

Ad Infinitum 611

Chapter 611: Scenes of the Past

Jiang Baimian immediately sensed that something in the building had been triggered thanks to her abnormally sharp senses. She then saw the small jade Buddha in Shang Jianyao's palm disappear inch by inch, just like how it had been swallowed by the darkness in the Vigilance Cathedral's main hall.

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she turned her head to look outside. She realized that thick white fog had risen outside the window at some point in time, making Long Yuehong's figure—which was sprawled on the wall nearby—appear to be hundreds of meters away.

Jiang Baimian turned around and informed Shang Jianyao in a deep voice, "Something happened."

As she spoke, her gaze gradually froze. This was because the wall behind Shang Jianyao—which originally contained the employee introduction board—was no longer as tattered as before. It had become very complete.

In the much dimmer light, there were photos stuck to it. Under the photos were textual introductions.

Jiang Baimian looked over and quickly confirmed something.

Among the food company employees represented by those photos was a sales manager named Liu Lu. This was identical to what Shang Jianyao had seen in the psychological trauma of Room 522's owner.

Shang Jianyao also turned around at that very moment and clicked his tongue. "We've gone back in time?"

Jiang Baimian didn't respond and instead cast her gaze at the four corners of the employee introduction board.

Her pupils dilated again.

There were no missing photos in those four corners!

Jiang Baimian composed herself and quickly asked Shang Jianyao, “Where was the missing photo?”

As Shang Jianyao had used words to describe the situation back then and hadn’t hand-drawn the entire employee introduction board to confirm the situation, Jiang Baimian couldn’t determine the location due to the use of relative terms—whether it was from his perspective, the wall, or the bulletin board.

The bottom left corner of the employee introduction board could either be the bottom left corner of the noticeboard or Shang Jianyao’s left. The two were diametrically opposite.

Shang Jianyao sighed. “We’ve really gone back in time!”

He raised his hand and pointed at a spot. “There.”

Jiang Baimian was just about to look over and distinguish the images and words when she suddenly felt a figure flash at the door. She then sensed a certain electric signal, but she didn’t sense any human consciousness.

As Jiang Baimian prepared Spatial Hallucination, she cast her gaze at the door. The next second, she saw a figure.

It was a woman with short black hair that just reached past her ears. She wore a white shirt inside and a blue suit outside. She looked young and beautiful—identical to the person in a photo.

“Liu Lu?” Jiang Baimian asked in a deep voice. Of course, she was asking Shang Jianyao, not the woman at the door.

Shang Jianyao nodded. “She has been made young again.”

“Pui, you call that young?” The honest Shang Jianyao retorted himself. “It’s more appropriate to use the term ‘returning to the age when she was younger.’”

Jiang Baimian carefully examined Liu Lu's face for a while and realized that she was indeed not in her thirties or older like Shang Jianyao had previously said. Upon careful inspection, she looked like a young girl who had just graduated three to four years ago and desperately wanted to use her hairstyle and clothing to show her maturity and professionalism.

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian's conversation didn't affect Liu Lu. This girl with plenty of blood vessels in her eyes but was rather clear-headed ignored them and walked to the employee introduction board step by step.

Liu Lu stopped in front of the wall and seriously looked at the photos and introductions.

The Shang Jianyao—who had a cheerful personality and liked socializing—stood beside her and admired her.

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment before walking over. She looked at the photo that was supposed to be missing.

In the photo was a young man in his mid-twenties; he was younger than Liu Lu. He looked well-built and had short, tidy hair. He didn't have any characteristics that were worth probing.

Jiang Baimian's gaze moved down and landed on the corresponding introduction. "Ge Junfei, sales manager, Iron Mountain City resident..."

Not from Long River City...? Jiang Baimian sighed inwardly.

Long River City's United Steel Plant was the original name of the steelworks factory ruins. It was the place where Shang Jianyao found the original medical record; it was one of Buddhism's Five Great Holy Lands.

The Old Task Force had previously guessed that the missing photo corresponded to Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong's son, who had become a vegetable after getting into an accident.

Although Long Yuehong had conclusively proven that it was impossible back then, Jiang Baimian was still disappointed to see confirmation.

She didn't waste any time and cast her gaze at the other photos and text introductions, hoping to memorize them and analyze them in detail later.

In the dark environment, Jiang Baimian only scanned the area and realized some details. Although Iron Mountain City was a large city with many out-of-state residents living in it, nearly half of the food company's sales department employees were locals.

"This means that the remuneration is stable and that it's suitable for those without much ambition?" As Jiang Baimian muttered silently, Liu Lu—who was standing beside Shang Jianyao—did something new.

As her gaze moved to a corner, the expression on her face gradually warped. Liu Lu then took a step forward, stretched out her right hand, and pulled off Ge Junfei's photo and the whiteboard with the textual introduction.

Liu Lu's hands moved violently as she tore the photo into pieces.

Shang Jianyao was 'dumbfounded.' He raised his hands, but he forgot to clap.

Liu Lu then shattered the whiteboard piece.

"A jerk?" Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

Liu Lu ignored him and left the room with the fragments.

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she quickly followed.

The light in the corridor was very dim at this moment. It didn't seem like it was only four in the afternoon; it looked like it was six or seven in the evening. All that was left from the sun was only a sliver of light.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao followed behind Liu Lu and came to the middle of the corridor with her before she turned left.

Shang Jianyao looked at the label and took the initiative to stop.

This was a public bathroom; Liu Lu had entered the female bathroom.

The polite Shang Jianyao naturally couldn't barge in.

Jiang Baimian didn't attempt to persuade him and entered by herself. She then saw Liu Lu throw the fragments in her hand into a squatting urinal and step on the flush.

With splashing sounds, everything entered the sewers.

After the Old World was destroyed, the electricity and water supply in a city that wasn't attacked seemed to be maintained for a period of time...?Jiang Baimian casually thought as she watched Liu Lu stand in front of the squatting urinal. The latter looked down as her chest heaved violently.

She was breathing heavily.

"Why bother? The air here isn't good." Jiang Baimian thought that she had been corrupted by Shang Jianyao and had actually developed such a baffling thought. However, she realized that Hey had walked in at some point in time and was standing beside her as he pointed here and there.

"Where are your manners?" Jiang Baimian turned her head and asked in exasperation and amusement.

Shang Jianyao glanced at her. "Pedantic! Is it still the time to care about such matters?"

...Which Shang Jianyao is this? The timid but ruthless one?

?Jiang Baimian gritted her teeth.

At this moment, Liu Lu stabilized her breathing, turned around, left the bathroom, and walked back to the employee introduction board. When she passed by Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian, she didn't even glance at them as if they didn't exist.

After returning to the original room, Jiang Baimian looked around and planned on taking a photo of the employee introduction board for documentation.

She could tell that Shang Jianyao was already eager to test Liu Lu.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian realized that Liu Lu's figure seemed to become a little transparent.

This...? Just as this thought flashed through Jiang Baimian's mind, the light around her quickly lit up. Liu Lu's figure and the complete employee introduction board melted like thin snow that had caught the sun.

Jiang Baimian then looked at the window and saw that the thick fog was indeed dissipating.

She immediately picked up the walkie-talkie and asked, "Did anything happen just now?"

Long Yuehong quickly replied, "Yes. The room became very dark, and your figures became very blurry. I tried to contact you through the walkie-talkie, but it was completely useless."

Bai Chen recalled and said, "The entire building seemed to darken a little."

"What about Old Ge? What's the situation on your side?" Jiang Baimian asked.

Genava's slightly synthetic voice sounded. "I'm summarizing the data. Done; the preliminary conclusion is that there was a strong magnetic field change in the building just now."

"Why didn't I sense anything..." Jiang Baimian's voice gradually softened.

An unknown Shang Jianyao laughed. "It's fated to only happen here."

At this moment, the small jade Buddha appeared in his hand again.

Jiang Baimian composed herself and looked out the window. "It's almost five. Do a final search and see if there's anything extra here; then, evacuate this ruin before it turns dark. We'll come back tomorrow."

"Yes, Team Leader!" Shang Jianyao replied very loudly. It was unknown which screw went loose.

After half an hour of hard work, the Old Task Force confirmed that the situation in the Second Food Company was no different from before Shang Jianyao used the small jade Buddha. They then returned to the car and headed to the edge of the city.

On the way, they didn't discuss anything. They planned on having a brainstorming session after setting up camp.

As they drove, Bai Chen said, thanks to her sharp eyesight: "The Salvation Army's car."

The dark car driving over from another direction was Xu Datong, Li Shouyi, and the others' car.

Shang Jianyao rolled down the window and waved his arm. "You guys are finally here!"

In the dark car's passenger seat, Xu Datong stuck his head out. "We've already been to Second Food Company and didn't discover anything. We even encountered a strange Superior Heartless's attack. We destroyed the building's door."

Ah??Long Yuehong couldn't help but tilt his head. He suspected that he had heard wrong.

The Old Task Force had just left Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company not long ago. Although the door was open, it was intact!

Chapter 612: Romance Film?

Jiang Baimian also connected Xu Datong's words to her team's encounter in reality.

The two parties had clearly gone to the same place, so why did they see different situations? Furthermore, it hadn't been long since the Old Task Force left the Second Food Company, and the Salvation Army had clearly come from another direction. The Old Task Force arrived only after they had finished exploring. It was impossible for the collapsed building's door to be intact as if time had reversed.

There must be something wrong!

When Jiang Baimian raised her hand to touch her cochlear implant, Shang Jianyao—who had been waving his arm—mocked Xu Datong and the others. “Did you guys go to the wrong place? Did you treat another building as the Second Food Company?”

Xu Datong signaled Li Shouyi to stop the car by the side and pushed open the door. “Isn’t it in that direction, the building that hasn’t collapsed?”

He was referring to the place where the Old Task Force had come from.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Bai Chen and signaled for her to stop the car as well. She then got out of the car and asked Xu Datong from a distance, “Can you describe the situation there in detail?”

Xu Datong was experienced. He immediately understood that something was amiss and focused on describing the various details he had seen in the Second Food Company.

Apart from the door being destroyed by them, everything else was basically the same as what the Old Task Force had seen.

“You guys definitely got the right place.” Shang Jianyao—who had also alighted—was rather gratified.

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and replied, “The Second Food Company we saw is a little different from the one you went to. We plan on returning now to confirm it.”

“Shall we go together?” Xu Datong suggested.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Alright.”

She then asked, “You guys only came in one car?”

There were only four people in the car.

Xu Datong nodded. “The others are waiting to carry out the transaction in Redstone Collection. It’s useless for them to be here. It’s best to have a small but elite team in such operations so that it’s easier to move.”

Yes, a strategic retreat...?Long Yuehong added inwardly.

Jiang Baimian didn't harp on the topic. She got into the car again and got Bai Chen to drive back to the Second Food Company.

The Salvation Army's dark car maintained a distance and followed behind them.

After a while, Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company—which had lost its signboard—appeared in front of the Old Task Force members again.

Its facade was covered in greenery, leaving behind a hint of yellow. It looked desolate and dilapidated.

Jiang Baimian and the others weren't concerned about this but the door. They focused their gazes and saw that the entire area had collapsed, forming a mound. They had to cross it to enter the food company.

It was clearly intact moments ago when the Old Task Force carried out the exploration!

Long Yuehong suddenly felt like he had been in a dream. This dream lasted from the moment they entered Iron Mountain City Ruin until they encountered the Salvation Army.

Jiang Baimian composed herself, turned around, and asked Xu Datong and the others loudly, "When did you guys arrive here?"

Xu Datong quickly gave an answer. "Yesterday morning!"

The door to Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company collapsed yesterday morning.

Upon hearing this answer, the Old Task Force members fell silent.

After a while, Bai Chen couldn't help but mutter to herself, "What kind of place did we see and explore just now..."

Jiang Baimian snapped to her senses and looked at Genava. “Old Ge, did you discover anything abnormal back then?”

“No,” Genava replied with a shake of his head. “The door I saw was also intact. Besides, we didn’t go around any obstacles when entering.”

Xu Datong heard the smart bot’s words and roughly understood what October Xue’s team had encountered. He deliberated and said, “Maybe you triggered an abnormality and entered an illusion as soon as you approached this area.”

“Maybe.” Jiang Baimian didn’t retort. She looked around, stopped the suddenly excited Shang Jianyao, and said to Xu Datong and the others, “We still have to investigate the exact situation, but it’s almost night. We plan on leaving this ruin first and coming back tomorrow morning.”

“Wise choice,” Xu Datong praised. “It’s the same for us.”

Jiang Baimian looked up at the sky and asked, “Where did you go after exploring the food company?”

“We searched for Government House, hoping to obtain the plans and building plans for the old city’s rejuvenation. We want to investigate what abnormal things Modeus had encountered here,” Xu Datong replied truthfully.

The Old Task Force had briefed the Salvation Army team about Modeus in the subsequent two communications, but they didn’t go into much detail. They only mentioned that the Underground Ark’s first owner had been to Iron Mountain City and participated in the old city’s rejuvenation project. After the Old World was destroyed, he had Awakened his abilities in the Subhuti domain.

In the eyes of Xu Datong and the others—who knew that Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company was a Buddhist Holy Land—such a connection was indeed sufficiently suspicious. It was an important direction for investigation.

“Have you found it?” Jiang Baimian was also interested in this matter.

“We did.” Xu Datong smiled bitterly. “But we didn’t find anything. Too many Ruin Hunters have been here; they plundered everything.”

Plans, building information, and other things could be used to start a fire or wipe one’s ass. The hard drive that stored the corresponding electronic data was a recyclable and tradeable resource.

“Sigh...” Shang Jianyao sighed and expressed his regret, fully immersed in the situation.

According to her observation and logical inference, Jiang Baimian believed that Xu Datong wasn’t lying. She flipped her wrist and looked at her electronic watch.

“After we make confirmation tomorrow, we do have something to share with you.”

They then discussed how special the Superior Heartless that had attacked the Salvation Army was. The Old Task Force bade Xu Datong and the others farewell and agreed to meet at the food company’s entrance at 10 a.m. the next day.

...

Under the deep night sky, in a hidden col outside Iron Mountain City Ruin.

The Old Task Force surrounded the bonfire after dinner and discussed their afternoon experience and gains.

“An initial suspicion is that it was an illusion. We’ll talk about it after we survey it tomorrow.” Jiang Baimian skipped the bizarre topic. “What we need to think about now is who Ge Junfei is and why the person possessing Liu Lu tore off his photo and introduction.”

Shang Jianyao already had thoughts on this matter as he eagerly said, “Ge Junfei and Liu Lu were once a couple, but he had an affair and abandoned Liu Lu. The person who possessed Liu Lu ripped apart the photo to help her vent her anger, fulfill her wish, eliminate her obsession, sever this karma, and completely take over her body...”

When Jiang Baimian and the others heard the first half, they felt that although it was a little contrived, it was still a possibility. However, they later confirmed that Hey’s train of thought

couldn't be inferred with common sense. As he spoke, he went from an urban romance film to an eastern fantasy immortal cultivation film.

After Shang Jianyao finished speaking, Long Yuehong hesitantly said, "We might not have had an effective harvest this time. We don't even know if we entered the real Second Food Company."

"Let's assume that we did," Jiang Baimian emphasized.

Long Yuehong tersely acknowledged it. "Then, I have another guess. First, Ge Junfei is the person who possessed Liu Lu. He destroyed his photo and introduction to keep it a secret, but Team Leader said that Liu Lu's expression was relatively contorted with hatred back then. This detail isn't right. Second, Little White previously speculated that the person possessing Liu Lu has a certain, very subtle affection for her."

"That's not what I meant. The person who possessed her was doing it for a prolonged period, and it happened to be the first time. So it's natural that he has very subtle feelings for the body. Back then, Big White and Hey saw Liu Lu. It probably wasn't long after she was possessed. Otherwise, she wouldn't have looked at the employee introduction board for so long." Bai Chen interrupted Long Yuehong. "But your guess isn't wrong. That person might've had a certain level of affection for Liu Lu before the possession. Therefore, when the Old World was destroyed, he directly chose Liu Lu—who had already become a Heartless. He hoped to allow her to continue living on with him."

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she analyzed the situation. "Therefore, he never considered changing the target of possession. He didn't occupy the body of Room 522's owner until Liu Lu's body completely lost its mobility.

"Yes... Coupled with Hey's first half of his story, Liu Lu and Ge Junfei might really be a couple. After the person who likes Liu Lu possessed her and saw his love rival's photo, he tore it up on the spot in hatred. This matches Liu Lu's slightly contorted and hated expression back then."

At this point, Jiang Baimian paused and said, "In that case, it seems like we can include Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong's son—the vegetable who was sent to a hospital in the north for experimental treatment."

Bai Chen's eyes lit up. "Yes. He might've really worked at the Second Food Company back then and had a crush on Liu Lu or had an ambiguous relationship with her. He was just short of bedding her, but he ended up in a car accident and became a vegetable..."

“A few years later, he returned in a certain state before the Old World was destroyed. On the one hand, he watched his parents from afar and confirmed their situation. On the other hand, he ‘came’ to Iron Mountain City to pry into Liu Lu’s life and realized that she was in a relationship with Ge Junfei, who later joined the company. Not only did Ge Junfei snatch his girlfriend, but the photo also occupied his original spot. He couldn’t control his anger when he saw it.”

Jiang Baimian nodded excitedly.

Although Bai Chen was only making a guess, it was rather reasonable. She had strung up many details!

As expected, only people with meticulous thoughts can make such a guess...?Jiang Baimian subconsciously turned her head and looked at Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Genava, planning to ask if they had any different thoughts.

The three of them listened in a daze as if they couldn’t keep up.

Upon seeing Jiang Baimian look over, Shang Jianyao subconsciously raised his hands.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

He applauded.

Chapter 613: The Result of Bragging

Bai Chen had received Shang Jianyao’s applause a few times in the past, so she no longer felt embarrassed. Of course, this was mainly because her analysis wasn’t anything embarrassing.

Jiang Baimian ignored Shang Jianyao and asked Genava and Long Yuehong, “So? Any thoughts?”

Genava replied according to the analysis, “Going inside the mind of the person in question; it is rather reasonable, but we lack sufficient evidence.”

After giving his evaluation, as an honest smart bot, he raised a question. “How did you guess so much from today’s harvest?”

This was like seeing half a lip mark and directly replicating a love story that involved life and death.

That's right, that's right...?Long Yuehong had similar feelings and doubts.

Jiang Baimian scoffed. "You guys aren't meticulous enough and are relatively slow when it comes to relationships."

Not at all...?Long Yuehong had always found himself emotionally rich and meticulous.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao expressed his opinion. "I'm beginning to think that we still lack a companion—a member of the Shang Jianyao Democratic Association that's positioned to be a female with amazing intuition. Lacking one will make our thoughts incomplete and possess a major flaw."

'We' referred to the Shang Jianyaos.

You want to create a female personality??Jiang Baimian immediately understood what Shang Jianyao meant and almost couldn't control her twitching facial muscles. She didn't dare to imagine what a female Shang Jianyao would be like.

Genava didn't understand Shang Jianyao's regret. "You have two female companions with amazing intuition now. The only problem is that they aren't members of the Shang Jianyao Democratic Association. However, this isn't impossible to resolve. According to your Pangu Biology's marriage regulations, you will be family once you get married. They will then be considered half a member of the Shang Jianyao Democratic Association."

Wait. Old Ge, what are you talking about? You crappy robot!?Long Yuehong was first stunned before he roared inwardly.

While Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen wore blank expressions, Genava realized a problem. "However, your Pangu Biology's marriage regulation stipulates that you can't get remarried and that monogamy is followed. Therefore, you can only choose one. No, the word 'choose' isn't appropriate. Marriage is mutual..."

"Old Ge." Jiang Baimian took a deep breath and said, "Don't divert the topic."

“Alright.” Geneva indicated that he understood.

Long Yuehong quickly changed the topic. “If the person attached to Liu Lu is really Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong’s son, he’s still rather kind. Over the years, countless Ruin Hunters have broken into the Second Food Company, including the owner of Room 522. He only chased them away or ignored them. He didn’t really harm them.”

Otherwise, Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company would’ve long been labeled a forbidden zone.

Upon hearing this, Shang Jianyao raised his left hand and placed it vertically in front of his chest. “Namo Annutara-Samyak-Subhuti. This is a show of mercy.”

Bai Chen nodded. “Otherwise, it wouldn’t have become a Buddhist Holy Land.”

After they discussed for a while, Jiang Baimian concluded, “This is a relatively reasonable guess at the moment. It can link the two Buddhist Holy Lands—Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company and Long River City’s United Steel Plant—but this might not be the truth. The Five Great Buddhist Holy Lands involves the two Kalendarium—Subhuti and Master Zhuang. It’s only logical for two to three groups to form a connection. However, Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company might not be related to Long River City’s United Steel Plant. It might also be related to Tai City’s First Middle School, the Holm Fertility Center, and Dajiang City’s Linhe Village.”

She meant that the Five Great Holy Lands were divided into two groups. One group involved Subhuti, while the other involved Master Zhuang.

Shang Jianyao laughed. “In any case, we’re just making bold assumptions now.”

He used Jiang Baimian’s catchphrase.

Jiang Baimian chuckled and restrained her expression. “Assuming that our guess is right, Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company and Long River City’s United Steel Plant are indeed in the same group. The key figure that links them seems to be Fan Wensi’s vegetable son. He’s...”

At this point, even Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but pause despite her boldness. “Is he the body for Subhuti’s descent, or did the experiment back then allow him to come into contact with Subhuti and

become Subhuti? In contrast, Jiang Xiaoyue—who participated in the same experiment—became Monitor or Master Zhuang?”

Jiang Xiaoyue’s room number in the Mind Corridor started with ‘5.’ This either corresponded to May’s Monitor or the entire year’s Master Zhuang.

Team Leader, be careful not to be struck by lightning...? Long Yuehong became more and more terrified as he listened.

Bai Chen inexplicably shivered and raised a contradicting example. “Fan Wensi sensed her son appearing around her some time before the Old World was destroyed. This means that her son should’ve obtained the Subhuti domain’s abilities back then and was extremely strong. If he were a Kalendaria, it would be impossible for him not to protect his parents and crush when the Old World was destroyed.”

“That’s true.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “If he became Subhuti because of that experiment, what’s up with the New World? How do you explain that some of the Eighth Research Institute’s personnel have become traitors that hide in the darkness?”

After Jiang Baimian said that, Shang Jianyao began to think hard as if he wanted to fabricate a fantastic story that could string all the clues together.

Even for him, this wasn’t a simple matter.

Upon seeing that nobody was speaking, Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “It’s about time. Let’s take turns resting. We have to return to the Second Food Company tomorrow morning to confirm today’s encounter.”

After Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and the others replied at the same time, Jiang Baimian reminded them, “You have to be careful of the Superior Heartless Xu Datong and the others encountered today.”

According to Xu Datong, the most special thing about the Superior Heartless was that he seemed to know their arrangements like the back of his hand. He circled around the two Salvation Army members that provided periphery defense and sneaked close to him and Li Shouyi. If not for his special abilities, the team might’ve been wiped out.

Based on this, Xu Datong suspected that the Superior Heartless not only knew how to hide his consciousness, but he also had the ability to secretly investigate the target's condition. For example, the Subhuti domain's Clairvoyance.

Long Yuehong suddenly felt the night darken a little upon hearing his team leader's words. There seemed to be some kind of gaze in the wind that blew across the col.

He hissed and consoled himself. "Team Leader, don't worry. Don't we still have Old Ge? He can monitor us 24/7 as long as we prepare enough batteries for him. Besides, you can also sense bioelectric signals. That Superior Heartless definitely doesn't know how to hide from that. He will be discovered by you the moment he approaches."

"That may be true..." Jiang Baimian paused and looked around.

At the same time, Long Yuehong felt that the night had returned to normal. The wind that blew past only brought about a little coldness.

"I kept having the feeling that someone was watching us, but not anymore." Shang Jianyao stroked his chin.

"That's right..." Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

Don't scare me...? Long Yuehong knew that his team leader wouldn't joke at a time like this.

Bai Chen and Geneva fell silent and focused on observing the darkness around them.

After waiting for a while, Jiang Baimian covered her mouth and yawned. "It seems gone. Get some sleep; follow the previous night duty sequence. Old Ge, you'll have to work a little harder. Don't switch on power-saving mode tonight."

"Alright." Geneva had plenty of batteries.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao got into the jeep one after another, and they each found a spot to lie down. Geneva chose to sit beside the bonfire and be on night duty.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen carried their Berserker assault rifles and submachine guns. They patrolled the camp from two to three meters away.

It was a spring night, and the wind inevitably felt a little cold at the edge of the mountains. Long Yuehong looked around and mustered his courage to say to Bai Chen, “Do you want to wear more?”

“There’s no need.” Bai Chen’s current physique was much better than when she had just joined Pangu Biology. Although the genetic enhancement she had previously done wasn’t too effective because of her age, it still brought about a slight improvement. Furthermore, her Firearms Talent genetic modification involved many aspects that included vision, reaction, coordination, and so on. These were also part of her physique.

Long Yuehong didn’t know how to continue. He silently patrolled forward for a while before coming up with a new topic. “Actually, there’s no need to be too nervous or rely too much on Team Leader, Hey, and Old Ge. I also have the ability to sense our surroundings.”

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, “The environmental information collector and auxiliary chip installed in your mechanical arm?”

Since the electric eel-like biomechanical limb could be equipped with an auxiliary chip, it was reasonable for the T1 multi-purpose arm—which was a mechanical electronic product—not to include this.

“Yes.” Long Yuehong happily introduced Bai Chen to his functions when he saw that she was interested in the topic. “I periodically gather environmental information in a certain range through the mechanical arm and do a comparative analysis with the previous period. Once there are any changes, I’ll quickly detect the problem. For example, although the Superior Heartless can hide his consciousness, I don’t think he can eliminate his scent. Their habits are similar to beasts, and they don’t like to shower that much. Yes... Unless his Awakened abilities are related to Concealment, there’s no way to mask it.”

Long Yuehong became more and more excited as he spoke. “I can shoot out a laser beam and penetrate his body as soon as I discover him. I’ll trap him in place and make him incapable of using his abilities due to the pain. Then, you can rush over and burn him with the flames of your prosthetic limb...”

Even if it was only fictitious, he wished to have Bai Chen participate and use her abilities.

Before Long Yuehong could finish speaking, cawing suddenly sounded from 100 meters away.

As the bird flew up, a figure seemed to rapidly disappear into the distance under the cover of the night.

“Uh...” Long Yuehong hesitated.

“You scared him away!” Shang Jianyao stuck his head out from the jeep, feeling pained.

Chapter 614: Selection

Long Yuehong remained stunned and confused. “What do you mean ‘scare it off?’”

Shang Jianyao pushed open the door and alighted. Having ‘expected better from him,’ he explained, “Have you forgotten how we sensed someone secretly watching us? However, the other party didn’t come over despite us waiting. Therefore, Big White wanted to feign sleeping and lure him into attacking. She wanted to find an opportunity to capture him and study his characteristics—well... if he’s really that special Superior Heartless. Who knew that you would formulate a plan yourself and scare him away!”

As Shang Jianyao spoke, Jiang Baimian alighted from the jeep.

“Team Leader never said that...” Long Yuehong carefully recalled the situation and cast a pleading gaze at Jiang Baimian.

He found it ludicrous. I only bragged in front of Little White. How did I end up scaring away a Superior Heartless? If the other party really had Clairvoyance, he shouldn’t have mixed up the brag with the real, implementable plan!

Although Bai Chen and Genava were a little confused a few moments ago, they eventually came to a realization.

Before Jiang Baimian could answer, Shang Jianyao excitedly said, “It’s all very subtle! Got it? Do you know what it means to be subtle? Don’t you know what kind of person Big White is? She’s so full of curiosity. How could she let go of any abnormalities so easily, especially after we sensed the hidden gaze? You have to learn to understand the subtleties behind one’s words and have a silent rapport with us.”

Is this the Shang Jianyao that likes to joke or the Shang Jianyao that seeks novelty? He's actually playing the role of Little Red's elder and teacher...?Jiang Baimian glared at Shang Jianyao and cleared her throat. "Don't listen to Hey. I just want to carry out further observation before sleeping to prevent any accidents from happening."

So Hey is telling the truth... Team Leader, you even deceived your team members in order to deceive the enemy...?Long Yuehong suddenly recalled what had happened when they faced Jingfa.

Back then, Jiang Baimian had come up with a fake plan and deceived Jingfa by deceiving her team members. This led to a successful ambush.

Upon seeing Bai Chen reveal a reminiscing expression, Jiang Baimian quickly added, "Besides, I can't say it out loud when it comes to such matters. Do you still remember Jingfa? Back then, he showed outstanding hearing and grasped our 'plan.' Also, didn't we experience what others saw and heard when we were trapped in the Crystal Consciousness Church's Sikhara Temple?

"According to my understanding of the Buddhist scriptures and the fact that there's a Buddhist Holy Land here, the abnormalities should be related to this. I suspect that the special Superior Heartless's ability isn't Clairvoyance but Heavenly Ears and Heavenly Eyes. Yes, I began to suspect something after Little Red mentioned that Old Ge could monitor 24/7 and that I could sense bioelectric signals."

"Yes." Bai Chen and Genava expressed their agreement.

Long Yuehong thought about it seriously and found it reasonable.

Therefore, my bragging was heard by the Superior Heartless, and that scared him away??Long Yuehong came to a realization and found it funny. However, he still had some doubts. "Team Leader, he's only a Superior Heartless. Why can he understand our words and the meaning behind them? This is completely different from the ability to predict danger through Clairvoyance."

Even if a Superior Heartless recovered a certain level of intelligence, they should only be able to understand relatively simple words, just like the ones following Xiaochong.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “Since he’s a special Superior Heartless, there must be something ‘special.’ Maybe he’s also possessed by something and has the other party as a translation device.”

“Don’t underestimate Superior Heartless either.” Shang Jianyao felt unjust. “If Xiaochong’s subordinates further evolve, they might be able to understand more complicated words.”

I think what Team Leader said is more likely. Not only is this place a Buddhist Holy Land, but something had once possessed Liu Lu...?Long Yuehong muttered as he expressed the corresponding content in a more euphemistic manner.

Shang Jianyao—who had switched personalities—didn’t insist on his opinion. He only said regretfully, “Unfortunately, the trap failed. We didn’t capture him.”

“Forget it, forget it. Let’s sleep.” Jiang Baimian exhaled and said, “He probably won’t come again tonight.”

The other Old Task Force members had similar judgments regarding this.

...

The night passed uneventfully. At 9:30 the next morning, the Old Task Force arrived at Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company half an hour early.

The door here was still in ruins.

Jiang Baimian and the others quickly searched the food company for 15 minutes and realized that it was no different from yesterday’s situation.

Shang Jianyao then took out the original medical record and the small jade Buddha one after another and made an attempt. However, nothing happened.

“We really entered an illusion yesterday?” Jiang Baimian muttered to herself regretfully. “Was this Eidolon Nun’s goal?”

As she, Long Yuehong, and the others ruminated over the matter, Xu Datong and Li Shouyi's dark car drove over.

"How's it? Any discoveries?" Xu Datong asked enthusiastically.

When others were enthusiastic, Shang Jianyao naturally became more enthusiastic. "No, but it doesn't indicate that we entered an illusion yesterday!"

An illusion... That's a good explanation...?Jiang Baimian came up with a plan and said, "We triggered an anomaly in the illusion, allowing the employee introduction board I mentioned to be completely replicated..."

She recounted what she had experienced yesterday and only skipped on mentioning the small jade Buddha. She then pushed all the problems to the illusion.

Finally, she guessed, "The reason we encountered the illusion instead of you guys might be that we have a medical record from Long River City's United Steel Plant ruins. That's another Buddhist Holy Land."

"No wonder..." Xu Datong came to a realization." However, what you saw in the illusion doesn't seem valuable. "

Jiang Baimian first shared the medical record with him before saying, "We're searching for a connection between the two."

She didn't mention her team's guess last night. It was too shocking while lacking evidence.

"Thank you so much," Xu Datong said sincerely. "How can we help?"

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and asked, "You mentioned that you had gathered a few hard drives from Iron Mountain City Ruin and restored the data inside. Some of the information you previously gathered for us came from here. Can you copy the entire database to us now?"

"We gave you what we carefully selected and found useful. The rest are all random and worthless." Xu Datong felt that it was meaningless.

Jiang Baimian cleared her throat and smiled. “To be honest, I also have another identity as a folklore scholar. I’m very interested in the Old World’s living environment, and there’s a high chance that the miscellaneous content contains such details.”

Xu Datong glanced at her and chuckled. “Alright.”

He then got a Salvation Army member in the car to take out a portable computer.

Genava didn’t decline the responsibility. He walked over with firewall and anti-virus software and copied all the information.

Jiang Baimian gave an order in front of Xu Datong and company, “Old Ge, carry out some simple filtering of the data now.”

“The first keyword is Long River City.” It was Shang Jianyao who spoke this time.

The Old Task Force had previously done a similar screening regarding Iron Mountain City’s information. Everyone was very familiar with it.

“There’s only a few trade-related content that’s of little meaning.” Genava quickly gave the results.

Bai Chen immediately said, “The second keyword, Modeus.”

This was the name of the first Underground Ark owner. He had once gone to Iron Mountain City to participate in the bidding for the Old City’s rejuvenation and had Awakened Subhuti domain abilities after the Old World was destroyed.

“None,” Genava replied.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “The third key term is ‘foreign merchant.’”

Genava quickly completed the search. “There are a few news reports from foreign chambers of commerce. They don’t involve Modeus or the Old City’s rejuvenation.”

The Old Task Force then used keywords like ‘old city rejuvenation’ to carry out more filtering, but they didn’t find anything. Xu Datong, Li Shouyi, and the others watched patiently.

As time passed, Jiang Baimian paced back and forth. “Keyword: foreigner.”

Genava did another search. After a few seconds, he said in a slightly synthetic voice, “I got something.”

“What is it?” Shang Jianyao excitedly came close.

Genava looked up at Jiang Baimian and said, “There’s a thread from Iron Mountain City’s local forum; the topic is about condemning law enforcement injustice. Someone in this thread mentioned: There was once when a foreigner driving without a license hit a pedestrian who turned into a vegetable, but he wasn’t sentenced and only paid some compensation.”

A foreigner driving without a license turning a pedestrian into a vegetable through a car accident?? Long Yuehong’s pupils dilated, and the hair on his back stood on end.

Chapter 615: Plan

Modeus: foreigner; Fan Wensi’s son: turned into a vegetable after a car accident.

There had been a traffic accident in Iron Mountain City where a foreigner had gotten into an accident with a pedestrian, turning the person into a vegetable.

Modeus had Awakened Subhuti domain abilities after the Old World was destroyed.

Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company had become one of Buddhism’s Holy Lands. Its employee, Liu Lu, had been possessed via Destiny Connection by someone.

Shang Jianyao used Fan Wensi’s medical record to trigger an anomaly in the psychological trauma that included Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company.

Long River City’s United Steel Plant—where Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong lived—had also become a Buddhist Holy Land.

This series of information echoed in Long Yuehong's mind, making him feel like the clues they had gathered all this time were strung together. There were no longer any gaps.

However, this also brought about contradictions, disestablishing many of the Old Task Force's previous guesses.

If Fan Wensi's son had really become a vegetable because of Modeus, why would he—who was suspected to be related to the Kalendaria, Subhuti—allow Modeus to awaken his abilities in the corresponding domain? Furthermore, he managed to enter the Mind Corridor all the way until he was suppressed by another Kalendaria, Eidolon Nun?

Long Yuehong cast his gaze at Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen and realized that they had obvious reactions—one was deep in thought, another was astonished, and the last was confused.

As for Genova, apart from the red glow in his eyes blinking a few times, his face was expressionless.

He was expressionless to begin with.

Xu Datong, Li Shouyi, and the other Salvation Army members had previously received Fan Wensi's medical record from the Old Task Force. After learning that Modeus was a powerful Awakened in the Subhuti domain, they instantly made sufficient connections and felt an indescribable shock when they heard Genova's words.

Amidst their shock, they fell silent and quickly thought about the story that these clues could weave and what terrifying secrets were hidden behind the story.

After a while, Xu Datong took the initiative to say, "With so many things intertwined, there must be some secret we don't know about. Sigh, we're still lacking a little bit more information. Maybe we'll be able to see a corner of the truth with another piece of related information."

The current clues only confirmed that those people and matters were related.

The person who connected them all together seemed to be Fan Wensi's vegetable son, but why were they connected, and what did these phenomena mean?

Everything was only a baseless guess.

"That's right, that's right." Shang Jianyao—who was used to echoing—spoke before Yuehong again.

Upon hearing Xu Datong's words, Jiang Baimian turned her head to look at the seven-story building where Iron Mountain's Second Food Company was. She thoughtfully said, "It's not impossible to find more relevant information here..."

"You mean?" Xu Datong was experienced and could vaguely guess what October Xue wanted to say.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "The special Superior Heartless you encountered. Many of the unique points in Iron Mountain City Ruin should be related to this Buddhist Holy Land. Besides, the Superior Heartless attacked you here. Therefore, if we can capture him and figure out what makes him special, we might be able to find more relevant information or even answers to our questions."

Xu Datong nodded without hiding his intentions and agreed with Jiang Baimian.

Li Shouyi frowned and said, "That Superior Heartless isn't that easy to capture. He seems to have Clairvoyance..."

"It's not Clairvoyance." Shang Jianyao interrupted Li Shouyi.

This was a rude Shang Jianyao because he was too honest.

Jiang Baimian could only help add, "We suspect that his ability is Heavenly Ears, and we might have to add Heavenly Eyes..."

She roughly explained the basis of her judgment. Of course, she definitely wouldn't take the initiative to reveal the other types of reconnaissance abilities the Old Task Force had and had pushed all of this onto Genava.

In any case, Genava did have radar, infrared surveillance, and other functions. It could increase the risk of the Superior Heartless being exposed.

Those who knew smart bots were no strangers to these.

Xu Datong thought for a moment and said, “If it’s Heavenly Ears, that explains our previous encounter.”

Jiang Baimian nodded and smiled. “Therefore, we have to come up with a plan to avoid his Heavenly Ears.”

“First, we have to find the target.” The honest Shang Jianyao never hid his thoughts just because they were all part of a team.

Nobody retorted him—this was indeed a rather realistic question.

Iron Mountain City used to be a megacity, and the ruin it had turned into was equally large. It was definitely very difficult to find prey that was good at hiding and had outstanding instincts in this concrete ‘jungle.’

It wasn’t that Xu Datong and the others hadn’t thought of tracking the Superior Heartless after they were attacked, but the Superior Heartless didn’t leave many traces during his retreat. There were indeed some traces in the beginning, but they completely disappeared later.

Furthermore, the target’s usual residence was likely the nearby mountains. Only those places had enough food to feed him and his subordinates.

“If we treat this as hunting, luring the target and setting up traps might be the most effective method.” Xu Datong recalled his experience dealing with some Superior Heartless.

Although these Heartless were slightly smarter than average Heartless and had higher intelligence, they still couldn’t escape their bestial instincts.

With a questioning tone, Jiang Baimian said, “Then, what should we use as bait? Food?”

“The target doesn’t look like he lacks food,” said Li Shouyi—who had previously fought the Superior Heartless.

With outsiders around, Geneva had always played the role of an ordinary robot. Although he had analyzed a possibility, he couldn’t raise it at this moment. He could only turn to look at Jiang Baimian, attempting to give Big White a string of Morse code through the frequency of the red glow in his eyes.

Carbon-based humans relied on tacit understanding, while smart bots relied on technology.

Jiang Baimian nodded indiscernibly at Geneva and deliberated before saying, “It’s very likely that the Superior Heartless tried to attack us because of our exploration of this place.”

She was referring to Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company.

Jiang Baimian further explained, “Most of the Ruin Hunters who encountered him in Iron Mountain City Ruin weren’t attacked; they were only affected in some way. Only a small number reflexively fired at him, resulting in a nasty outcome.”

Xu Datong thought for a moment and pointed at the food company building beside him. “Use it as bait?”

Upon hearing their discussion, Long Yuehong felt that something was amiss and blurted out, “If the Superior Heartless is hiding in the surrounding area, won’t he have already heard everything we say through Heavenly Ears?”

In that case, any plan would be useless!

Jiang Baimian, Xu Datong, and the others fell silent. Even Shang Jianyao didn’t make any jokes and only stroked his chin.

After a while, Jiang Baimian sighed and smiled. “Heavenly Ears is quite difficult to deal with. Sigh, we can only forget it and go to other Buddhist Holy Lands to find new clues. The other three Buddhist Holy Lands are...”

She shared this information with Xu Datong and the others before leading the other Old Task Force members to the jeep and driving north of the city ruin.

Xu Datong looked at them for a few seconds before returning to the dark-colored car with Li Shouyi and heading south.

After the jeep drove for a kilometer or two, Jiang Baimian—who was in the passenger seat—suddenly said, “Give me the wheel.”

Ah? Team Leader, calm down...? This thought subconsciously flashed across Long Yuehong’s mind. Although he knew that his team leader wouldn’t get lost with a manual navigator and would only be a little slower than normal, he felt that it wasn’t a good idea to let a directionally challenged person drive.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was in the driver’s seat—stroked his chin and smiled. “Let me continue.”

As he spoke, he turned the steering wheel and made the jeep turn left. At the same time, Shang Jianyao pointed at the rearview mirror and whistled.

Are we... returning to the Second Food Company? Team Leader’s words to Xu Datong and the others were a trap for the Superior Heartless! Long Yuehong was first stunned before he understood.

He turned to look at Bai Chen and realized that she slowly nodded.

The Old Task Force’s jeep circled around and arrived in front of Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company’s seven-story building again.

It was still quiet with no trace of anyone.

Almost at the same time, Xu Datong’s dark-colored car appeared in the distance.

After they met again, Jiang Baimian—who had already alighted—looked around and said regretfully, “Unfortunately, he didn’t fall for it.”

“So you really were tricking him.” Xu Datong revealed an expression of admiration.

Shang Jianyao curiously asked, “When did you figure it out?”

Xu Datong smiled. “Given my age, I’m quite experienced. Back then, I felt that you guys gave up too quickly.”

He paused and said, “What should we do now?”

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a few seconds before turning to look at the food company’s seven-story building. “Should we try to destroy this place and agitate him?”

She recalled the collapse of Building 4 in the steelworks factory ruins’ Residential Zone 2.

Xu Datong fell silent for a moment before saying, “We can give it a try.”

Jiang Baimian reminded him seriously, “This is a Buddhist Holy Land. Normal destruction might be fine, but devastating destruction might bring about terrifying anomalies.”

The younger Li Shouyi frowned again and said to Xu Datong, “There’s no need to do so. He’s only a Superior Heartless. No matter how special he is, he can’t possess many secrets.”

Xu Datong thought for a moment and smiled in relief. “Little Li, get in the car and stay 200 meters away. Leave this place to me. Since I’ve seen hope of figuring out the truth, I have to give it a try.

“That’s enough. This is an order!”

“Yes.” Li Shouyi raised his right hand and pressed it to his left chest.

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to step forward and look at Xu Datong. He also pressed his right hand to his left chest and said in a deep voice, “For all of humanity!”

Xu Datong's expression instantly turned solemn. He also pressed his right hand to his left chest.
"For all of humanity!"

Amidst the brief and forceful voice, the two of them walked to the seven-story building where Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company was.

Chapter 616: Following the Footsteps of a Villain

"Wait." Jiang Baimian interrupted Shang Jianyao and Xu Datong's firm footsteps.

The two of them simultaneously turned their heads and cast their gazes at her.

Jiang Baimian deliberated and asked, "Do you know what to do and how to do it?"

She didn't want to doubt the older Xu Datong, but she felt a little worried when she saw how tacit the other party was with Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao shook his head without hesitation.

At the same time, Xu Datong replied, "Destroy those load-bearing walls. We'll deliver one last blow to this building when coming out."

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped.

Xu Datong turned his head to look at his 'peer,' his expression ambivalent. It was unknown if he was regretting being Shang Jianyao's partner.

Fortunately, this Salvation Army powerhouse is in his fifties and has plenty of experience. He's not as unreliable as Shang Jianyao...?Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. "We will constantly and comprehensively monitor the situation. Be careful."

As she spoke, she threw the grenade launcher she had prepared at Shang Jianyao.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Geneva tacitly scattered and took up positions in different areas.

This was all in the tactical manual.

After entering the seventh-floor room of the Second Food Company, Shang Jianyao picked up the grenade launcher and pulled the trigger at one of the load-bearing walls.

Boom!

Accompanying the explosion, Xu Datong—who hadn't taken out his weapon—raised his arm, clenched his fists, and struck forward.

Bang!

A few meters away, a load-bearing wall suffered an invisible blow and cracked from an emanating center.

Matter Interference!

Upon seeing this, Shang Jianyao became increasingly excited and popped out grenades one after another.

As the two of them wreaked havoc, they didn't forget to take in their surroundings. They remained tense as they waited for an anomaly to happen.

When the building showed clear signs of instability, Xu Datong retracted his right hand and said to Shang Jianyao, "That's our cue to leave."

Shang Jianyao didn't say another word. He turned around and ran with large strides.

Xu Datong was stunned for a moment as if he didn't expect the other party to be so decisive and 'hard-working.' He quickly snapped to his senses and followed closely behind Shang Jianyao, running as if he had returned to his prime.

After leaving the building and running for a distance, Xu Datong stopped and faced Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others pushed their focus to the maximum. On the one hand, they wanted to prevent any anomalies from happening in this Buddhist Holy Land. On the other hand, they were waiting for the special Superior Heartless to appear.

At this moment, Xu Datong stretched out his right hand, clenched it, and suddenly pulled downwards.

Rumble!

The already tottering food company building collapsed, stirring up a large plume of dust and rubble. However, nothing else happened.

The five Old Task Force members and Xu Datong waited for a while, but there was no sign of the special Superior Heartless.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and said to Xu Datong, "It seems like he won't appear again."

Even the destruction of Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company failed to lure him out.

Xu Datong nodded. "The only solution now is for everyone to split up and maintain a certain distance from each other. We can then lure him into attacking by deliberately creating a decoy that's 'left behind.'"

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment before saying, "It's too dangerous. Besides, he most likely heard you say that. We plan on leaving according to our original plan and going to other Buddhist Holy Lands to search for new clues."

Xu Datong glanced at her as if he were trying to determine if she was telling the truth or not. Finally, the Salvation Army's Mind Corridor Awakened chose to believe her. "We're also about to return to Redstone Collection. After we complete the transaction regarding the military exoskeletons, we might make a trip to Long River City's United Steel Plant and use our methods to conduct another search."

“Uh...” Jiang Baimian was momentarily at a loss for words.

The honest Shang Jianyao frankly replied, “You can forget about it. The Buddhist Holy Land there has collapsed, just like this one.”

Xu Datong fell silent. He sized up the Old Task Force members and sincerely said, “Everyone, if you are going to Icefield Tai City in the future, you might very well pass by our Salvation Army’s sphere of influence. When the time comes, just say my name if you encounter any problems. I’m a member of the Public Security Council. However, it might not work. Favors aren’t systematic, so all I can say is to give it a shot.”

“Alright!” Shang Jianyao agreed excitedly as if he was already certain that the Old Task Force would enter the Salvation Army’s sphere of influence.

Xu Datong bade farewell and walked into the distance to rendezvous with Li Shouyi and the others 200 meters away.

After getting into the dark-colored car and watching October Xue and the others leave, Xu Datong informed his subordinates of their discussion.

Li Shouyi frowned. “The Buddhist Holy Land of Long River City’s United Steel Plant was destroyed. It’s very likely because of them?”

Xu Datong nodded slightly, indicating that he thought so too.

Li Shouyi quickly said, “Iron Mountain City’s Second Food Company—another Buddhist Holy Land—was also destroyed today. They have at least half the responsibility. Could they be high-ranking commissioners from the Eighth Research Institute?”

Otherwise, how could they complete what the Eighth Research Institute wanted to do but had never been able to accomplish? And it happened twice!

Xu Datong had the intention of helping the Old Task Force come up with an explanation, but he was momentarily speechless.

...

Toward the evening the next day.

A convoy drove into Iron Mountain City Ruin from the northwest. They carried at least 30 cannons and established a position a few kilometers away, aiming at the Second Food Company.

The team's 'leader' was a man and a woman. The woman wore a white shirt and a blue cowboy top and pants, with a wide felt hat topping everything off. The man wore a black trench coat and dark sunglasses. He was more than 1.8 meters tall.

The woman in the cowboy outfit took out her binoculars and cast her gaze in the direction of Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company, prepared to help the gunners adjust their firing parameters.

She was Ashlandic with an oval face and willowy eyebrows. She looked to be only 25 or 26 years old, but she had a rather mature air about her.

"Eh..." The woman adjusted the binoculars' direction as she voiced her confusion.

"What's wrong?" asked the man in the trench coat and sunglasses.

The sky was still relatively bright, so he kept his sunglasses on. From his neatly combed golden-brown hair, he looked to be of Red River ethnicity.

The woman in the cowboy outfit observed for a while before saying in disbelief, "That Buddhist Holy Land has already been destroyed, but I'm not sure if I've found the right target."

"What? Who did it?" The tall man in sunglasses reached out for the binoculars. After repeated confirmation, he frowned and said, "That's indeed Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company... Who did this? It saved us a lot of time."

Their conversation was done in the Red River language with a northern accent, but some of the words and sentences had an Ashlandic flair.

"No matter who did it, we have to report it immediately." The woman in the cowboy outfit took off her canvas backpack. She then took out an item that resembled an Old World tablet.

After lighting up the screen and unlocking it, she opened a telegram simulation software and inputted a series of numbers.

After she completed the connection, the LCD screen suddenly darkened as if it were passing through a tunnel.

The scene soon lit up, revealing a figure sitting behind a table.

The 'space' around the figure distorted as static appeared, making him appear very blurry and difficult to identify. Amidst the static, the figure asked, "Lan, what's wrong?"

The woman in the cowboy outfit replied respectfully, "Doctor, Iron Mountain City's Second Food Company has been destroyed."

The figure named Doctor fell silent for a while before saying, "Listen to the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station tonight. I want to speak to Wu Meng."

"Yes, Doctor," replied the woman in the cowboy outfit and the man in sunglasses.

At the stipulated time that night, they got a radio, tuned it to 119.2, and received the Dao and Electrical Appliance Repairs radio station's broadcast.

At the same time, Xu Lan—who was dressed as a cowboy—took out the tablet computer again and connected to 'Doctor.'

As soon as the distorted and blurry figure appeared on the screen, Wu Meng's voice sounded from the radio. "You're back. How is it? How's the New World now? I previously sensed Truth's aura appear in First City, but I ended up bumping into that person. How unlucky."

He still spoke in the Red River language.

Doctor used the same language and said in a deep voice, "You don't have to worry about the New World."

“Then, why are you looking for me?” Wu Meng’s voice carried an indescribable smiling tone. “Because I know a few Buddhist Holy Lands?”

Doctor calmly replied, “That’s one aspect.”

Wu Meng’s voice disappeared for a few seconds before it sounded again with an obvious smiling tone. “Since you want to know so much, I’ll tell you. The highest virtue is like water. Water benefits all while not competing. This ruin I’m in has a place called the Holm Fertility Center. It’s another Buddhist Holy Land.”

Chapter 617: Happens Daily in the Wilderness

The Old Task Force stayed in the periphery of Iron Mountain City Ruin for another day, but the special Superior Heartless remained elusive. They then headed north to First City to prepare for the exploration of the Holm Fertility Center in Wasteland Ruin 13.

After circling around the various polluted and dangerous areas for nearly two days, Genova looked at the wilderness outside. “There’s a nomad settlement nearby. Do you want to go over and do a RESUP?”

This was the place he had previously passed when heading south from First City.

Bai Chen was unfamiliar with the wilderness around here because she had never been here.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Sure.”

Although the Old Task Force’s jeep had been modified and had a wider trunk, the three military exoskeletons and two bionic artificial intelligence armor still occupied a considerable amount of space. With the addition of bullets, grenades, hand grenades, rockets, explosives, and spare weapons, there wasn’t much space for the other supplies.

With the help of a real smart navigation system, the jeep passed through a small forest and a few hills before arriving at a settlement that was strategically located in an Old World ruins based on the terrain.

When the car was about 100 meters away from their destination, Shang Jianyao suddenly sat up straight. “There’s nobody.”

“They migrated?” Bai Chen guessed as she slowed down the car.

This was relatively common in the Ashlands. Every few years—or even shorter—wilderness nomads would leave their current settlements and migrate to safer places due to location exposure, intense weather changes, problems in the environment, mutated creatures, and Heartless changing their hunting range.

“Impossible,” Geneva replied firmly. “When I passed by previously, they were farming in the farms behind the settlement.”

Humans who were about to migrate wouldn’t do things that were a waste of resources.

The honest Shang Jianyao immediately retorted, “Maybe they were discovered by First City’s slave hunters in the past few days.”

They had no choice but to migrate in a rush.

As the carbon-based human and silicon-based human conversed, the jeep approached its destination.

“There are indeed no human bioelectric signals.” Jiang Baimian confirmed Shang Jianyao’s previous discovery.

The settlement’s gates were made of wood. At this moment, it was ajar.

Bai Chen swept her gaze and said in a deep voice, “There’s blood on the ground.”

Her vantage point was better than Geneva, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao’s. Jiang Baimian was focused on sensing the area.

The Old Task Force members looked over and saw several pools of dark-red blood beyond the door.

This gave Long Yuehong an ominous feeling. He recalled his encounter in Blackrat Town.

“An attack?” Jiang Baimian made the jeep stop. She slung a grenade launcher over her shoulder and held a rocket launcher as she pushed open the door and alighted.

Shang Jianyao and the others followed closely behind and entered the settlement one after another.

Some of the houses here originated from the Old World and had been later repaired to a certain extent, while some were newly built from wood. These two eclectic styles brought about a unique charm.

There were no humans here anymore, just as Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian had sensed. However, there were obvious traces of blood in many places. They were either splattered on the walls or on the ground into the distance.

Such scenes could be seen at virtually every house.

A massacre...? This thought surfaced in Long Yuehong's mind.

During the subsequent search, doubt grew in him. Since it's suspected to be a massacre, why aren't there any corpses? Why are fingers, rotten flesh, and other things occasionally found? It's impossible for the wilderness nomads residing here to be blown to pieces, right?

Even if that was the case, the number of flesh remains didn't match!

Furthermore, all the weapons in the settlement were gone, including woodcutting knives and other items.

In addition, blankets, rugs, clothes, and various foods had also disappeared.

These things definitely existed. Otherwise, the wilderness nomads in the settlements wouldn't have been able to survive the winter.

However, there were also metallic items stocked up in each building—presumably for the transaction of other resources—as well as two fuel generators.

After the inspection, Bai Chen pursed her lips and said, "Preliminary judgment indicates that they were attacked by the Heartless."

Upon seeing Long Yuehong's confused expression, she simply explained, "If they were bandits or slave hunters, the generators and metallic items wouldn't have been left behind. These things are sometimes more valuable than slaves. If it was a result of mutated creatures or other beasts, they wouldn't take away weapons, clothes, blankets, or rugs. Only an attack by the Heartless will leave such a scene."

At this point, Bai Chen concluded, "Many wilderness nomads believe that Heartless who lack food in winter are the most aggressive and dangerous. Actually, it's the same for Heartless in spring. After a long winter, the Heartless who manage to survive will often have run out of food and need replenishment."

Jiang Baimian had only experienced the Heartless attack on human settlements a few times while serving in the Security Department's other companies. With their help, the settlements under Pangu Biology's aegis successfully survived the danger and didn't encounter such a disaster.

She sighed and said, "Nomads who can survive in the wilderness won't slack when it comes to such matters. It seems like they were overwhelmed by strength..."

"It's also possible that a group of Heartless suddenly migrated here after spring because there were originally no powerful Heartless here." Bai Chen recalled the situations she had encountered and heard of.

Jiang Baimian looked at the silent Shang Jianyao and was momentarily at a loss for words.

"What should we do now?" Long Yuehong asked.

It was clearly impossible to exchange supplies. He wanted to ask if they should rest here and set off tomorrow or continue their journey while it was still early.

Shang Jianyao suddenly turned his head and asked Genava, "Are there other wilderness nomad settlements nearby?"

“There are three more within 20 kilometers,” Geneva replied.

Bai Chen quickly said, “They shouldn’t have been attacked yet. The food harvested here is enough for the Heartless to survive for a long time. In such a situation, their aggression will be greatly reduced.”

This was similar to how many beasts didn’t have aggressive tendencies after eating their fill. Furthermore, if one hunted too much in one go, there was no way to preserve it for a long period of time. It would result in a huge waste.

For Heartless—who were slightly smarter than beasts—it was better to continue letting them live.

Shang Jianyao laughed and suggested, “Should we eliminate the Heartless horde?”

“With the strength they have shown, the other three settlements probably won’t be able to withstand an attack either...” Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and said, “We can give it a try, but we can’t be rash.”

To the current Old Task Force, this was something they could do in passing. It wouldn’t be too difficult.

...

When it was almost evening and the clouds on the horizon were still fiery red, the Old Task Force tracked down the target group after Geneva and Long Yuehong gathered, compared, and analyzed the environmental information.

They hid in a relatively large hill and occupied a hidden cave.

Geneva put on the Chameleon bionic artificial intelligence armor and sneaked closer to observe the area carefully.

He then returned to the jeep and reported, “There are four Heartless guarding the cave entrance. Their weapons are hunting rifles, assault rifles, shotguns, and submachine guns.”

Jiang Baimian was perplexed and wistful. “They have pretty good firepower... The harvest from plundering the wilderness nomad settlement?”

Bai Chen pursed her lips and said, “That’s one aspect. From what we saw, their firepower wasn’t weak to begin with either.”

Genava then said, “From time to time, a unique aura will leak out of the cave, making the four Heartless guards tremble in fear.”

“Tremble in fear?” Jiang Baimian muttered to herself.

“A Superior Heartless?” Shang Jianyao was a little excited.

Long Yuehong came to a realization. “It’s no wonder they can crush that wilderness nomad settlement.”

Not only did these Heartless have adequate firepower, but they also had a leader equivalent to an Awakened!

“From the looks of it, there might be a certain problem with their origins,” Jiang Baimian said thoughtfully.

There were relatively few Superior Heartless; they only appeared in large city ruins from among thousands of Heartless. According to Genava’s observations, there weren’t more than 50 Heartless in the cave.

Of course, there were exceptions to such matters. A probability, no matter how minuscule, was still possible.

After some thought, Jiang Baimian ordered, “Don your gear and make plans for any accidents. Little White, get into sniping position. Little Red, you and Old Ge will charge in front. I’ll support you. Hey, exert your influence at the end and control the entire situation.”

After some work, Bai Chen—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—followed Genava to a sniping spot he had found during his reconnaissance.

From the top of a withered tree, one could see the four Heartless guarding the cave entrance nearly 300 meters away.

Chapter 618: Two

Bai Chen adjusted her posture and slowly aimed. Long Yuehong and Genava—wearing the Blackmarsh Iron Snake bionic artificial intelligence armor and Chameleon bionic artificial intelligence armor respectively—sneaked toward the hidden cave.

Jiang Baimian turned her head and reminded Shang Jianyao, “You don’t have to consider Thought Guidance. It shouldn’t be effective since they don’t understand you.”

Although she knew that it was impossible for Shang Jianyao not to know this given his combat intelligence and experience, she was always afraid that he would suddenly switch to the personality that was always making different attempts. Therefore, despite clearly being a reminder, it was more a ‘warning.’

Shang Jianyao—who was warming up before the battle—replied indifferently, “If you don’t follow them, they’ll shake you off.”

His warm-up was based on the radio gymnastics he had learned from Wang Fugui. He was methodical and energetic.

Jiang Baimian stopped breathing for a moment, gritted her teeth, and stared at Long Yuehong’s back when she heard his words. She then steered the military exoskeleton and chased after him, placing one foot ahead of the other.

The reason she didn’t fixate her gaze on Genava was that the smart bot had already used the Chameleon bionic artificial intelligence armor to hide and disappear from her sight. Although Jiang Baimian could still sense the electric signals, she felt that it wasn’t safe enough and believed it only when she could see it.

Long Yuehong quickly saw the four Heartless guarding the cave—they were all men.

Like ordinary Heartless, they had slightly hunched backs. Their eyes were turbid and bloodshot, and their hair was messy and greasy. The muscles on their faces were somewhat deformed as well.

They were wearing clothes that didn't fit well and had many traces of sewing while holding assault rifles, hunting rifles, shotguns, and submachine guns.

For proper teams belonging to large factions, it wasn't beneficial to have too many types of weapons. After all, every type of ammunition had to be prepared, and the knowledge on how to repair every type of firearm was required; this especially affected logistical efficiency. However, even Ruin Hunters couldn't care less about this, much less Heartless that threw away anything that had been depleted.

Long Yuehong focused on the four Heartless and waited for Bai Chen to fire the first shot.

Almost silently, a bullet quickly flew over and sank into a Heartless's head. His head bloomed like a red flower.

This was the signal. Long Yuehong and Jiang Baimian simultaneously jumped out of their hiding spots and stormed into the cave.

As they rushed forward, they didn't forget to use their assault rifles and the submachine guns attached to the military exoskeletons to provide suppressive fire.

Amidst concentrated gunshots, one of the three Heartless's heads bloomed as he died under Bai Chen's shot. Another was executed by Genava, who had blocked him after stealthily approaching. The other was hit several times as blood splattered.

A Heartless in the cave sensed the commotion as they fell to the ground and jumped out. She was a cap-wearing woman with a dirty face.

As her gaze locked onto Jiang Baimian—who had caught up to Long Yuehong—half of Jiang Baimian's body suddenly turned numb. She couldn't control the military exoskeleton any longer and toppled to the side.

The woman raised the shotgun in her hand at the same time.

Jiang Baimian's eyes suddenly glazed over as the female Heartless's shotgun rose two inches.

Bang!

A large number of iron pellets spewed into the air.

Spatial Hallucination!

Jiang Baimian used Spatial Hallucination to make the enemy err in judgment and aim at an empty spot.

As a Heartless, the woman had a beast-like intuition. She sensed danger after her shot failed and quickly retreated into the cave to escape through another exit.

But at this moment, her feet no longer obeyed her.

Limbs Immobility!

Boom!

Jiang Baimian—who had fallen to the ground—fired a rocket at the cave.

The explosion swallowed the Superior Heartless and tore apart a portion of her body.

Amidst the smoke, Genava and Long Yuehong rushed into the cave one after another. The first thing they saw was the human corpse hanging high above, gently swaying with the blast from the explosion.

These corpses had been stripped naked. Some had even lost their skin, revealing their flesh and blood.

There were dozens of them; they were wilderness nomads from the settlement that had been attacked. The youngest was only a few years old and was being dried.

Long Yuehong's eyes reddened when he saw this. He picked up the Berserker assault rifle in his hand and fired at the Heartless who had dodged the blast.

The Heartless were hit by the bullets before they could react. Bloody holes riddled their bodies, and some bullets blew off chunks of their body.

Long Yuehong was just about to reload when his mind suddenly buzzed. Intense, instinctive fear then surfaced in his heart.

He began to tremble and forgot to use his weapon. He saw a man with dark skin that resembled half an iron tower walk out from the cave's depths.

This man's hair was like a chicken's coop, and his eyes were turbid. He exuded ferocity—clearly another Heartless. He was only wearing canvas pants and had a naked upper body. He constantly let out deep roars.

A terrifying aura spread out. Long Yuehong's legs went limp, and he almost couldn't withstand his body weight.

At this moment, Geneva—who wouldn't be affected—was in a fierce fight with a few skilled Heartless that had used the cave's boulders for cover and concealment.

Some of the Heartless used individual combat rocket launchers, and some carried sniper rifles that were more suitable for long distances. All of them could threaten Geneva to a certain extent.

Of course, Geneva didn't care too much because he was now wearing a Chameleon bionic artificial intelligence armor. He only believed that he had to suppress these enemies because of the cave environment to prevent the shockwaves and shrapnel from injuring Jiang Baimian, who was following behind.

Geneva didn't think he had to worry too much about Long Yuehong—who was equipped with the Blackmarsh Iron Snake bionic artificial intelligence armor.

The corporeal fear seemed to turn into a hammer that struck Jiang Baimian's heart again and again. However, not only did she not tremble after entering the cave, but she also looked excited.

Another Superior Heartless? The one that Old Ge previously mentioned? It's indeed abnormal for such a small group of Heartless to have two Superior Heartless...?Jiang Baimian abandoned the rocket launcher and picked up the grenade launcher amidst the suffocating fear.

Stimulation Disorder!

Thanks to Genava's previous reconnaissance, Jiang Baimian had modified her reaction to such stimuli in advance, turning her fear and horror into excitement and stimulation.

The inspiration for such modifications came from Shang Jianyao.

Bang!

A grenade flew at the muscular, tanned Superior Heartless. He—who had wanted to dodge—lost control of his feet.

Boom!

The male Superior Heartless's upper body was hit by the grenade and exploded, instantly blasting into pieces.

The Heartless playing hide and seek with Genava jumped out one after another, appearing extremely 'brave.' Amidst the gunfire, they fell under Genava's sweeping shots.

Meanwhile, Long Yuehong returned to normal and rushed deeper into the cave. He skillfully reloaded the Berserker assault rifle and constantly fired at the enemies along the way.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in his eyes—it was a Heartless less than ten years old.

Apart from his turbid eyes, facial muscles, and teeth that had mutated to a certain extent needed for biting and chewing, he was no different from a normal human child.

He hunched his back and warily looked at Long Yuehong. His body constantly trembled, and his eyes were filled with tears from fear. He looked helpless and pitiful.

Long Yuehong hesitated for a moment and didn't pull the trigger.

The young Heartless suddenly took out a grenade that had its ring pulled out at some point in time and threw it at Long Yuehong with a ferocious gaze.

Long Yuehong's pupils froze as he reflexively pounced to the side and curled up in midair.

Boom!

Long Yuehong dodged the immediate blast, but shrapnel struck the bionic artificial intelligence armor; none of them penetrated his armor.

The only place he wasn't protected was the T1 mechanical arm. Its hardness far exceeded that of the Blackmarsh Iron Snake.

When Long Yuehong panted and rolled to his feet, the young Heartless had already been blasted into a sieve by Jiang Baimian.

As the Heartless fell to the ground one after another, the assault team arrived deep in the cave. Only two young female Heartless and the children behind them were left.

The two Heartless stared at Long Yuehong and the others with extremely tense bodies, shielding the ferocious-looking young ones—who weren't more than five years old—behind them.

They whimpered in an attempt to scare the enemy away, but their bodies trembled uncontrollably, revealing the fear in their hearts.

They didn't take a step back.

Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong slowed down at the same time and didn't attack.

At this moment, a grenade passed them and flew deep into the cave.

The figures collapsed amidst the loud explosion.

Genava came to Jiang Baimian and Long Yuehong's side and said in a slightly synthetic voice, "They are now enemies of humanity.. Being benevolent to them is a crime against humanity."

Chapter 619: Magnetization

Jiang Baimian gaped without saying a word when she heard Genava. She had already recalled one of Genava's core settings: Protect and serve humans.

Long Yuehong subconsciously said, "It's not like they necessarily eat humans for food..."

As he spoke, he fell silent.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen passed by the naked corpses that were being dried in the cave and arrived at the messy depths.

Bai Chen scanned the area and wasn't moved by the situation. She only gave a simple evaluation: "A complete Heartless cluster."

This was common terminology used by wilderness nomads. They felt that using the term 'tribe' or 'clan' to describe a small society made up of Heartless was an insult to humans, so they were more willing to use 'cluster' to describe such a situation.

Jiang Baimian quickly recovered and frowned. "There are two Awakened Superior Heartless out of dozens of Heartless; the ratio spells an obvious abnormality. It cannot be explained simply with the probability involving special exceptions and natural mutations. There has to be a reason behind this."

It was obvious how rare Superior Heartless were from the fact that An Ruxiang, Wu Shoushi, and the other Ruin Hunters didn't show much vigilance when exploring Swamp Ruin 1.

"Unless this cluster is the remains of tens of thousands of Heartless." Bai Chen helped Jiang Baimian fill in the gaps in her logic.

In a place like Swamp Ruin 1, apart from the uniqueness brought about by Xiaochong, the number of Heartless was also enough to support the birth of a few Superior Heartless.

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. "Let's split up and search this place. We'll examine the corpses and see what clues we can find."

Long Yuehong composed himself and joined Bai Chen in searching every corner of the cave.

Genava reported the preliminary autopsy results after quite some time. "There are no needle holes on these corpses. There are no signs of surgery."

This preliminarily ruled out the possibility that scientific experiments had caused the abnormality in this Heartless cluster. This was because there were definitely steps that needed to be taken during experiments, such as the regular taking of blood samples. There was a high chance that there would be traces left behind.

Sometimes, judging the experimental effects through surgery was also an option.

Shang Jianyao squatted beside a corpse and held up his chin with the back of his hand. "Almost all the corpses have traces of radiation, including lymphoma."

"You know this?" Long Yuehong was a little surprised.

Shang Jianyao pointed at Genava. "You can always rely on Old Ge."

Genava had already discussed this with him just now.

He had forced it out of him.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and said, "That explains nothing. Many Heartless are active in areas with relatively serious pollution. Otherwise, they would've long been wiped out by large faction armies."

"Not necessarily." The honest Shang Jianyao began to retort. "Aren't there many wilderness nomad settlements that those large factions aren't in control of? They have limited manpower, and there are too many places suitable for hiding."

Long Yuehong replied in Bai Chen's stead: "But most of those wilderness nomad settlements are in places with relatively harsh environments that barely allow survivability. Those that are relatively suitable for farming with unpolluted water sources are all occupied by large factions."

Jiang Baimian clapped her hands and said, "Alright, alright. Continue searching."

Seven to eight minutes later, Jiang Baimian squatted beside an incomplete corpse. She touched the metal accessory on his thick, blue-patterned pants and muttered to herself, "It's very magnetic..."

"Was this hip in the Old World?" Shang Jianyao came over with a curious expression. "People of different genders wear pants with different magnetic poles. Once a man and woman are within a certain distance from one another, they will be stuck together. Therefore, please maintain a sufficient distance if you don't have a good impression of me?"

What kind of thought is this...? Jiang Baimian admitted that she couldn't keep up with Hey's train of thought.

Fortunately, Genava—who had sharp ears and eyes—said, "I have also discovered a problem—the metal accessories on the clothes and pants of several corpses have been magnetized."

Jiang Baimian's eyes flickered as she stood up. "Is this because they are wearing their original clothes, while the remaining Heartless have replaced their clothes with those from the wilderness nomads?"

Therefore, one was magnetic while the other wasn't.

Jiang Baimian's guess was quickly confirmed because Long Yuehong and Bai Chen found items like a baseball bat, dagger, kitchen knife, and iron rod near the other cave exit.

Anything metal among them more or less had signs of magnetization.

Jiang Baimian gave her guess. "This Heartless cluster likely came from a place with relatively heavy pollution. There's a very strong magnetic field there for some reason. However, we can't determine if they were originally settled there or if they had passed by during their migration."

“They have clearly more Superior Heartless because of the strong magnetic field?” Long Yuehong was more concerned about this question.

Shang Jianyao laughed. “You can give it a try. Maybe you’ll succeed?”

I’m not stupid...?Long Yuehong muttered inwardly.

Shang Jianyao became more and more excited as he spoke. “If it really works, you can find a partner and test to see if Awakening abilities can be inherited...”

Uh...?Long Yuehong hesitated.

“Whoa.” Jiang Baimian interrupted Shang Jianyao’s imagination. “It’s been so many years since Awakened appeared. If it could be inherited, do you think the company would allow you and me to remain single?”

“Maybe a suitable match is lacking.” Shang Jianyao tried to insist.

Jiang Baimian ignored him and looked around. “Let’s go to other wilderness nomad settlements nearby to inquire about the areas with relatively high pollution and magnetic anomalies. Hmm, bury all the corpses here. Bury them deeper and take away all valuable items. Don’t waste them; we can trade them later.”

...

In a wilderness nomad settlement in a city ruin, the Old Task Force members met the leader—who was known as Elder.

This settlement relied on the city’s sewage system to develop a society with nearly 300 people.

Their main food was edible moss and mushrooms. The city ruin’s sewers and hidden environments were only suitable for these plants.

Therefore, the first question Shang Jianyao asked when he saw Elder was: “Is it delicious?”

“Are mushrooms and moss delicious?”

The elder was in his forties. He had a messy brown beard and seemed to be short-sighted.

He smiled proudly. “These have been screened for several generations. It definitely tastes good.”

With that said, as if afraid that the Old Task Force would eye them, he tugged at his blue, tweed clothes and added, “It’s just that production is a problem. We planted them in many places, but there’s still not enough to eat.”

Frankly speaking, he definitely wouldn’t have received them if these outsiders hadn’t found the entrance and shown their strength.

Jiang Baimian asked with interest, “Mr. Dawson, normal mushrooms and moss can’t be planted in this way, right?”

Dawson unconsciously rubbed his hands. “There was originally a research institute here that specialized in enhancing mushrooms and moss. We found the information they left behind and experimented with it for a long time. I’m still carrying out such research.”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped and said, “Very impressive. Can we exchange canned meat for your mushrooms and moss later?”

Dosen was stunned for a moment before he said happily, “Alright.”

Long Yuehong suddenly felt a little scared. “Apart from mushrooms and moss, what else do you usually eat?”

He originally wanted to ask if anything bad would happen if he ate too much mushroom and moss, but he gave up on the idea when he thought that the other party definitely wouldn’t answer truthfully. He planned on getting Geneva to conduct a quantitative test to see if there was any toxicity.

Dawson casually replied, “We also organize hunts. Mushrooms and moss will also attract rats.”

After chatting for a while, Jiang Baimian looked at the rusted pipes outside and probed, “Mr. Dawson, is there a relatively polluted area with a very chaotic magnetic field around it?”

Dawson asked in confusion, “What’s a magnetic field?”

“...” Jiang Baimian quickly composed herself. “It’s where the metal you carry will become heavier...”

Dawson recalled and said, “There’s no such place nearby.”

Amidst Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and the others’ disappointment, Dawson changed the topic. “But we once had a hunting team go relatively far west. Your description fits the situation there...”

Don’t leave a sentence hanging...? Long Yuehong couldn’t help but criticize inwardly.

Dawson continued, “However, I advise you not to go. You will feel uncomfortable staying there for too long. There’s also a very powerful bandit group nearby. Their name is Zorro, and they have dozens of cannons!”

Chapter 620: Fragile Peace

“Dozens of cannons?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise.

Such strength far exceeded the Hyena bandits the Old Task Force had previously encountered. They could almost be compared to those who occupied mineral resources in harsh environments.

Dawson stroked his messy beard. “Our hunting team heard it from Ruin Hunters passing by, but we’ve never really encountered them. If they did bump into them, how could they return? In any case, it’s my warning to you. Believe whatever you want; I won’t be able to find any other reason to persuade you otherwise.”

With that said, as the settlement's Elder, Dawson asked in concern, "How much canned meat do you want in exchange for the mushrooms and moss?"

It was fine if foreigners died, but the transaction of supplies couldn't be delayed.

Dawson had actually lied about some of the details. This was mainly focused on the production of mushrooms and moss.

Although the production wasn't that high, the sewage system of a large city in the Old World was massive. There were plenty of places in the ruins suitable for growing mushrooms. Coupled with generations of improvements, it was barely sufficient as a staple for their settlement.

Dawson knew the principle of 'don't show the wealth in your pockets to others.' Otherwise, these foreigners might have thoughts that they shouldn't have. Therefore, he deliberately said that the production of edible mushrooms and moss was a problem and that it wasn't enough for the townsfolk.

Of course, such food didn't provide sufficient nutrients and didn't fill the stomach. Therefore, they still had to organize teams to hunt and pick fruits regularly. At the same time, they wouldn't let go of the opportunity to exchange for food like military canned food and compressed biscuits.

Not only were these delicious, but they were also enough to satiate their hunger!

Jiang Baimian replied before the high-spirited Shang Jianyao could. "At most four. We don't have much left either. Oh, do you need weapons? We have relatively varied types, and there aren't many corresponding bullets. However, you can exchange for them using a few bags of dried mushrooms. If you need metal resources, we've also gathered a little."

These were all taken from the Heartless cave and packed the jeep's remaining space. Therefore, Jiang Baimian hoped to clear them as soon as possible and replenish their food supplies so that she didn't have to be a part-time hunter on the way to First City—real hunters.

Dawson scratched his slightly moist hair. "I'm afraid we can't afford to exchange so much. There are still a few settlements in this area. Why don't we do a collective trade?"

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong deeply understood the lack of supplies in the settlement.

This couldn't be described as 'poverty.'

"There's no need. It will be a waste of our time..." Jiang Baimian tried her best to promote the resources she had plundered. She exchanged for three bags of dried mushrooms, a bag of edible moss, and a map of the water sources with relatively mild pollution in the surrounding area.

Both parties were happy.

After being sent out of the shed Dawson had built in the sewage, Long Yuehong shook the flashlight in his hand and illuminated the green and wet moss on the walls on both sides.

This settlement only had one fuel generator and a few solar panels produced by the Old World. They were very sensitive to energy expenditure. Even when Elder Dawson and the Old Task Force conversed, they mainly relied on the flashlight in Jiang Baimian and the others' hands for illumination.

After staying in a dark and humid environment for extended periods, the residents here had certain abnormalities in their facial features. They could move freely in the sewers like rats, coming and going like the wind.

Upon seeing that nobody was around, Long Yuehong asked, "Team Leader, should we go to the place with the magnetic field anomaly in the west?"

He didn't care much about the bandits named Zorro. As long as the other party didn't have a Mind Corridor-level Awakened, it was almost impossible for the Old Task Force to fail with their current strength and carelessness.

No matter how many cannons there were, they needed people to operate them. If the people suffered problems, the cannons would be useless.

At this thought, Long Yuehong glanced at Genava guiltily. "Yes, smart bots are also humans!"

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, "The magnetic field in that area is chaotic. Be it Old Ge, our military exoskeletons, or various weapons, they can't be used. Who knows if there are any

dangerous creatures lurking there? It's better to report this matter to the company and get them to specially organize an Awakened team to investigate."

Jiang Baimian paused and said in the tone of a team leader, "You have to remember that we have a large faction backing us. There's no need to think about doing everything yourself. If you want to do everything yourself, even if it's not dangerous, just running around will exhaust you! In any case, this concerns the secrets of Awakening. The company definitely won't let it go. Once they have results, won't we be the ones benefiting?"

"When the time comes, we can also apply to read the corresponding information and see if there's any hidden reason for the Old World's destruction and the origins of the Heartless disease."

Bai Chen agreed. "According to the Elder from before, the journey will take two to three days. It completely deviates from our planned route."

"I understand," Long Yuehong replied in a tone as though he had learned something.

Shang Jianyao had a hesitant expression, but he ultimately chose to obey his leader under Jiang Baimian's gaze.

The five Old Task Force members passed through a sewer filled with edible moss and arrived at the metal staircase that led to the ground.

Many residents were lining up and climbing in sequence.

It was afternoon, and the sun was shining brightly outside.

Jiang Baimian and the others climbed out of the sewers and casually looked around. They realized that the townsfolk who had previously come out had first gone to the various cool and humid areas to examine their farmed mushrooms. They then found areas that were exposed to the sun and relatively protected. They lay down one after another and narrowed their eyes in comfort.

The environment in the sewers made them enjoy the sun. It was also because of this that they chose to believe in July's Kalendaria, Double Sun.

Jiang Baimian took note of this folk tradition with interest.

Upon seeing this, Long Yuehong opened the door to the jeep's backseat and sighed with emotion. "Compared to many wilderness nomad settlements, this place is like heaven. It's a little outside First City's sphere of influence. A town with sewers is relatively hidden, so there's no need to worry too much about slave hunters and all kinds of bandits. Furthermore, they have also found the mushroom cultivation technology from the Old World and horticulture involving edible moss. They have a relatively stable source of food, and being a little conservative is enough to deal with famine..."

The honest Genava reminded Long Yuehong after he was done with his piece, "However, they can't escape the Awakened's perception, nor do they have the strength to resist external enemies. If it weren't for the fact that we happened to encounter them and conveniently finished off the Heartless cluster, it's very unlikely that the humans in this settlement would be spared when they finish their food reserves and begin 'hunting.'"

Long Yuehong fell silent.

After a few seconds, the honest Shang Jianyao helped him curse. "This f*cked up world!"

This was the Ashlands.

...

As many places required detours and many roads were very difficult to traverse, the Old Task Force took more than a week to drive the jeep to First City's southern entrance.

Long Yuehong looked at the khaki-colored tanks, armored vehicles, city defense soldiers holding assault rifles, submachine guns, and the cars and pedestrians being examined. On the one hand, he felt that this was no different from before. On the other hand, he still found it a little different.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian looked around and said, "There's nobody like Jadi here."

Jadi was a Red Coaster they got to know at the other end of the Red River Bridge when the Old Task Force first came to First City. He helped convoys and hunters with contraband enter the city safely.

But now, such people weren't active at the southern city entrance.

This was rather abnormal.

Upon seeing Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao look at him, Genava placed a pair of sunglasses on the bridge of his nose and blocked his blinking red eyes. "When I left, Consul Gaius was reorganizing the army. On the one hand, he emphasized discipline and promised to expand..."

"So the city guards don't dare to receive bribes?" Jiang Baimian came to a realization.

This killed off business for Jadi and company.

If it were the Old Task Force in the past, they would definitely be a little vexed when they encountered such a change. But now, they only stopped the car in the distance and switched Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao before continuing forward.

Before long, it was their jeep's turn to be examined.

Shang Jianyao—who had disguised himself to a certain extent—stopped the car, took out the identification General Phocas had given him, and casually waved it. "I really envy you guys. You don't have to rush around every day; you just have to do the same thing regularly. We have to find people everywhere. Chap, I'll talk to you later."

Compared to Inference Clowning, Thought Guidance was milder and more concealed. The city guard next to the jeep immediately laughed and waved his hand to let them pass. "See you later."

They thought that they were colleagues on a secret mission.

The Old Task Force easily returned to First City.