

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 61: Drawing - Read

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Chapter 61: Drawing

While Shang Jianyao still pondered over the last sentence's meaning, Jiang Baimian quickly wrote: "We didn't sense anything abnormal, but the chip discovered something amiss. This means..."

She did not finish writing the sentence. She slowly put away the pen and paper and continued holding her chin, staring at Qiao Chu's side profile in an infatuated daze.

Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze and guessed at the reason, but he didn't know what he could or should do. This was because some force seemed to be preventing him from thinking deeper. It also prevented him from thinking about where the problem originated or what it even was. It made him vaguely hope that this didn't shatter a beautiful image.

The source of this power was not external but from his heart.

Life is already so difficult, so why not let yourself be intoxicated by a beautiful dream?

Bang!

Under Qiao Chu's instructions, the jeep passed through the gaps between many greenish-black vines. This inevitably led to a collision as the jeep's side was scratched.

These vines with red spikes slid past the glass window, leaving behind countless, extremely fine scratches.

Shang Jianyao—who was searching for a solution on the surface of his thoughts—subconsciously looked over. In the dark and gloomy environment, he saw his reflection in the window.

His heart stirred as his eyes suddenly turned deep. He wanted to use the Corny Person ability on himself. If it were effective, his actions would immediately become corny, and his actions would deviate from the logical reasoning behind his actions.

For example, he couldn't stand Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong also staring at Qiao Chu and requested to leave in order to advance. For example, he had to start a quarrel in such a dangerous situation...

When such abnormalities happened, the situation would change. Whether the changes were good or bad, they would expose some problems and help Shang Jianyao return to 'reality.'

A few seconds later, Shang Jianyao's eyes returned to normal.

He looked down at his hands, then at his reflection in the window.

He shook his head slightly.

His attempt failed.

Corny Person seemed different from Inference Clowning. He couldn't affect himself by using the simple method of looking into a mirror.

Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze and began thinking seriously. Meanwhile, Qiao Chu was focused on commanding Bai Chen to pass through the swamp—which was covered in terrifying vines—and had no time to bother about him.

Suddenly, the corners of Shang Jianyao's mouth slightly twitched as they curled up. In such a depressing and gloomy environment, he smiled like a mentally ill patient.

After about ten seconds, Shang Jianyao's expression returned to normal. He frowned in thought as his eyes gradually lit up. He looked at his reflection in the window again and muttered, "Jiang Baimian has long legs, so do I."

Jiang Baimian turned her head with a confused expression. She raised her hand to touch the metal cochlear implant in her left ear, indicating that she had not heard him clearly with her actions.

Shang Jianyao ignored her and continued muttering, "Jiang Baimian is amazing, and so am I."

Qiao Chu heard Shang Jianyao's words, but on the one hand, he needed to distinguish the vines' distribution, the road condition, and the swamp's various details. He could not afford to be distracted. But on the other hand, he felt that there was nothing wrong with what Shang Jianyao said. It was like a jealous concubine privately slandering the favored person.

Long Yuehong looked at Shang Jianyao, not understanding what he wanted to do. Since he did not understand the situation, he definitely did not intend to protect Qiao Chu by exposing the secret.

Shang Jianyao looked at his reflection in the car window, and his eyes turned increasingly deep.

"So?" The next second, he answered his own question. "We're the same."

Shang Jianyao's expression quickly changed a little. It slightly warped as if he was trying his best to suppress something.

Jiang Baimian looked at Shang Jianyao as she asked Long Yuehong, “What did he just say?”

“He said that your legs are long, and so are his. You’re amazing, and so is he. Therefore, the two of you are the same.” Long Yuehong repeated the monologue.

Jiang Baimian subconsciously opened her mouth to reply, but she quickly closed it.

After a few seconds, she laughed and said to Shang Jianyao, “What’s the point of doing this?”

Upon seeing that the four-person team didn’t think there was anything wrong with Shang Jianyao’s words and discussed them without hiding anything, Qiao Chu—who was already too busy to be distracted—became even more unconcerned about this small interlude.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao’s butt left his seat. He leaned forward and grabbed Qiao Chu’s shoulder.

Qiao Chu subconsciously wanted to reach out and pull out the United 202 from the holster at his waist. However, he realized that he couldn’t raise his right hand.

It was not that he didn’t have the strength, nor was it because Shang Jianyao had grabbed his shoulder, causing his joints to be locked. It was because he couldn’t do such an action; it was as if he never had such capabilities.

A layer of cold sweat immediately covered Qiao Chu’s back. He instinctively turned his head and looked at Shang Jianyao in the back row. “What are you doing?”

Shang Jianyao’s gaze burned as he gripped Qiao Chu’s shoulder tightly. A crazy smile appeared on his lips. “I want to f*ck you!”

Jiang Baimian’s mouth opened slightly. She didn’t know whether to curse, laugh, or stop him.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen—who were clueless about the situation—were both surprised and confused at this moment. They also felt like they were witnessing a god—no, a devil—descend upon the mortal world.

Qiao Chu’s expression distorted, but his face did not flush as if he had encountered many such situations.

An invisible ripple suddenly appeared in his golden eyes.

As Qiao Chu desperately resisted the force Shang Jianyao exerted to drag him back, he turned his head and gently said to Bai Chen, “Give him a toy.”

Bai Chen was confused and habitually stepped on the brakes. In a daze, she opened the armrest compartment and took out a few pieces of paper and a ballpoint pen.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao was a little impatient. His hands suddenly changed positions.

His left hand gripped Qiao Chu's neck, and his right hand clenched into a fist. He was about to smash the area under the other party's ear in an attempt to knock him out and break down all his resistance.

Almost at the same time, Qiao Chu's body became extremely soft like a large, humanoid python. As Qiao Chu shrunk and swung, his neck strangely broke free from Shang Jianyao's grasp as though he was extremely slippery.

He then spoke quickly with a gentle voice. "Is drawing not fun?"

Shang Jianyao's actions instantly stopped, and his expression revealed inconceivable perplexity and confusion. He then looked at Bai Chen and took the pen and paper from her hand. Nôv(e)B\jnn

The smile on his face became clearer.

After receiving the pen and paper, Shang Jianyao eagerly sat down and used his thigh as a cushion to draw. He had a very focused expression and was extremely quiet, like a child obsessed with their hobby.

Upon seeing this, Qiao Chu finally heaved a sigh of relief. He glanced around coldly and chuckled without any smiling intent. "So there is an Awakened among you. Unfortunately, so am I."

His hands had already returned to normal, and his right hand was gripping the United 202 gun's handle. This was his own pistol.

After hesitating for a few seconds, Qiao Chu gave up on the idea of shooting Shang Jianyao. He smiled and said, "Praise my benevolence and tolerance. I still have uses for you. I don't accept your obsession, but it's understandable. Even a horse chased after me for more than 100 kilometers."

Jiang Baimian was entranced by his words and sincerely praised him. "How impressive."

"How impressive." Shang Jianyao drew without raising his head as he repeated Jiang Baimian's words.

Jiang Baimian then asked, "Where are you from?"

“Where are you from?” Shang Jianyao repeated again.

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but glare at Shang Jianyao. After thinking for a few seconds, she chuckled and said, “I have breasts, but you don't.”

Shang Jianyao was just about to repeat her words when his expression suddenly turned confused. After a few seconds of silence, he focused again and quietly continued drawing.

At this moment, Qiao Chu had already sat up straight and answered Jiang Baimian's question in a deep voice. “That's not something you should know.”

“I understand.” Jiang Baimian didn't mind and smiled sweetly.

Qiao Chu turned to look at Bai Chen, who had already stepped on the brakes. “Continue.”

Bai Chen had no objections.

Under Qiao Chu's instructions, they traversed the vine 'forest' deep in the swamp. During this process, Shang Jianyao kept drawing until he completed a piece of work.

He then seemed to break free from a dream and looked at the child's scrawl in surprise. He looked up at the back of Qiao Chu's head and remained silent.

As time passed, his condition became similar to Long Yuehong and the others. However, he did not forget to fold the drawing in his hand and put it in his pocket.

Jiang Baimian tried to peek at what Shang Jianyao had drawn but failed.

After moving forward for a few hours, a swarm of mosquitoes—each the size of fingers with dark-red heads—suddenly flew out of the greenish-black and slightly red vines.

“How unlucky...” Qiao Chu couldn't help but curse when he saw this.

Bai Chen's body instinctively tensed up.

One swarm, two swarms, three swarms. More and more giant mosquitoes flew out from the different vines, forming a black mass.

These hideous, dark-red-headed mosquitoes gathered together like black smoke that filled the air. They were densely packed together, blotting out the sky and covering every gap.

Under such a scene, they looked like an army from hell or a curse from the Old World.

“Close the windows tightly and rush over!” Qiao Chu ordered in a deep voice.

Chapter 62: Tunnel

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong had heard Bai Chen mention mutated mosquitoes, so they knew how dangerous they were toward unprepared humans.

Mutated mosquitoes always moved in large numbers, and they flew quickly. They could tolerate a certain level of heat and low temperatures.

They were relatively small in size and difficult to be hit by bullets. Even if they encountered sharpshooters—or if the swarm was too dense—mutated mosquitoes would be unafraid of losses due to their large numbers. The number of bullets and ordinary bombs a team could carry could not compare with the number of mosquitoes.

Mutated mosquitoes usually lived on plant sap, but they yearned for blood. They had strong survival abilities and extremely terrifying offensive abilities. They were brainless and fearless. Even if more than half of their kind was lost, they would still come for blood one after another.

Their bites came with poison that could paralyze a human body and an animal's body and slow their thinking.

Their proboscises were longer, firmer, and sharper than those of unmutated mosquitoes. They could penetrate clothing fibers and pierce into the target's skin...

For many Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads, this was a hellish tide that could devour life. Upon encountering mutated mosquitoes, it was difficult to escape the swarm even with the advantage in numbers.

Of course, as one of the most ferocious creatures in the Ashlands, humans were not incapable of resisting such mutated mosquitoes. However, all the solutions required relatively special equipment. For example, flamethrowers, special mosquito repellent spray guns, a Pangu Biology Herbicide Round, a complete set of biochemical clothes that could defend against toxic gases, sufficient numbers of incendiary rounds, technologically immature kinetic armor, or rare, terrifying bombs from the Old World that could cause high temperatures around the explosion's core...

Unfortunately, the Old Task Force didn't have any of these items.

Fortunately, the jeep they drove was relatively well-sealed. It was impossible for the mutated mosquitoes to force their way in. Furthermore, this vehicle was electric-powered, so there was no fear that the mosquito swarm would fearlessly block the exhaust pipes and other places. At the same time, the mutated mosquitoes' proboscises were not strong enough to puncture the rubber tires.

This was indeed good news for Jiang Baimian and the others, but it was also bad news.

The ventilation system had to be switched off; otherwise, it would eventually be blocked by the mutated mosquitoes.

As a result, the air quality in the car would rapidly decrease until it was unbearable. Shang Jianyao and the others had to rush out of the mutated mosquitoes' encirclement before that happened.

Bai Chen had experience dealing with such terrifying creatures. The same moment Qiao Chu gave the order, she had already closed the windows and turned off the ventilation system.

As Bai Chen continued stepping on the accelerator, she habitually consoled everyone in the car. "Don't worry. These mutated mosquitoes won't distance themselves from places with vegetation. As long as we pass through these vines, they should give up."

"Left..." As Qiao Chuyu nodded, he directed the way forward.

Jiang Baimian muttered thoughtfully, "Even mutated creatures have the instinct to continue living in swarms. Therefore, such mosquitoes won't leave places with dense vegetation... This is a necessary condition for them to survive. The blood of humans and animals is only a very attractive delicacy..."

"That's true. The Old World has been destroyed for so many years. The mutated creatures that can't reproduce would've died long ago..."

Qiao Chu ignored Jiang Baimian's mutters. He was more focused on identifying the path blocked by the greenish-black vines than before.

A few seconds later, the moving jeep encountered the mosquito swarms.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

The finger-sized mosquitoes with dark-red heads were like miniature bombers. They used themselves as bombs as they smashed into the windshield one after another.

In Shang Jianyao's eyes, this was like the first rainstorm he had seen in Moat Town. Countless water droplets smashed against the glass with all their might. However, unlike the rain, these 'droplets' did not slide down and stuck to the glass instead.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Be it the windshield or the windows on both sides, they were covered with black mosquitoes amidst a series of continuous sounds. The dark-red heads and hideous proboscises were densely packed together, giving one a headache.

Bai Chen and Qiao Chu couldn't see the road ahead. The jeep was like a wild horse that had lost control at the edge of a cliff. They had no idea where they were heading.

Long Yuehong's face quickly turned pale. He wanted to save himself, but he didn't know what he could do or how to help.

Jiang Baimian's and Shang Jianyao's bodies tensed up. Their expressions were filled with worry and confusion. Their life-preservation instincts and hormonal secretion from the life-and-death situation seemed to allow them to sense the anomaly in their current situation.

At this moment, Qiao Chu stopped looking ahead and glanced down at the mechanical watch on his wrist. The dial was attached with a compass filled with engravings.

"Head in the 3:12 direction." Qiao Chu seemed to have established a map of the swamp's depths in his mind. He then relied on the equipment to 'navigate manually.'

Bai Chen was no stranger to using clock positions as an indicator for bearings. However, the ones she had encountered previously had never been this specific. Therefore, after being momentarily stunned, she immediately reacted and started steering.

But with a mutated mosquito swarm in front of her, she couldn't accurately drive according to the navigation instructions. There were definitely deviations.

Qiao Chu did not mind because he also knew that it was impossible for humans without a supplementary chip or the corresponding genetic modifications to accomplish such maneuvers at such high speeds. He had given a highly precise bearing so that the deviation would be within an acceptable range.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao suddenly said, "You can wear an exoskeleton and drive."

Qiao Chu had previously seen the military exoskeleton device in the trunk. After some thought, he nodded and said, "Do it quickly."

Normal exoskeleton devices had short-ranged positioning capabilities. This was often integrated into the comprehensive warning system and facilitated the wearer via a supplementary chip.

"Let me do it," Jiang Baimian volunteered.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had no objections. They immediately turned around and dragged the military exoskeleton from the trunk.

With their help, Jiang Baimian quickly adjusted the metal skeleton's length and wore the equipment.

After the system's self-checks were complete, she quickly said, "It's done."

"Stop the car." Qiao Chu immediately retracted his gaze from his watch.

Bai Chen stepped on the brakes without hesitation.

With a screeching sound, the jeep suddenly stopped. Shang Jianyao and the others lunged forward from the momentum, but thankfully, they were held back by the seat belts. Many of the mutated mosquitoes covering the windshield and the windows on both sides were flung out.

As for Jiang Baimian—who did not have a seatbelt to secure her—she easily offset the inertia with the military exoskeleton.

As soon as the car stopped, Bai Chen immediately unbuckled her seat belt, changed gears, and pulled up the handbrake. She then crawled to the backseat from the armrest compartment.

Jiang Baimian stretched out her arms that were covered in black metal bones, picked Bai Chen up, and placed her on Long Yuehong's side.

She then followed Bai Chen's 'path' and quickly climbed into the driver's seat.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

The swarm of mutated mosquitoes with dark-red heads slammed into the glass windows again, densely covering them.

Jiang Baimian—who had a powerpack behind her—couldn't lean back. She could only lean forward and start the jeep. She buckled her seat belt as she steered the steering wheel with one hand.

Qiao Chu lowered his head again and differentiated the changes in the compass on his watch. He kept reporting the direction to take using clock positions.

With a supplementary chip, Jiang Baimian controlled the jeep accurately. In the harsh environment filled with black mosquitoes, she made the jeep traverse the swamps and vines through great danger.

In a highly focused state, the passage of time seemed to become a blur. After an unknown period of time, when Shang Jianyao and the others began to panic, the large mosquitoes covering the windshield and the windows on both sides began to fly up one after another.

These mutated creatures soon left the jeep and flew back 'reluctantly.'

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen saw pure, boundless black mud in front of them. No plants were growing on the surface, but bubbles occasionally popped.

"2:24." Qiao Chu looked up and stopped paying attention to the changes in the compass on his watch.

After Jiang Baimian turned the steering wheel, everyone in the car saw a path that led downward.

It slanted into a swamp, and a black hole was at the end.

"Drive in," Qiao Chu ordered.

Jiang Baimian—who was wearing the exoskeleton—didn't hesitate to drive the jeep down the path.

The black soil on the road was soft and muddy, and many of the jeep's wheels had sunk into the mud. But something harder seemed to be propping them up from beneath the mud, allowing the heavy jeep to stabilize.

The jeep quickly drove into the hole. At the same time, Jiang Baimian switched on the ventilation system and the headlights.

Shang Jianyao and the others immediately took a deep breath and sized up the surroundings through the glass windows.

The cave was pitch-black, with only the sound of water droplets dripping to the ground intermittently. Where the headlights illuminated, the rock walls and roads were relatively flat, stained with a certain amount of mud.

"It doesn't seem natural," Jiang Baimian evaluated as she drove.

"An underground tunnel of the Old World," Qiao Chu replied simply.

Jiang Baimian nodded and thought for a few seconds. "It's a little strange that there's no moss growing... Its previous environment wasn't suitable for living beings?"

Qiao Chu ignored her and calmly said, "Keep driving straight."

The tunnel was originally silent, but the jeep would occasionally bump into cracks or bumps in the ground. Therefore, intermittent crashing sounds tore deeper into the tunnel without any returning echoes.

In this deep and strange silence, Shang Jianyao and the others didn't say a word. It was as though they were heading to the end of the world.

Several minutes passed before light gradually appeared in front of them. It quickly formed an arched exit.

Jiang Baimian—who had goggles on—was unaffected by the change in light intensity. She allowed the car to rush out of the tunnel.

The sun outside was already setting in the west. The setting sun's rays shone on the ground as if plating it with a layer of gold.

Not far away, buildings—dozens or more than a hundred meters tall—stood orderly. No sound came from the buildings, nor was there an end in sight.

They bathed in the red sunlight like a dead jungle consisting of steel and concrete.

Chapter 63: City

Before this, the tallest buildings Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had seen were the few 'chimneys' in the steelworks factory ruins. They clearly couldn't compare with the high-rise buildings they saw now.

This did not mean that the 'chimneys' were necessarily much shorter. It was more based on the visual impact. Be it in terms of length or width, these high-rise buildings were clearly superior to the steelworks factory's 'chimneys.' Therefore, when taking every aspect into account, they could be called 'colossal.'

What shocked Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong the most was that there were more than one or two such buildings. There were so many that it was difficult to determine their exact number.

These buildings were neatly arranged in a pattern that stretched on without end in every direction.

At that moment, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong seemed to have become mice. This was the first time they had come to a human nation, and they could only observe it by looking up.

Under the setting sun, thousands of glass panes shimmered on the skyscrapers' outer walls. They looked like they were made of gold or were being incinerated by 'flames.'

Shang Jianyao's and Long Yuehong's eyes slightly narrowed as they resisted the slightly blinding light.

The jeep slowed down rapidly. It was unknown if Jiang Baimian was also shocked or if she was instinctively guarding against an accident.

As the car drove forward, the sun continued setting. The golden or orange glow on the high-rise buildings gradually faded.

Before long, the dazzling buildings fell into darkness and grayness one after another like old photos that had faded.

The city's colors dimmed again.

Long Yuehong opened his mouth, wanting to say something. However, he couldn't express his feelings with words.

In fact, it was not like he had never come into contact with a building that was more magnificent and miraculous than the current scene. The underground building that Pangu Biology used as a base was more than 2,000 meters tall. If it had been on the surface, it would have long collapsed due to the lacking support from the materials used.

But Long Yuehong usually lived in the underground building, so it was impossible for him to see the entire building from the outside. Therefore, he naturally couldn't sense the building's grandeur.

The row upon row of high-rise buildings in front of him left an indelible impression on him.

"Is this the Old World?" Shang Jianyao's voice was inexplicably gentle as if he was asking himself a question.

"Yes. Didn't you guys see the corresponding pictures in textbooks?" replied Jiang Baimian, who was sitting in the driver's seat.

The military exoskeleton's 'comprehensive warning system' allowed Jiang Baimian's problematic ears to clearly hear what Shang Jianyao was saying without her cochlear implants.

Long Yuehong looked at Qiao Chu's side profile and muttered, "The feelings the photos give are completely different from the real sight..."

It was only at this moment that he and Shang Jianyao saw more details as they calmed down while the car approached the buildings.

Some of the high-rise buildings were black, some were dark-blue, some were dark-yellow, and some were brightly colored. All of them were somewhat different. However,

the glass walls and ordinary outer walls on their surfaces were either very dirty, looking foggy and stained. Otherwise, they were mottled and even missing.

Some green plants grew out of the cracks and tenaciously expanded their territory. Various birds circled back to their nests on a particular floor under the setting sun's last rays of light.

On both sides of the road, the trees' dense leaves were mostly yellowish. As the wind blew, they scattered down like rain.

Fallen leaves had piled up on the ground, and some even showed signs of decay.

Some of the street signs had fallen to the ground, some hung by their doors, and others were missing several words.

At a glance, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong saw the words 'foot bath,' 'hairstyling,' 'supermarket,' 'stir-fry,' 'barbecue,' 'hot pot,' 'clothing,' 'pets,' and 'police.' However, these corresponding shops were either dilapidated or covered in dust. There was no one.

Cars were randomly parked along the way, seriously hindering traffic. Their frames and glass surfaces were covered in stains that had been washed away by the rain before solidifying again...

Everything was quiet except for the gentle breeze.

This city was long dead.

"Something's not right..." As Jiang Baimian stared ahead, she used the exoskeleton's comprehensive warning system to gather all the details around her.

Before Bai Chen could inquire, Qiao Chu looked into the distance and at the setting sun that filtered through the skyscrapers. He spoke first in a deep voice. "It's almost night. Try not to speak until we enter a safe house without any problems. If you have to say something, keep your volume down."

He then suppressed his voice and pointed to the left. "Turn into that door."

It was a door that could accommodate two cars driving side by side. There was a sentry post in the middle that divided the lane equally. It seemed to allow entry on one side and exit on the other.

The metal fence that could block out vehicles had been lying on the ground for an unknown number of years, and its surface was covered in rust.

Long Yuehong subconsciously looked at the entrance and saw that its shape was closer to the gateway structures in textbooks. It was an archway made of brownish-yellow stone.

In the middle of the archway, most of the golden words had faded away. Only two of them could barely be distinguished: "... Yang ... Yuan."

The jeep quickly passed through the archway and drove through the door.

This was an area surrounded by seven to eight tall buildings. There was a lawn overgrown with weeds, a dirty pool filled with trash, a pavilion that seemed to block the rain, and trees that seemed to bear fruits.

"Turn right, first building." Qiao Chu seemed to be very familiar with this place.

Jiang Baimian followed his instructions and passed through the narrow path between the two abandoned cars. She stopped outside the first building with brownish-yellow outer walls.

"Take some food and enter a unit." Qiao Chu alighted the car first.

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen left the jeep without hesitation and carried a pile of food out of the trunk.

Long Yuehong was a step slower and failed to take on the mission. He could only follow Qiao Chu and Jiang Baimian into the rightmost entrance.

This place was paved with brown tiles, and weeds filled the cracks. It seemed like no one had trimmed them in ages.

After Long Yuehong passed through the foyer, he took a step forward and went straight to the three silver-black elevators. He instinctively pressed the upward button and turned his body to let Qiao Chu enter first.

But the button didn't react at all; it did not light up.

Long Yuehong was stunned for a moment before coming to a realization. "There's no electricity..."

Jiang Baimian looked at the old-looking elevator and the rust-free button before saying, "That's not right..."

This time, Shang Jianyao and the others could tell the problem without her needing to explain.

The elevator, the buttons, the floor tiles' state, and the spreading of weeds didn't look like they had not been maintained for decades. Calling it abandoned for less than a year was closer to the truth.

"Could it be that wilderness nomads used to live here?" Bai Chen raised a possibility.

The next second, she denied this possibility. "No, wilderness nomads don't maintain useless things. Besides, didn't they say that this is a newly discovered city ruin?"

"It's not just that." Upon seeing that Qiao Chu did not stop her, Jiang Baimian added, "The number of fallen leaves piled up on the streets, and the damage to the houses seems to imply one thing: Someone recently 'maintained' this city."

She paused and voiced her guess. "Maybe someone is 'maintaining' this city periodically?"

"A smart robot? Even after humans are gone, smart robots still adhere to their duties?" questioned Long Yuehong immediately.

Jiang Baimian shook her head. "That's unlikely. As far as I know, real smart robot technology only underwent great development before the Old World was destroyed. Products like these were still considered relatively extravagant. It's unlikely that they can be used for such matters unless it's in a place like Mechanical Paradise.

"Yes, it's possible that this place is special."

Qiao Chu listened to their discussion for a while and didn't say anything. He turned around and walked into the staircase. He didn't stop until he reached the sixth floor. He turned into the right corridor and entered the innermost room.

The dark-red door to this room was half-closed and not locked. The doorknob had come off, revealing clear rust.

After passing through the door, Qiao Chu—who was carrying a silver rifle on his back and a United 202 pistol attached—looked back at Shang Jianyao and the others as they entered.

He had a habitual smile on his face, but his eyes were very cold. "Let's rest here. While sleeping, one person will guard the floor-to-ceiling windows and monitor the tunnel's exit. Another person will patrol the room and pay attention to everyone's situation. Once anything abnormal happens, wake everyone up immediately."

Jiang Baimian was puzzled. "You also know about the real nightmares? How... how are they created?"

“A special mutated creature called a Nightmare Horse. As long as your dream is affected by it, dying in the dream is equivalent to dying in reality,” Qiao Chu replied casually. “It chased me for more than 100 kilometers.”

“Why?” Bai Chen had never seen a monster with such patience and perseverance.

Qiao Chu did not answer and prepared to leave the door and walk into the room.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao revealed an unconcealed smile. “I know the reason! It wants to f*ck him!”

Long Yuehong and the others were silent.

Qiao Chu frowned slightly and glanced at Shang Jianyao. “Did you exchange your brain or your ability to think for powers at Star Cluster Hall? Don’t write off the problems now. When you enter the Sea of Origins, your symptoms will only worsen. Forget it; you won’t have a chance to enter either.”

“You know so much... How impressive.” After hearing Qiao Chu’s words, Jiang Baimian praised him sincerely. “Where exactly are you from?”

Qiao Chu thought for a few seconds, straightened his black trench coat, and bowed slightly. “Then let me reintroduce myself. Eighth Research Institute’s commissioner, Qiao Chu.”

Chapter 64: At Night

“Eighth Research Institute...” Jiang Baimian repeated the term in a low voice. Clearly, she had never heard of such an organization.

Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong were the same. The gazes they directed at Qiao Chu had even greater hints of admiration.

Great strength with a mysterious background had always been an element that effectively left people infatuated.

The helmeted Jiang Baimian’s lips quivered as if she was organizing her words. She wanted to ask about the Eighth Research Institute’s location, which technology it had inherited, its relationship with the Old World, and why it had sent a commissioner to this city ruin deep in the Great Swamp.

Without waiting for her to speak, Qiao Chu turned around and walked to the right, leaving behind a light sentence. “Remove your exoskeleton and conserve electricity.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian agreed immediately.

This was also what she wanted to do. The electricity stored up by the solar panel was all given to the jeep today, and it was already nighttime. Although they still had a spare high-performance battery, they had to make sure that they had sufficient energy in such a strange Old World city ruin. It was better to be prepared.

While Bai Chen helped Jiang Baimian remove the military exoskeleton, Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong sized up their current location.

The first thing they saw was an LCD screen. It was several inches larger than the ones in the Rec Center on the 495th floor. It hung on the wall in front of them and was abnormally eye-catching.

“This is good stuff...” Long Yuehong sighed, eager to give it a try.

If he could take it back to the company—no, move it back to the company—he didn’t know how many contribution points he could exchange for it, even if it was already broken.

Although these were mostly items that needed to be handed over, the company would still give them a certain level of reward.

Qiao Chu walked to the rightmost window and glanced at Long Yuehong. “In the buildings you saw just now, there’s such a display behind most of the glass windows.”

Long Yuehong recalled the high-rise buildings he had seen and blurted out, “That many?”

He then asked Qiao Chu in confusion, “Why did you suddenly say that?”

Beside him, Shang Jianyao smiled and interrupted, “It means that we have to pick something more valuable, even if we are picking up trash!”

“This is a rich mine.” Bai Chen added in a customary term used between wilderness nomads.

‘Rich mine’ referred to an area with plenty of resources and that there was no need to worry about not finding anything to pick up for a certain period of time.

In such a situation, one had to carefully choose because the number of items they could bring with them every time was limited. Otherwise, they would be failing to meet the expectations of such an expedition.

This was like entering a gold mine. One definitely had to stuff more gold into their bags, not ordinary rocks.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and agreed with Shang Jianyao's words. He then continued studying the surroundings.

Under the LCD screen with many stains on its surface was a long, short wooden cabinet. It looked gray. Its original milky-white color was barely recognizable.

On the short wooden cabinet was an emerald-green cup, two electronic equipment—the size of a palm—with wires inserted, and a transparent, long-necked bottle.

About a third of the dirty water remained in the bottle, and some black chips floated above it.

This matched Jiang Baimian's previous judgment.

If nobody had 'maintained' this city since the Old World was destroyed, the water in the bottle should have evaporated. The windows were tightly shut, and the rooms were dry. It didn't seem like rain had entered.

Opposite the wall that faced the hanging LCD screen was a coffee table—the same color as the short wooden cabinet. On it were some dirty water glasses and a black pack of tissues.

On the left side of the coffee table was a trash can filled with holes. Inside was a blue, translucent plastic bag. On the other side of the coffee table was a very dirty-looking, cloth-covered sofa. It was unknown if the sofa was originally violet-blue or dark-gray.

Between the coffee table and the short wooden cabinet was a faded, folded stool. Its surface was pink, and the outline and pattern seemed to form a cartoon pig. On the right side of the coffee table was a relatively wide area. Qiao Chu was standing there.

Behind Qiao Chu was a row of wooden railings covered in dust. Several large, glass windows stood on the railing's outer side, acting as walls.

Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong had never learned what such windows were called in textbooks. However, they felt that it was quite an image after hearing Qiao Chu call them floor-to-ceiling windows.

On both sides of the floor-to-ceiling windows was a sink area with a stone platform on one side and a few brownish-red pots on the other.

The soil in the pot was yellowish-brown and had a certain level of dryness. The plants planted inside seemed to have been reduced to ashes long ago. They were buried deep in the soil, leaving no traces behind.

In front of Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong was an aisle with several rooms inside.

On their left was a small round table. Above it was a tablecloth with a few simple flowers embroidered on it. The tablecloth's original white color was now almost gray.

Around this round table were four ordinary armchairs with mottled cream-white surfaces. One of them had a clear crack, and the wood inside looked severely rotten.

Across the round table—near the door—was a half-open room. Shang Jianyao immediately saw the same electric cooker as the one back home.

It was also covered in peeling paint, and many places were rusted.

Adjacent to the rice cooker were two metal objects that appeared to be stoves. On them were one large pot and one small pot. The large pot was iron-black in color, while the small one was pink on the outside and grayish-white on the inside.

In addition to these, Shang Jianyao also saw a tap, a metal sink, and various cabinets.

Based on his general knowledge, Shang Jianyao came to the conclusion that this area was probably a kitchen.

Long Yuehong—who was beside him—looked over and sighed with emotion. “How extravagant...”

Shang Jianyao nodded in agreement. “That’s right, that’s right.”

From what they knew, only senior employees could have a room with an attached kitchen. For a room with such a large kitchen, they probably had to search for one among the management’s residences in the Residential Zone.

As he spoke, Shang Jianyao raised his feet and quietly retreated step by step.

Qiao Chu looked over.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already retreated to the door and looked up.

“605...” He read out the door number.

“What are you doing?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

“There are five rooms on each floor, and each block has a total of 20-30 floors. Each building has several blocks...” Shang Jianyao muttered to himself. “There are still hundreds of such large rooms.”

Qiao Chu clearly did not grasp what was on Shang Jianyao’s mind. He calmly said, “Come in; close the door behind you.”

After Shang Jianyao gently closed the door, Long Yuehong came to his senses. “There are seven to eight buildings here, and there are more buildings in the vicinity... Is this the Old World?”

Shang Jianyao ignored him and squatted down to open the wooden cabinet on the entrance’s right side.

A putrid smell instantly wafted out as he found rows of different kinds of shoes inside the wooden cabinet.

Qiao Chu pinched his nose and said, “Close it!”

Shang Jianyao didn’t take a careful look and immediately slammed the cabinet door.

“How extravagant!” Long Yuehong sighed again. What kind of family is this? They actually have so many shoes!

At this moment, the sun had already set below the horizon. The sky seemed to be made of gray metal, reflecting a sliver of light.

Shang Jianyao and the others saw the entire city turning darker through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The high-rise buildings were like lone islands being swallowed by the increasingly ferocious dark ‘tide.’

Their hearts seemed to sink.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the nearby block—followed by a bang.

Jiang Baimian and the others looked at each other and made a judgment at the same time—that was the sound of a gunshot!

Someone had fired a shot just now!

Before they could speak, a hoarse roar resounded through the area. This roar quickly spread out as responses came from all directions.

“Roar!”

“Woo!”

This commotion continued without end, and the sounds were all approaching the area where the gunshot was fired.

The city—which had been completely silent moments ago—instantly became lively.

The roars subsided after a minute or two, and the entire city fell into extreme silence.

Jiang Baimian—who had already taken off her military exoskeleton—frowned and thought for a few seconds. “Heartless?”

As far as she knew, Heartless lingered and loitered in many city ruins. The exact number depended on the local ecosystem and the number of remaining supplies that could support the population.

Qiao Chu was still carrying the silver rifle on his back. He faced the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared at the dead city outside. “Yes.”

“The Ruin Hunters that entered the ruins from other paths encountered an attack by the Heartless and fired, triggering a chain reaction?” Jiang Baimian tried her best to reenact the scene.

This time, Qiao Chu ignored her and stood there quietly, seemingly looking at something.

Shang Jianyao then asked, “Could the howling we heard in the wilderness come from them?”

“Impossible. How can sounds of such a decibel level travel so far?” Jiang Baimian replied thoughtfully. “However, we might have heard the Heartless’s howling in the area we were in back then. They were responding to the most exaggerated howl in the beginning. Based on the direction, the howl that echoed through the wilderness might really have originated from here...”

“From the power of the howl and the fact that it can trigger the Heartless’s response, that monster is probably very dangerous! Extremely dangerous!” Long Yuehong joined in the discussion, becoming increasingly nervous.

Upon hearing this, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen’s expressions suddenly flickered as if they recalled their decision not to approach the dangerous area back then.

This was completely contradictory to their current state.

Jiang Baimian’s eyes flickered slightly, and her expression gradually turned heavy. She subconsciously looked at Qiao Chu.

At this moment, Qiao Chu had already turned around and smiled. “Since we’re already here, we can only protect ourselves first. At the same time, think about what’s most precious and what you want to protect the most.”

His golden eyes momentarily lost their focus as if they were a deep lake reflecting the sun.

Jiang Baimian pursed her lips, and her eyes softened again. "I understand."

Shang Jianyao and the others returned to their original state of discussion.

Qiao Chu retracted his gaze and looked around. "Have dinner first; then, take turns resting until midnight."

Chapter 65: Searching the Rooms

After hearing Qiao Chu's words, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao spoke at the same time.

"I..."

Upon seeing that the other party had something to say, they shut their mouths again. The scene immediately fell into a strange silence.

After a few seconds, Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "You speak first."

Shang Jianyao nodded seriously. "I want to use the bathroom first."

"...Don't you have any other thoughts?" Jiang Baimian was almost speechless.

Shang Jianyao didn't think before answering, "I'll also inspect the other rooms while doing so."

"Inspect... Wouldn't it be better to use the word 'patrol?'" Jiang Baimian asked habitually. She then nodded in satisfaction. "Go ahead."

As soon as she finished speaking, she turned to look at Long Yuehong. "When resting in such a sealed room, you have to remember to make sure that there's nothing abnormal inside. This isn't a problem that can be resolved simply by having night duty. This is because such an environment is cramped and filled with obstacles. It's not conducive for escaping or fighting. Even if you can discover an accident in time, it will still be rather troublesome."

At this point, Jiang Baimian subconsciously glanced at Qiao Chu, surprised by his lapse in wariness. Is this commissioner from the Eighth Research Institute too confident and not afraid of accidents, or is he just inexperienced in such matters?

Qiao Chu did not look at her. He took off the silver rifle on his back and pulled a relatively intact brownish-yellow chair in front of him. He then walked to the old coffee table and took out several pieces of tissue from the pitch-black box. After that, he turned around to wipe the chair that had accumulated dust.

Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong didn't know if he should search the room with Shang Jianyao or help Qiao Chu clean up.

"Just remember it for now. Have a seat." Jiang Baimian did not make things difficult for him.

Long Yuehong reflexively sat on the sofa. However, the grayish surface—the original color was unknown—suddenly sank before it tore apart with a crack.

Long Yuehong failed to sit still and almost fell into the sofa.

Jiang Baimian retracted her gentle gaze and glanced at her subordinate's sorry plight. She chuckled and said, "Be careful. These are all antiques from 70-80 years ago or even older. Besides, I don't know how much bacteria and viruses are in the dust. Although you have undergone genetic enhancement and have a physique that isn't prone to diseases, you have to be careful."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Long Yuehong stood up and loudly replied as he had done many times in the past.

"Team leader..." Qiao Chu repeated this term in a low voice with an indifferent gaze. He did not care much.

He had already cleaned the chair and sat down.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen began to clean up the sofa, chairs, and coffee table. Shang Jianyao returned to the intersection between the living room and the dining room and walked toward the short aisle deep in the room.

At this moment, the room became dark as night fell.

The living room area was fine since the floor-to-ceiling windows were large. Even though there was no moon outside, the starlight still shone in a little, barely allowing Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others to see each other's faces. After entering the aisle, Shang Jianyao could only make out the rough outline of things.

Shang Jianyao unzipped his camouflage backpack and took out a silver flashlight with a granular feel. He did not always hang the flashlight on his belt. Occasionally, he would put it in the Security Department's standard backpack.

With the help of the flashlight's orange-yellow light beam, Shang Jianyao saw the scene in front of him clearly.

On both sides of the aisle were brownish-red wooden doors, but they were asymmetrical. Their styles were also different. The one on the left was closer to the entrance. Above it was thick glass that prevented the interior from being seen clearly.

The one on the right was almost at the end of the aisle. Its handle was brass colored, and some places were covered in green rust.

On the wall at the end was another brownish-red wooden door to the left.

Shang Jianyao first walked to the door on the aisle's left because it was the closest. During this process, he drew his Ice Moss pistol to prevent any accidents.

Shang Jianyao turned the doorknob with the hand holding the flashlight. After pushing open the door, Shang Jianyao was in no rush to enter. He shone the flashlight in for a while.

He saw a sink, something that resembled a toilet in a textbook, a glass door that seemed movable, producing a section that contained a showerhead.

"Bathroom," Shang Jianyao muttered before walking in.

From his point of view, he could see every angle clearly. Sometimes, he would jump up and look at the ventilation duct above. Sometimes, he would squat down and examine the small space between the toilet and the sink as if he thought that a person could be hidden there.

Finally, he only found some moss and a few ants in some dark places, but not much.

After finishing his inspection, he walked to the toilet and lifted the lid.

There was no more water inside.

Shang Jianyao tried the different buttons on the toilet bowl in a scientific manner and realized that they had lost their functions.

He straightened his body, twitched his nose dramatically, and took a few deep breaths.

"There's no smell..." He came to a conclusion a few seconds later. It was impossible to tell if his expression was one of relief or regret.

He then tested the showerhead and confirmed that no water flowed out.

After completing the inspection, Shang Jianyao fell into deep thought. It was unknown what he was thinking.

After a while, he placed the Ice Moss pistol back on his belt and reached into the sink to pull out the metal filter. It was too rusted, and Shang Jianyao almost broke it.

After putting this item to the side, Shang Jianyao propped himself up with one hand and jumped up. He firmly stood on the sink and stepped to the side, appearing extremely balanced.

He then clamped the flashlight under his chin, lowered his pants, and aimed at the sink's hole.

After relieving himself, Shang Jianyao jumped down and stuffed the metal filter back into its original spot.

In the living room outside, Qiao Chu frowned and pinched his nose when he heard the commotion. Long Yuehong and Bai Chen revealed complicated expressions.

Jiang Baimian did not hear any of this. She seriously distributed the compressed biscuits, energy bars, and other food.

Shang Jianyao left the bathroom and politely closed the door. He then walked to the end of the aisle with a gun in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

At this moment, there was a door on his right and a door on his left.

He gestured with his pistol and flashlight and decided to choose the left door.

He was also very careful when opening the door.

The most eye-catching thing inside was a relatively wide bed. On the bed was a dirty, light-green bed sheet with two pillows covering the same pillowcase.

On the right side of the bed was a short cabinet. To the short cabinet's right was a row of tall, dilapidated, cream-colored cabinets that reached the ceiling.

On the bed's left side was a table with a sizable LCD screen and a black metal box.

Near the LCD screen were a mouse and a keyboard that Shang Jianyao recognized, as well as a dark-blue object covered in honeycomb patterns.

Further to the left of this table were the wall and a large windowsill. On the windowsill was a brown rug that had many holes—perhaps the work of rats. On the rug was a small wooden table.

Shang Jianyao held a flashlight and walked toward the windowsill from the aisle between the end of the bed and the wall.

He bent down and carefully searched for a while. Finally, he could only mutter to himself regretfully, "There's no rat feces..."

This sentence echoed in the slightly empty room as if it carried some doubts.

Shang Jianyao then walked to the table where the LCD screen was placed and picked up different items with his gun-wielding hand.

As a graduate of Pangu Biology's electronics department, it was not difficult for him to recognize the computer in front of him.

He tried his best to turn his head and look at the camouflage backpack behind him, giving up on the idea of stuffing such large objects inside.

Finally, he picked up the object that seemed to be covered in black honeycombs. It was only slightly bigger than a palm.

Coupled with his professional knowledge and his knowledge of the Rec Center's small market, Shang Jianyao quickly confirmed that it was a small speaker—a speaker that could play music.

He quickly plucked out the wire on the speaker and completely pulled the item away from the computer.

After cleaning the dark-blue speaker with the bedsheets beside him, Shang Jianyao took off his camouflage backpack and stuffed it inside.

He wasn't sure if the speaker could still be used, and he even felt that it couldn't be used anymore. However, it didn't matter. He knew how to repair the speaker as long as he could find suitable and intact components to replace the broken parts.

After wearing the camouflage backpack again, Shang Jianyao held the gun in one hand and the flashlight in the other. He checked every corner and the different items in the room.

He quickly circled to the other side. He bent down to look at the bottom of the bed before pulling open the bedside table's drawer.

This short cabinet had a total of two drawers. The first one Shang Jianyao opened was the one on top. There was a dazzling array of items inside, but it was also filled with a putrid smell.

“Ultra Thin... Aspirin... Cold medicine...” He flipped through the items one by one before putting them back.

He then pulled open the drawer below. It was empty; nothing was inside.

Shang Jianyao stared at it for a few seconds before retracting his gaze. He straightened his body and walked to the closet.

After opening the closet door, he saw a black jacket, a white muslin dress, and other clothes with styles he couldn't put his finger on. They hung there neatly. Other than the slightly unpleasant smell, they seemed no different from back when they were used.

Shang Jianyao recognized the dress because some women in Pangu Biology liked wearing such clothes very much.

It was something highly impractical. With all the energy from the environment being directed to the Indoor Ecosystem Zone—leaving only a small portion for the Residential Zone—long-sleeved clothes and long pants were the best choices. This also made work very convenient.

Only women from slightly more well-to-do families would use their contribution points to exchange for cloth and make such dresses for themselves following the dress styles worn by certain management families.

These clothes would be one of their most precious items. They only wore such clothes when they watched the end-of-year performances, participated in certain collective activities, or when strolling in some corner with their lovers.

Shang Jianyao subconsciously stretched out his hand and touched the white muslin dress.

Perhaps it was because the closet rod had long decayed, or perhaps it was because it was in a fragile balance, but the rod slid down with a swish the moment Shang Jianyao touched the dress. This caused many clothes to fall to the wooden board below.

Shang Jianyao silently stared at it for a few seconds before retracting his hand that was holding the Ice Moss.

He continued to check the drawers in the closet, but he didn't find anything noteworthy.

He quickly left the room and entered the one on the right of the aisle.

This room was even smaller. It only had a not-too-wide bed, a row of milky-white wardrobes, and a desk with a desk lamp.

The bed sheet was blue with many golden stars on it. It was much cuter than the one next door. However, it also had many stains on it.

Shang Jianyao searched everywhere. Finally, he leaned over to the pillow and shone the flashlight back and forth.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao placed the flashlight on the bed and adjusted his position.

Under the light's illumination, he then stretched out a hand and twirled out a long strand of hair on the pillow's edge.

White hair.

Chapter 66: Midnight

"I found something." Shang Jianyao held the long strand of white hair and quickly walked back to the living room.

To allow Qiao Chu, Jiang Baimian, and the others to see it clearly, he turned the flashlight around and shone it at his hand.

The yellow beam of light spread out slightly, reflecting Shang Jianyao's extremely gloomy face.

Long Yuehong almost jumped up and shot him.

Shang Jianyao seemed to have expected Long Yuehong's reaction, but he only added, "Look at my hand."

Long Yuehong slowly exhaled and looked over.

In the yellowish beam of light, fine dust danced, and a strand of white hair swayed gently.

"Where did you find it?" Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao pointed at the wall with a hanging LCD screen. "On the pillow in this bedroom."

"There's only one strand?" asked Jiang Baimian.

"In theory, yes. Unless it can devour its companions and evolve on its own," replied Shang Jianyao seriously.

"Do foundational classes teach such stuff these days?" questioned Jiang Baimian casually, seemingly distracted by various possibilities.

Bai Chen—who was listening quietly—tugged at the old scarf around her neck and said, "Left behind when the Old World was destroyed?"

Hair didn't rot easily in such an environment.

"It doesn't make sense that there's only one strand left." Jiang Baimian voiced her doubts. "Besides, didn't we come to a preliminary judgment? This city has periodically

been 'maintained' to certain levels. Some of the situations in this room are also confirming this, just like how we discovered traces of rat activity in the dining room and kitchen earlier. But apart from bite marks and scratches, they didn't leave anything behind."

Long Yuehong couldn't help but mutter, "This sounds more and more terrifying..."

A city that had long died was still periodically clearing away junk to 'maintain' itself!

Without knowing the reason, this was even more terrifying than the ghost stories on the radio!

"The rats might have been eaten by the active Heartless here. They also need food." Bai Chen voiced her guess.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. "That's possible. However, will the Heartless help the mice clean up? They only have survival instincts left."

Shang Jianyao switched off the flashlight in his hand and said seriously, "What's impossible? Don't they all know how to sing?"

"..." Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him. "Why would you call those roars a song? Besides, even if they have a certain instinct to clean up the environment—although I've never seen Heartless anywhere else do that—let's assume that they do. In short, they should be frequently conducting 'maintenance' and not just after a long period has passed. After all, they don't have many thoughts and only act according to their instincts."

Judging by the streets, buildings, and rooms' conditions, it had been a long time since the city was maintained.

Shang Jianyao tried to 'reason.' "Humans have the instinct to be lazy. How often do you clean your room?"

Jiang Baimian was momentarily speechless. She looked at Qiao Chu and said, "I'm just a little more casual when carrying out missions in the wilderness. This is a sign of social camaraderie. In the company, if you cook by yourself, you will clean up every day—perhaps more than once a day. If you eat in the canteen, you will clean up once every three days and do major cleaning once a month."

Since their discussion began, Qiao Chu—who had been silent all this while, suddenly asked, "Are you from Pangu Biology, United Industries, Orange Company, or Future Intelligence?"

"We are from Pangu Biology," Jiang Baimian replied truthfully.

Qiao Chu touched the silver rifle on his knees and nodded slightly. "There's no need to discuss that strand of hair. It's not a big deal."

"Eat, rest, and wait for midnight."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao and the others gave up on the discussion and found their seats. They ate compressed biscuits and energy bars while drinking water from the waterskins.

After filling her stomach, Jiang Baimian stood up, walked to the dining area's window, and looked down at the overgrown lawn.

She originally wanted to lay out her request directly, but she became a little embarrassed after looking at Qiao Chu. "I'll go down to relieve myself."

"You can relieve yourself with the bathroom here." Shang Jianyao looked eager as if he wanted to share the method he had discovered with his companions.

"There's no need... It'll affect your rest." Jiang Baimian rejected his kindness.

Sitting in the chair, Qiao Chu—who seemed to be resting with his eyes closed—opened his eyes and said, "You can go to the corner of Unit 601."

Jiang Baimian instinctively shook her head. "It's best to be careful in such a strange place. If we don't mask stronger scents and have it close to us, it might attract unnecessary trouble."

"It's fine." Qiao Chu insisted on his opinion.

Jiang Baimian did not want to retort and chose to obey.

Bai Chen stood up as well. "I'll go with you."

"We can keep an eye on each other." Jiang Baimian nodded and smiled. "Even if you don't want to go, I would've dragged you along."

Long Yuehong tucked his thighs and looked at Shang Jianyao. "Shall we go together later?"

"Alright," Shang Jianyao replied regretfully. "Since Qiao Chu said that it's fine, we can completely relax a little. For example, we can stand on the railing, open the window, and aim out..."

"Stop!" Long Yuehong stopped Shang Jianyao's abnormal train of thought—or rather, his sudden fantasy.

After this interlude, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen each occupied one end of the sofa. They curled up and prepared to rest.

Qiao Chu remained sitting on the chair with his eyes closed. It was unknown if he was resting or if he had already fallen asleep.

Shang Jianyao sat cross-legged on the railing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window. He looked in the direction of the tunnel and monitored the activity in the dark city. Jiang Baimian did not carry the grenade launcher but an Ice Moss pistol. She walked back and forth in the living room, constantly watching out for any abnormalities that happened to the people sleeping.

After a few minutes, a scream of terror sounded somewhere in the city.

In this abnormally quiet night—amidst the city ruins that resembled a deathly still forest—the tragic cries reached far and wide.

Long Yuehong—who had not fallen asleep—felt his scalp tingle as he trembled.

Gunshots sounded one after another.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

This string of activity was like firecrackers, and it vanished as quickly as it sounded.

After a while, Shang Jianyao used the weak starlight to see a figure jump out of a nearby alley.

This figure was hunched, and his actions resembled those of an ape, not a human. He wore messy clothes and had some cloth tied to them. He quickly approached the building where Shang Jianyao and the others were.

He then ran towards the other end of the street that was covered in yellow leaves. From time to time, he skillfully climbed to a high spot before jumping down lightly.

Upon seeing this scene, Shang Jianyao felt that it would be very difficult for him to complete such actions, even if he had undergone genetic enhancement and systematic training. After all, the enhancement's main direction was not this.

At this moment, the clouds high in the sky moved. Moonlight leaked out a little, barely allowing Shang Jianyao to make out the figure's appearance.

This figure was likely a male. His black hair was messy and dirty, but it wasn't too long. It didn't reach his shoulder.

As if sensing Shang Jianyao's gaze, the figure suddenly turned his head and looked upstairs.

A blank expression immediately appeared in Shang Jianyao's eyes.

Heartless.

This was a Heartless, a Heartless in his prime.

Shang Jianyao did not dodge the Heartless's gaze. He opened his eyes and quietly stared at the Heartless from a great distance.

Finally, the Heartless retracted his gaze and continued heading toward the shadows of the tall buildings in the distance before disappearing.

A smile gradually appeared on Shang Jianyao's face as if he had obtained a decisive victory.

Suddenly, he saw a figure.

This figure also had a hunched body and was much slower than the Heartless from earlier.

Shang Jianyao looked over and saw a wrinkled, shriveled face and messy, white hair.

This figure flashed and burrowed into the left alley—Shang Jianyao's blind spot.

In the next two hours, Shang Jianyao saw several Heartless. Jiang Baimian also noticed this and expressed her doubts about the number of Heartless here.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong woke up later and took over their duties.

By the time Long Yuehong woke up Shang Jianyao, Qiao Chu had already left the chair and stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"It's almost midnight," said Qiao Chu calmly. He then retracted his gaze from the dark city ruin and instructed coldly and gently, "Help me put on the exoskeleton."

Before long, Qiao Chu put on the military exoskeleton with Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen's help and booted up the system.

After picking up the silver rifle, Qiao Chu—whose body was covered in the black metal skeleton—walked to the floor-to-ceiling windows and pointed at a building a few blocks away. "That's our destination."

Shang Jianyao and the others looked in the direction he pointed in and saw a building—which was quite far away from all the buildings around it. It also seemed to have a large, attached compound.

At this moment, it was quietly standing in the dark city ruins. There was no light shining from inside as if it had long died.

A few seconds later, Qiao Chu turned around. As he walked towards the door, he said in a deep voice, "Let's set off!"

Chapter 67: City at Night

After picking up the rest of the food, the five of them left Unit 605 and went down the stairs to the first floor.

"Shall we drive over?" Jiang Baimian looked at the jeep parked to the side.

The Blackmarsh Iron Snake's outer skin, tied to the car's roof, was so eye-catching that nobody noticed the solar panels.

Qiao Chu shook his head. "It's too loud."

Jiang Baimian wanted to say that this was an electric vehicle. As long as she switched off the simulated sounds, it would be virtually silent.

Unexpectedly, Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—suddenly started jogging and said, "Follow me!"

Jiang Baimian didn't say anything else. She jogged towards the exit with Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen holding their weapons.

There were more clouds in the sky at this moment, and only a few stars were visible. The moon occasionally showed itself, scattering its faint glow.

Darkness was the city ruins' main theme.

In the extremely quiet environment, Shang Jianyao and the others didn't turn on their flashlights. They jogged down the main road and entered the opposite street.

During this process, they kept having the feeling that they were about to be swallowed by the night's darkness. The abandoned vehicles and trees by the road were shadowy, as if they were monsters hiding in the dark.

In the face of such a scene, the Old Task Force naturally dispersed into formation according to their usual training and maintained a certain distance.

Among them, Jiang Baimian followed closely behind Qiao Chu. Long Yuehong was on the right, Bai Chen was on the left, and Shang Jianyao took the rear.

They maintained a certain speed the entire way, ensuring that they didn't ignore their surroundings and kept up their vigilance despite the running.

As he ran, Shang Jianyao suddenly changed directions and diagonally rushed into an open room by the left side of the street.

Jiang Baimian and the others reacted in response. They rolled to the ground, and each found an abandoned vehicle to provide cover and concealment.

Qiao Chu also stopped and turned to look at Shang Jianyao. The exoskeleton's comprehensive warning system told him that there was nothing abnormal around him. However, he still raised his silver rifle—which had a rather special design—in the event of any accidents.

He then used the comprehensive warning system to observe Shang Jianyao's destination.

Although it was a very dim night, Qiao Chu could easily see the situation on the street's left side from a distance with the help of equipment.

Like the other streets, the outlets were situated side by side. The ones facing outside were almost all open. The rooms inside were in terrible states or abnormally old. The only thing they had in common was that there were no signs of life.

Some of their signboards had fallen to the ground and shattered to pieces. Some were mottled and faded. Some words were blurry, and some words were missing. Only a portion remained. Some hung down diagonally, just short of falling.

The room Shang Jianyao had rushed into still had the signboard hanging above. It was blue with a single word left: "...Maintenance..."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already taken out his flashlight and shone it around the narrow room.

He quickly opened all kinds of lockers and found some small pieces of equipment and tools. He also stuffed them into his camouflage backpack, along with the various components and wires—which were either packaged or unpackaged.

After putting on his backpack and latching on the flashlight, Shang Jianyao jogged back to the street with the Berserker assault rifle.

Upon seeing this, Qiao Chu—who was wearing a helmet—ran over with large strides. With his experience, nobody would take the initiative to act on their own unless he

showed signs of attacking. They would definitely do as he instructed. Even if they were confused or puzzled, they would ask and provide suggestions at most.

On this point, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen acted sufficiently 'normal.'

When he arrived in front of Shang Jianyao, Qiao Chu asked in a deep voice, "Why did you leave the team without permission?"

Shang Jianyao frankly replied, "A brain spasm."

"..." Qiao Chu narrowed his eyes. Shang Jianyao's figure instantly appeared in the goggles in a relatively abstract manner as the shape of crosshairs took form.

This was the precision aiming system that naturally activated when Qiao Chu raised the silver rifle.

After a few seconds of silence, Qiao Chu slowly exhaled and lowered the muzzle. "Continue to the destination."

Although his voice was not loud, Jiang Baimian and the others had been paying attention to the situation here. They quickly left their hiding spots and got back into formation.

The five of them followed their previous formation and posture and ran towards the three-way junction at the end of the street.

The night wind was a little cold in the city ruins. It made Long Yuehong feel like he had returned to Pangu Biology—the period after lights-out.

When Long Yuehong was about to turn left on the road, he couldn't help but look up at the sky. Ever since he came to the surface, his first wish was to see the real sky. His second wish was to see the sun that illuminated everything. His third wish was to see the starry sky depicted in the textbooks.

He had already fulfilled his first and second wishes. Only his third wish remained unfulfilled.

The weather had recently been abnormal for a long time. There were often many clouds at night, and he could only occasionally see a few stars and a portion of the moon. However, this couldn't be considered a starry sky.

I wonder when I'll be able to see the stars... Just as Long Yuehong retracted his gaze, he saw Qiao Chu and Jiang Baimian raise their hands simultaneously, aim at a spot, and pull the trigger.

The only difference was that Jiang Baimian drew the United 202 instead of using the grenade launcher.

Bam! Bang!

Two slightly different gunshots sounded in succession.

With a flash of silver-white lightning, a figure in tattered clothes—with some exposed parts—fell from a tree in the middle of the right street and smashed into the top of an abandoned car.

His blood quickly pooled.

The crude shotgun in his hand flew out and landed on the road.

“A Heartless.” Jiang Baimian held the grenade launcher firmly with her left arm. Her night vision was clearly better than an ordinary person’s.

Bai Chen subconsciously asked, “Shall we pick up the gun?”

Jiang Baimian shook her head. “There’s no need for the gun. It’s obvious that a wilderness nomad settlement made the gun. There’s no need for it.”

The Old World had been destroyed for many years, and many guns were useless. Many bullets of certain calibers had been expended. The large factions with certain production capabilities started with replicating the Old World’s weapons to maximize the supplies’ use. But in recent decades, the large factions gradually made internal standardizations. Although these weapons definitely used past weapons as references, the variety had been reduced.

This way, the firearms obtained by many Ruin Hunters and wilderness nomads were broken and couldn’t be repaired, or they would slowly be unable to find suitable rounds. They had to expand their searches of ruins or buy firearms smuggled out from large factions while attempting to create their own weapons and rounds.

Among the latter, a shotgun was undoubtedly a good choice. The required equipment was relatively simple, and many wilderness nomad settlements had them.

For such a shotgun to land in the Heartless’s hands meant that a Ruin Hunter or wilderness nomad had very likely been killed.

“Do we do a body search?” asked Bai Chen.

“There’s no need,” replied Qiao Chu—who had just used the exoskeleton’s electromagnetic weapon—as he turned around.

Bai Chen didn't insist any longer, and the five of them continued jogging toward their designated destination.

After turning into another street, Qiao Chu suddenly slowed down.

Jiang Baimian also raised her hand and pressed it down, indicating for Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong to stop.

Under the slightly brighter moonlight, Shang Jianyao saw a gray, abandoned black car in front of him.

Beside the sedan car sat a person.

This person had a square face and wore a so-called formal suit of the Old World. His upper body was leaning against the car door, and his eyes were tightly shut. It was unknown if he was dead or alive.

"Wu Shoushi..." Jiang Baimian recognized the man. He was the Ruin Hunter they had previously encountered in the wilderness.

The other party and his companion told the Old Task Force about the newly-discovered city ruin north of Yuelu Station.

Wu Shoushi was alone at this moment, and his fate was unknown.

"There are still signs of life." Jiang Baimian made a judgment based on the electric signal she sensed.

Qiao Chu observed for a while before saying, "He's sleeping."

Jiang Baimian's pupils slightly dilated when she heard the word 'sleep.' She quickly raised her right hand, about to fire at Wu Shoushi. However, she was aiming at the car's glass, not at the person.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao had already taken the initiative to fire at the car behind Wu Shoushi.

With a click, a window's glass pane shattered.

Wu Shoushi's eyes flickered as if he were about to wake up. However, his expression suddenly contorted. His entire body convulsed twice before he completely stopped moving.

"He's dead?" Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

“In theory, there’s still a chance of being resuscitated...” Jiang Baimian said, but she had no intention of going forward. At the same time, she observed her surroundings as she moved towards an abandoned car.

Bai Chen was the same and gave a reminder. “That terrifying Nightmare Horse might have already returned.”

Long Yuehong jumped in fright and tried his best to widen his eyes to prevent himself from falling asleep.

Qiao Chu didn’t say anything. He used the comprehensive warning system to focus on finding the possible ‘enemy’ around him.

Shang Jianyao looked at Wu Shoushi—who was in front of him—and suddenly said, “Would you guys sleep on the streets? Although I will...”

“That Nightmare Horse can force people to sleep?” Jiang Baimian instantly understood Shang Jianyao’s meaning. “However, it didn’t show this characteristic when we previously encountered it.”

After she and Shang Jianyao woke up from their real nightmares, they didn’t inexplicably fall asleep again.

“Either it can only make one person sleep at a time and will choose to give up when facing more targets, or...” Shang Jianyao looked up at Qiao Chu, who was wearing the exoskeleton.

Qiao Chu had survived after facing the Nightmare Horse alone.

Shang Jianyao paused and said, “Or there are other monsters here—monsters that can force people to sleep.”

Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine when he heard that. He felt like something was hiding in the darkness around him.

“I’ll go over and see if he can still be saved. Pay attention to my situation.” Shang Jianyao then walked toward Wu Shoushi in an open and aboveboard manner as bait.

He had just taken two steps when a desolate, hoarse howl suddenly sounded from the city ruins.

“Howl!”

This howl echoed through the clouds, making people tremble.

Chapter 68: Inspection

The desolate, hoarse howl was still echoing when similar sounds echoed from elsewhere in the city ruin. They weren't that loud, but their undulations made one's scalp tingle.

The most terrifying thing was that countless roars came from 100 meters away from Shang Jianyao and the others.

At this moment, the clouds in the sky seemed to have been scattered by such a commotion. Half of the yellow moon's face was temporarily revealed.

Bright light scattered and shone on the buildings—dozens to hundreds of meters tall—at the end of the street.

The windows reflected the moonlight in the rich darkness, revealing countless figures.

It was impossible to see these figures' appearances clearly. The only certainty was that they seemed to be looking at Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others. Furthermore, their bodies were slightly hunched.

Shang Jianyao and the others subconsciously reacted. They each carried out the necessary maneuvers to use a nearby obstacle to provide themselves with cover and concealment. Even Long Yuehong did not slow down much after experiencing such situations several times. He fully showcased his training's effects.

The clouds quickly moved, blocking out most of the moon again. The buildings at the end of the street sank into the darkness again, leaving only faint outlines visible.

After a while, seeing that they wouldn't be attacked, Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—left his hiding spot first. However, he didn't return to the middle of the main road. Instead, he came to the street's left side, paved with dark-red stone bricks. Here, trees—with their leaves still intact—blocked any line of sight from above, preventing him from being targeted by a sniper at the end of the street.

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen similarly closed in on Qiao Chu one after another.

Shang Jianyao looked up at the sky and saw that the moonlight and starlight were getting weaker. He suddenly pounced out from his hiding spot and did two rolls before arriving beside Wu Shoushi. He then dragged the corpse, bent his back, and quickly entered an open outlet by the left side of the street.

This outlet's signboard hung down diagonally, half-broken. Only the two Ashlands words 'Snacks Holdings' could be seen.

Inside the outlet, dusty rectangular tables were lined up in two rows.

Shang Jianyao didn't care if they were dirty or not. He placed Wu Shoushi on one of the tables and proceeded with providing resuscitation by following the first-aid knowledge taught by Jiang Baimian. He undid the other party's top and started doing CPR.

"It looks like it's useless..." Jiang Baimian had come in at some point in time and watched Shang Jianyao complete the process.

Without giving Shang Jianyao a chance to speak, she habitually instructed, "Check his body and see if there are any clues."

Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—walked to the open door. He pursed his lips and looked inside for two seconds. "There's no need. Let's head to our destination as soon as possible."

Jiang Baimian looked back at Qiao Chu and sincerely said, "If we can figure out this Ruin Hunter's encounter and find the real reason why he was sleeping by the street, we should be able to avoid a large number of dangers in our subsequent operations. This area is really strange. The monsters are more terrifying than I imagined—likewise for the number of Heartless. What do they eat to survive?"

Although the Heartless had the instinct to reproduce and wouldn't gradually disappear because of an individual's death, they were also biological beings. Hence, they also needed sufficient food. In the city ruins—which had lost agriculture and industrial support—it was impossible for the Heartless to maintain a population of this size by hunting their own kind, mice, and insects.

The ecological environment would gradually be balanced.

"Maybe this city has plenty of supplies... Heartless have survival instincts and will take the initiative to search for these things." Bai Chen also entered the outlet and guessed the reason.

As for whether the food reserves had expired or not, the Heartless wouldn't consider too much about it. It was almost equivalent to them being brainless.

"Maybe." Jiang Baimian did not deny the possibility. After all, she didn't know where the city ruins were in the Old World. What if there were food reserve warehouses here, just like those discovered in other ruins?

Furthermore, if the Heartless continued reproducing for generations, it was entirely possible for them to evolve and gain the ability to eat raw rice and flour.

Upon hearing the ladies' discussion, Long Yuehong couldn't help but say, "There are many Heartless here, and the situation is strange. Shall we retreat? Just moving some of the things on the road can be considered a great harvest!"

As Long Yuehong spoke, his eyes were fixed on Qiao Chu.

Qiao Chu ignored him and only urged Shang Jianyao, "Hurry up."

He seemed to have accepted Jiang Baimian's words and felt that it was necessary to investigate Wu Shoushi's encounter. Otherwise, it would also be dangerous for him.

After saying that, Qiao Chu seriously patted away the dust on his body.

Shang Jianyao held the flashlight and did a thorough check. He didn't find any obvious injuries on Wu Shoushi, but Wu Shoushi's face had contorted as if he had seen an extremely terrifying object or encountered an extremely terrifying event.

This was very similar to the strange deaths north of Yuelu Station as described by the bald hunter, Harris Brown.

Coupled with Qiao Chu's words, Shang Jianyao could make a preliminary judgment that they had died from the Nightmare Horse's attack.

As for where the monster was and how far it was from here, he had no way of knowing.

Shang Jianyao then took off Wu Shoushi's clothes and searched for any inconspicuous traces.

Jiang Baimian came over and helped Shang Jianyao quickly complete the inspection. "There's a circle of skin around his wrist that's fairer than the rest of his skin. This means that he used to wear a watch, but it might have dropped somewhere... There aren't any recent injection holes... Unfortunately, there's no way to do a blood test here. It's difficult to determine if he'd inhaled anesthetic gas..."

She then straightened her body and looked at Qiao Chu, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong with a slightly solemn expression. "There's a high chance that he was forced into sleeping by abilities similar to the Nightmare Horse's. What we can't be sure of is whether the Nightmare Horse did this or another monster."

"It's not a Nightmare Horse," Qiao Chu said very firmly.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "Oh... Do you know what a Nightmare Horse's roar is like?"

Qiao Chu opened his mouth as if he wanted to simulate it, but he felt too ashamed and eventually gave up on the idea.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao stood up. He held the flashlight and seriously asked, “Is it like that?”

Just as he said that, he mimicked the most sonorous and most terrifying roar from before. He did not show any signs of embarrassment. Of course, he kept his volume down.

“No.” Qiao Chu shook his head and denied it without hesitation.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly. “It seems like the most terrifying monster in this city ruin isn’t the Nightmare Horse.”

This was what she wanted to determine from her previous question—whether the Nightmare Horse was the one letting out the loudest roar, which attracted a series of responses.

“Then, was it like this?” Shang Jianyao repeated the roars he had heard previously.

“None of them.” Qiao Chu—who was wearing a helmet—couldn’t help but ask, “Can’t you just imitate a horse’s neigh? A Nightmare Horse’s roar is almost identical to a normal horse’s neigh. It’s just slightly different.”

Shang Jianyao glanced at Qiao Chu. “I’ve never seen a horse.”

With that said, Shang Jianyao turned around, bent down, and checked Wu Shoushi’s pocket.

The first thing he flipped out was a brass badge. On the front of the badge was a human face engraving with blurry facial features, a saber, and a spear. A small chip was embedded in the back.

Shang Jianyao had previously seen such a thing and knew that it was the Hunter’s Guild badge. He casually handed it to Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian did not read the chip’s contents and directly put it away.

The missions that Wu Shoushi previously completed had little to do with his encounters in this expedition.

The second item Shang Jianyao found was a blue and white checkered handkerchief. This handkerchief looked very old. Its surface had a few lint balls, but it was folded neatly.

Shang Jianyao shook open the handkerchief, but he didn’t find any clues. He then folded it and stuffed it back into Wu Shoushi’s chest pocket.

The third item he found was half a piece of black chocolate wrapped in tin foil. This chocolate had clear signs of melting and hardening, but there were no bite marks.

As Shang Jianyao flipped the piece of chocolate around, Bai Chen suddenly said, "It's probably something he just licks or places in his mouth to suck when he wants to eat it."

Bai Chen spoke very calmly as if she was already accustomed to such customs.

Shang Jianyao nodded slightly and asked, "Do you want it?"

Bai Chen shook her head. "There's no need to take it in a city ruin like this."

There had to be a lot of supplies that could be found here.

Shang Jianyao didn't ask anyone else and continued searching through Wu Shoushi's clothes.

The fourth item he found was a piece of paper that was also folded neatly. The words on the paper were rather neat: "I owe Ruxiang a canned beef.

"I owe Ah Gang two payments and a large bag of compressed biscuits.

"I owe Cripple Zhang half a bowl of oil.

"I owe Olenc a pistol and ten rounds.

"I owe Little Guang one serving of meat.

"I owe Ruxiang a flower..."

Shang Jianyao quickly finished reading it and refolded the paper before putting it in his pocket.

"Don't tell me you want to help him pay the debt?" Jiang Baimian was a little surprised. However, she wouldn't be too surprised about anything Shang Jianyao did.

Shang Jianyao replied expressionlessly, "If we encounter his companions, I'll give them this paper and the Hunter's Badge."

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and didn't say anything else.

The fifth 'item' that Shang Jianyao found was 12 coins in Wu Shoushi's pocket. From their patterns and shapes, they likely belonged to the Old World.

Long Yuehong glanced at the coins and asked in surprise, "Are the Old World's coins still usable?"

“Sure, but we don’t look at the face value. We only look at what metal it is and how heavy it is,” Bai Chen explained simply.

Of the 12 coins, seven were silver-white while five were golden. Shang Jianyao looked at them for a while before putting them into his camouflage backpack’s small compartment.

After that, apart from Wu Shoushi’s clothes, pants, and shoes, he only found Wu Shoushi’s black pistol.

“Ubei 7, there are still five rounds.” Shang Jianyao identified the gun model and latched the gun on his belt.

This gun’s bullet caliber was 7.62 mm, different from the ones they had prepared when they set off.

As for the automatic rifle that Wu Shoushi carried when he first met them, it was nowhere to be found.

After the search, Shang Jianyao put the clothes back on for Wu Shoushi.

“Let’s go,” urged Qiao Chu impatiently when they didn’t receive any clues.

Jiang Baimian and the others did not object and followed him out of the building by the street.

Shang Jianyao was the last to leave. He looked up and suddenly jumped up, pulling down the metal door.

With a rattling sound, the outlet was sealed.

Qiao Chu couldn’t help but say, “What’s the use of that? The Heartless can open doors. When the time comes, he will be their food.”

Then, he said in a deep voice, “Follow me!”

Shang Jianyao didn’t do anything else. He followed behind the team and continued holding his gun as he jogged towards a certain spot in the city ruins amidst the deep darkness.

Chapter 69: Crossfire

In the depths of the night, Long Yuehong—who took the team’s left flank—became more and more apprehensive as he advanced.

In fact, he was not this afraid when he left Unit 605 because he had yet to encounter any dangerous enemies or monsters. The Heartless that occasionally appeared were easily dispatched by the team before they could do a thing.

This made Long Yuehong think that he could do the same if he wanted to. In fact, with two pistols and an assault rifle and having undergone genetic enhancement, he could easily finish off two to three Heartless—even if they were armed—as long as he overcame his nervousness.

Of course, carelessness and negligence could result in an adult being killed in crossfire by a child during a shootout.

Long Yuehong believed that he wasn't certain to emerge victorious in a one-on-one battle if a Heartless attacked him. However, the enemy would not put too much pressure on him if they were a child.

Long Yuehong began to feel nervous and anxious when he saw Wu Shoushi—who he had once conversed with—die bizarrely in his dream and realized that they couldn't even find the 'murderer.'

Jiang Baimian had previously told him that psychological trauma in war did not come from killing the enemy opposite him with one's own hands. Instead, it came from the tragic deaths of the people he knew and comrades he had spent time with.

Not only did this bring intense grief and pain, but it also made everyone involuntarily wonder if they would be next. This uncontrollable sense of anxiety led one to have nightmares all the time, causing them to be irritable, anxious, and unable to focus.

At that moment, Long Yuehong felt that he had some of those symptoms. Similarly, the unknowns regarding the murderer's situation clearly intensified his fear.

In the quiet city ruins, the only sound that reached Long Yuehong's ears was the five of them running forward. Apart from that, there was no other sound. In the darkness's depths, the buildings on both sides silently seemed to form a net set up by hunters.

At that moment, Long Yuehong heard his team leader's anxious and loud voice. "Incoming!"

As Long Yuehong had experienced many dangerous situations during this field training, he trusted Jiang Baimian quite a bit. He didn't hesitate when he heard her and reflexively pounced at an ash-red abandoned car by the side of the road.

Almost at the same time, Jiang Baimian jumped up and did a spin in midair, raising her right arm that was holding the United 202 pistol.

Bang!

On the third floor of a building by the street's left side, a glass window shattered. The figure by the window swayed and collapsed.

Under the weak moonlight and starlight, the figure had abnormally long teeth and turbid eyes. It was obvious that this figure was not a normal human.

Immediately after that, there was a crashing sound. On the building's different floors, glass panes shattered one after another as figures appeared.

The moonlight scattered down as the clouds moved, illuminating everything.

The figures had disheveled hair. Their faces were thin, and their hair was thick and long. Their clothes were not too tattered, but the clothes were casually draped over the figures as if they were used only to resist the cold.

All of them had hunched bodies. Some had bloodshot eyes, and some held kitchen knives that shimmered with a cold light. Others held revolvers commonly known as Pythons, and some were completely black in color as if they had melted into the darkness. This made them difficult to discover.

These figures were Heartless!

One figure was tall but had a slight stoop. His beard was thick and stiff. He held a shotgun and quickly cocked the gun before pulling the trigger and firing at Jiang Baimian.

Bang!

Bullets rained down, engulfing the area where the target was.

But Jiang Baimian had already landed. She rolled and hid behind the front of an abandoned sedan car.

On the other side, Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—jumped up. He held the silver rifle in one hand and pulled the trigger with the precision aiming system's help, firing a round that seemed to be wrapped in a silver-white electric arc.

He was actually carrying a Gauss rifle.

Bang!

A blood-colored hole immediately appeared in the Heartless's forehead. His eyes suddenly glazed over as he fell backward.

At the same time, Qiao Chu raised his metal arm—which was equipped with a grenade launcher. He aimed at the broken window that revealed the most figures and pulled the trigger.

On the street's left side, a figure tore out from the second-floor window and jumped down—landing behind Shang Jianyao—before he could stand up from pouncing to the side of the road after hearing Jiang Baimian's warning.

This figure also had a slight stoop. He wore an old and greasy blue work suit that didn't fit him well. In his hand was a large wrench that shimmered silver-white. As soon as he landed, the figure was about to swing his right arm and smash the wrench on Shang Jianyao's head.

Shang Jianyao—who had his back facing the figure—seemed not to notice.

The figure's right arm suddenly froze, unable to be swung out no matter what. As a Heartless who behaved on instinct, he seemed to lack such instincts.

Shang Jianyao did not turn around. He only flipped the assault rifle's muzzle around and fired backward, using his shoulder as support.

Bang!

The skull of the Heartless behind him was blown open as blood and brain matter splattered.

At this moment, Long Yuehong—who was not far away—also realized that a Heartless had jumped down from above.

His mind went a little blank. He followed his instincts and aimed his Berserker assault rifle at the attacker.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

He fired crazily, almost emptying the entire magazine. He fully showcased why the assault rifle in his hand was nicknamed Berserker.

The Heartless was unable to change directions in midair. His body was peppered with holes until it resembled a sieve as blood spewed everywhere.

Long Yuehong snapped back to reality when he heard the trigger's empty click and quickly reloaded.

At this moment, Long Yuehong saw another Heartless jump down from his left without him realizing it. It was a Heartless holding a Python revolver.

The Heartless was seven to eight meters away from Shang Jianyao—who was on the same side of the street—and less than two meters away from Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong's pupils dilated. He instinctively tried to dodge, but it seemed to be too late.

The Heartless had already aimed at him; all he needed to do was pull the trigger to take down Long Yuehong. But the Heartless couldn't squeeze the trigger, no matter how hard he tried. It was as if such an action was missing from his genes.

Bang!

The Heartless's head was hit and exploded like fireworks. Red and white matter splattered everywhere; some even landed on Long Yuehong's face and body.

Long Yuehong subconsciously looked over and saw Shang Jianyao waving at him with a smile. He also saw Bai Chen—on the opposite side of the road—moving her rifle's muzzle away from him.

Before he could breathe, he heard a loud boom.

The grenade fired by Qiao Chu landed in the corresponding room and produced a scarlet fireball.

The glass windows around them shattered.

The Heartless—who had yet to launch an attack—seemed to be shocked. At the same time, they moved away from the windows lining the street, retreated deep into the room, and disappeared into the thick darkness.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian ran out of her hiding spot and shouted, "Leave this place immediately!"

There were too many electric signals here, so she had no way of determining how many Heartless and monsters were hidden here. Furthermore, there were more obstacles here that could interfere with her senses than in the wilderness. This resulted in her losing her perception of the enemies once the Heartless left the rooms beside the road.

Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen had full trust in their team leader. They immediately rushed out and ran to the end of the street.

Qiao Chu's actions of turning around and running had long indicated his thoughts.

They didn't slow down until they ran out of the current street and reached the intersection ahead. Only then did they feel like they had escaped the encirclement.

Long Yuehong seized the opportunity to swap the Berserker assault rifle's magazine and filled the empty one with rounds.

Jiang Baimian looked back at the street and frowned. "There are way too many Heartless here, right?"

Shang Jianyao and the others looked over and felt that figures were moving in the darkness, seemingly dragging the corpses across the street.

"They're all generationally-advanced Heartless. They don't look like Ruin Hunters or wilderness nomads who recently entered and ended up being infected with the Heartless disease." Bai Chen gave her judgment.

Generationally-advanced Heartless were more capable of using weapons. Their eyes were only turbid, and they did not have irrational craziness. At the same time, they would take the initiative to change their equipment and add more clothes. They did not wear tattered clothes, with the possibility of wearing a mixture of clothes.

"We're almost at our destination." Qiao Chu looked ahead and urged Jiang Baimian and the others.

The Old Task Force ended the discussion and followed Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—into the night.

After they jogged for 100 meters, two people suddenly appeared in the alley beside them.

One was a woman in her twenties. She had black hair and brown eyes, and she wore an army-green camouflage uniform. Her facial features were not bad, but she gave off an icy-cold feeling.

The other was a man in his thirties, also with black hair and brown eyes. He wore a plush hat—which had a hole in it—and held an automatic rifle.

Jiang Baimian and Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—were the first to react. The latter was just about to respond when Jiang Baimian put her body in between them and shouted, "Ruxiang?"

She had already recognized the woman as Wu Shoushi's teammate. Her name was Ruxiang.

Upon hearing this, An Ruxiang realized that there was a team not far away. She was vigilant at first and wanted to find cover, but her eyes quickly softened as she involuntarily looked at Qiao Chu.

The man beside her was the same. It was as if he had met someone he had admired for a long time.

The two of them quickly walked over to Qiao Chu's side.

Qiao Chu's face—which was covered by a helmet—had no expression, but he ultimately ignored them.

An Ruxiang then looked at Jiang Baimian. "You guys?"

Jiang Baimian's team was the only team they had recently encountered with an exoskeleton, so it left a deep impression on them.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and turned around. "It's us. I didn't expect to encounter you so quickly."

She paused, and her expression turned serious. "We just encountered Wu Shoushi."

Upon hearing the name 'Wu Shoushi,' An Ruxiang was first stunned before her face twisted.

This name seemed to be an invisible arrow that struck a certain spot in her heart, agitating her until she woke up from her sweet dreams.

She struggled for a while before anxiously asking, "W-where is he?"

Chapter 70: Intelligence

Jiang Baimian took precautions when she heard An Ruxiang's question. She turned around and glared at Shang Jianyao, indicating for him not to speak. She then pursed her lips and said to An Ruxiang, "When we met him, he was sleeping by the side of the road. We were just about to wake him up when his face suddenly contorted. His body convulsed a few times before he completely stopped moving.

"H-he died just like that." At this point, Jiang Baimian suddenly felt that her description was ridiculous. She immediately felt a little apprehensive and quickly added, "Do you believe what I just said? No, I mean, you have to trust us."

Frankly speaking, Jiang Baimian wouldn't have believed such a thing if she hadn't experienced it herself or seen it with her own eyes. After all, very few mutated monsters in the Ashlands had such strange abilities. Furthermore, it hadn't even been three years since Jiang Baimian was transferred to the Security Department. The number of missions she had undertaken was considerable, but not numerous. The mutated creatures she had encountered were considered relatively common.

An Ruxiang's cold and indifferent face had already changed at the beginning of Jiang Baimian's description. Her expression gradually became complicated and difficult to hide.

Although Jiang Baimian couldn't understand what all of the other party's microexpressions meant, she immediately felt strong, intense, and uncontrollable sadness.

Jiang Baimian had met An Ruxiang only once, but she had previously determined that An Ruxiang was very reserved and never revealed her feelings. Now, she saw An Ruxiang's expression for the first time—an expression of losing control.

An Ruxiang took two deep breaths and said, "I believe you. This is because we encountered something similar after entering this city ruin. If you didn't witness it with your own eyes, I believe you wouldn't have fabricated such an experience."

An Ruxiang's voice was deep and hoarse as if she was trying her best to hold back something within her.

The man beside her had a mixed expression of grief and fear.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged An Ruxiang's words and didn't offer any condolences. Instead, she asked, "What exactly did you encounter?"

An Ruxiang wiped the corners of her eyes, and her expression returned to normal. "We drove into this city ruin from a road deep in the swamp. We didn't plan on exploring any of the secrets hidden here. We only planned on plundering at the ruin's edges and returning with some valuable items.

"Just as we got a pile of supplies, Little Guang—one of our teammates—suddenly fell asleep. He fell asleep while moving a box of thick clothes. We thought he had an ailment attack and didn't wake him up immediately.

"In the end, after we confirmed that he was only sleeping, his closed eyes distorted as if he had encountered something extremely terrifying. Th-then, he died."

Jiang Baimian wanted to say, "It seems only one person can be forced to fall asleep at a time." However, she looked at An Ruxiang's eyes and resisted the urge.

An Ruxiang continued, "We were terrified after Little Guang died. We aren't afraid of fighting Heartless and monsters head-on. But this kind of attack—which we have zero knowledge of or defenses against, much less know who is going to be next—is really terrifying and breakdown-inducing.

"We decided to leave this city ruin on the spot. After all, we had already made a sufficient harvest. To our surprise, we strongly believed that something abnormally

precious was at the corner of the street ahead of us and that we had to obtain it. It was as if we were possessed.

“We went over just like that and saw a Heartless. She was female, looking somewhere between 17 and 26 years old. As you know, it is difficult to determine a Heartless’s age based on their looks.

“She was dressed better than the two Heartless we encountered while searching for items. Her clothes weren’t that dirty, and her face was relatively clean. However, her eyes remained turbid and bloodshot.

“Yes, she was wearing a white, shriveled down jacket. Back then, we felt like the abnormally precious item was somewhere on this Heartless. Therefore, we accelerated and approached her, prepared to shoot. However, we didn’t expect a large number of Heartless to appear. They appeared to have been laying an ambush nearby.

“It was a trap!”

Be it An Ruxiang or the man beside her, they couldn’t help but show a little fear at this point.

Jiang Baimian didn’t make a judgment or a guess and asked, “And then?”

An Ruxiang took another deep breath. “When the Heartless lying in ambush appeared, the feeling of being blinded by greed vanished. We no longer felt like the special Heartless had anything abnormally precious that we needed to get our hands on.

“Fortunately, only a portion of the Heartless had guns. Among them, some even used the guns as iron rods. This was probably because they were out of bullets. In short, we managed to get under cover in time. Hence, we didn’t die in the first wave of gunfire.

“What followed was an intense battle. Originally, we would’ve died there after killing multiple Heartless. However, the heavens favored us. For some reason, a mechanical monk in a red kasaya suddenly rushed over from nowhere and attacked all the female Heartless in an extremely brutal manner.

“I could sense that he was also filled with malice toward me.”

Jiang Baimian finally couldn’t help but blurt out, “Jingfa?”

That mechanical monk repaired himself and came to join in the newly-discovered city ruin’s bustle?

“You know him?” An Ruxiang asked in surprise.

“We’ve met before,” Jiang Baimian replied briefly.

Qiao Chu—who didn't stop them from conversing—quietly listened by the side as if he wanted to obtain useful information.

An Ruxiang didn't ask any further and returned to the topic at hand. "With the mechanical monk joining us, we found an opportunity to escape. Shoushi took the initiative to cover our retreat. We had agreed upon a rendezvous place and time, but... Heh heh, he always said that he's a punctual person, but he's definitely going to be late this time..."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao took a few steps forward and said seriously, "Maybe it's because he doesn't wear a watch."

An Ruxiang was stunned for a moment before she suddenly laughed. "Yeah, his precious watch's strap broke during the ambush and dropped there."

An Ruxiang smiled and wiped her eyes. After a few seconds, she spoke with an increasingly hoarse voice. "Back then, it wasn't dark yet. We first found a place to hide for a while. When all the commotion subsided, we circled around and rushed to the rendezvous point. However, we ended up encountering you guys before we even arrived."

"Weren't the gunshots fired by you guys?" Jiang Baimian sighed thoughtfully. She then cursed herself. Seriously, why have I been neglecting things these past two days? I haven't been careful enough.

"Perhaps it was due to Qiao Chu saying that a Nightmare Horse created the real nightmares, but my train of thought has been limited to mutated monsters. From An Ruxiang and the others' encounters, it's very possible that there are mutated Heartless in this city ruin. Furthermore, they are very special and have strange abilities—the kind that's rare in the outside world.

"Apart from monsters that can forcefully make one fall asleep, there's also the possibility of mutated Heartless." Jiang Baimian said this to Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao. At the same time, she reminded An Ruxiang to be careful of such mutated creatures.

Bai Chen nodded and said, "In First City and its affiliated factions, they call such Heartless Superior Heartless."

Long Yuehong felt another wave of horror.

An Ruxiang took a deep breath and said, "I've said everything I can. I believe it will give you some ideas and be of some use to you. Can you tell me where Shoushi is now?"

Jiang Baimian turned around and pointed at the street. "Walk straight and turn right. In the only outlet that has its shutters closed on the right side of the street. However, that

street is relatively dangerous. There are many Heartless. It's best you circle around them."

"Thank you," An Ruxiang and the man replied in unison.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao took a few steps forward and took out the folded piece of paper. "This was on him."

"His Hunter badge." Jiang Baimian also took out Wu Shoushi's Ruin Hunter badge.

An Ruxiang reached out to take the items. She instinctively unfolded the piece of paper and brought it close to her eyes. She scanned it under the not-too-weak moonlight.

"I owe Ruxiang a canned beef.

"I owe Ah Gang two payments and a large bag of compressed biscuits.

"I owe Cripple Zhang half a bowl of oil.

"I owe Olenc a pistol and ten rounds.

"I owe Little Guang one serving of meat.

"I owe Ruxiang a flower..."

An Ruxiang's mouth twitched, but she pursed her lips tightly and didn't open them. This made her expression slightly odd. Something seemed to be reflecting the moonlight in and around her eyes.

Jiang Baimian and the others didn't say a word as they quietly waited for An Ruxiang to compose herself.

After a while, An Ruxiang exhaled and said, "Thank you. There's no need to give me the rest of the items."

With that said, she turned her head and spoke to the man beside her. "Ah Gang, let's go find Shoushi."

"Alright," replied the man in a deep voice.

An Ruxiang didn't stay any longer, nor did she bid farewell. She quickly ran toward the faraway street, planning to circle around and avoid the danger.

Jiang Baimian retracted her gaze and reminded her teammates, "The most important piece of information we received just now was that the ability to forcefully make one fall asleep is likely single-target."

At this moment, Qiao Chu—who was wearing a helmet and a black metal skeleton—suddenly asked, “Who’s Jingfa?”

“A mechanical monk and an Awakened at the same time...” Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen fought to be the first to tell Qiao Chu the information regarding Jingfa. Finally, they said, “The price he paid was enhanced lust. Since he became a mechanical monk by uploading his consciousness and lost the ability to satisfy his desires, his mind has become extremely warped. He also abhors women.”

“Abhors women...” Qiao Chu repeated and didn’t ask any further. He pointed ahead and said, “Continue. We’ll reach our destination if we circle around it.”

Shang Jianyao and the others started jogging with their weapons once again.

...

An Ruxiang—who had entered another street—suddenly slowed down and raised her hand to rub her temples in confusion.

“What’s wrong?” the man beside her asked curiously.

An Ruxiang replied with a solemn expression. “Don’t you think there’s a problem? Just now, we actually lowered our guard and even wanted to follow the person in the exoskeleton. At that moment, I forgot Shoushi and only wanted to gain that person’s favor.”

The man beside An Ruxiang gradually frowned. “Yeah. I-I... You know I like women, but I actually thought that it wouldn’t be too bad if it were him... Isn’t... that too odd?”