saw his father—Long Dayong—come out of their small bathroom.

“Still awake?” Long Dayong yawned.

Long Yuehong tersely acknowledged it and hesitated for a moment. “I’m thinking about something.”

“What is it?” Long Dayong asked.

Long Yuehong opened his mouth and hesitantly replied, “Dad, if you encounter something that’s very valuable but is also accompanied by certain risks, will you choose to do it or give up and lead a stable life?”

Long Dayong instinctively replied, “I’ll listen to your mother.”

“...” Long Yuehong didn’t know whether to be envious or speechless.

Upon seeing his son remain silent, Long Dayong thought for a moment and said, “Our current life can also be considered stable. But I remember your grandfather telling me that when he was young, he didn’t feel safe even when hiding in this underground building because Heartless might appear around him at any moment. Only half of his friends—who were about his age—survived.

“Also, after you joined the Security Department, your mother specially went to get to know the female family members of those at the front line. She learned a lot from them. Right, the number of deaths on the front line is much higher than the number of people in the company who contract the Heartless disease.

“She never mentioned this to you because she’s afraid that it would worry you and that you would worry about us having negative emotions. All we can do is let you relax and be happy every time you return.” At this point, Long Dayong said with emotion, “We really have to thank you and the other employees on the front line for our stable lives.”

Long Yuehong felt mixed emotions when he heard that, but he couldn’t help but criticize inwardly. Dad, you keep going round and about. One moment it’s good, and it’s bad the next. I can’t tell what your suggestion is...

Long Dayong glanced at him. “In any case, we will support your decision. Yes... If the risk of that matter is especially high, it’s better to give up. If you think you can still handle it, give it a try. Don’t leave yourself any regrets.”

Long Yuehong fell silent for a moment before saying, “I’ll consider it.”

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The next morning, Room 14 on the 647th floor.

Shang Jianyao told Jiang Baimian—who had arrived at the office early—about what happened last night.

“What do you have in mind?” Jiang Baimian didn’t help with the analysis immediately. Instead, she asked Shang Jianyao about his thoughts.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and said, “It felt like it was a death in a cutscene. I had no way of resisting.”

Have you played too many games? Long Yuehong scoffed at Shang Jianyao’s words. Of course, he didn’t dare to say it out loud.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and thought for a moment before saying, “Could the room owner have encountered such a thing back then? Otherwise, your experience wouldn’t be so clear. Besides, if he didn’t encounter anything in the food company, the psychological trauma brought about by the large number of Heartless should’ve ended long after he entered the ‘safe zone.’”

Long Yuehong joined the discussion and made a guess based on Jiang Baimian’s words. “The room owner scared away the woman on the third floor. After seeing those photos, his thoughts suddenly froze. He couldn’t control his body and knocked his head against the wall, knocking himself out?”

Shang Jianyao followed this train of thought. “What happened after the room owner fainted? Was he also ‘sent’ back to the starting point?”

Jiang Baimian slowly shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s puzzlement, Jiang Baimian further explained, “Shang Jianyao has explored the psychological trauma for several days and only found one complete route. In other words, the room owner will still choose the same path to the Second Food Company if he were sent back to the starting point. Logically, this is very contradictory. If it were you, would you still have gone to the Second Food Company to wade into trouble after encountering such a strange and terrifying matter? The room owner wasn’t an Awakened back then!”

“Indeed.” Long Yuehong agreed.

Shang Jianyao didn’t answer. It was unknown which him it was.

Jiang Baimian continued, “I speculate that the room owner was ‘sent’ to another place in Iron Mountain City’s ruins after he fainted. When he woke up, he discovered a safe route. Therefore, he

left the area. This encounter left a psychological trauma in him. As these subsequent situations aren't in the psychological trauma, Shang Jianyao returned to the starting point."

Long Yuehong nodded and felt that this possibility wasn't low. He then frowned as he glanced at Shang Jianyao. "Doesn't this mean that the psychological trauma can't be cleared?"

The room owner was helpless back then.

Shang Jianyao didn't respond and seemed to be in deep thought.

Jiang Baimian laughed. "No, no, no. It's still possible. Have you forgotten that the room owner wasn't an Awakened back then? He definitely had to face this matter if he wanted to cross the islands of fear. He's now a Mind Corridor-level Awakened, so this means that he has successfully defeated this psychological trauma."

As Long Yuehong's thoughts raced, Jiang Baimian pointed out the key point. "Then, how did he defeat it? For such a matter, there's no way to defeat it without returning to the scene and facing the fear from back then. Therefore, he should've entered Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company again. Hey, if you can find the areas which the room owner didn't encounter during their first exploration, it's very likely to squeeze into their subconscious and get it to review their second experience to perfect the scene. There's most likely an opportunity hidden inside."

How complicated... However, it does make sense... Long Yuehong was convinced.

"We'll give it a try next time." Shang Jianyao had an eager expression.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "This is only one possibility. Another possibility is that the psychological trauma is dynamic—some things are connected to something even more terrifying. When an explorer makes contact with it, it will attract additional trouble. This was something the room owner didn't encounter back then. No, it's not that he didn't encounter it, but there's a high chance that he didn't sense it. However, this doesn't explain how he later became a Mind Corridor-level Awakened."

#### Chapter 574: Full Members

Long Yuehong found Jiang Baimian's new suggestion a little unacceptable. "Doesn't this mean that the room owner's mind world has become a sieve? That thing that is even more terrifying can interfere however it wants? He's already a Mind Corridor-level Awakened..."

According to this, isn't the room owner equivalent to that terrifying thing's puppet?

"It's only a possibility, but it's actually not a highly probable one," Jiang Baimian replied.

"Actually, based on the fake Father's condition, it's impossible for the room owner to accommodate himself and enter the Mind Corridor without him noticing if he was secretly affected before he became an Awakened or before entering the Mind Corridor. However, our knowledge on this matter isn't sufficient, so we can't make a 100% judgment. Maybe there are special situations?"

"That's right." Shang Jianyao chose to agree. "Just like how Awakened won't encounter each other in the Mind Corridor under normal circumstances, there are always exceptions."

The Mind Corridor in his words referred to the corridor with a dark-yellow carpet, excluding the rooms on both sides.

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. "If you don't want to give up on this room and don't plan on finding other places to practice, stick to your previous plan. Uh, try your best to avoid that strange woman to prevent yourself from suddenly stiffening and crashing into the wall. Then, seize the opportunity to go to the fourth, fifth, sixth, or seventh floor to take a look.

"There's a high chance that these are areas that the room owner didn't enter when he first explored the Food Company. Once you enter, his subconscious will definitely have to obtain the relevant details from his memories to perfect the scene. The corresponding memories will most likely come from his second or third exploration. Those experiences helped him overcome his psychological trauma."

Jiang Baimian said this because the room owner had clearly fainted on the third floor during his first exploration.

"Alright." Shang Jianyao raised his head and massaged his temples.

"You want to give it a try now?" Long Yuehong was shocked.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him strangely. "I just have a headache."

This was the aftereffect of last night's encounter. Fortunately, it was relatively mild; he would be fine in a few days.

Upon hearing their conversation, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Since you have a headache, take the next few days to rest. Try again after I successfully apply for the bionic artificial intelligence armor for adaptive training."

Such training definitely required them to go to the surface.

"Why?" Long Yuehong wanted to ask, "Aren't we waiting for Little White?" However, he changed his question just before he voiced it.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao and said, "This psychological trauma has already shown obvious strangeness. Hey, you might trigger something if you continue exploring. When the time comes, the company definitely won't be able to immediately react even though it has many powerhouses. The population density in your residential area is very high. Hey—who's a Mind Corridor-level Awakened—may not suffer any serious repercussions once something 'strange' leaks, but it's difficult to say the same for his neighbors. This is the same as dismantling bombs in residential areas. Since there are other ways to avoid it, why choose to be rash?"

Long Yuehong accepted this explanation without hesitation because his parents, brother, and sister were Shang Jianyao's neighbors.

"Then, send in the application quickly." Shang Jianyao rushed Jiang Baimian.

The rash him was always anxious.

Jiang Baimian didn't do it immediately, and her eyes flickered slightly. "Recall your sudden stiffness, your frozen thoughts, and your experience of crashing into a wall. Do you find it familiar?"

"Destiny Connection." Shang Jianyao had a look of 'isn't this obvious' and 'wasn't that what DiMarco did back then?'

Jiang Baimian raised her hand and pressed the corners of her mouth. "Indeed. However, it doesn't seem too strange to encounter Destiny Connection in one of Buddhism's five Great Holy Lands..."

She muttered a few words and began busying herself.

After Jiang Baimian submitted the application through the intranet, Long Yuehong hesitated and said, “Shall we visit Little White today and train when we return?”

He remembered that today was the day Bai Chen would be rolled out of the ICU and transferred to an ordinary room.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before she smiled. “Alright.”

She then looked at Shang Jianyao. “Look, look. Little Red is much more attentive than you. He still remembers that Little White will officially be out of observation today.”

“I remember it too!” Shang Jianyao didn’t wish to be one-upped.

“Then, why didn’t you take the initiative to mention it?” Jiang Baimian chuckled.

“This will embarrass you and make you look like you’ve forgotten.” The weak and timid Shang Jianyao always focused on analyzing the human heart.

Uh... Long Yuehong couldn’t help but reflect on himself.

Jiang Baimian spat. “Am I such a person? I’ve always been broadminded. Let’s go—let’s not waste any more time. Otherwise, Little White’s transfer will already be done.”

As Jiang Baimian spoke, she stood up, left her seat, and led the way to the door.

Just as she stepped out of the room, Jiang Baimian suddenly paused and looked around.

“What’s wrong?” Long Yuehong turned inexplicably nervous.

Jiang Baimian laughed to conceal her feelings. “I suddenly thought of something. I’ll deal with it when I return.”

She then chose the right direction.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and smiled.

...

In the research institute on the 12th floor of the underground building.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong lined up at the visitation window and greeted Bai Chen inside.

After they completed this matter, the researcher in charge said, “The various reactions in the patient’s body have stabilized. What’s next will be some form of self-recovery. In theory, there won’t be any danger of a genetic breakdown. But as you know, there can be exceptions for everything...”

“There are no exceptions to the rule that humans will eventually die,” the honest Shang Jianyao immediately retorted.

He then raised a problem with his claim. “Eternals are an exception!”

“How many years has it been? Who knows if the Eternals will experience a consciousness decline in the future...” The Shang Jianyaos began arguing.

The researcher’s forehead twitched. He pretended that this fellow didn’t exist and said to Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong, “In short, the patient still has to be kept here for a period of time and receive many auxiliary treatments. She can leave after she fully recovers—I told you about this after the surgery.”

“Back then, you mentioned it would take about a month?” Long Yuehong took the initiative to ask.

The researcher nodded. “Normally, that’s the case. However, one of your companion’s modifications include Enhanced Self Recovery. It’s obvious it has been in effect over the past few



days. Coupled with the various recovery methods we provide, she should be able to completely return to normal in two weeks or less.”

“How can that be considered normal?” Shang Jianyao quickly asked.

Everyone fell silent. This question was really difficult to answer.

After settling the procedures, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong waited at the ICU door and watched the research institute’s specialized personnel push Bai Chen out.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao applauded. Not only did he clap, but he also shouted, “Welcome back!”

Bai Chen closed her eyes and had the urge to pretend to disavow this fellow.

Long Yuehong volunteered to help push the bed.

After arriving at the ordinary ward, Jiang Baimian smiled. “Little White, do you want to try getting off the bed and taking a few steps?”

This was already permissible.

“Alright.” Bai Chen was already sick of lying down.

Jiang Baimian immediately stretched out her hand and helped her companion up.

Upon seeing Bai Chen’s unsteady footsteps shift bit by bit, Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief and smiled sincerely.

After a while, Jiang Baimian informed Bai Chen just before visiting hours were almost over that the team would head outfield for training one day.

Jiang Baimian joked, “Don’t worry. We plan to go out in the afternoon, spend the night on the surface, and return the next morning. We won’t leave you alone.”

Bai Chen tersely acknowledged her words. “Alright.”

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian raised her eyebrows slightly and didn’t say anything.

On the way back to the 647th floor, she sighed with emotion. “Although Little White looks strong and often puts on a front of nonchalance, there are still parts of her that are weak and fragile in her. I was clearly joking, but she took it seriously. This means that she really doesn’t want to be alone anymore and has now unconsciously started to rely on her companions...”

Long Yuehong turned agape and fell silent.

After returning to the Old Task Force’s office, he finally mustered his courage. “Team Leader, I want to stay with the team a little longer.”

“Have you decided?” Shang Jianyao asked seriously instead of Jiang Baimian.

Long Yuehong exhaled. “Yes, I’ve decided. I’ll stay a little longer while my abilities can still keep up.”

Jiang Baimian slowly nodded. “No matter what the reason is, I believe you’ve thought it through. In that case, let’s...”

She then smiled. “Welcome back to the team!”

Long Yuehong’s eyes reddened as he replied loudly, “Yes, Team Leader!”

After calming down a little, he quickly asked, “Should I apply for a biological prosthetic limb transplant, genetic modification, and Awakening experiment as well?”

With that said, he recalled that he didn’t have that many contribution points. He had helped his parents change to a bigger room and had lived extravagantly for some time.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “There’s no need for a biological prosthetic limb. Your mechanical arm isn’t bad at all. You can give the genetic modification and Awakening experiment a try, but not now. Your physical condition is far from optimal. When the time comes, I can lend you contribution points if you don’t have enough. After all, I usually freeload off my parents.”

“Yes, yes.” Long Yuehong nodded repeatedly.

...

Two afternoons later, the remaining Old Task Force members—who had obtained approval—left Pangu Biology with two military exoskeletons and the acquired Chameleon bionic artificial intelligence armor and arrived on the Ashlands’ surface.

#### Chapter 575: Old Friend

The grayish-green jeep slowly drove along the green, withered mountain road, headed for the distant wilderness.

Who is Team Leader waiting for? Why is she driving so slowly... Just as this thought flashed through Long Yuehong’s mind, he saw the jeep stop by the roadside.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and asked, “Which of you will sit in the passenger seat?”

When they set off, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong actually gave up on the passenger seat and chose the backseat. It looked like they were leaving Bai Chen a seat.

Uh... Amid Long Yuehong’s confusion, Shang Jianyao pushed open the door, alighted, and moved to the passenger seat.

Jiang Baimian looked ahead and ordered, “Guide the way and do manual navigation.”

She then added casually, “The price I paid obfuscates my ability to recognize directions.”

“Directionally challenged...” Shang Jianyao came to a realization.

Long Yuehong was stunned for a moment before coming to a realization as well. So Team Leader chose the Shattered Mirror domain, and the price is being directionally challenged... No wonder she drove so slowly after getting into the car. It's because she's afraid of getting lost!

Directionally challenged... Jiang Baimian asked in a joking tone, "Why? Do you find it funny?"

Long Yuehong subconsciously replied, "No, especially when it's a solemn matter like a price."

To enhance his persuasiveness, he added, "No matter how strange it is, can it compare to Shang Jianyao's price?"

Jiang Baimian nodded inwardly and glanced at Shang Jianyao. "I thought you would laugh."

Shang Jianyao replied solemnly, "I've long laughed."

As he spoke, he smiled.

Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth. "Quick, guide the way!"

"First, I have to know where we're going." It was the calm and rational Shang Jianyao.

Jiang Baimian had long decided on a destination. "Choose anywhere that is less than two kilometers from Pangu Biology's entrance."

"Why limit it to two kilometers?" Long Yuehong was the first to express his confusion.

Jiang Baimian looked at the rearview mirror. "Didn't we come to the surface to prevent Shang Jianyao from triggering an accident while exploring the psychological trauma, not wanting the 'anomaly' to leak out and affect his neighbors? We don't have to worry about them now, but we have to consider ourselves. At a distance two to four kilometers away from the company, we should still be within the range of the powerhouses who have entered the New World or the Awakened who have explored the Mind Corridor's depths. They can quickly provide help if anything happens."

"That's right..." Long Yuehong felt that his team leader had really considered everything.

The fact that he chose to stay in the Old Task Force didn't mean that he was no longer afraid of death or any accidents.

“You have to believe in Buddha's mercy.” The person who replied this time was the cyborg monk, Zen Master Redemption. Of course, he couldn't obtain a metal body with glowing red eyes in the real world.

He was followed by the frank Shang Jianyao. “Do we still need to give directions now? Isn't there only one path? Let's talk about it after we enter the Blackmarsh Wilderness.”

The one path actually meant that there was only one relatively wide path. However, there were still many natural 'paths.'

I'm just afraid of driving up the mountain, alright? Jiang Baimian—who had the intention of replying to Shang Jianyao—felt inexplicably worried.

After driving along a dirt road for a while, Jiang Baimian relied on her outstanding vision to discover military troops approaching from a distance.

There were dozens to a hundred of them. They wore grayish-black uniforms of Pangu Biology's Security Department and drove many vehicles with cannons.

Among them, the most eye-catching ones were the thick-plated armored vehicles.

“Colleagues...” Shang Jianyao was a little happy.

Jiang Baimian turned her head and asked, “What are you happy about?”

She had already confirmed that she was about to encounter a Pangu Biology company.

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “It's fate for us to meet. Why don't we invite them to tonight's bonfire party?”

“When did we decide on a bonfire party?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “After I saw them.”

I’m really stupid. Why did I bother with him... His price is getting worse! As Long Yuehong criticized inwardly, the two teams approached each other.

When they were only 100 meters away, Jiang Baimian realized that she had encountered an acquaintance—this was Wang Beicheng’s 23rd Company!

In Swamp Ruin 1, Pangu Biology had sent this company as reinforcements.

“It’s you guys?” Wang Beicheng—who was sitting in the passenger seat of an armored jeep—stuck his head out. He remained as handsome as last year, but he seemed to have gotten a little tanned.

“Long time no see!” Shang Jianyao stretched his right hand out the window and waved it a few times.

After leaving the car and standing by the roadside, Jiang Baimian smiled and asked Wang Beicheng, “Captain Wang, are you returning from Swamp Ruin 1?”

Wang Beicheng—who was nearly ten years older than Jiang Baimian—replied calmly, “That’s right. We’ve been taking turns guarding Swamp Ruin 1 with two other companies in the past year. We explore as far as we can.”

At this point, he smiled and saluted. “I have to thank you on behalf of my entire company. Without your help, we wouldn’t have had the chance to participate in Swamp Ruin 1’s excavation. A city ruin that hasn’t been explored is really a gold mine!”

Over the past year, the 23rd Company had brought a large number of ‘war spoils’ with them every time they returned to Pangu Biology to rest and recuperate. Although these wouldn’t become their direct belongings, Pangu Biology was still relatively generous. They would convert them into contribution points based on some ratio. The entire 23rd Company’s employees made a killing.

This didn’t include the gains from obtaining the company’s authorization to transact with the Hunters from the factions that had entered Swamp Ruin 1 to explore.

Jiang Baimian shook her head and smiled. “You would’ve gone there even without us. Weren’t you guys rushing north of Yuelu Station after learning of the anomaly?”

“But we would’ve lacked a lot of important information. We wouldn’t be able to avoid the hidden dangers.” Wang Beicheng’s attitude was rather sincere. “Besides, didn’t you provide us with an armored vehicle and a heavy machine gun?”

“The company has already converted them into contribution points and distributed them to us.” Jiang Baimian skipped the topic and asked curiously, “Did you discover anything in Swamp Ruin 1?”

Wang Beicheng touched the grayish-black beret on his head. “That laboratory was destroyed, and we’ve only found a few things. At present, we’ve explored one-fifth of the ruins. There’s plenty of valuable research information that involves all kinds of technology, but there shouldn’t be anything you’re interested in...”

Jiang Baimian nodded. “Have you encountered any Superior Heartless?”

“We did, twice in the beginning. As we obtained information from you in advance, we handled it pretty well. There were no casualties, and we didn’t encounter any more after that. They may have retreated to an area in the ruins that have yet to be explored.” Wang Beicheng didn’t hide the truth.

No, they are likely out working... Long Yuehong replied inwardly.

Wang Beicheng didn’t continue the topic because many things needed to be kept confidential. He had yet to confirm Jiang Baimian and the others’ clearance.

He looked at Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong and smiled. “I heard that you’ve already been promoted to D5? You’ve done quite a number of feats in the past year.”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s surprise, Wang Beicheng smiled and added, “A relative of mine has a colleague on your floor. He heard about you guys. Isn’t that the case in the company? Everyone is related.”

“That’s right.” Long Yuehong nodded slightly.

At this moment, the honest Shang Jianyao corrected Wang Beicheng. “D7—we’re already D7s.”

“Huh?” Wang Beicheng didn’t hide his surprise and cast his gaze at Jiang Baimian. He didn’t know where Jiang Baimian’s team had gone or what they had done after their last meeting.

This wasn’t something he could understand with his current clearance.

Shang Jianyao immediately added for Jiang Baimian, “She’s a D9.”

“Really?” Wang Beicheng couldn’t help but want to confirm it.

“I was lucky,” Jiang Baimian replied humbly.

Wang Beicheng looked around and slowly sighed. “It’s only been a year, but you guys have already been promoted so many times... You guys have really done many great feats.”

As a D8 OC of a company, he knew better than anyone how difficult it was to go from D8 to D9. He had been at this rank for more than five years. Furthermore, Jiang Baimian was only a D6 when he encountered her last year.

“This was exchanged with our lives.” Shang Jianyao solemnly pointed at Long Yuehong’s mechanical arm.

Wang Beicheng expressed his understanding. “I remember that you have another companion. She...”

“She underwent genetic modification and is recuperating.” Long Yuehong was worried that Wang Beicheng would say something inauspicious, so he quickly gave the correct answer.

Wang Beicheng—who had wanted to chat more with Jiang Baimian’s team—suddenly felt dispirited. He barely maintained his manners and said, “We have to return to the company to rest. Have a safe journey.”

“See you tomorrow!” Shang Jianyao was very polite.



Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "See you tomorrow."

...

After bidding Wang Beicheng and his 23rd Company farewell, the Old Task Force entered the wilderness and found a place with water and rocks to set up camp.

Although it was still early, Shang Jianyao eagerly held the Six Senses Beads, the Life Angel necklace, and the original medical record and entered the Mind Corridor.

In Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company, Shang Jianyao hid in the darkness at the second-floor stairwell. He waited until he heard footsteps coming from the end of the corridor before quietly sneaking to the third floor.

Chapter 576: Once Again

According to the plan, Shang Jianyao didn't stay on the third floor for long. He went straight to the fourth floor that the room owner's first exploration didn't cover.

When he walked down the stairs that seemed to be copied and pasted and reached his destination, he realized that the light shining in from the windows facing outside on both sides of the room had dimmed significantly.

This seemed very logical because dusk was approaching when the psychological trauma began. Darkness had already enveloped the land, so it was logical for the night to thicken.

However, Shang Jianyao realized that not only was the moon not high in the night sky outside, but there were no stars either. It was pitch-black.

Logically speaking, such an environment should be pitch-black. It was close to Pangu Biology after lights-out at night. But in fact, a little light still shone into the food company from somewhere, vaguely illuminating the different objects' silhouettes in the darkness.

"It seems like some details went wrong when the room owner's subconscious tried to complete this scene..." Shang Jianyao took out a pipe from somewhere, brought it to his mouth, and sniffed it.

The pipe vanished as he slowly walked along the corridor with the flashlight.

The discovery indicated that he was in the room owner's memories of his second exploration of the food company.

After walking a distance, Shang Jianyao suddenly felt something and shone the flashlight beam at a room beside him.

There was a figure in the room, wearing a white female shirt and a blue suit. It was the professional woman who was supposed to be on the second floor.

Under the light, Shang Jianyao realized that she seemed to be a little older than before. Although her black hair remained the same at first glance and she still looked to be in her twenties, the muscles on her cheeks had drooped to a certain extent, and the wrinkles on her face had deepened.

Just as Shang Jianyao tried to 'persuade' the other party to stay and prevent her from escaping in a panic, the professional woman's bloodshot eyes darted around as she cast her gaze at Shang Jianyao.

Unlike the previous two encounters, the horror, fear, panic, and confusion she showed were different. At this moment, she was calm, silent, and wooden.

"That's more like it!" Shang Jianyao slapped the side of the flashlight with his left palm, producing a clang.

This was in line with his imagination of a final boss.

The next second, the professional woman opened her mouth and spoke in a drake-like voice. "Leave this place."

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao's vision turned pitch-black. He couldn't see anything, hear anything, sense anything, or even think.

He completely fainted, not even having a dream.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao slowly woke up. He saw the car that had its front door open and the billboard on the ground not far away.

He had returned to the starting point.

“The room owner failed his second exploration as well...” Shang Jianyao muttered to himself.

His previous experience should be the same as when the room owner explored Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company again. Otherwise, the experience wouldn’t be so clear and completely different from the first time.

If it were only subconscious self-completion and not because the room owner had the corresponding experience, Shang Jianyao believed that he would definitely repeat his previous encounter. His body would stiffen, his thoughts would freeze, and he would collide into the wall because this was the most natural, easiest, and energy-conserving ‘completion.’

Shang Jianyao took in his physical condition and realized there were no problems. In no rush to leave Room 522 and return to reality, he sneaked toward Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company again.

Not only did he skip the first three floors in one go, but he also didn’t stay on the fourth floor for long. He went straight to the fifth floor.

He wanted to see if the room owner had explored this place a third time.

The layout of the fifth floor wasn’t much different from the second, third, and fourth floors. However, the glow that seeped in from the window seemed to be a little brighter as if it were the last bout of brilliance.

With the help of such an environment, Shang Jianyao switched off the flashlight and relied solely on the natural light to observe the rooms on both sides of the corridor.

They had signs hanging from them—each belonging to different companies. Shang Jianyao—who was familiar with the Old World’s entertainment—wasn’t surprised by this and easily understood the situation.

Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company clearly didn't occupy the entire building that belonged to them. Therefore, they rented out the fifth floor and above to others.

Skyglow Technology, White Sea Oil's Iron Mountain City Branch... In order to identify the companies' names, Shang Jianyao switched on the flashlight.

As the yellowish beam of light flickered, he saw a skeleton in a room in front of him from the corner of his eye.

The bones shone brightly without any rotten flesh hanging from it, making it appear very strange. At the same time, it wore a white shirt and a small blue suit.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao spun the Six Senses Beads and chanted a Buddhist proclamation. "Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti. Even a beauty eventually becomes a skeleton. All things are illusory; only the consciousness is real."

With that said, Zen Master Redemption bowed seriously and slowly approached.

After careful observation, he found an employee pass wrapped in a plastic case hanging from her white shirt under her suit.

There was a photo, name, and position on it: "Liu Lu

"Sales manager

"Work ID: 100482."

Shang Jianyao squatted down and tried to search the pockets of the blue suit. The red light in his eyes dyed the bones red.

Suddenly, a black figure flashed in front of him. It was a thick, slippery tentacle with evil-looking patterns.

This tentacle extended out from the pile of bones!

Almost at the same time, Shang Jianyao felt the lurking gaze intensify from all directions.

He instinctively looked around and saw black holes on the wall. There seemed to be all kinds of eyeballs staring at him from the holes.

Shang Jianyao exerted strength with his knees and jumped up, running toward the window near the room without looking back.

During this process, he saw the changes in the skeleton from the corner of his eye.

It had pulled out human skin from somewhere and wore it. It then returned to its previous professional female form. The only difference was that her current clothes seemed to be drawn on her skin.

Black tentacles constantly drilled out from below and extended toward Shang Jianyao.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao ran with heavy clanking sounds like he was metal. He leaped, slammed through the window, and jumped down from the fifth floor.

As a cyborg monk, he accurately landed on a narrow windowsill on the fourth floor. He then jumped down one floor after another and quickly landed in the alley behind the food company.

Before he could stand firmly, he looked up and had the feeling that the entire building had come to life. It swayed and creaked as windows opened as if mouths were opening.

Amidst the chomping sounds, Shang Jianyao couldn't find any human consciousness at all. He also didn't have a target to use the items or Awakened abilities on. He could only open his stride and continue sprinting.

He circled around and returned to the starting point by taking his original route.

Huff, huff, huff...

After all this, even the cyborg monk Shang Jianyao panted heavily.

The calm and rational him quickly made a decision. “Retreat first. Come again after we have rested up.”

...

The grayish-green jeep was parked beside a burning bonfire, and the window reflected the flickering flames.

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong—who were highly vigilant—saw Shang Jianyao push open the door and get out of the car.

“How was it?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief. Seems like nothing terrible happened...

Shang Jianyao walked to the bonfire, came to his companion’s side, and described his experience.

“It seems like the room owner has explored the Food Company more than three times...” Jiang Baimian said with emotion after hearing that.

He fainted the second time and returned to the starting point when he woke up. The third time, he ran away from the anomaly in fear.

Long Yuehong frowned and felt that something was amiss. After a few seconds, he raised an idea with uncertainty. “The anomaly in the food company doesn’t seem to have any ill intentions toward the room owner?”

Otherwise, the room owner wouldn’t have had the chance to explore a second, third, or even fourth time. He would’ve long died.

The idea was very simple. His body was stiff, and his thoughts were frozen. When he slammed his head against the wall, he probably wouldn’t wake up if he had exerted a little more strength. Or

perhaps, the hidden force wouldn't have thrown him back to the original spot after he fainted but might instead throw him into an area where the Heartless gathered. That would be his end.

"It seems so." Jiang Baimian nodded. "The room owner probably discovered this later. Otherwise, he wouldn't have dared to explore it again and again."

Shang Jianyao smiled. "That's why I dared to return to the Food Company as soon as I woke up."

Jiang Baimian continued analyzing. "From the details you observed, there was a considerable gap between the room owner's first, second, and third explorations. The strange woman named Liu Lu aged with time before she died and became bones. What will happen next?"

"She... revived?" Shang Jianyao's train of thought was always abnormal.

"That's terrifying." Jiang Baimian had never evaluated this 'possibility' before and said, "You fainted during your first exploration today. Doesn't this resemble Consciousness Deprivation? You encountered a ghost-like scene during your second exploration. Doesn't this resemble an application of the Six Realms of Rebirth and Existence?"

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

Long Yuehong sighed with emotion. "As expected of one of the Buddhist Holy Lands..."

Shang Jianyao then pointed at the jeep. "I'll go get some sleep. I'll try again later."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "Try going to the sixth and seventh floors."

...

When it was almost midnight, Shang Jianyao woke up and entered the Mind Corridor again.

## Chapter 577: Strange

As a staunch believer of Save-Load RNJesus, Shang Jianyao—who had prior experience—easily caught up to his previous progress and successfully sneaked to the fifth floor of Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company.

He didn’t delay and followed Jiang Baimian’s suggestion to head straight to the sixth floor.

Just as Shang Jianyao finished climbing the stairs, his eyes lit up.

The full moon outside the window seemed to be hanging not far away, illuminating the floor as if it were daytime.

In a daze, Zen Master Redemption thought that the sun had risen from the east and almost sang the Great Sorrow Incantation.

As the one with the best intelligence among Shang Jianyao’s group, he easily came to a conclusion: “The room owner’s fourth exploration was during the day. The subconscious that maintains this psychological trauma knows that it’s impossible to jump from the end of dusk to noon when the sun is high in the sky. Therefore, he replaced it with a moon that exceeds the norm a little...”

As he muttered to himself, Shang Jianyao walked to the other end along the corridor. Along the way, he constantly looked around and observed his surroundings, searching for clues that could help him clear this psychological trauma.

After walking for a while, Shang Jianyao suddenly realized that it was getting brighter.

The windows were already covered in a golden muslin with blinding light filtering through. The full moon outside was orange-red as if it were on fire.

Accompanying this change, the originally oppressive atmosphere gradually dissipated. It gave one a refreshing feeling.

The Shang Jianyaos believed from a sensory perspective that this was a good change.



But the ground under his feet began to tremble, and large patches of paint on the walls around him peeled off.

After the paint peeled off, the walls didn't reveal concrete or bricks. They were pitch-black as if they were incorporeal.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao's eyes darted around slightly as he quickly repeated his previous actions. With the help of the narrow windowsill, he jumped from the sixth floor to the back alley, circled around, and ran toward the starting point.

Amidst the creaking and grinding sounds of metal, Zen Master Redemption felt the ground shake and the sky burn. The buildings around him collapsed one after another, and the hidden Heartless degenerated into illusions.

Before this world completely collapsed, Shang Jianyao returned to the starting point and left Room 522.

"Huff, huff—what a scare. I was this close to clearing the level..." In the corridor, Shang Jianyao panted heavily with an expression that said: "I haven't had enough fun."

He then temporarily left.

...

In the real world, Shang Jianyao straightened his back, pushed open the door, and alighted.

"That fast?" Long Yuehong was surprised.

Hey had just fallen asleep for 15 minutes. According to his previous description, that was only enough time to cover the periphery journey and reach Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company again.

Jiang Baimian directly asked, "What happened?"

The Shang Jianyaos quickly recounted their encounter on the sixth floor of the food company and the subsequent changes. Finally, they said proudly, “Fortunately, I ran fast!”

Jiang Baimian quietly listened and frowned. “Why do I feel that it’s a good thing? The overall change seems to be dispelling the shadows…”

“Maybe I cleared the level,” Shang Jianyao replied using game terminology.

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong had played games before, so they easily understood what he meant.

The former made a guess thoughtfully. “The room owner’s fourth exploration of the food company finally brought him to the sixth and seventh floors. Along the way, he didn’t encounter the woman again, including her remains. The strange atmosphere that enveloped the area had also vanished by then?”

“Coupled with the judgment that the anomaly in the food company doesn’t have any ill intentions toward him and the past situations, he finally resolved the corresponding psychological trauma and cleared that island of fear?”

Long Yuehong followed this train of thought and continued, “The act of an outsider clearing a psychological trauma is the complete breakdown of that scene?”

“Probably.” Shang Jianyao didn’t retort.

“Then, why did you run?” Long Yuehong expressed his confusion.

Shang Jianyao had clearly reached the door to success, but he actually chose to turn around and escape! Then, why did he painstakingly search for clues and methods to clear this psychological trauma?

It was unknown which Shang Jianyao sighed. “You don’t understand. How can we advance the primary plot without clearing the side quests first? Wouldn’t it be a waste of the food company map if we clear it now? There are still many things worth pondering about inside.”

As he spoke, he raised his finger and gave examples one by one. “Who does the missing photo and the relevant employee introduction point to? Why was it torn away?”

“Why does that woman’s voice sound like a drake? If I closed my eyes, I would think of her as a male.”

“Why did she panic and escape in fear when she saw the room owner in the beginning? Why was she silent and calm when the room owner came back after a few years? Why did she send the other party away with a simple ‘leave?’”

“Why did she die a few years later without leaving any rotten flesh? Why were there nearly zero corpses left when the room owner visited the place a fourth time?”

“Why don’t the Heartless around dare to enter this area, with only a few exceptions?”

“...”

Upon hearing this series of questions, Long Yuehong’s mind buzzed. Only one short sentence echoed: “100,000 whys...”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “I have a guess, one produced from the fact that it’s one of Buddhism’s five Great Holy Lands.”

The Shang Jianyaos immediately looked over with bright eyes. “What is it?”

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment and said, “Perhaps an employee in Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company Awakened in the Subhuti domain due to the Old World’s destruction. He should be male. The abilities he has are Destiny Connection, Consciousness Deprivation, and Six Realms of Rebirth and Existence.”

“During the Old World’s destruction disaster, he lost his body like DiMarco. He had no choice but to rely on Destiny Connection to forcefully occupy the body of his female colleague, Liu Lu. This can explain why the woman named Liu Lu emitted a male voice and why there was a strange hidden gaze.”

These were all speculations based on the available information. The more Long Yuehong listened, the more he felt that it was likely.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao suddenly clapped.

Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him and continued, “He had zero contact for many years, and he lacked a clear understanding of his abilities. Therefore, he was scared away by the room owner on the latter’s first entry. Unaware of the situation outside, he—who was afraid of exposing his true identity—had long torn off his photo and the relevant introduction on the employee board. He took the opportunity while the room owner searched the third floor to secretly attack the other party with Destiny Connection.

“He might not have truly killed anyone and didn’t dare to do it. After succeeding, he only sent the other party to a relatively safe area outside. When the room owner returned a second time, that employee already knew how strong he was. Therefore, he stopped being afraid and easily deprived the other party of their consciousness before sending him away.

“Unfortunately, he didn’t realize that the incompatibility between his body and mind would accelerate the former’s decline. When he realized that there were no humans to choose from, he could only die alongside Liu Lu’s body.

“On the room owner’s third trip to the food company, his consciousness had actually dissipated. Only his psyche or aura remained, bringing about a ghost-like experience.”

This strung everything together. No matter what others thought, Long Yuehong believed that this was probably the most reasonable and natural explanation.

Shang Jianyao didn’t clap and seriously said, “There’s another question.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t ask what it was and continued, “If that’s the case, it can extend to a very important question. Is it because Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company is indeed a Buddhist Holy Land that hides a certain uniqueness that the male employee Awakened in the Subhuti domain, or is it because the aura he left behind has modified that place, making the Crystal Consciousness Church monks—who later explored that place—think that it’s a Holy Land? Or could he be Subhuti’s embodiment? Or could he have encountered the Subhuti that descended and obtained enlightenment?”

Long Yuehong became more and more terrified as he listened.

“We have to make a trip to Iron Mountain City if there’s a chance.” Shang Jianyao replied to Jiang Baimian’s question with a yearning expression.

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “The answer to this question can only be found from a real exploration.”

“That’s why I held back from clearing the level. I wanted to explore more.” Shang Jianyao changed the topic.

Jiang Baimian didn’t object and only mentioned two things. “First, if the room owner didn’t gain anything or hadn’t found any clues, there won’t be anything for you no matter how you explore. Second, do you have a way to resist the sudden Destiny Connection and Consciousness Deprivation?”

Shang Jianyao shook his head. “No, I couldn’t sense who attacked me at all. The room owner was the same back then.”

In other words, it couldn’t be covered with an area-of-effect ability.

“It’s very difficult for you to continue exploring then.” Jiang Baimian sighed.

Shang Jianyao suddenly laughed. “I have my ways.”

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian’s alarm sounded. What is it? Is this fellow going to court death again?

After Shang Jianyao briefly described his plan, Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong were a little dumbfounded. Would this be useful?

What an ingenious way of thinking!

Normal people wouldn’t make such an attempt!

...

After resting for a while, Shang Jianyao entered the Mind Corridor again and arrived at Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company.

After he went up to the second floor, he arrived at the end of the corridor and hid in the darkness, waiting for the sound of footsteps.

Before long, the professional woman named Liu Lu came from the third floor and entered the room in front of him.

The rustling subsided a little.

Shang Jianyao sat down cross-legged, switched on the flashlight, and placed it in his arms. He then spun the Six Senses Beads with one hand and conjured the original medical record with the other—the medical record from Long River City's United Steel Plant ruins, which was another Buddhist holy land.

Without any hesitation, Zen Master Redemption—who was wearing a monk robe and a kasaya—chanted a Buddhist proclamation. “*Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti. Name: Fan Wensi. Female. Age: 52. Married. Address: Residential Zone 2, Building 4, Room 302...*”

He rhythmically recited the contents of the medical record as if he were preaching the Buddhist Dharma.

He wanted to see what kind of changes would happen if the two Buddhist Holy Lands ‘collided!’

#### Chapter 578: Anomaly

“There is no fixed Dharma called Supreme Enlightenment, and there is also no fixed Dharma the Tathagata can expound. Why? The Dharma the Tathagata expounds cannot be clung to and cannot be expressed; it is neither Dharma nor Not-Dharma...” For a moment, the food company's second-floor corridor sounded as though an accomplished monk was giving a lecture. It was serene and solemn as a melodious voice echoed, but one would discover that the content wasn't so if they listened carefully.

“The patient describes her mobility and mental state to be normal. Everything that’s normal is very normal. Her medical history states that she has seen her son every day for the past seven days. The frequency is at least once. Her son...” Shang Jianyao read out the contents of the medical record as if he were reciting Buddhist scriptures.

Furthermore, in order to match the Diamond Sutra scene he had chosen, he forcefully cut off the sentence and added the vocabulary in a special tone to accentuate the patient’s situation.

As the saying goes: Love whatever job you take up. Zen Master Redemption was a staunch believer of this mantra.

As for whether it would appear incongruous because of this, he didn’t mind. He just needed to express the meaning and act realistically.

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong didn’t think highly of his fantastical attempt. This was because this was Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company in the psychological trauma of an Awakened, not the Buddhist Holy Land in reality.

Everything here was a result of the room owner’s experiences. Anything beyond this range was made up by his subconscious; it wasn’t the same as the real situation.

Therefore, unless the room owner had encountered a strange incident back then and had a certain level of self-awareness regarding this, the medical record from another Buddhist Holy Land—Long River City’s United Steel Plant—shouldn’t induce any special changes.

As he read, the cyborg monk Zen Master Redemption became increasingly solemn.

He felt the gaze in the dark becoming increasingly obvious and increasing in number. The gazes came from the room beside him, the ceiling above, the darkness in the stairwell, and the mottled spots on the walls.

Shang Jianyao was delighted instead of being shocked. To him, changes meant that his idea was on the path to success.

Of course, this could go both ways. This might bring about latent clues and benefit Shang Jianyao. On the other hand, there was a certain probability that the anomaly here would go from not having

any ill intentions to a murderous attempt of killing the chanter. Shang Jianyao might thus end up trapped in this psychological trauma and become a vegetable or die in reality.

According to the plan, Jiang Baimian would shake him awake once she discovered the sudden change in his expression to see if they could grab back a portion of his consciousness.

Zen Master Redemption maintained his compassionate and calm state as he recited the contents of the medical record.

At this moment, figures walked out of the room where the professional woman—Liu Lu—was. Their eyes were turbid and bloodshot—Heartless.

These Heartless didn't attack Shang Jianyao. Instead, they walked to his side and sat cross-legged around him like mountain ghosts undergoing enlightenment.

“Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti...” Amidst Zen Master Redemption's Buddhist proclamation, the professional woman named Liu Lu—who was wearing a white shirt and a blue suit—came to the corridor.

She looked at the cyborg monk and stood there in a daze.

Almost at the same time, Shang Jianyao noticed that the woman's eyes were different from before. Her eyes were abnormally turbid, and the dense blood vessels made her look ferocious.

She has become a Heartless! Just as this thought flashed through Shang Jianyao's mind, he heard a boom.

Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company building collapsed! Chunks of reinforced concrete peeled off, falling into the incomparably dark abyss with numerous surrounding buildings.

This building wasn't the only one that collapsed; the world was no exception!

As the psychological trauma collapsed, Shang Jianyao vaguely saw green light fly out from different parts of the food company's building and burrow into the Six Senses Beads in his hand.



After the anomaly ended, he realized that he was standing at the entrance of Room 522. In front of him was a dark sea. On it cruised a cruise ship covered in barnacles, and behind it was a door that led to the corridor.

...

At the bonfire in the real world.

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong stood beside the grayish-green jeep and stared at Shang Jianyao inside. Suddenly, they smelled a fresh scent.

It was as if autumn and winter had finally passed, and spring had arrived. The grass was growing, and the orioles were flying.

The two of them subconsciously looked around and realized that green shoots were sprouting from the trees that were nearly barren, instantly taking shape.

On the ground beside him, weeds drilled out of the dry soil and condensed droplets of dew.

This... Long Yuehong blinked and saw that things had returned to their previous state.

This was the periphery of Old Mountain in late autumn.

Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Shang Jianyao in the car and saw that he had opened his eyes at some point in time.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

Although this action was baffling, it calmed Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong down significantly.

“Why are you suddenly clapping?” Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief.

Shang Jianyao replied truthfully, “Cheering for myself!”

Before Long Yuehong could react, Jiang Baimian’s heart palpitated. “It worked?”

“Yes.” Shang Jianyao nodded. As he crawled out of the jeep, he said, “Those patrons admire the Buddhist Dharma and have already converted to Subhuti...”

“Speak human.” Jiang Baimian interrupted Shang Jianyao’s description.

Shang Jianyao didn’t embellish the story any further. He recited his attempt of reading the medical record as if he were teaching the Buddhist Dharma, resulting in the Heartless sitting cross-legged around him to listen.

He recounted everything without missing any details. This included the professional woman showing her Heartless side and the collapse of the world formed by the psychological trauma.

“She actually became a Heartless?” Long Yuehong was greatly shocked. Could it be that the contents of the medical record really belong to the Buddhist Dharma? Could the ‘ghost’ that possessed the professional woman, Liu Lu, end up exorcised because of this? This also resulted in Liu Lu contracting the Heartless disease?

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and replied, “Maybe it didn’t become that but that it was originally so.”

Shang Jianyao immediately echoed, “That’s right. It’s very likely that Liu Lu contracted the Heartless disease when the Old World was destroyed. But after her body was occupied by that person with Destiny Connection, she showed a normal side.”

This is indeed more reasonable and logical... Long Yuehong was convinced.

Jiang Baimian had a doubt. “If Destiny Connection can target Heartless and allow one to occupy their bodies for prolonged periods, it’s impossible for the person possessing Liu Lu to die as Liu Lu’s body deteriorates. There’s definitely no lack of Heartless in such a city ruin.”

“Maybe he really didn’t die.” Shang Jianyao stroked his chin.

Long Yuehong joined in the discussion. “Then, why did the food company return to normal many years later?”

Shang Jianyao laughed. “First, it might just be what the room owner thinks is normal. Second, after he discovered that he can possess other Heartless, he used them as springboards to leave the Iron Mountain City ruins and go somewhere.”

“It’s all possible.” Jiang Baimian asked thoughtfully, “If it’s the latter, where could that somewhere be?”

Shang Jianyao had already thought about it. “New World. A place with the New World’s door in reality.”

This was also a place Du Heng said he was searching for.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before realizing that there was no way to discuss this track of speculation because there were no substantial clues.

She then considered another question. “The recital of that medical record was actually effective... There are indeed some things lurking in that psychological trauma, and the two Holy Lands of Buddhism are sufficiently related.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong’s response, she came up with a guess. “Could it be that Fan Wensi’s son—who became a vegetable and was sent to a place in the north for experimental treatment—is the one missing from the food company’s employee introduction board?”

Long Yuehong was inexplicably terrified and thought for a moment. “The timing doesn’t match. Fan Wensi’s son had an accident a few years before the Old World was destroyed and became a vegetable. How can the food company still keep his photo and introduction for so long without hiring new employees? He doesn’t seem like a particularly important person.”

He meant that even if Fan Wensi’s son had worked at the food company, the missing photo and introduction on the employee introduction board definitely weren’t his. New employee photos and introductions definitely would’ve occupied the corresponding spot after several years.

“That makes sense.” Jiang Baimian agreed with Long Yuehong’s analysis.

Shang Jianyao didn’t retort and only mentioned, “I now feel that Fan Wensi’s daily sighting of her son who’s far in the north without being able to approach or confirm it is a little like the hidden gaze from the food company.”

“There might be a key connection hidden here.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

At this moment, the Shang Jianyaos sent another person out. He gave up on the discussion and bragged. “My Six Senses Beads have changed. It’s stronger!”

...

At night, in a room somewhere.

An elder with grizzled hair suddenly woke up. Then, he walked to the window and looked out at the surging sea.

He had a dream—an experience from his youth. This dream was so clear that he suspected that someone had entered his Mind Room and touched the psychological trauma.

But for the experienced him, the dream this time was different from a dream of someone exploring the depths of his mind world.

It was too clear and consistent, making the elder feel like his memories had been awakened and flipped through.

As he recalled, his body suddenly froze. He realized that one of his memories of that experience wasn’t clear enough and was something he didn’t care much about. Now, it was like an Old World movie replaying in his mind again.

After returning to Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company for the fourth time and finally defeating the psychological trauma, the elder vaguely heard something when he left. But when he looked back, everything was normal. The anomaly that needed to be dealt with had long vanished.

At this moment, the elder finally recalled and figured out what the ‘something’ was. When he left Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company, a sigh came from the depths of the building—a faint sigh.

## Chapter 579: Upgrade

Beside the grayish-green jeep.

Shang Jianyao showed the Six Senses Beads in his hand and asked in anticipation, “Notice anything different about it?”

Although Long Yuehong always felt that it was inappropriate for a healthy man to talk to others while holding the Six Senses Beads—which would be too rude—he resisted his exaggerated curiosity’s urge to look at Shang Jianyao’s crotch. Instead, he seriously sized up the prayer beads. “It doesn’t seem to have changed. At least on the surface...”

Jiang Baimian clearly acted in a more natural and open-minded manner. She thought for a moment and said, “It’s more lustrous?”

“No.” Shang Jianyao shook his head. “I’ve rubbed it out a texture!”

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong’s response, he added, “Also, I originally needed to strip the target’s five senses first before I could strip him of his consciousness. I can do so directly now.”

“Amazing!” Long Yuehong blurted out.

This wasn’t weaker than the Life Angel necklace’s Cardiac Arrest. The Six Senses Beads’ new 80-meter range far exceeded the former 40-meter range.

Shang Jianyao smugly shook the Six Senses Beads. “Its effective range is now 120 meters.”

“An increase of 50 %...” Jiang Baimian was rather envious. She didn’t have her own items yet.

Of course, the Six Senses Beads and the Life Angel necklace were essentially the Old Task Force’s common property. Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s role was equally crucial when dealing with

the Eighth Research Institute's commissioner, Khal. Therefore, Jiang Baimian also had the right to use them. However, she felt that these two items were clearly more effective in Shang Jianyao's hands in the current situation.

She was currently looking forward to obtaining other items in the future or finding items more suitable for the Shattered Mirror domain during Shang Jianyao's exploration of the Mind Corridor.

For some reason, Shang Jianyao suddenly sighed. "But it seems like it can only be used three times as a result."

Through Shang Jianyao's previous experiments, the Old Task Force had already grasped how much energy the Six Senses Beads still had—it could be used five to six more times. A single use referred to the complete cycle from Visual Deprivation to Consciousness Deprivation.

Shang Jianyao now meant that if he directly used Consciousness Deprivation, the Six Senses Beads would lose its powers in not more than three attempts.

"Still, it's not bad. It can save lives at critical moments." Although Jiang Baimian found it a pity, she still felt that the pros outweighed the cons.

Long Yuehong deliberated and asked, "How many more times can it be used based on the original usage?"

Shang Jianyao's smile lit up. "Nine times."

He immediately jumped out of his depression because he was already a different person.

The honest Shang Jianyao then took the initiative to brag. "My abilities have also improved. The range hasn't changed, but the affected number of people has increased from 20 to 50."

"..." Jiang Baimian was first stunned before she commented, "This suits the Subhuti domain's characteristics very well."

She thought of DiMarco. Apart from Destiny Connection, the Underground Ark's former owner had another ability that allowed him to split his consciousness and possess multiple targets. Therefore, it

was completely understandable for Shang Jianyao's abilities to double the number of targets affected after clearing the psychological trauma that the Buddhist Holy Land was part of.

Jiang Baimian also believed that Shang Jianyao's harvest this time was definitely far greater than normal.

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion. "Room 522's owner was unknowingly affected a little back then. The effects remain until now."

"But in that case, he shouldn't have been able to enter the Mind Corridor." Long Yuehong expressed his confusion.

Jiang Baimian exhaled deeply and said, "I originally thought so too, but I found it understandable when considering Destiny Connection's characteristics. At a certain level, Destiny Connection should be able to make one's aura attach to another person in minute amounts and hide in their psychological trauma. It won't affect the target's actions, including their advancement. It can only be triggered at critical moments."

Long Yuehong slowly nodded when he thought of DiMarco and Shang Jianyao's experience and gains.

Suddenly, he recalled something, and his heart tightened. "Could the aura left in the room owner's psychological trauma have partially infiltrated Shang Jianyao's mind world?"

"It seems like it has been absorbed by the person's own kind in the form of the Six Senses Beads." Jiang Baimian didn't use a firm tone.

Shang Jianyao wore a nonplussed expression, considering how this wasn't new. "I'll take a look later. If there is, I'll invite him to play games with Xiaochong and me."

"..." Both Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong were speechless.

After more than ten seconds, Jiang Baimian said, "It's necessary to return to the steelworks factory ruins next and see if we can find the patient named Fan Wensi's whereabouts after the Old World was destroyed."

Although most people hadn't survived the Old World's destruction back then, there was still hope and direction for the investigation since they couldn't confirm Fan Wensi's death.

"It's also necessary to schedule Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company." The one who spoke was the calm and rational Shang Jianyao. "I hope we can find the missing photo and the relevant introduction."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged his words and quickly made a plan. "When Little White is almost recovered, I'll arrange for another field training session. The target is the steelworks factory ruins. After the Lunar New Year, we will pass through Redstone Collection and head to Iron Mountain City's ruins. We will then go to First City to prepare for the exploration of the Holm Fertility Center in Wasteland Ruin 13. If everyone's mental and physical condition is still up for it after completing these matters, we will consider going to the city ruin in the north to search for the former Old Task Force. Heh heh, I'll give you a chance to spend the Lunar New Year at home this year no matter what."

...

Plans almost never kept up with the changes in life. After Bai Chen recovered, Long Yuehong's application for genetic modification was approved as soon as it was submitted.

He had always been conservative and careful. He gave up on a few tempting modifications and chose the options with the overall lowest risk—Enhanced Self Recovery, Increased Immunity, and Increased Reaction Speed.

In Shang Jianyao's words: "How is this different from not doing anything?"

Even such options cost Long Yuehong 30,000 contribution points, considering his rank.

Due to the low risk, success was only natural. However, Long Yuehong remained in bed for more than two weeks.

After he recovered and underwent training to boost his physical condition to an optimal state, it was already January, Year 48 of the New Calendar—a few days short of the Lunar New Year.

Jiang Baimian could only give up on her field training plan and directly scheduled the mission of exploring the steelworks factory ruins to their next mission.



The Lunar New Year was always exciting. Among them, the end-of-year report performance—which had been influenced by the Old World’s entertainment—received great reviews. Shang Jianyao’s applause almost made his palms swell. He was filled with regret that the Entertainment Department only borrowed a computer from Long Yuehong and didn’t get him to provide guidance.

Considering how Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen didn’t have family, Jiang Baimian specially held an internal team reunion at noon on New Year’s Eve. During the Lunar New Year, she also took the time to bring Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong on a tour of the Rec Centers on the busiest floors.

She nearly lost her way!

During the break after the Lunar New Year, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen participated in Awakening experiments, only to meet with miserable failure. Fortunately, there were no repercussions.

...

“Good evening, everyone. I’m Newspoint broadcaster, Hou Yi. It’s 8 p.m. now...

“First, let’s review the Ashlands’ situation in the past week...

“First City’s new consul and commander-in-chief, Gaius, issued an order to dismiss two generals and further consolidate a few divisions...

“The White Knights and the Salvation Army have reached an agreement to exchange food for genetic enhancement serum...

“...”

A slightly childlike voice echoed in Zone B, Room 196 on the 495th floor. Shang Jianyao lay on the bed in the darkness with a calm expression.

He had fallen asleep at some point in time and had forgotten to explore the Mind Corridor.

Shang Jianyao woke up the next morning. He quickly washed his face, brushed his teeth, and went to the public bathroom to relieve his bladder.

After doing this, he packed his tactical backpack and stuffed all the useful items inside.

With a click, Shang Jianyao slung his backpack over his shoulder, locked the door, put away the key, and walked to Zone C.

...

349th floor, Zone C, Room 12.

In order not to be late, Jiang Baimian decided to set off early. She stood in front of a full-body mirror and checked her appearance.

At this moment, her mother—Xue Sumei—appeared behind her with a livid expression.

“Mom, you gave me a fright.” Although Jiang Baimian had sensed something in advance, she still protested.

“Why didn’t you think about how it would give me a fright when you did the Awakening experiment without informing me?” Xue Sumei didn’t give her daughter a pleasant expression.

Jiang Baimian laughed dryly. “It’s not like it’s anything dangerous.”

This topic had been repeated many times.

Xue Sumei didn’t say anything else and asked faintly, “When can you return this time?”

Jiang Baimian deliberated and replied, “As early as July, but if it drags on, the end of the year.”

This depended on whether they wanted to go to the city in the north that had already become a Heartless paradise.

She flipped her wrist to look at the time and pointed at the door. "I'm leaving."

She picked up her tactical backpack, walked out the door, and turned somewhere.

"Where are you going? That's the wrong direction!" Xue Sumei shouted at her.

Jiang Baimian was just about to repent for her hasty departure when Xue Sumei came in front of her and nagged, "Don't you know how to straighten your clothes?"

As she spoke, she lowered her head and helped Jiang Baimian straighten her clothes that were actually fine.

Jiang Baimian pursed her lips and didn't say a word.

...

622nd floor, Zone B, Room 59.

Bai Chen looked back at the table and bed that had been cleaned. She then slung her tactical backpack over one shoulder and walked out.

Thud!

She closed the door.

...

495th floor, Zone C, Room 11.

Long Yuehong waved at his parents—who had sent him to the door. "I'm leaving."

Gu Hong opened her mouth and finally said, “You have to be careful outside. Don’t put on a brave front. I know that you have your own ideas now and have secretly undergone genetic modification. You might not listen to us, but we still have to say what needs to be said.”

His mother’s grumbling made Long Yuehong scratch the back of his head. “I will.”

He then made a promise. “When my abilities can’t keep up, I’ll apply to be transferred. I have the right now!”

Without waiting for his parents to say anything else, Long Yuehong waved his hand again and left, afraid that they would say something else.

After walking for a distance, he encountered Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao glanced at him and suddenly ran. “Don’t be last!”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

His figure disappeared from Long Yuehong’s line of sight.

You’re nuts... Long Yuehong felt very helpless. Finally, he caught up to Shang Jianyao in the elevator.

Not long after the two of them arrived at the 647th floor, they saw Bai Chen coming from the other end.

“Morning!” Shang Jianyao greeted. He had already forgotten about not being in last place.

“Morning.” Long Yuehong nodded.

Bai Chen smiled and replied, “Morning.”

The three of them came to Room 14 together to find Jiang Baimian already inside.

Upon seeing that her team members were all here, she cleared her throat and smiled. “Let’s set off!”

Chapter 580: Return Again

“My favorite record shop;

“Yesterday was her last day;

“Shards that once enchanted me;

“They are all scattered by the side of the street[1]...”

Shang Jianyao moved his body to the small speaker’s rhythm as he drove the grayish-green jeep to the road at the edge of the swamp.

Jiang Baimian rested her right arm across the passenger door and turned her body sideways to look out the window. She was already accustomed to Shang Jianyao playing music every time he drove, but she would suggest changing songs from time to time because she really couldn’t appreciate certain songs.

Jiang Baimian didn’t comment on the song echoing in the car and asked her team members with interest, “Do you still remember what happened here?”

“We encountered the Blackmarsh Iron Snake and those bandits.” Long Yuehong had a deep impression of his first encounter with danger.

“That’s right.” Jiang Baimian sighed with emotion. “If not for us, those bandits would’ve been doing well in most of the wilderness with their equipment.”

Although the bandits only had a few people, they had a military exoskeleton. Many large bandit groups couldn’t even obtain such powerful items.

Bai Chen—who was sitting on the other side of the backseat—looked at the sunlight that filtered through the leaves and the few terrifying deformed trees nearby. She thought for a moment and said, “I remember that the bandit leader’s wife was captured by First City and became the exclusive

property of an Elder or his immediate descendants. His son first became a slave of that family before being sent to school.”

If not for this connection, how could those bandits have a military exoskeleton?

After hearing Bai Chen’s words, Jiang Baimian clicked her tongue. “Because of this, I’ve always been curious about the madam’s looks. She actually left an authoritative figure in First City so infatuated that he was willing to give a military exoskeleton to her ex-husband—uh, in the settlement she previously lived in.”

It had been less than 70 years since the Old World was destroyed. It was indeed possible to find good-looking men and women in various wilderness nomad settlements, but they were either covered in dirt or extremely thin. They lacked the characteristics that made one’s eyes light up.

A natural beauty could hardly be produced in a wilderness nomad settlement that found survival difficult.

Furthermore, in the eyes of the Old Task Force members who were accustomed to Chosen Ones—people who were also genetically enhanced—they might consider a small number of people beauties, but it was difficult to use the term ‘stunner.’

However, there were always various exceptions in the world. A wilderness nomad’s genes could be retained, so it was acceptable for them to be enchanting from a slight wash-up.

Regarding Jiang Baimian’s sigh, an unknown Shang Jianyao who was driving commented, “She’s definitely inferior to you.”

“Whoa.” Jiang Baimian asked in amusement, “Should I be flattered?”

Although she had always been very confident in her looks and figure, and her skin color was the type she liked, she felt that she couldn’t be thrilled when facing Shang Jianyao—who never played by the book.

Who knew what this fellow would say next!

Besides, Jiang Baimian had always believed that she relied on her brain and strength. Her looks were only icing on the cake.

As Long Yuehong and Bai Chen guessed what shocking words Shang Jianyao would say this time, he replied seriously, "I'm very honest. I'll say whatever is on my mind. I won't belittle anyone, nor will I specially praise anyone."

From the looks of it, Hey—who likes to argue—has a cute side... Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and said, "I wonder if the person who wrote the letter and his mother were affected by First City's uprising?"

Just as she said that, the honest Shang Jianyao shouted in horror, "Y-you want to stamp out any potential trouble?"

This fellow isn't cute at all... Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth. "Are they worthy?"

The current Old Task Force was a group the corresponding faction's higher-ups needed to pay attention to no matter where they went. Even large factions like First City and the White Knights wouldn't underestimate them.

Although they definitely had the ability to suppress the Old Task Force, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others would definitely cause considerable damage before that happened. Furthermore, they had a chance of escaping in advance.

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao's response, Jiang Baimian recalled the scene from back then and looked out the window with a yearning look. "We even seized a heavyweight motorcycle back then. It felt good riding it. I wonder when I can get another one..."

Uh... Long Yuehong chose to shut up, and so did Bai Chen.

Even Shang Jianyao didn't dare to speak at that moment.

Jiang Baimian naturally could guess why they acted this way, and she thought sadly, "I probably won't have the chance to ride heavyweight motorcycles in the future..."

With her current situation, she probably wouldn't be able to return successfully after riding the motorcycle and speeding forward with a vroom unless she was willing to follow the jeep slowly.

But if that happened, the fun of riding a heavyweight motorcycle would be completely gone. Then, what was the point of riding it?

Heh, Hey, Little White, and Little Red previously wanted to vote to strip me of my right to drive. Fortunately, I reasoned with them. Hmph, you should thank me for letting the two of you sit in the back row! Jiang Baimian's thoughts raced as she indignantly recalled an incident when they had just left Pangu Biology.

Back then, Shang Jianyao had suggested that she not drive in the future and focus on being a passenger. This was to prevent her from taking the team somewhere unknown without realizing it.

Upon seeing that Bai Chen and Long Yuehong were clearly tempted, Jiang Baimian decisively suppressed the fellow—who was known to be honest—and made the 'proposal' die a stillbirth.

Her sense of direction wasn't so bad that she would deviate from her route even with manual navigation!

...

Long River City's United Steel Plant ruins.

This place was a small ruin that had been discovered in the Chaotic Era, and it had long been visited by a large number of Ruin Hunters. Even the attached hospital's door had been moved away, so nothing valuable was left.

Apart from the Hunters who did a search again when passing by in hopes of finding some trash that could be exchanged for food, almost nobody specially came.

This was the information that Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others originally had. However, they now knew that this desolate and dilapidated place had another identity—one of Buddhism's five Great Holy Lands!



Every year, believers of Subhuti and Master Zhuang from different places in the Ashlands would come here to pray and pay respects to the steel-refining stupa.

Jiang Baimian looked at the deserted ruins, the attached hospital on the road to the factory, and the residential area around the steelworks factory. She pondered for a moment and said, "Go straight to Family Zone 2."

On the medical record, Fan Wensi lived in Room 302 in Building 4 of Zone 2.

Finding her whereabouts after the Old World was destroyed was Shang Jianyao and the others' main goal in this operation.

As for where Family Zone 2 was, Jiang Baimian had already done her homework.

As a ruin that had been explored and had most of its value drained countless times, much of the information here was public. Pangu Biology was the hidden master behind the scenes in the Blackmarsh Wilderness. How could they not know anything about this place and have never sent anyone here in the early stages?

Just by extracting information regarding the steelworks factory ruins from the company, Jiang Baimian restored the entire layout and figured out where Family Zone 2 was.

Upon seeing his team leader take out the map, Shang Jianyao raised his hand. "I have a question."

Denied... Jiang Baimian almost replied, but her rationality stopped her.

"What?" She nodded.

Shang Jianyao asked seriously, "Did you really not make any mistakes when drawing the map? A map drawn by a directionally challenged person doesn't seem trustworthy."

Uh... On the one hand, Long Yuehong felt that Shang Jianyao's concerns made sense. On the other hand, he wanted to see him get beaten.

Jiang Baimian controlled her left hand and snorted before enunciating each word clearly. “I. Checked. It. Five. Times! I even got Little White to check twice.”

“Yes.” Bai Chen indicated that it was indeed so.

Shang Jianyao heaved a long sigh of relief. “That’s good.”

Just as he said that, he opened the door and jumped to the side, avoiding Jiang Baimian’s gaze.

As the Shang Jianyaos made all kinds of ad-libs, the Old Task Force’s jeep arrived at the factory entrance along the road. However, they didn’t enter and turned right.

The buildings connected to it came under Zone 2. Some of the buildings here had collapsed, and some were very dilapidated. Lots of greenery had crept up, but the thing they had in common was that they didn’t have doors.

The wooden doors had become fuel for bonfires while the iron doors had been taken away and recycled as scrap metal in exchange for food.

The Old Task Force’s jeep drove amidst the silence for a while before finding Building 4.

It remained standing, but it was also dilapidated.

After sensing the area, Shang Jianyao said to Jiang Baimian and the others, “There’s no human consciousness on the third floor.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, indicating that she sensed the same from the electrical signals.

The four of them alighted one after another. Long Yuehong and Bai Chen stood guard below, prepared to provide support at any moment. Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian walked up to the third floor through the damp and rotten corridor.

The two apartments on the third floor also had no doors, allowing people to see the situation in the living room from the corridor.

After a brief inspection, Jiang Baimian confirmed which apartment was Room 302 and cast her gaze in.

She vaguely seemed to see a clump of long black hair lying quietly on the ground.