

## Ad Infinitum 681

### Chapter 681: New Plains

The sky had just lit up when Shang Jianyao—who had just finished his rotation and lay down for an hour—jumped up. He pushed open the door, alighted, and stretched his body.

“It’s time for breakfast... It’s time for breakfast...” he muttered as he turned to the trunk, looking like he would leave the camp the moment he finished his meal.

“Can you let me sleep!?” Jiang Baimian stuck her head out from the passenger seat.

Worried that there would be other anomalies last night, she got Long Yuehong and Bai Chen to rest after she took a quick nap. She did night duty with Shang Jianyao and only woke her teammates up when it was almost morning. She then got back into the car to catch up on sleep.

Shang Jianyao explained sincerely, “We can’t stay here for long!”

Jiang Baimian was just about to ask why they couldn’t stay longer when Bai Chen led Davis and the others around the front of the car to her.

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before she asked with a smile, “What’s the matter?”

Davis nervously stroked his hair and tried his best to be as forthright and natural as usual. “After a night’s sleep, I realized that I was too nervous last night. I forgot to thank you. If not for your help, my companions and I might’ve already become Heartless.”

“We were just saving ourselves.” Jiang Baimian didn’t take credit.

“No matter what, we have to thank you sincerely. I wonder if there’s anything we can help with?” Davis’s attitude was prim and proper.

He had considered it. The other party might not care about receiving gratitude, but not him and the others. Furthermore, it might be beneficial to build a good relationship with such an experienced and powerful team.

This was his philosophy of living in the wilderness as a Ruin Hunter.

You definitely can't afford what we need...?Jiang Baimian completely forgot that she had previously been vexed over the insufficient funds due to Alpha's body.

She smiled and planned on finding a more appropriate reason to reject him.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao interrupted. "If you really want to thank us, you can give us your trench coat."

Davis was nearly 1.8 meters tall, only five centimeters shorter than him.

"Huh?" Davis was clearly stunned. He never imagined that the other party would make such a request.

He subconsciously cast his gaze at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian could only smile.?It's impossible to say to a stranger, "Sorry, my teammate is nuts," right?

Davis snapped to his senses and weighed the pros and cons. He then smiled and took off his black trench coat, handing it over to Shang Jianyao without even taking out the items in his pockets.

"Not bad, not bad." Shang Jianyao didn't stand on ceremony at all, but he took the initiative to take out the items in his trench coat pocket and return them to Davis. This included a few notes, many coins, a lighter, and a magazine filled with bullets.

"We've received your gratitude. There's no need to feel bad. After all, everybody ended up fine." Jiang Baimian helped Shang Jianyao smooth things over.

Davis heaved a sigh of relief and asked with a smile, "How may I address you?"

“You don’t have to know that. It might not be a good thing to know.” Jiang Baimian smiled.

As wanted criminals that had a huge bounty on their heads in First City, it was best not to have much contact with the Ruin Hunter team based in First City. Otherwise, how would the latter react after discovering the truth?

If the other party tried to capture them, ignoring the trivial matters over conscience, they most likely weren’t the Old Task Force’s match. If they didn’t capture them and this scene was seen by others, how would they explain to First City’s Hand of Order upon returning?

How mysterious...? Davis muttered silently. He didn’t ask any further and tactfully bade farewell.

Jiang Baimian was completely awake after being disturbed by him and his companions. She instructed Shang Jianyao to prepare breakfast in revenge.

Shang Jianyao put on the trench coat smugly, found his sunglasses, and put them on. He then went to the trunk to choose two cans of vegetables, two cans of braised beef, and a few pieces of bread. Following that, he busied himself at the bonfire.

After having their fill, Bai Chen drove the jeep out of the parking lot camp under everyone’s gazes—it was unknown if they had recognized the Old Task Force’s status as wanted criminals.

They headed northeast and quickly ventured deep into the wastelands. They took the derelict paths that appeared and disappeared from time to time.

After circling around an abandoned mine, Jiang Baimian saw that the vicinity was deserted—even animals rarely appeared. She got Bai Chen to slow down and stop in a concealed area.

Jiang Baimian ordered, “Old Ge, try to repair the phone and extract the data. We’ll wear the bionic artificial intelligence armor and the military exoskeleton to prevent any accidents.”

After his teammates were prepared, Geneva began to work.

After a while, he raised his metal head and said in a slightly synthetic voice, “Only a portion can be recovered.”

A portion of it is already a blessing...

?Long Yuehong muttered inwardly.

Under normal circumstances, it was very likely that nothing could be recovered.

Jiang Baimian—who remained vigilant—nodded. “What’s there? Give me a summary.”

The red light in Genava’s eyes flickered. “The first is that the phone’s owner made a call two hours before the Old World was destroyed. The number is labeled ‘Delivery Company.’

“The second was another 45 minutes later. He took a long-distance international call. The number didn’t have a corresponding label, but I can confirm that it came from New Plains...”

New Plains...?Jiang Baimian’s heart palpitated.

Children born in Pangu Biology had a certain level of understanding of the continent’s situation before the Old World was destroyed. They knew that New Plains was mainly made up of Ashlandics and was located northeast of this land. Its territory was roughly north of the Salvation Army today, including a portion of Icefield.

Jiang Baimian had a nagging feeling because New Plains was one of the few countries in the Ashlands’ northernmost area. This naturally reminded her of a hospital in the north, the Northern Company, and even Icefield’s Tai City.

Genava continued, “Third, there’s an address in the phone’s notes: New Plains, Burang Prefecture, Tai City Renhui Hospital...”

“Tai City? Renhui Hospital?” Long Yuehong blurted out. He was all too familiar with these two names!

Tai City was the Old Task Force's next destination. The No. 1 Senior High School there was one of Buddhism's five Great Holy Lands. Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong's vegetable son had been sent to a hospital that participated in experimental treatment. It was very likely that its name was Renhui!

The latter came from some of the data recovered from Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong's phones. This couple had most likely rented a place in Harbour Homeland near Renhui Hospital back then to take care of their son.

"So that Renhui Hospital is in Tai City..." Bai Chen realized that things had connected.

Be it Long River City's United Steel Plant where Fan Wensi and Li Jinlong lived or Icefield's Tai City, they were one of Buddhism's five Great Holy Lands.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. "But why is Tai City's Buddhist Holy Land the No. 1 Senior High School and not Renhui Hospital?"

"There might be some secret in this..." Jiang Baimian replied simply and looked at Geneva excitedly. "Is there anything else after the address?"

"Probably, but that portion of data has been completely damaged. At present, I can only determine that the address was written after the transnational journey," Geneva said truthfully.

Jiang Baimian analyzed the situation. "After a long transnational journey, they wrote down this address. Less than an hour later, they called a delivery company... That long transnational trip was to get the phone's owner to... hmm... find a certain item and send it to Renhui Hospital in Tai City, Burang Prefecture, New Plains?"

The reason she added 'find' was that the phone's owner took 45 minutes to call the delivery company.

"What item could it be?" Long Yuehong muttered to himself in confusion.

Just as he said that, Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian said in unison, "That cross necklace?"

This item was placed in front of the phone owner's corpse!

“Very likely.” Bai Chen nodded.

The basis of her judgment was that the item was rather strange and was suspected to be connected to the New World. It was understandable if this item was related to a Buddhist Holy Land.

Shang Jianyao immediately said excitedly, “Shall we recover that cross necklace?”

Bang!?

Jiang Baimian slapped his shoulder with her right hand. “Do you have a death wish?”

She paused and said seriously, “Our gains today are mainly to find another direction for our operations in Tai City. All the clues point to the past.”

“Yes, yes.” Long Yuehong nodded and asked, “Before we go to Icefield, should we visit Ruin 9 and see what else we can find in that room?”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “Not for the time being. Ruin 9 is definitely very dangerous. Besides, the items that are of value to us have likely been taken out by Davis and the others.”

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief.

It had been a ruse on his part.

Genava then explained the rest of the restored data one by one, but there was nothing that left them impressed or shivering. As a smart bot, he naturally knew how to prioritize.

After finishing the data recovery, Shang Jianyao eagerly took out the Six Senses Beads and the Life Angel necklace and fell asleep.

He first brought the two items’ auras into the Mind Corridor. Then, he replicated what he had done before, moved his limbs, and grew new ones before entering Room 912 in a rather strange manner.

He had returned to the first day he boarded the cruise ship previously, so this entry naturally brought him to nighttime. Most of the passengers and crew had fallen into a chaotic and crazy state.

Shang Jianyao wore the Life Angel necklace, held the Six Senses Beads, and sank his consciousness into the latter.

Darkness—which was different from the night—immediately appeared in front of him. It was almost illusory as it gently swayed as if it were silently contracting and expanding.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao applauded himself.

This cruise ship did have a New World node!

He immediately left the room and began searching in the increasingly dark direction. On the way, he encountered aggressive Chaotic Ones from time to time, but he avoided them in advance thanks to his perception of human consciousness and agility.

After a few failures, Shang Jianyao finally arrived in front of a door. Behind the door was ‘darkness’ that was as thick as ink.

Shang Jianyao took a closer look and laughed. “The captain’s cabin...”

As he spoke, he raised his working left foot and kicked open the door.

Behind the door, the captain was ‘as always’—on one knee, looking at the ceiling and begging for love with an aria. There was nothing ‘abnormal.’

But in Shang Jianyao’s ‘eyes,’ all the ‘darkness’ surged out of his body.

In his body!

## Chapter 682: Argument

Shang Jianyao let out a long exclamation, walked into the room, and circled the captain twice. Finally, he stopped and sighed in his mother tongue. “So it’s you!”

The source of the darkness was actually in the captain’s body!

Shang Jianyao then stroked his chin and ignored the captain’s aria as he muttered to himself, “It comes from within the body...”

“Did he eat something he shouldn’t have?” The honest Shang Jianyao stuck his head out from the right shoulder and joined the discussion.

The cheerful Shang Jianyao, who liked to joke, appeared on the left shoulder. “No matter what it is, it will eventually be expelled as long as it’s not stuck in his body. However, its form might not change.”

“It’s stuck in his body...” The calm and rational Shang Jianyao thoughtfully said, “Don’t you get it? A transplanted bone marrow. The goddess, Dufftiel Osira, who’s a researcher...”

The honest Shang Jianyao jumped up and stretched his neck high. “The source of darkness, and the New World node originates from Dufftiel’s bone marrow?”

“She entered the New World, and her body that remains in reality mutated, including the bone marrow she donated?” The cheerful Shang Jianyao didn’t show his sense of humor this time by spouting any nonsense.

The Shang Jianyao in the middle tacitly agreed with this guess and smiled. “Don’t forget—that person is still a researcher.”

Regarding the Heartless disease’s source, many clues pointed at a scientific experiment in the Old World that involved the ‘darkness’ and the New World.

The most mysterious and dangerous organization in the Ashlands was the Eighth Research Institute.



Just as the calm and rational Shang Jianyao said that, his expression turned cold. He looked at the captain—who had stood up and was unconsciously pacing around with tears streaming down his face—and said in a deep voice, “Regardless of the reason, the source of the darkness is confirmed to be in his body. If we electrocute him, we should be able to resolve this cruise ship’s anomaly and allow us to clear this psychological trauma in a novel way.”

The other Shang Jianyaos fell silent at the same time.

After a few seconds, the benevolent Zen Master Redemption hesitantly asked, “Will electrocuting him kill him?”

“Isn’t it a good thing that he’s dead? If we throw the corpse into the sea, we can bury this New World node.” The gloomy Shang Jianyao scoffed at the cyborg monk’s words.

The Shang Jianyao that abhorred evil and made it his responsibility to save all of humanity appeared from the body. “But he didn’t do anything bad. We can’t euthanize him just because a person suffers an infectious disease post-surgery that might very well affect others, right?”

“Come to your senses!” The gloomy Shang Jianyao cursed. “This is a psychological trauma. The people here are all fake!”

The righteous Shang Jianyao didn’t back down at all. “A gentleman needs to be careful. We can’t indulge ourselves just because we are in a virtual world. We can’t do things that violate our worldview, outlook on life, and values.”

The gloomy Shang Jianyao scoffed. “Hypocrite! If we don’t deal with the captain, most of the passengers here will contract the Heartless disease on the last day! In order to show your kindness, would you rather have thousands of people die? Is this kindness? Pui, this is just a hypocritical fantasy on your part!”

“No, you can’t think that way.” The Shang Jianyao that valued relationships helped the one who abhorred evil. “If you were the captain, what would you think or do when you are hunted by others to be euthanized when you were infected for no reason on your part?”

“Kill them, of course!” the gloomy Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation. “I won’t hesitate even if I have to become enemies with all of humanity! What value does this world have to me if I’m dead?”

Without waiting for the other Shang Jianyaos' response, he fully explained his philosophy. "Doesn't the final choice of such matters depend on which side you are on? If I were the majority, I definitely wouldn't allow anyone to harm us in the name of respecting the rights of a few people and not harming any individuals. It's the lesser of two evils! If I were a minority—the individual that might be harmed—I would naturally have to tell everyone that 'I won't be the last perpetrator!' Even if I have to fight all of humanity and cause the deaths of the majority, I have to ensure my survival! Anyone who can make the opposite decision in both situations is either some selfless fool or a hero."

Upon seeing how open he was about his selfishness, the other Shang Jianyaos couldn't find a reason to retort.

As time passed, the calm and rational Shang Jianyao laughed. "Actually, there's no need to be so extreme. In the current situation, is electrocuting the captain the best choice? We previously dealt with items and a ceiling, but it's the human body this time. Nobody knows if there will be any additional changes."

He looked around and glanced at the heads that had popped out of his body. He smiled and said, "Although this is a psychological trauma, we might very well be harmed in reality if anything happens. We might become vegetables or even die on the spot. Therefore, it's not a bad thing to be careful."

"That's true." The ruthless but timid Shang Jianyao thought for a few seconds and agreed.

The calm and rational Shang Jianyao voiced his plan. "Let's first try to bring the captain five kilometers away from the cruise ship to observe the changes."

This was the team's previous solution when dealing with the cross necklace.

"Sure, sure!" The Shang Jianyao—who had been afraid to speak because of his companions' argument—quickly raised his hand in agreement.

Shang Jianyao's ten heads turned to the captain—who had kneeled down again and was belting out his aria for love.

They smiled.

In less than a minute, the captain was tightly bound in bedsheets.

During this process, Shang Jianyao didn't dare to use his abilities, afraid that he would be corrupted by the darkness. But with his physique, he easily completed the mission of 'abduction.'

He then carried the whimpering captain and dragged his paralyzed right leg—which had been moved to his tailbone—out of the room and went straight to the deck. His target was the lifeboat attached to the cruise ship!

With his perception of human consciousness and agility, Shang Jianyao circled around the deranged humans and arrived at the railing. He then lowered the lifeboat into the sea.

After picking up the captain and getting into the lifeboat, Shang Jianyao waved his right hand at the cruise ship. "Bye!"

He was excited as if he were playing a game.

The sea breeze at night was strong, and the water was cold. Shang Jianyao tightened his clothes and said to the unconscious captain, "You are very lucky that it's the benevolent me now. After all, a cyborg monk isn't that afraid of the cold. Otherwise, you definitely wouldn't have been able to keep those bedsheets!"

As he rambled, Zen Master Redemption drove the lifeboat a long distance.

He couldn't estimate how far he went, but it was definitely more than five kilometers. He then conjured a pair of high-magnification binoculars and observed the cruise ship's situation under the moonlight and starlight that scattered down from the sky.

Darkness still filled the area, but it was a little thinner than before. People were undoubtedly still in a chaotic and crazy state.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin and muttered to himself, "The range of this influence is a little terrifying... Or could it be that it's essentially impossible to widen the distance without finding the right solution because we are in a psychological trauma? Must we really electrocute him?"

He considered for a moment and sent the captain back to the cruise ship before leaving the psychological trauma.

...

In the real world, Shang Jianyao opened his eyes and saw Jiang Baimian and the others—who looked like they were facing a great enemy.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and asked in concern, “How was it?”

Shang Jianyao seriously explained the situation he had observed and what he had done.

Long Yuehong couldn’t help but sigh with emotion. “I have headaches whenever I hear about research institutes and researchers.”

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Big White used to be a researcher.”

“Assistant, an assistant,” Jiang Baimian said humbly. She thought for a moment and said, “We might have to find a way to suppress the New World node that matches the psychological trauma or, in other words, something the room owner understands.”

“Any ideas?” Shang Jianyao had never cared about his reputation. He would raise any question.

Bai Chen pursed her lips and probed, “High-voltage electrocution?”

“We’ll leave that as a last resort.” Shang Jianyao looked around. “Is there any other solution?”

Genava, Long Yuehong, and the others fell into deep thought.

After quite some thought, Jiang Baimian said, “Let’s comb through the patterns of the entire psychological trauma.”

“First, under normal circumstances, I’ll end up in the nearest room from where I left...” Shang Jianyao quickly began to recall.

These were all his previous conclusions.

He repeated these conclusions until he reached: “Six—the period before we boarded the cruise ship was rather special. It didn’t appear again after that.”

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “The sixth rule didn’t involve anything previously. Yes... Ask Loannes, Sully, and the others about the differences before and after they boarded the cruise ship on your next entry.”

Smack!

Shang Jianyao clenched his right fist and punched his left palm. “Alright!”

...

When Shang Jianyao entered again, the psychological trauma was in the day. Everyone had returned to normal.

He found Loannes and successfully deceived him again, becoming brothers with zero blood relation with him.

“What do you think the greatest difference before and after you boarded this cruise ship is?” Shang Jianyao asked with bright eyes.

Loannes frowned and recalled. “I felt that I’ve finally invited some peace. It was like this before I discovered anything abnormal at night. Also, I didn’t have to worry about the pursuit of a large group of Heartless...”

Shang Jianyao listened attentively and didn’t interrupt.

Toward the end, Loannes smiled. “There’s something else, but I don’t know if it counts. The weather was pretty warm previously, so it was enough for me to wear such long-sleeved T-shirts. On the day I boarded the cruise ship, the temperature dropped in the evening, and it became very

cold that night. I had to wear thick clothes or wrap myself in a blanket. That damn captain didn't allow us to turn on the air conditioner because he wanted to conserve energy!"

"It became very cold?" Shang Jianyao repeated the other party's words, and his eyes gradually lit up.

### Chapter 683: Key Point

Loannes was very confused by Shang Jianyao's reaction. "What's wrong? Don't you find it very cold at night?"

"I do." Shang Jianyao nodded honestly. Without waiting for Loannes to ask again, he muttered to himself, "When all the passengers boarded the cruise ship in the evening, a cold draft blew south and plummeted the temperatures. The cycle began from that moment..."

"It's fine during the day, but the night's cold is bone-chilling... It's normal during the day and chaotic at night... On the last day, we relied on hiding in the dark and cold storage to escape the fate of being infected with the Heartless disease..."

Loannes was stunned. "What are you talking about?"

As his father was an Ashlandic culture enthusiast, he had grasped Ashlandic when he was young. With this skill, he barely managed to survive around Iron Mountain City—which was mainly Ashlandic. Finally, he entered the Second Food Company and had a 'fortuitous encounter.'

At this moment, he only had one thought: What is this fellow rattling about?

Faced with Loannes's question, Shang Jianyao smiled brightly. "I figured out some stuff and found a key point. Then, I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

With that said, Shang Jianyao—who was wearing a black trench coat—pressed his hand to his chest and bowed. It was unknown where he had learned this from.

As he bowed, his figure quickly faded and disappeared in front of Loannes.

Loannes was dumbfounded. “H-he’s really from the future? What did he mean by seeing me the day after tomorrow?”

After the fourth exit and re-entry, Shang Jianyao arrived on the day when the cruise ship docked. He knew that Loannes, Sully, and the others had already hidden in the cold storage at this moment. Therefore, he went straight there and slammed the metal door.

The crew in the kitchen had their thoughts guided by him, so they treated this as normal.

After slamming the door for a while and not receiving a response, Shang Jianyao opened the door and walked in. He didn’t forget to put on thick clothes and wrap himself in a rug and blanket.

After casually closing the freezer door, Shang Jianyao switched on the flashlight and shone it around. As expected, he found Loannes in the familiar spot.

“We meet again.” Shang Jianyao smiled and waved.

Loannes was stunned for a few seconds before asking in confusion, “You are—you’re the Shang from two days ago?”

He still retained the corresponding memories before the story was rebooted.

“Who else do you think it is?” asked Shang Jianyao, who was wrapped up like a bear.

Loannes was excited. He looked around and suppressed his voice. “I chose to hide here because I thought of how you mentioned that the freezer is cold and dark. Did the Heartless disease really erupt outside?”

He had ruminated over Shang Jianyao’s cryptic words many times over the past two days.

“You’ll know the answer when the cruise ship docks.” Shang Jianyao dragged his paralyzed right leg—which was located at his tailbone—as he walked to a corner where there was still some food.

When Sully and the others saw his ‘appearance,’ they felt a chill run down their spines. They trembled as if they were facing a monster.

If it weren't for the fact that Shang Jianyao didn't show any intention of attacking or even glance at them, they would've long lost control of themselves and rushed out of the freezer to search for another hiding spot.

Of course, on the other hand, the fact that such a monster chose the kitchen's freezer as a hiding spot meant that this place was better than other places.

As for Loannes, he ignored Shang Jianyao's unique appearance. He was long 'accustomed to it.'

Shang Jianyao didn't waste any time here. He exited and entered again, pushing the timeline to the node when the cruise ship was docked.

As soon as he appeared in the freezer, he immediately ran to the door amidst the broadcast and opened it.

In the kitchen outside, the crew—who had become Heartless—looked over.

Shang Jianyao ignored them and circled around to escape the hunters. He was racing against time in his attempt to reach the source of the darkness—where the captain was. He was unwilling to delay any further.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Amidst Loannes and the others' shots at the Heartless, Shang Jianyao rushed out of the kitchen and relied on the Six Senses Beads' perception to run in the direction of the gradually thickening darkness.

On the way, he had no choice but to fire at a Heartless blocking the way. His shots hit accurately.

After arriving at the wheelhouse, Shang Jianyao finally saw the captain.

His rotund body leaned against the glass beside him as he looked down at the chaotic scene of the Heartless disease outbreak without moving.



If not for the fact that he still had human consciousness, Shang Jianyao suspected that he was already dead. Of course, Heartless also had human consciousness.

All kinds of signs indicated that the captain had already been infected with the Heartless disease.

First, he was the source of darkness, the node that connected to the New World. If the Heartless disease really came from this, it was impossible for him to be spared.

Second, there were many crew members in the cabin; they were all infected with the Heartless disease. Their bodies were hunched, and their eyes were turbid and bloodshot. However, they didn't attack the captain. In a situation where they weren't especially hungry, the Heartless didn't hunt its own kind.

...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao held an Ice Moss in his left and a United 202 in his right to knock the Heartless—who were attempting to pounce on him—to the ground.

Upon hearing the gunshot, the captain's rotund body slowly turned around.

His face was filled with panic and fear. Although his eyes were a little bloodshot, they weren't turbid at all.

He had yet to become a Heartless!

However, Shang Jianyao could 'see' it very clearly. The source of the darkness was still in his body.

Shang Jianyao's thoughts raced as he mimicked Jiang Baimian and smiled kindly. "I'm here to save you!"

"Y-you aren't infected with the Heartless disease..." The captain observed for a while and heaved a sigh of relief. He then broke down and said, "I thought I was a goner! B-but..."

As he spoke, the captain revealed a look of suspicion.

Shang Jianyao didn't respond. He put away the United 202 and walked over.

Bam!

He punched the captain behind the ear.

The captain fainted without a grunt.

Shang Jianyao then tore off the nearby Heartless's clothes and tied the captain tightly again. He then carried the captain and stomped to the kitchen.

As Loannes and the others had already left and a batch of Heartless along the way had been eliminated, Shang Jianyao returned to the freezer rather easily.

He took a deep breath and confirmed that the Six Senses Beads and the Life Angel necklace were fine. He then walked through the ajar door and entered the dark and cold interior.

Hiss!

The unconscious captain twisted like he was awakening as though he had been thrown into ice water.

Shang Jianyao closed the metal door to the freezer.

Almost instantly, he felt the entire cruise ship shake violently. No, the entire world was shaking!

At the same time, he sensed that the 'darkness' was like a receding tide as it surged back into the captain's body, curled up, and gradually disappeared.

An illusory click sounded as the psychological trauma cracked. The 'glass shards' fell one after another, revealing the dark void hidden behind them.

In the void, there was a city that had tall towers reaching into the clouds.

Crack!

The entire psychological trauma completely collapsed. A thin fog that seemed to reflect a burning cloud surged out and flew toward Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment before reaching out to catch it and turning it into a ball.

After the psychological trauma completely disappeared and the dark void melted into the night, a temple ruin propped up by many stone pillars appeared in front of Shang Jianyao. This was Room 912's owner's second psychological trauma.

Shang Jianyao glanced at it and coolly left the room, returning to reality.

...

"It's a little cold." Shang Jianyao hissed and shrank his neck the moment he sat up straight.

He picked up the sunglasses on his trench coat and moved the crimson fog that he received from the psychological trauma inside.

Outside the jeep with the door open, Jiang Baimian asked curiously and with concern, "What's wrong?"

Shang Jianyao threw his sunglasses to the passenger seat and smiled. "It's been resolved. I obtained an item."

"How was it resolved?" Long Yuehong was rather curious.

Shang Jianyao recounted his entire idea, placing his focus on the keyword 'cold.'

"So, is the darkness afraid of the cold or not?" Bai Chen asked in confusion.

Its surge was accelerated in the cold night, thus affecting the entire cruise ship and causing most people to fall into a chaotic state. It appeared to enjoy such an environment, but it chose to circle around the freezer, allowing the people hiding inside to survive. Furthermore, when Shang Jianyao finally stuffed the captain into the freezer, the 'darkness' clearly retracted and gradually disappeared.

Jiang Baimian reenacted the relevant scenes in her mind and deliberated before saying, "I think it's fear, but the reaction is different because of the different degrees of cold."

She further explained, "At low temperatures, the darkness is frustrated by the cold and affects humans. At temperatures like that of the freezer, it chooses to go around it and escape."

"I wonder if such a situation happens to the previous 'darkness...'" Geneva agreed with Jiang Baimian's explanation and began coming up with ideas.

Shang Jianyao stroked his chin. "Being afraid of the cold seems to be one of the Door of Scorching domain's characteristics? That darkness has Dufftiel's consciousness?"

"It shouldn't be limited to Awakened from the Door of Scorching." Jiang Baimian didn't refute Shang Jianyao's guess and only reminded him not to miss anything.

The few of them discussed for a while before Shang Jianyao suddenly pointed at the sunglasses in front of him and said to Jiang Baimian, "Give it a try."

"This is mine?" Jiang Baimian joked.

"That's right!" Shang Jianyao didn't hesitate.

Jiang Baimian was just about to speak when she suddenly shivered.

"It's a little cold..." Her teeth rattled.

It was almost summer, so she wore thin clothes.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “The price is ‘fear of the cold.’ The ability is to throw people into chaos—probably.”

He had no way of knowing the correct name of the ability.

Jiang Baimian first put down her sunglasses and prepared to thicken her clothes before trying again. She then asked Shang Jianyao, “Your abilities should’ve improved significantly after clearing this psychological trauma, right?”

#### Chapter 684: Upgrade

Shang Jianyao wasn’t modest at all. “Of course! Furthermore, the improvement is considerable. As for the exact details...”

He cast his gaze at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong reflexively took a few steps back as if he had foreseen Shang Jianyao’s sinister intentions.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “I’ll try using a psychological trauma later. It won’t be too different from reality.”

“...” Long Yuehong was stunned for a moment. “That wasn’t what you said previously.”

Shang Jianyao explained seriously, “The room owner of the previous psychological trauma—the one in Iron Mountain City Ruin’s Second Food Company—wasn’t an Awakened back then, so I couldn’t sense human consciousness inside. My abilities were greatly interfered with, so I couldn’t compare with reality; therefore, I didn’t discover this. The cruise trauma felt relatively close to reality.”

Although what you said makes sense, I keep having the feeling that you’re bullsh\*ting me...? Long Yuehong muttered inwardly.

He didn't attempt to 'expose' Shang Jianyao. After all, he had already escaped the fate of becoming an experimental subject.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian looked at the sunglasses that had fused with the Chaotic aura and thoughtfully said, "The Sea of Origins can't directly correspond to reality. The data obtained from the experiments there is inaccurate. I have to figure out how large this pair of sunglasses' range of influence is later and how many people it can be used against. I need to know the different effects it has on Awakened who have already stepped into the Mind Corridor, Awakened who are still in the Sea of Origins, and ordinary people..."

"Uh..." Long Yuehong was a little stunned. Team Leader, you're known to be kind, but now you are in cahoots with Shang Jianyao?

Jiang Baimian smiled at him and said, "The Mind Corridor-level experimental subject is naturally Hey. I'll be the one responsible for the one in the Sea of Origins. When the time comes, I'll get Hey to use the item. Then, who do you think is the better experimental subject for ordinary people—you or Little White?"

Upon hearing his team leader's question, a scene that often appeared in the Old World entertainment surfaced in Long Yuehong's mind: someone spreading their pitch-black, vile devil wings out their back.

"I'll do it!" Long Yuehong blurted out without hesitation.

Jiang Baimian looked at him, and her lips seemed to tremble. Finally, she couldn't help but laugh. "Haha! Little Red, you're really the most innocent and gullible boy I've ever seen!"

"Ah..." Long Yuehong was confused and embarrassed. He subconsciously turned his head to glance at Bai Chen and realized that his companion seemed to be holding in her laughter.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "There's no need for me to experiment personally. I can just return the item to Hey and get him to bring the aura into another person's psychological trauma for testing. Won't that work? This is no different from experimenting with how much his abilities have improved. At most, I'll use him as my experimental subject after he's back in reality to test how much influence it has on Awakened at the Mind Corridor level."

Clap! Clap! Clap!?

Shang Jianyao applauded this 'exciting' con.

The person in question instantly realized what was happening, and his face flushed red.

Jiang Baimian knew when to stop and quickly praised Long Yuehong. "The fact that you didn't go into detail shows your trust in your companions and how you're willing to make certain sacrifices for the team. Well done!"

She gave a thumbs up.

Team Leader, have you never heard the story of 'the boy who cried wolf?' If you continue making such jokes, nobody might take it seriously when the time comes and cause a strategic misunderstanding...? Long Yuehong criticized inwardly and waved his hand. "It's only right."

He couldn't say that he had turned flushed out of concern for someone, right?

Jiang Baimian then changed the topic and looked at Geneva. "Seriously, Old Ge, you have to be an experimental subject later. I want to try to see if the Chaotic aura comes with the Electromagnetic Interference ability."

"You can first try to see if you can interfere with matter and carry out an elimination," Geneva replied according to his programming.

"There's no way to eliminate the possibility. Perhaps both abilities are present." Jiang Baimian shook her head. "Although I can still use walkie-talkies and electrical appliances as experimental subjects, they can't give me the most accurate and direct feedback. It's not that easy for Hey to find a real smart bot in psychological traumas."

Geneva accepted this explanation. "Alright, no problem."

After a series of attempts, Shang Jianyao finally concluded: After the cruise ship's trauma, the number of people he could affect had increased to 100. The range of Literary Hipster-Corny Person reached 150 meters. Limbs Immobility and Electromagnetic Interference were 200 meters. Matter Interference was 100 meters. Thought Guidance didn't change in this regard; it was still based on

the requirement that one heard the corresponding words clearly. Therefore, it could affect people through phones, radio stations, and other means from a distance.

The price of the Chaotic aura was that it was cryophobia—fear of the cold. To a certain extent, one had to wear a sweater even in summer, or they would be trembling.

Its effect was to make ten humans within 100 meters fall into a chaotic, crazy, and subconscious state. Even if the influence was interrupted, this state could be maintained for nearly two minutes.

The effects suffered by ordinary people and Sea of Origins-level Awakened were no different. When it came to Awakened at the Mind Corridor level, the duration and level of chaos clearly decreased. The former lasted only 15 seconds left, while the latter allowed the target to maintain a certain level of consciousness. However, it was easy to hallucinate. They would easily treat the hallucinations as real and carry out actions that targeted them.

In other words, Mind Corridor-level Awakened wouldn't truly enter a state of unconsciousness and go completely crazy even if they were affected by the Chaotic aura. They would only be a little unable to distinguish reality from illusion.

In such a situation, he could react if a certain action was taken against him unless the attacker was coincidentally replaced by his hallucination.

“Therefore, it really suits you,” Shang Jianyao said sincerely as he looked at Jiang Baimian.

As the Old Task Force's team leader, Jiang Baimian had the hallucinatory abilities of Spatial Hallucination and Item Agnosia.

Under normal circumstances, she—who was only at the Sea of Origins level—couldn't affect a Mind Corridor Awakened with her created illusions. At most, she could give the other party a feeling that they were watching a holographic projection or be in a temporary daze.

But when the target fell into 'chaos,' the effects of her 'hallucination' would be completely different.

Jiang Baimian laughed and said bluntly, “Since you're so sincere about giving it to me, I'll reluctantly accept it.”



She knew that refusing would only hurt the Shang Jianyao that valued relationships.

“However,” Jiang Baimian smiled and made a request. “It’s best to fix the aura on my glove. It will be more convenient.”

She took out a pair of black leather gloves with some fluff.

Although the Old Task Force estimated that it would be midsummer when they arrived at Icefield’s Tai City and that it was the best season in the area, Jiang Baimian wasn’t sure if they would meet with any delays. Therefore, she still got her team members to make some preparations while buying all kinds of supplies in First City.

Shang Jianyao naturally wouldn’t refuse such a simple request. He used the Mind Corridor to transfer the Chaotic aura to the right-hand glove. Therefore, this item was named Chaotic Right Hand.

Jiang Baimian picked up the glove and said regretfully, “Unfortunately, this can’t interfere with electromagnetism or matter.”

She wanted to sigh, but she felt that exhaling hot air was too extravagant.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao made a strange sound. “Coo, coo. The cold wind is?freezing1...”

Jiang Baimian glared at him and placed the item back into her tactical backpack. She then looked around and said, “After what happened last night, I have some confidence in defeating the island of fear. I’ll give it a try now.”

Nobody objected.

...

In the Sea of Origins, in the solemn and quiet Pangu Biology underground building.

Jiang Baimian stood outside her house and spoke as if she were chatting with someone. “I’ve figured something out now: Being in the Ashlands, accidents are inevitable. Even if I don’t do anything—or rather, do everything to the best of my ability, it’s still possible for me to face all kinds of accidents when I wake up. This might be because someone nearby had retrieved an item in a ruin, or it might be a surgery that some innocent man nearby had previously undergone... These are things beyond our control. There can even be undiscovered anomalies that might result in my companions, friends, and family suddenly being infected with the Heartless disease.”

Jiang Baimian paused, and her expression gradually turned solemn and serious. “I’m afraid of losing my family, relatives, friends, and companions. I’m afraid of losing my current way of life. However, it doesn’t mean that I won’t lose these just because I’m afraid! As long as I don’t figure out the cause of the Heartless disease or the reason for the Old World’s destruction, everyone will live in fear! I will work hard at advancing so that I won’t have to be on edge one day!”

She frankly voiced her feelings before laughing. “I’ll install explosives in a few key spots here later and personally blow up this underground building. Terror can’t stop me from moving forward. It can only become a driving motivation for me to move forward!”

Nearly half an hour later, at the parking lot entrance of the underground building.

Jiang Baimian put on her sunglasses and walked to the door. She even hummed a song. “Do you remember the dreams of your youth?”

“Like a flower in eternal bloom...”

Rumble!

Behind her and under her feet, a series of explosions shook the ground violently.

The entire island seemed to collapse, and flames flickered amidst the dust. Jiang Baimian didn’t even look back as she walked to the edge of the island.

After the explosion completely subsided, she knew that she had overcome the corresponding fear.

...

After leaving the Sea of Origins, Jiang Baimian tested the improvement of her abilities.

Her Spatial Hallucination could now affect seven people, and the range became 30 meters. Item Agnosia could affect two targets at once. The range was 20 meters, with a period of 90 seconds. Stimulation Disorder could only modify one related reaction at a time for one target. The duration increased to two minutes, with a maximum range of 15 meters.

After Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian had their breakthroughs, the Old Task Force set off again.

After nearly two weeks, they finally arrived at the border between First City and the Salvation Army after taking many detours.

This was a continuous mountain range.

#### Chapter 685: Mountain

This endless mountain range was called Cloud Mountain. If one wanted to circle around it, they could either head northwest and pass through the White Knights' sphere of influence or head southeast until they reached the Great Plains, where the terrain eased. That was the front line of First City's confrontation with the Salvation Army—it was the former's Eastern Army defense zone.

In the Old World, Cloud Mountain wasn't an insurmountable natural stronghold. Many bridges and tunnels connected the two sides, but many bridges had collapsed, and many tunnels were now blocked. Only a few remaining routes allowed passage through the mountains, and these were guarded by First City and the Salvation Army.

In the driver's seat, Bai Chen released one hand and pointed at a mountain path ahead. "We can cross Cloud Mountain from here and won't encounter any especially strict interrogations. It's considered a road of relatively low importance. There's not much reliance on tunnels or bridges when circling up the mountain. Although many spots along the way have collapsed, it can barely allow a large car to go through."

Jiang Baimian nodded and curiously asked, "Little White, I thought you haven't been here before? Why are you so familiar..."

"Because I know how to read maps," Shang Jianyao replied on her behalf.

As Bai Chen drove the jeep toward the mountain road, she explained, “Although I’ve never been here, I had some idea of this place a long time ago. Back then, the Salvation Army sent people everywhere to gather wilderness nomads and organized them to head east of Cloud Mountain. They said that although food was still lacking, relying on the mountains and rivers for food and water allowed everyone to barely survive if a strict rationing system was followed. Everyone worked together and fought against any dangers. They cultivated farmlands in areas with less severe pollution and established factories to prevent anyone from suffering from famine and cold...”

Bai Chen slowed her speech as she spoke as if she recalled how she felt when she first heard about this.

Shang Jianyao straightened his back and pressed his right hand to his left chest. “For all of humanity!”

‘For all of humanity’ was the Salvation Army’s slogan and ideal. ‘To save all of humanity’ was Shang Jianyao’s own; he knew the difference very well.

Bai Chen ignored him and continued, “Back then, people from the Salvation Army also came to our settlement. He described such a future for us and also gave us a method to bypass First City’s army and pass through Cloud Mountain—this is the path. Back in First City, I noticed it at a glance when we split up to search for maps and information.”

Long Yuehong—who was listening seriously—quickly testified. “Yes, I remember Little White specially asking about this road back then.”

“Yes.” Geneva indicated that it was indeed so.

Jiang Baimian temporarily didn’t care much about the problem of this ‘trail.’ She was more curious about another point. “Little White, did anyone from your settlement follow the Salvation Army back then?”

“Many. My parents wanted to, but they decided to wait a few years because I was still young and not suitable for long journeys.” Bai Chen pursed her lips. “Later, they passed away. In the past decade, I’ve never heard of the Salvation Army doing such things.”

“Is that so...” Jiang Baimian skipped the topic fluidly.

As the Old Task Force members conversed, the jeep drove into the mountains.

The further they went, the more lush the trees on both sides became. From time to time, bird chirping sounded from a distance.

It had been less than 70 years since the Old World was destroyed. Just this period of human civilization being absent in this area allowed nature to eliminate all traces except for the derelict, overgrown roads.

Shang Jianyao attentively listened to the bird chirping as if he were pondering over the different kinds of culinary methods in the wilderness. He only thought of 'roasting' and couldn't help but wipe the corners of his mouth.

The jeep started and stopped; the Old Task Force members would alight from time to time to clean up the insurmountable obstacles or get a few trees. They would place them in depressions that were inconvenient for passage, ones that prevented the vehicle from speeding up.

From about 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Shang Jianyao and the others spent the time traversing Cloud Mountain with difficulty, but they appeared to have escaped First City's effective sphere of influence.

As they passed through an area with high cliffs on the left and right, Jiang Baimian suddenly stopped watching the scenery. She turned her head rather naturally to look out the window at an adequate speed. At the same time, she casually said, "There are human-like bioelectric signals. Two."

She couldn't make a very accurate judgment based on bioelectric signals. After all, many medium-sized animals had similar physiques to humans.

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, "I don't sense any human consciousness."

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen tensed up.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "It's either two large 'monkeys' or two Awakened. Salvation Army patrolmen?"

Since this was a hidden route provided by the Salvation Army, it was definitely under their supervision.

“What should we do next?” Long Yuehong didn’t look at the cliff covered in vegetation to their right like Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Ignore it for now. We have to deal with the Salvation Army eventually. It might not be a bad thing to feign ignorance.”

“Right, we also know Xu Datong from the Public Security Council.” Long Yuehong agreed with his team leader.

The Salvation Army’s core organization was called the Supplies Management Committee. The Public Security Council directly came under it. It was equivalent to the Pangu Biology’s Order Supervisory Department combined with the Security Department sans its foreign combat capabilities, and it wielded great power.

In the Old World’s words, the Salvation Army was a highly unified force between the military and the government. They were military-like for many domestic administrative issues.

In the Ashlands, this wasn’t a special exception but a norm. Only a few places had a clear distinction between the military and the administrators—Pangu Biology was one example.

Upon hearing Long Yuehong’s words, Shang Jianyao clicked his tongue. “How do you know that there is no political in-fighting or factional strife in the Salvation Army? What if we encounter Commissioner Xu’s political enemy?”

Long Yuehong was momentarily speechless.

Based on the Old World entertainment he had watched and the few factions he had encountered, there were conflicts wherever people were.

Jiang Baimian scoffed at Shang Jianyao. “I thought you have always believed that the Salvation Army had never degenerated and that they are still that organization filled with ideals?”

Shang Jianyao's expression sank bit by bit as he said with unconcealed grief, "That's why I raised the worst-case scenario in advance."

Uh, is it currently the Shang Jianyao that values relationships or the Shang Jianyao that abhors evil and shoulders the responsibility of saving all of humanity??Jiang Baimian said to Genava, whose turn was to drive, "Maintain the speed from before."

Before long, a female voice suddenly sounded at the bend in the perilous road. "Halt! Don't continue forward, or you will be bombarded remotely!"

It was spoken in Ashlandic with a moderate accent.

Jiang Baimian looked up and realized that a slightly rusted loudspeaker was tied to a tree at the edge of the road.

It was connected to a circuit, and the circuit was hidden in the vegetation.

"Stop the car," Jiang Baimian said to Genava as if she were prepared.

The jeep stopped in the middle of the road, and the Old Task Force members alighted one after another.

In such an environment, it wasn't safe to be in the car. It was too easy a target, and it wasn't easy to dodge any attack.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" The female voice sounded through the speaker again.

Perhaps it was because the equipment was old, but the voice sounded a little distorted.

Jiang Baimian replied, "We are Ruin Hunters. We want to make a living east of Cloud Mountain."

"Why don't you stay in First City?" the female voice asked remotely.

She was outside Shang Jianyao's perception range.

Jiang Baimian wore a look of 'helplessness.' "We weren't too lucky and are wanted by First City. I believe you also have a Hunter's Guild here. You can check through them if we are really wanted by First City."

"Name, Hunter ID." The woman's voice was relatively polite; she didn't get the Old Task Force to hand over their Hunter Badges directly.

After Jiang Baimian finished giving their aliases and IDs, the female voice asked, "What placed you on the wanted list?"

Uh...?Jiang Baimian couldn't remember the original reason for being put on the wanted list.

They had been placed on the wanted list by First City too many times!

"We stole three military exoskeletons and two sets of bionic artificial intelligence armor!" Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava couldn't stop Shang Jianyao from revealing their assets despite their collective efforts.

The other party fell silent.

Shang Jianyao smiled again. "I'm joking."

The other party remained silent.

After a while, the female voice sounded through the radio again. "After confirmation, you are indeed wanted by First City with a very high bounty. The fact that you haven't been captured to this day means that you are very strong."

"That's right, that's right." Shang Jianyao wasn't modest at all.

Jiang Baimian smiled. "But we come in peace. Furthermore, our final destination is Icefield. You aren't unwelcoming of foreign Hunters, right?"



At the very least, there hasn't been the case of the Salvation Army forbidding Ruin Hunters from other factions to enter their borders.

"Icefield?" The woman's voice suddenly sounded a little strange. She paused for a few seconds before saying, "We just don't welcome Ruin Hunters who are spies. You can continue forward. You can't enter any settlements you encounter; you can only camp outside unless you undergo further inspection."

Upon seeing that their conversation was relatively normal and smooth, Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Alright."

### Chapter 686: Ding Ling

The jeep drove along the bumpy road beside a tall cliff before arriving at a valley.

In the valley, a clean stream emitted a clear sound as it happily flowed forward, moistening a large piece of fertile land.

It wasn't considered deep, and it was even a little shallow. The Old Task Force's jeep could drive over the pebbles at the bottom.

The road was cut here and connected a distance away to the other side. In the middle stood a small settlement made of steel frames caked in mud bricks.

On the settlement's high perimeter walls, a few men in the Salvation Army's black uniforms held semi-automatic rifles, assault rifles, and other weapons as they stared at Jiang Baimian and the others with sharp gazes.

In the farmlands that surrounded the stream, men and women in military uniforms were working.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian nodded slightly, knowing that this was a military border stronghold.

In such strongholds, the troops took turns guarding, patrolling, farming, and hunting. Apart from ammunition, clothes, and other supplies that required regular supply from the rear, they were barely self-sufficient for everything else.

At the same time, Jiang Baimian swept her gaze and, with her rich experience, discovered traces of many Salvation Army members lurking on the cliffs around the valley.

They deploy powerful long-range firepower hundreds of meters away to guard the stronghold against attacks from Mind Corridor-level Awakened...?Jiang Baimian thoughtfully retracted her gaze. She then smiled at her team members and said, "It's almost dark. We'll camp by the stream tonight."

"Alright!" Shang Jianyao replied without hesitation.

He suddenly pushed open the door and alighted. He then faced the military stronghold, stretched out his right hand, pressed it to his left chest, and shouted, "For all of humanity!"

The Salvation Army members on the settlement's perimeter were a little stunned. One after another, they decided to ignore this fellow as long as he didn't take any further action.

Jiang Baimian—who had alighted with Shang Jianyao—curled her lips behind him and pretended not to know him.

Upon seeing that the Old Task Force had no intention of entering the settlement and instead chose to camp a certain distance away, the Salvation Army members heaved a sigh of relief.

"They sure are nice!" Shang Jianyao exclaimed at Long Yuehong and the others.

Long Yuehong was a little confused. "Why do you say that?"

Shang Jianyao replied righteously, "Shouldn't normal soldiers find fault with us and take action to satisfy their greed when encountering rich outsiders like us at such a remote and uninhabited border stronghold? They actually heaved a sigh of relief because we didn't cause trouble. What a kind and benevolent showing!"

Bai Chen agreed with Shang Jianyao's words. "Similar things happened many times in the wilderness strongholds around First City. This resulted in Ruin Hunters and smuggling caravans circling around those places—taking the risk of encountering bandits, Heartless, mutated creatures, and accidents—rather than heading there."

If they were really targeted by First City's wilderness strongholds, it would be great if they only lost their property. What they feared was losing their lives.

Furthermore, if they counter-attacked and injured or killed a few regular troops, they would definitely be wanted by First City unless they silenced everyone and prevented others from finding out later.

Jiang Baimian mercilessly shattered Shang Jianyao's beautiful fantasy. "Maybe it's because our resume is too glorious."

Being wanted time and time again by First City with a bounty of 10,000 Oray while still running around free and alive meant that they weren't a team to be trifled with.

Upon seeing the unconcealed collapse of Shang Jianyao's expression as if he were still a child, Jiang Baimian sighed silently and added, "No matter how much the outside world claims that the Salvation Army has degenerated, I believe they still have some bottom lines and won't casually attack the innocent. Yes... If it were a First City military stronghold, how could the soldiers and farmers be taking turns to do the farming? They would definitely capture wilderness nomads and enslave them to do these things in their stead."

"Yes." Bai Chen nodded.

Only a portion of the Ashlands had regained some semblance of order. The border or wilderness strongholds were clearly not included.

Shang Jianyao smiled again and hummed a song. He volunteered to test the water quality by the stream.

The Old Task Force gathered firewood, raised a bonfire, and prepared dinner when the military stronghold's steel door opened.

A man and a woman walked out.

The woman was 1.65 meters tall and was in her thirties. She was mature and charming, and she had black hair and brown eyes. Her eyebrows were thick, and she had decent facial features. Her skin color was similar to Jiang Baimian's; they were both the color of healthy wheat, but she was darker.

She had clean, short hair that reached her ears. She wore a black uniform and was neither fat nor thin, reaching the standard height and weight. Although this lady was walking alongside the young man, her bearing and attitude indicated that she was the leader.

The man looked to be 17 or 18 years old. There was some hair above his lips, and he looked ordinary and unsophisticated.

After approaching the Old Task Force, the young man—who still had a hint of youth—took the initiative to introduce the lady beside him. “This is Captain Ding from our border settlement.”

“Ding Ling.” The lady smiled and stretched out her right palm openly.

Upon hearing this slightly accented introduction, Jiang Baimian laughed. “Were you the one who warned us over the broadcast?”

She also stretched out her right palm and gently shook her hand.

Ding Ling nodded. “This is our duty as a border settlement. We can’t permit suspicious people entry. October Xue, right? Although I know that this is most likely an alias, it’s fine. A name is only a designation.”

She then casually introduced the young man beside her. “Zeng Ping’an.”

“Good name!” Shang Jianyao clapped, making the lad feel a little embarrassed.

“Beautiful hopes of peace by his parents,” Ding Ling explained simply.

Jiang Baimian then introduced her team members. Of course, she only gave aliases.

As for Geneva, he was now acting as an ordinary robot. He had no name but a code name, so there was no need to introduce him.

After the two parties finished exchanging pleasantries, Shang Jianyao asked Ding Ling with a sense of responsibility, “If First City chooses to use this place as a breakthrough point, can a small settlement like yours—with dozens of people—really withstand it?”

He acted like a senior Salvation Army member.

At this moment, Ding Ling felt like she had encountered an inspection by her superior.

What has this got to do with you even if we can’t stop them!??She smiled and said, “We definitely can’t block them. Our main purpose is to serve as an early warning system and use several different methods.

“Last year, this settlement encountered a sudden attack by First City. After we gave the warning, we gave up on this place and retreated into the mountains in teams. We then found an opportunity to sabotage the enemy along the way and slow down their advance. As long as people remain alive, we can definitely establish a new settlement.”

Ding Ling’s answer was relatively detailed, and she mainly wanted to tell the strong team opposite her that the Salvation Army settlement had a mature plan for different enemies so that they shouldn’t take the risk.

“It must be very difficult and dangerous to retreat deep into the mountains, right?” Shang Jianyao had a look of concern.

Ding Ling was stunned for a moment before saying, “Yes.”

Her and Zeng Ping’an’s expressions flickered as if they recalled the various dangers back then.

After a few seconds, Ding Ling took the initiative to ask, “W-why do you want to go to Icefield?”

I noticed that you showed some concern toward Icefield...?Jiang Baimian organized her words and said, “Before the Old World was destroyed, part of Icefield was still a place with relatively normal weather. There were many human cities. Later, the climate changed dramatically, and Icefield expanded and swallowed those areas.

“Due to Icefield’s climate restrictions and the small amount of arable land, there aren’t many wilderness nomads and Ruin Hunters there. Many city ruins are still in relatively well-kept states, allowing us to return with a bountiful harvest.”

“That’s indeed the case.” Ding Ling nodded. “Even our Salvation Army only organizes teams to gather resources from them most of the time during summer. Yes, it will be midsummer if you head over now.”

She opened her mouth and paused. After a while, she hesitantly asked, “When you reach Icefield, can you help me find out about someone?”

“Who is it?” asked the helpful Zen Master Redemption.

Ding Ling lowered her head and smiled. “My husband. His name is Ji Qiang, a researcher. We originally met twice a year, but he participated in an expedition team that went to Icefield two years ago. He said that he was carrying out a secret mission. If he succeeded, he would be qualified to transfer me back to Ubei, and our family would be reunited. However, I lost contact with him from then on. His unit couldn’t give me a detailed answer due to confidentiality.”

Perhaps it was because he didn’t expect his captain to go into such excruciating detail that it involved job allocation and transfers, the young man beside her, Zeng Ping’an, felt a little awkward.

“I see...” Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “If it’s just to find out about someone, it’s as easy as ABC..”

Ding Ling smiled sincerely. “I have his photo here. We took the picture in Ubei just after we got married.”

Ubei was one of the core Salvation Army cities. The guns—Ubei 6 and Ubei 7—they produced were relatively common in the Ashlands.

Chapter 687: Updated Data

As she spoke, Ding Ling took out a colored photo from the inner pocket of her black uniform.

The person in the photo was a man in his twenties. He was thin, slightly dark, and wore a pair of black-framed glasses. His hair was neatly combed to the back.

“This is a picture from almost ten years ago. He l-looks more mature now. His hair isn’t as neat,” Ding Ling added seriously.

She handed the photo to Shang Jianyao, who had stretched out his hands. After a pause, she said, “If you meet him somewhere in Icefield, remember to tell him that someone is still waiting for him.”

Toward the end, Ding Ling’s tone subconsciously became quite gentle.

“No problem!” Shang Jianyao replied firmly. He looked at the photo carefully, as if he wanted to imprint the person on it in his mind.

“Okay.” Jiang Baimian agreed. At the same time, she secretly sighed.

Based on what she had heard and experienced, she knew very well that there was a high chance that those that went silent would never return. However, Jiang Baimian didn’t burst Ding Ling’s bubble. It wasn’t a bad thing to have some hope for the future when living in the Ashlands. Perhaps not accepting reality was for the best.

Jiang Baimian could understand why Shang Jianyao was so agitated. She was certain that it reminded him of his long-lost father.

Shang Jianyao’s father had also gone out on a mission to investigate the cause of the Old World’s destruction and never returned. There was no news of him.

Ever since he joined the Old Task Force, Shang Jianyao had been searching for traces of his father. He now had some clues; he knew that there were some clues in a city that had been destroyed by a Heartless outbreak in the New Calendar.

Therefore, Shang Jianyao probably empathized with Ding Ling when she asked if someone could pass her husband a message.

He should be the one that values relationships now...

Jiang Baimian took Ji Qiang's photo from Shang Jianyao and looked at it seriously. "We'll keep an eye out."

Ding Ling didn't leave the photo with the Old Task Force. Instead, she took it back and carefully placed it back in the inner pocket of her black uniform.

Bai Chen believed that she might only have one photo left because of various reasons.

"Where's your marriage photo?" The honest Shang Jianyao clearly thought of a similar question.

Jiang Baimian couldn't stop him in time.

Ding Ling—who had maintained a polite smile when mentioning Ji Qiang—had a dazed expression. "When we retreated into the mountains last year and were pursued by First City, it fell into a mountain stream during an intense battle."

At this moment, her grief seemed a little uncontrollable.

She has always carried it with her...?Jiang Baimian deliberately changed the topic. "Does your settlement have a photocopier?"

"Not this year." Ding Ling shook her head. "It was taken away by First City when we gave up on the settlement last year. I've been applying for it this year, but it hasn't been approved. It seems like the supplies are a little tight. Otherwise, I would've directly photocopied a photo for you."

"It's fine. She's smart and has a good memory." Shang Jianyao didn't help Jiang Baimian with her humility.

After exchanging a few more words, Ding Ling led Zeng Ping'an to the settlement's entrance.

On the way, Zeng Ping'an looked back at the Old Task Force with a slightly complicated expression.

After they passed through the door and entered the settlement, Bai Chen retracted her gaze and whispered, "That Zeng guy likes Captain Ding."



“No way?” Long Yuehong blurted out. “The age difference is a little too great. The gap is bigger than between Yang Zhenyuan and Zhou Qi—it’s at least ten years!”

Furthermore, Yang Zhenyuan and Zhou Qi were married through the company’s central assignment. Under normal circumstances, it was unlikely that they would become a couple.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “Isn’t it normal for 17-year-olds to like big sisters? Besides, there are very few people Zeng Ping’an can come into contact with every day in a border settlement like this. The ratio of men to women here isn’t too balanced, and he often has to be on edge. The hormones catalyzed by danger made him unconsciously fall in love with the mature and reliable woman beside him. What’s so surprising about that? Ding Ling looks alright, doesn’t she?”

“You know quite a lot!” Shang Jianyao was just short of clapping.

“Expanding on this topic will result in a professional psychological paper.” Geneva echoed Shang Jianyao’s words.

That’s right, that’s right...? Long Yuehong agreed inwardly.

Jiang Baimian smiled humbly. “Actually, I didn’t realize it until it was brought up. If Little White hadn’t said anything, I wouldn’t have noticed it. I thought it was a comradeship from having gone through thick and thin together.”

Do you think we will believe you?? Long Yuehong muttered silently.

Bai Chen nodded. “I’m relatively sensitive to such matters.”

Uh...? Long Yuehong became nervous and uneasy.

The honest Geneva said, “I didn’t detect that, but I found something through analysis.”

“What is it?” Long Yuehong took the initiative to ask.

Genava moved his metal neck. “Ding Ling and her husband have been married for almost ten years, but she didn’t mention a child just now. Most factions in the Ashlands encourage childbirth as one of the most basic policies. The Salvation Army is no exception.”

Jiang Baimian looked around and sighed. “It’s possible that they didn’t manage to raise the child after giving birth, or it’s also possible that she didn’t discover her pregnancy immediately. She might’ve encountered an intruder or an attack from First City and accidentally suffered a miscarriage.

“There are many reasons. The outside world isn’t like the company; the environment for childbirth isn’t that good.”

“Alright.” Jiang Baimian clapped her hands. “Let’s prepare dinner.”

Just as the Old Task Force was cooking the new variety of pickled vegetables and pork canned food they had recently traded, a derelict jeep peppered with holes drove from east of the stream and stopped at the settlement’s entrance.

“Captain Ding, we’re here to update the data!” A head popped out from the jeep’s passenger seat.

He had shifty eyes under a thin felt hat, and he looked travel-soiled.

Ding Ling knew him, but she still sent her subordinates to body-search the two people as usual. They also checked the car before letting them in.

Ding Ling came down from the wall by a flight of wooden stairs and asked the shifty-eyed man, “Why are you so late? Didn’t you say that you would arrive in the morning?”

Unlike the gentle restraint she had when communicating with the Old Task Force, she was now feisty and strong.

“Gosh, don’t blame me! Captain Ding, our car broke down on the way. We spent a lot of time repairing it,” the shifty-looking man quickly explained.

His name was Zhang Chenguang, a staff member of the Ubei Hunter's Guild. Together with his companions, he was in charge of regularly updating Hunter information for all the settlements and border outposts in a large area to ensure that the data was in sync.

Ding Ling didn't say anything else. She led Zhang Chenguang and his companions into the two-story building covered in burn marks. She then pointed at a laptop and said, "Check why it lags all the time. It took me a while to find information on a few Hunters, and it was incomplete."

"Alright!" Zhang Chenguang was a technical personnel who had undergone professional training.

Of course, he was also a part-time Ruin Hunter. As he usually traveled, he naturally completed some missions. For example, helping some outpost soldiers send messages home.

After a round of cleaning, Ding Ling's computer was restored to normal. Zhang Chenguang then inserted a flash drive and uploaded the latest Hunter information from all over the Ashlands, replacing the original.

Ding Ling nodded slightly. "Help me pull up October Xue, Zhang Qubing, Qian Bai, and Gu Zhiyong. I didn't see why they were wanted in First City.

"Hunter IDs are..." Ding Ling picked up a piece of paper beside her and read the numbers on it.

"Alright." Zhang Chenguang typed hard on the keyboard, and he quickly pulled up Jiang Baimian and the others' information.

"Reward of 20,000 Oray?" Zhang Chenguang suddenly stood up as if there were nails under his butt. "How many pounds—no, how many tons of pork can I buy with that? How dangerous is a Hunter team with such a high bounty!?"

"I know that," Ding Ling said with a look of disdain. "Help me see why they're wanted."

If not for the Old Task Force's high bounty and the fact that they were on the way to Icefield, she wouldn't have asked for their help.

Zhang Chenguang sat down in fear as if a few monsters were lurking outside the room.

“Plotted, uh...” Zhang Chenguang was stunned. “Plotted a major plot against First City.”

“A major plot against First City?” Ding Ling suspected her ears. “There are only four people and a robot outside?”

Zhang Chenguang nodded mechanically. “That’s what it says here.”

“Yes, the reason given by First City might not be true. Sometimes, they will find an excuse to cover up the real reason.” Ding Ling quickly calmed down. “However, the people outside definitely did something impressive for them to be treated with such grave importance. I have to report it and see if we should make further contact.”

She cast her gaze at the radio transceiver in a corner of the room.

#### Chapter 688: Becoming Partners

The next morning, the Old Task Force members had a simple meal, packed their things, and prepared to leave.

At this moment, the door to the border settlement opposite the stream opened. Ding Ling walked out with Zeng Ping’an.

“That soon?” She smiled and greeted the Old Task Force.

The honest Shang Jianyao asked, “Do you want to treat us to lunch?”

Ding Ling clearly choked. She paused before saying, “I wanted you to wait. I happen to be returning to Ubei to submit my report, so I can leave with you.”

A smile appeared on her face again. “Following me will save you a lot of trouble on the way. Our Salvation Army is quite different from other factions; we are relatively strict. Without the help of acquaintances, referrals, or passes, you won’t be permitted to approach many farms, forestlands, and settlements, much less trade supplies. I’m troubling you to help me keep an eye on my husband’s whereabouts in Icefield. Since it’s on the way, I should help in any way possible. That’s why I’m telling you this.”

Upon seeing that October Xue didn't immediately answer and only turned to look at Qian Bai, Ding Ling added, "This isn't a mandatory request; you can refuse. Not traveling together will only cause you more trouble. It doesn't mean that you can't trade supplies or ask for directions. There are Ruin Hunters in the wilderness and outside the various settlements that act as brokers. You can do many things through them, but it's relatively inconvenient. Besides, it's not free."

Considering that Ubei was the large settlement closest to Cloud Mountain, was almost equivalent to an Old World city, and how it was a necessary route to Icefield unless one chose to circle around to a few relatively dangerous areas, Bai Chen nodded to indicate that Ding Ling was right.

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and smiled. "How can we refuse such kindness? It just so happens that we need to go to Ubei to replenish some supplies suitable for Icefield and obtain relevant information. These are very difficult to obtain in First City."

First City didn't directly border Icefield.

Ding Ling smiled and nodded.

Ding Ling didn't elaborate.

"Thank you so much!" Shang Jianyao stretched out his hands before Jiang Baimian could do so to express his gratitude.

Ding Ling was a little confused by him. She ended up shaking his hand and felt his sincerity and joy.

The next second, Shang Jianyao asked seriously, "If I want to join the Salvation Army, what procedures do I need to follow? How long will it take?"

Upon seeing that this fellow refused to let go of his captain's hand, Zeng Ping'an couldn't help but interject. "You have to live on a farm, forestry station, ranch, or city for at least three years."

"Is that so..." Shang Jianyao retracted his hand in disappointment.

Ding Ling skipped the topic and flipped her wrist to look at her simple electronic watch. “How about setting off in 15 minutes?”

“No problem.” Jiang Baimian readily agreed when it came to such matters.

After watching Ding Ling and Zeng Ping’an return to the border settlement, she turned her head and glared at Shang Jianyao. “Do you want to leave the company?”

“Not at all!” Shang Jianyao replied righteously. “The me from before doesn’t represent the current me. Besides, there are ten of us. It won’t be a problem for one of us to join the Salvation Army. The other nine still belong to the company!”

“Heh,” Jiang Baimian replied curtly.

In less than 15 minutes, Ding Ling drove a green, bulletproof mountain car out of the settlement’s entrance.

The Old Task Force’s jeep immediately crossed the stream and arrived beside her.

In the passenger seat, Jiang Baimian glanced around and realized that there were two men and a woman in Ding Ling’s car. They were all wearing the Salvation Army’s black uniforms.

However, this didn’t include the young man named Zeng Ping’an.

“Eh, where’s Zeng Ping’an?” Shang Jianyao—who had rolled down the window—asked honestly.

Ding Ling—who was sitting in the driver’s seat—looked at them and smiled. “He has to stay in the settlement. Him, me, and two others are considered relatively strong warriors here. We can’t have two gone at once.

“If it weren’t for the fact that he was worried about there being a problem with you and insisted on following me, I wouldn’t have wanted him to accompany me to meet you. We might’ve suffered heavy losses.”

Ding Ling acted casually and frankly regarding this matter.

There are four Awakened in such a border settlement? Or are they people with similar strength but different kinds of enhancement??Jiang Baimian immediately pondered.

Either possibility meant that the Salvation Army was extremely strong. As expected of the large faction that left First City in a sorry state back then.

After exchanging a few simple pleasantries, Ding Ling drove the green mountain car into the road that led east of Cloud Mountain. The Old Task Force's jeep followed closely behind.

Jiang Baimian looked ahead and suddenly smiled. "Ding Ling probably has some understanding of Zeng Ping'an's feelings. She deliberately found a dignified excuse not to bring him along."

Bai Chen nodded in agreement. "Women are relatively sensitive in this regard."

Uh...?Long Yuehong became nervous again.

Fortunately, Jiang Baimian didn't continue the topic.

They slowly left behind several precipitous or seriously damaged areas. The road gradually widened and leveled in front of everyone.

The road showed clear signs of maintenance.

"Isn't this better than First City's wilderness road that has been in disrepair for years?" Shang Jianyao pointed out the window proudly.

If anyone here didn't know his background, they might have imagined that he was from the Salvation Army.

Jiang Baimian didn't glare at him or mock him. She nodded and sighed with emotion. "The Salvation Army used to be very capable at mobilization. This is obvious from these details."

Just as she said that, the green mountain car ahead stopped in a relatively open area to the side.

Ding Ling pushed open the door, got out of the car, and shouted in the jeep's direction, "It's noon. Let's take a break and get something to eat. We'll then travel until we leave the mountain."

"Alright!" Shang Jianyao replied enthusiastically.

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but suspect something. Who's the leader he should be following in this fellow's mind?

As eating was a common requirement for all her team members apart from Geneva, Jiang Baimian wasn't a petty person who had to do the opposite. Therefore, she led her team members to alight naturally and instructed them to search for firewood.

Every bit of electricity saved for the solar charger board and batteries counted.

Upon seeing this, Ding Ling waved her hand. "There's no need to go through so much trouble. Let's share this."

Her subordinates had already started a fire.

"That works too." Who wouldn't want to slack off when they could? Jiang Baimian was no exception.

She walked over and scanned the area. Then, she smiled and praised, "Your subordinates are very proactive!"

They did many things without needing instructions.

Ding Ling sat cross-legged on the ground and smiled. "Because this is a benefit for them. In a border settlement, apart from having a fixed vacation every year to return home, we have to stay there all the time and can't leave without permission. Being able to go to Ubei on the grounds of a mission is what all of us look forward to.

"When I made the selection this morning, they were so enthusiastic that I could only decide based on the contribution they made during the attack from First City last year."



The woman and the two men—who were busy preparing lunch—smiled and nodded repeatedly, indicating that their team leader was right.

Shang Jianyao asked in concern, “Was the attack last year especially dangerous?”

A male Salvation Army member—who was only 1.7 meters tall and had a pockmarked face—replied in fear, “That’s right. Captain Ding almost died. Fortunately, Ping’an did his best to save her. Ping’an was shot thrice, and we thought that he was doomed. Fortunately, he’s young and healthy. He managed to survive eventually.”

Is that so...?Jiang Baimian forced herself not to look at Ding Ling.

“It’s all in the past.” Ding Ling smiled and consoled her subordinates. She then asked October Xue, “Did you bring a lot of notes from First City?”

“Not much. Most of them were exchanged for supplies,” Jiang Baimian replied frankly. She also casually found a place to sit down.

Ding Ling nodded. “That’s good. The main reason is that those First City notes are not legal tender in the Salvation Army. You can only exchange them for all kinds of negotiable instruments in the underground black market. The spread is very high.”

The Salvation Army mainly traded negotiable instruments in their day-to-day life, with cash being supplementary.

“We considered this.” With Jiang Baimian’s personality, how could she enter the Salvation Army’s territory without doing her homework?

The Old Task Force, Ding Ling, and the others quickly had lunch when a military jeep suddenly drove over from the east.

Upon seeing Ding Ling by the roadside, the military jeep suddenly braked and quickly stopped.

A man in a black uniform also left the passenger seat and circled to the open area. As he quickly approached, he shouted, "Captain Ding, there's something for you!"

As he swept his gaze, he discovered Jiang Baimian and the others.

"These are?" he asked Ding Ling suspiciously.

"My friends," Ding Ling introduced simply.

The man didn't say anything else. He took out a document and handed it over. "Captain Ding, two moles have stolen some military supplies and might defect to First City. Your settlement has to pay special attention to such figures."

Ding Ling's expression turned solemn. She tore open the document and read it for a while before handing it back. "I'm on my way to Ubei. Please continue forward and inform the warriors staying at the settlement."

"Alright." The man took back the document and jogged back to the military jeep.

Shang Jianyao and the others didn't ask any further. They ate their lunch without stealing glances or eavesdropping.

After setting off again, Jiang Baimian looked at the green mountain car in front of her and thoughtfully said, "The stolen military supplies are probably very important..."

## Chapter 689: Negotiables

Long Yuehong didn't ask why because he could also tell that things weren't that simple.

If it were just two moles stealing some military supplies, the Salvation Army wouldn't take it so seriously. They would send a telegram to the various border settlements and key outposts to describe the wanted moles' looks, height, and attire. They would then point out what the supplies they wanted to retrieve were, and that would be about it. They could provide warrants with photos when someone happened to pass by on the way; there was no need to send several specialized

personnel to carry documents to different border settlements and key outposts to inform them one by one.

“What could it be?” Bai Chen muttered to herself as she drove.

Shang Jianyao guessed with interest, “Military exoskeleton? A secret weapon excavated by the Salvation Army or developed by themselves?”

“Is there a possibility that the military supplies are only a cover—an excuse—and that something else was stolen?” Genova’s eyes flickered with a red glow.

Jiang Baimian grunted. “We can’t rule out that possibility. Gosh, stop guessing. Without any clues, isn’t this nothing but fabricating stories yourself?”

“That’s right, that’s right!” Shang Jianyao echoed.

He then retorted himself, “Doesn’t it bring out the atmosphere by fabricating a story?”

“Whoa, your vocabulary must’ve been enriched from all the Old World entertainment you’ve watched.” Jiang Baimian didn’t mind if her team members discussed it. After all, they had nothing to do.

Just like that, they followed the increasingly flat road. In less than an hour and a half, they completely left the mountains and entered a vast wilderness overgrown with weeds.

At this moment, Ding Ling slowed down the car. After the Old Task Force’s jeep was beside hers, she rolled down the window and said, “It will take at least eight hours to get to Ubei. We’ll find a settlement to get some rest and set off tomorrow morning. Is that alright?”

“No problem at all.” Jiang Baimian shook her head first before asking in confusion, “It takes only eight hours?”

She had seen high-resolution maps of the Old World and had also studied the crude maps drawn by Ruin Hunters in the current era. She felt that the distance between here and Ubei was about the same as the distance between Weed City and Redstone Collection. If one was lucky, it would take

days. If they encountered inclement weather and multiple disasters, they would need to take a long detour. It wasn't too rare to measure the trip in weeks.

Sensing October Xue's surprise, Ding Ling looked at the road in front of her and explained proudly, "In the first 20 years of the New Calendar, we completely repaired the main road from Ubei to Cloud Mountain. We've kept up with the maintenance all these years.

"From here to Ubei, apart from a few seriously polluted areas that require a detour due to the many problems they have, we just need to drive along the road. One of the Salvation Army's founders, Li Ziren, once made the analogy of food being blood and industry being bones. Roads are the nerves that connect everything."

Clap! Clap! Clap!?

Shang Jianyao clapped with all his might.

Jiang Baimian also truly felt that the Salvation Army had a different bearing from the other factions. Although they were believed to have degenerated, they far exceeded large factions like First City in terms of rebuilding.

Similar words often appeared in those places: "In any case, many of the roads left behind by the Old World can barely be driven on. Can't we just take a slight detour in certain places?"

"Where will you get all those supplies to repair the roads? It's not like we can't drive in the wilderness with vehicles with higher chassis!"

"I'm afraid that well-maintained roads will only make it easier for the slaves to run!"

To this day, only the streets and roads leading to the surrounding manors in First City had been repaired and were often maintained. Other places, including wilderness outposts and border settlements, mainly relied on the roads left over from the Old World and relatively flat wilderness.

Coupled with the large pollution zones, no man's land, danger zones, and the effects of extreme weather, the travel time for people increased exponentially.

"As expected of the Salvation Army!" Jiang Baimian also exclaimed in praise.

It was obvious that Ding Ling and her subordinates were rather happy about this. Regardless of whether they had degenerated, they were still rather proud of the Salvation Army's past actions and achievements. They shared the same feelings.

At three in the afternoon, the two cars arrived at a settlement.

This settlement was built around an Old World farm. Beyond the high walls were large patches of verdant fields, waiting to transform into gold.

Thanks to Ding Ling being a senior warrior in the Salvation Army and a captain of a border settlement, Jiang Baimian and the others directly entered the settlement without a pass or introduction letter and followed them to a remote oil depot.

Ding Ling alighted from the car and took out a rolled-up white handkerchief from somewhere inside her black uniform. She carefully unfolded her handkerchief and revealed stacks of small plastic cards in different colors.

"This is an oil negotiable for 50 liters..." After a simple search, Ding Ling took out a small, light-yellow plastic card.

Jiang Baimian noticed that the slightly transparent card had the words 'Standard Gasoline,' '50 liters,' and 'Supplies Management Committee.' It also had an incomplete red seal.

After the oil warehouse guard took the small plastic card and began to fill up the green mountain car's tank, Shang Jianyao curiously came to Ding Ling's side and looked at the small plastic cards. "Are these your Salvation Army's negotiable instruments?"

"Yes, there are oil negotiables, pork negotiables, beef negotiables, mutton negotiables, fish negotiables, rice negotiables, flour negotiables, cloth negotiables, and clothes negotiables..." Ding Ling briefly introduced them. "It's best if you exchange for some negotiables with supplies in the future. This will make it more convenient to replenish what you want."

"Oh, oh, oh." Shang Jianyao wore an enlightened expression.

Jiang Baimian took two steps forward and smiled. "Why don't we exchange some from you first?"

“Alright.” Ding Ling didn’t refuse and even joked, “Use the pickled vegetables and pork canned food you ate yesterday to exchange for it. That taste from yesterday has really whet our appetite. We keep salivating!”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “This was originally produced by your Salvation Army. It was smuggled across the border, allowing us a chance to obtain it...”

As she spoke, she glanced at Ding Ling and her subordinates’ expressions and realized that they didn’t care much about smuggling.

After some negotiation, the Old Task Force used the portion of canned food and biscuits they were sick of to exchange for some negotiables. This included pork negotiables that were calculated in pounds.

Long Yuehong watched the transaction and realized that Ding Ling still had a negotiable called ‘woodcutting negotiable.’

“This is?” He pointed curiously.

Ding Ling looked down and chuckled. “All of the Salvation Army’s resources are integral. If we want to cut down trees and get some wood, we also need a negotiable.”

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and pointed at the solar charger board on the top of his jeep. He asked seriously, “Do you also need a negotiable to obtain solar energy?”

Pfft... Why don’t you ask about the payment for a tan??Jiang Baimian scoffed inwardly.

Ding Ling was clearly stunned for a moment. “No, there’s no need.”

After the mountain car was fueled, Ding Ling and her subordinates led the Old Task Force members to a camp in a corner of the settlement.

On the way, they encountered men and women who seemed to be Ruin Hunters.

Jiang Baimian felt that they should be Ruin Hunters because they gave off a different vibe from the residents and soldiers in the settlement.

They were even more undisciplined and unrestrained, and they ignored the gazes of others. Among them, there were even people standing on the car roof, playing music, and gyrating their bodies, making Shang Jianyao's eyes glow.

One could call them Ruin Hunters, but these were different from the ones west of Cloud Mountain. They didn't have the unique bearing of depression and indulgence, nor did they look like they had suffered from much hunger and cold.

After parking the car at the camp, Jiang Baimian found Ding Ling and her subordinates and pointed at those people. "Are they Ruin Hunters?"

"Yes." Ding Ling nodded first. Upon seeing Long Yuehong and the others' confused expressions, she smiled and explained, "In our Salvation Army, it's not trivial to become a Ruin Hunter."

"Huh?" Shang Jianyao replied cooperatively. Of course, he was indeed very curious.

"Apart from children and elderly, everyone in our Salvation Army has their own jobs and duties. How can they be a Ruin Hunter just because they want to be one? You might not believe it, but in our sphere of influence, there are no wilderness nomads anywhere apart from the few mountains and unexplored polluted areas." Ding Ling revealed her inborn pride again.

She then said in detail, "In the beginning, we didn't welcome such professions at all since there were specialized teams in charge of exploring ruins and gathering supplies. But as the city population increased, the original positions gradually became insufficient. Even if a few new jobs were set up, it was still not enough. Only then did we assign a batch of willing people to join the Hunter's Guild. Therefore, in our Salvation Army, one has to obtain approval to become a Ruin Hunter."

This...? Long Yuehong's horizons were broadened at first, but he felt that this was no different from the company after some thought.

If he, Shang Jianyao, and the others hadn't been assigned to the Security Department and had a certain level of freedom outside, how could they have become Ruin Hunters?

In addition, they can also use the Hunter's Guild to obtain basic information about various parts of the Ashlands...?Jiang Baimian thought about the Salvation Army's implemented changes from a different perspective.

Ding Ling glanced at the Ruin Hunters and said with a slightly complicated tone, "These people now like to mock us for being old-fashioned and conservative, but they don't even seem to realize it. Who gives them something to eat when their explorations end up fruitless? Who allows them safety from bandits when out in the wilderness? It's their families and regular troops like us!"

The captain's feelings were shared by her subordinates as they nodded.

At this moment, a few Ruin Hunters ran out of a settlement and shouted, "There are clues regarding the two moles!"

## Chapter 690: Lunatics

Clues? That quickly??Long Yuehong was shocked.

To be honest, he had always felt that unless one was extremely unlucky, those who were wanted in the Ashlands would remain wanted for a long time.

As one of First City's most wanted criminals, he believed that he still had the qualifications to make this claim.

Admittedly, in the Ashlands, the Old Task Force was definitely one of the best in terms of experience, abilities, and caution. However, the reason they could enter and exit First City several times and act freely was that they benefited from the lacking population management methods, various technological gaps, insufficient resources, and the lack of information exchange.

They had just learned of two traitors from the Salvation Army who had stolen military supplies in the morning, but there were already clues about them in the afternoon. The efficiency was stunning.

On second thought, Long Yuehong recalled the various rumors regarding the Salvation Army and the situation that Ding Ling had unconsciously revealed in her words. He felt that it made sense.



The Salvation Army had relatively strong control over personnel from all walks of life. Outsiders needed to be reviewed and have a pass. Within the existence of the Salvation Army, bandits and wilderness nomads were basically eliminated. Even being a Ruin Hunter required approval.

In such an environment, the two traitors had a high risk of being exposed unless they didn't make contact with the various settlements or Ruin Hunters that acted as black market peddlers. They needed to be self-sufficient in the wilderness and mountains or risk the high chances of exposure.

Even if they had special Awakening abilities, they could evade detection temporarily but not for long. At most, they could delay the discovery of their tracks by a day or two.

Of course, it was another story if they had abilities with long-lasting effects like Inference Cloning. But from the Salvation Army's control, it was possible to avoid the corresponding abilities' effects during the investigation and figure out the real situation. It might even be printed in a manual and sent to the frontline personnel.

This was completely different from First City, which hid many known abilities from the lower-ranking public security officers to enhance the stability of their rule.

Jiang Baimian naturally came up with anything Long Yuehong could think of.

She looked up at the Ruin Hunters that had hurriedly stood up and were about to follow the clues to chase after the wanted criminal. She then cast her gaze back at Ding Ling and her subordinates and smiled. "I'm wondering what I should eat tonight. Are there any specialties around here?"

"You're concerned about dinner this early?" Ding Ling was a little stunned.

Shang Jianyao helped explain, "Eating is a matter of life. We have to reflect on ourselves three times a day: what to eat for breakfast, what to eat for lunch, and what to eat for dinner."

This was something he had learned from the Old World's entertainment. It was also suitable in the Ashlands today; he only needed to change it a little.

What's for breakfast, what's for lunch, and what's for dinner?? Jiang Baimian glanced at him and helplessly said, "I'm considered half a folklore scholar. I like to come into contact with different local customs, and this includes all kinds of unique food."

“I see.” Ding Ling nodded and smiled. “I thought you were deliberately changing the topic and didn’t want to show your concern for the mole incident, afraid that it would arouse our suspicion.”

Isn’t that so??Long Yuehong muttered. The way Jiang Baimian always acted made him feel that Ding Ling’s guess was right.

“I do have such intentions. One has to know how to avoid suspicion when they’re new,” Jiang Baimian admitted frankly.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!?

Shang Jianyao and Geneva clapped at the same time.

Shang Jianyao then turned his head and said to Geneva, “You can’t hide your humanization any longer!”

“I just feel like I know a little more about the ways of the world,” Geneva replied honestly.

Their conversation made Bai Chen want to turn her head to the side and pretend not to know them. However, Ding Ling and her subordinates didn’t mind. After all, Ubei was one of the Salvation Army’s main cities; there was no lack of robots. They had once seen a robot perform crosstalk with a human partner.

Crosstalk was an Old World art; it was preserved in areas that were majority Ashlandic. The Salvation Army and Pangu Biology were also in this category.

“Not bad.” Ding Ling praised Jiang Baimian’s thoughts. “Many foreign Ruin Hunters don’t realize this and are escorted out of our borders or sent to court before being sent to do labor.”

Is this a hidden warning??Long Yuehong always had rich thoughts.

Without waiting for Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao’s response, Ding Ling smiled. “I ate some of your canned food for lunch. I’ll treat you to a meal that’s considered a specialty in Ubei tonight.”

“Sure, sure!” Shang Jianyao didn’t stand on ceremony at all.

When the sun set, Ding Ling exchanged for a pile of firewood from the settlement. She also borrowed an iron pot, an aluminum basin, and a soup ladle and began preparing dinner.

She first poured a lot of flour into the aluminum basin before putting in water, sugar, and other things. She mixed them into a paste before heating the pot. She then took a small piece of lard and wiped the edges of the pot.

After finishing these preparations, Ding Ling scooped up the white paste in the aluminum pot with a metal spoon and poured it over the edge of the iron pot.

Amidst sizzling sounds, every spoonful of white paste spread out into a thin pancake.

Ding Ling skillfully controlled the fire and flipped the pancakes before long.

A sweet and alluring smell gradually filled the air, making Shang Jianyao gulp a mouthful of saliva.

After the pancakes were seared on both sides, a male Salvation Army member waiting beside them picked up the pancakes one by one and placed them in everyone’s lunch box. After a few rounds, everyone received six to seven pancakes.

Jiang Baimian held in her urge to eat and also signaled her team members not to be anxious, especially Shang Jianyao. After all, Ding Ling was still cooking.

After searing the last round of pancakes, there was still some residual flour paste in the aluminum basin. Ding Ling added a lot of water and stirred it before pouring it into the pot.

Before long, a pot of fragrant soup was finished.

After everyone received half a box of soup, Ding Ling took out a few cans of meat and boiled them in the pot.

“People like us—who do physical labor—won’t be satiated if we just eat pancakes without meat.” She smiled at Jiang Baimian and the others and said, “Tuck in, everyone.”

Shang Jianyao eagerly picked up a thin piece of pancake and stuffed it into his mouth.

Long Yuehong followed closely behind.

After taking a bite, he felt that the pancake was soft, sticky, and chewy. When he chewed it carefully, it had the fragrance of flour and the sweetness of sugar. He couldn't stop eating.

After wolfing down a pancake, Long Yuehong lowered his head and drank a mouthful of soup.

He didn't find it cloying at all; it was like clear water with wheat fragrance and some sweetness.

Jiang Baimian looked up and asked, "Not bad. What's this called?"

Ding Ling smiled. "In Ubei, we call it flour cake."

"Your culinary skills are pretty good!" Shang Jianyao praised.

Ding Ling's female subordinate—who was in her mid-twenties—nodded in agreement. "That's right. Captain Ding often cooks personally to make our meals better."

Shang Jianyao turned his head and said to Jiang Baimian, "Learn from her!"

Jiang Baimian expressionlessly raised her left hand and stopped the subsequent noise.

After having their fill, the Old Task Force rushed to clean up. The person who did most of the work was Shang Jianyao under orders from Jiang Baimian.

At this moment, Bai Chen realized that the Ruin Hunters—who had gone to tail the clues and search for the two traitors—had returned to the settlement one after another.

Ding Ling walked over and casually asked someone, "Any progress?"

The Ruin Hunter looked at her black uniform and the corresponding epaulet and replied in fear, “Yes, we found the two traitors and killed one. When the other saw that he couldn’t escape, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the mouth.”

Although Ruin Hunters under the Salvation Army always mocked the regular army for being old-fashioned and conservative, they didn’t dare to act rashly when they really encountered them unless they had a background.

“They’re all dead?” Ding Ling frowned slightly. “What did you find on them?”

The Ruin Hunter replied, “We didn’t find any so-called important military supplies. There were only some canned food, biscuits, energy bars, bullets, and lighters.”

Upon seeing that Ding Ling’s expression remained serious, he added, “Most of these were produced in Ubei. They might’ve been to Ubei and obtained some supplies from the black market.”

“Then, someone must’ve taken the load off them!” Ding Ling muttered.

It seems like those important military supplies have been offloaded... If they can’t find them subsequently, it will likely spark off a chain reaction...?Ever since her hearing recovered, Jiang Baimian had already completed the mission of secretly eavesdropping.

The night passed uneventfully. At 7 a.m. the next morning, the Old Task Force continued driving toward Ubei with Ding Ling’s mountain car.

After nearly nine hours, they finally arrived at the refurbished city by the Yuelin River, which had a nuclear power plant backing it.

The city’s overall appearance was very similar to the Old World’s, but there weren’t that many high-rise buildings. The buildings’ colors and shapes were relatively monotonous.

With Ding Ling around, Jiang Baimian and the others successfully passed a few intersection inspections and entered the city.

Suddenly, Shang Jianyao pointed out the window and exclaimed excitedly.

What the hell??Jiang Baimian looked over and realized that two people in strange clothes had passed by in the alley beside her.

Their clothes were ordinary, and they were all worn. The strange thing was that they wore aluminum pots used to boil water and stew vegetables on their heads. It made people wonder how they could see the road ahead.

The two of them quickly disappeared at the end of the alley. Shang Jianyao seemed eager to chase after them and communicate.

After Ding Ling parked the green mountain car in front of a rather imposing ten-story building, Shang Jianyao quickly alighted and asked about the townsfolk.

Ding Ling frowned. “Those are a bunch of lunatics!”