

Embers Ad Infinitum #Chapter 71: Reminder - Read

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Chapter 71: Reminder

As the man in the plush hat with holes spoke, he suddenly couldn't control his voice. "Could he be a mutated creature?"

The memories of his previous encounters were still fresh in his mind, leaving him filled with horror. He couldn't help but think of those matters the moment he discovered the corresponding signs.

An Ruxiang didn't hesitate to deny her companion's guess. "He clearly has sufficient intelligence. He's definitely not a Heartless. Furthermore, he looks human."

"What if he's a monster and only makes us feel like he's human? Think about it. The Superior Heartless from before didn't take out anything, but she made us believe that she had an abnormally precious item we needed," retorted the man in the plush hat quickly.

An Ruxiang had no answer. After some serious thought, she said, "That's indeed a possibility. However, there's another possibility: He's an Awakened. One of his abilities is the ability to bewitch and charm others."

The man in the plush hat thought for a moment. "Now that you mention it, I think it's really possible. Heh heh, in my heart, Awakened are about the same as mutated creatures to me. No, they are more terrifying and bizarre than most mutated creatures. I should say that they are about the same as what we encountered this time."

Most mutated creatures were similar to the Blackmarsh Iron Snake or Blackrat Town's residents. Some parts of their bodies had changed, providing them with certain, completely understandable enhancements.

An Ruxiang couldn't help but recall her encounter when she heard her companion's words. Several hours had passed, but she still couldn't get over it, even with her experience and willpower. It was like a real nightmare that she couldn't wake up from.

An Ruxiang took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She looked back at the street she had come from. "Could they have been bewitched as well? I remember the first time we met them in the wilderness. There were only four of them. The man that's suspected to be an Awakened wasn't with them.

"Should we remind them?"

The man in the tattered plush hat immediately shook his head and said, "It's too dangerous!"

An Ruxiang thought for a few seconds before saying, "They told us about Shoushi and returned the most important items to us. They also placed Shoushi's corpse in a sealed room to prevent the Heartless from quickly discovering him and eating... This is a huge favor to me; it's something worth a lot to me."

"Didn't you share the information with them as well?" The man in the plush hat tried his best to stop her. "Think about it. That person is wearing a military exoskeleton. Even if he isn't an Awakened, he can easily finish us off!"

An Ruxiang nodded. "Don't worry; I won't take the risk. I still have to bring back Shoushi's corpse. It hasn't been that long. They aren't too far from us, so I plan on staying here to shout a few words. As for whether they can hear us or understand their situation after hearing us, it's not something I can control."

"Shout from here?" The man in the plush hat looked around. "Alright, I'll help you with the shouting. We'll immediately leave after shouting."

An Ruxiang turned around, holstered the black pistol, cupped her hands around her mouth in the shape of a trumpet, and brought them to her mouth.

The next second, her sharp and loud voice sounded. "He has a bewitching charm! Be careful not to be controlled by him!"

...

Long Yuehong held the Berserker assault rifle and jogged to the team's left flank while guarding the corresponding area.

After hearing An Ruxiang's recount and Bai Chen's discussion, he became even more afraid of the expedition. Be it forcefully making one fall asleep, real nightmares, or indefensible traps, they exceeded his limits of acceptability. He instinctively felt that this was not something he could handle.

If not for the fact that he had seen Shang Jianyao's Inference Clowning and Jingfa's Hungry Ghost Realm, Long Yuehong felt that he might have already broken down.

Uncontrollable fear kept growing in Long Yuehong's heart, making him observe this operation involuntarily.

Why are we taking such a big risk... Didn't Team Leader say that she wouldn't bring us to places that are too dangerous until we are truly accustomed to the Ashlands and have accumulated enough experience...? It's indeed necessary to help Qiao Chu as long as he gains a better impression of me... B-but is it worth it? I'm not married yet...

As they jogged, Long Yuehong looked at the figure in the lead wearing an exoskeleton. He had an intense struggle deep down.

As he stared, he suddenly felt sad. I'm only 1.75 meters tall after genetic enhancement. My looks are average, and my grades are only average. I was also assigned to the Security Department's most dangerous team. I'm called the unlucky one. How can I catch Qiao Chu's eye? Forget it. It's better to give up on my own accord...

Give up... Long Yuehong's eyes gradually glazed over as if he had grasped something amiss but couldn't put it into words.

At this moment, intermittent voices came from the wind.

"Bewitching charm ... Be careful ... controlled..." This voice was very sharp, but it was very unclear due to the distance.

Jiang Baimian slowed down and tilted her head slightly. "What are they shouting?"

"I only heard 'be careful,'" Shang Jianyao replied in all seriousness. "It seems like someone is offering us a beautiful blessing."

The next second, another voice sounded in the wind. "Bewitching charm ... Be careful ... controlled..."

This time, it was a loud male voice.

"Control..." Bai Chen tried her best to identify it.

At the front of the team, Qiao Chu's expression changed slightly. He then said in a deep voice, "We can't waste any more time. Let's go."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian couldn't refuse the suggestion.

The five of them jogged again.

Long Yuehong was on the left side of the team. The voice he had just heard kept circling in his mind.

Be careful... control...

Be careful of control?

Be careful of control...

Long Yuehong was shocked and vaguely sensed that the situation was a little off. He subconsciously turned his head and looked at Shang Jianyao—the person he had the best relationship with in the team.

As he jogged, he saw Shang Jianyao's mouth widen as he wore that dazzling smile again.

What does he mean...? Long Yuehong tried to understand Shang Jianyao's thoughts but failed. He then recalled everything that had happened along the way, attempting to find clues related to the problem.

Two to three minutes later, the group of five circled around a building and saw their destination—which had sunk into the darkness.

Their destination was a 100-meter-tall building with a large courtyard. It was extremely quiet inside.

As the group was still 200 to 300 meters away, Shang Jianyao and the others couldn't clearly see what was written on the signboard horizontally placed above the courtyard's entrance.

At this moment, Qiao Chu, who was in front, suddenly stopped. He then leaned back and fell to the ground amidst a metallic clang.

Jiang Baimian and the others watched this scene in surprise. They subconsciously moved closer to confirm the problem.

The exoskeleton made a beeping sound almost at the same time, and all the auxiliary joints shook.

Qiao Chu's body moved as he slowly crawled up.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian seemed to sense something. She held the grenade launcher and pulled the trigger while aiming at a tree to the side.

Boom!

A fireball rapidly expanded, illuminating the ignited tree's crown and a figure that had jumped into a building by the street.

This figure was of a feline creature, about a meter long. Its body didn't seem to have any fur or skin, and its blood-red 'muscles' were directly exposed. Its tail seemed to resemble a scorpion's. The feline creature was covered in a hard, brown carapace with barbs growing out of it. On its shoulder were clumps of white bone spurs that looked like decorations. It seemed to have four ears on its head.

No matter how one looked at it, it was not a normal creature.

The monster jumped into a room on the second floor and barely dodged the grenade's explosion. Then, it quickly ran, escaping Jiang Baimian's perception range before disappearing into the depths of the buildings by the street.

At this moment, Qiao Chu had already returned to normal and stood up again. He looked in the direction where the monster had vanished and said in a deep voice, "I fell asleep just now. Fortunately, this exoskeleton has a good wake-up function."

"Is that the monster that forces people to sleep?" Bai Chen immediately reacted.

"It looks like a mutated creature." Jiang Baimian made a judgment.

Qiao Chu didn't attempt to chase after the feline monster. He pointed at their destination and said, "Let's go over."

Shang Jianyao was the first to make his stand. He ran towards the tall building that came with a courtyard.

Jiang Baimian and the others quickly followed.

As they ran, Shang Jianyao suddenly asked, "Shall we give it a name?"

"Who?" Jiang Baimian was a little confused.

"That monster from before," Shang Jianyao said seriously. "Shall we call it Ghost Cat?"

"It sounds terrible." Jiang Baimian subconsciously rejected the suggested name. "Let's call it Slumber Cat!"

As they spoke, they reached their destination and arrived in front of the courtyard's entrance.

With the faint starlight and moonlight's help, the group clearly saw the black signboard placed on the ground.

The signboard was made of stone and didn't look too dirty. It looked like it had often been washed by the rain or 'maintained' by someone.

The golden words on its surface hadn't fallen off. They were all in the Ashlands language.

These words formed a term Long Yuehong had never heard of: "City Intelligence Network Control Center."

“What is this place?” Long Yuehong blurted out a question.

Jiang Baimian explained slightly, “Water pipes, natural gas pipes, electric wires, and fiber optics are combined together to form a large intelligence network in certain cities. The one controlling this network is the city intelligence network center.”

“Then... why are we here?” Long Yuehong became increasingly confused.

At this moment, Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—said coldly, “There’s a hydropower station still operating in this city ruin, and it’s also being maintained. Many of the lines in the city ruin have been ‘maintained’ well.

“What we need to do is enter the control center and reconnect the power.”

Jiang Baimian subconsciously asked, “Why are we reconnecting the power?”

Qiao Chu fell silent for two seconds before saying, “To open all the doors to a laboratory.”

Chapter 72: Depression

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao and the others before looking at Qiao Chu again. “Where’s that laboratory?”

Before the helmeted Qiao Chu could answer, a desolate, hoarse roar sounded again.

“How!!”

This time, Shang Jianyao and the others could clearly hear that the roar’s origin wasn’t far away—just a few streets behind the City Intelligence Network Control Center.

The roar was so loud that Shang Jianyao and the others felt their ears ring and their heads spin. It seemed to come from the depths of everyone’s hearts, from a fearful memory that couldn’t be wiped away. It made Long Yuehong’s legs tremble uncontrollably, and Bai Chen subconsciously tightened her scarf as if she wanted to strangle herself.

Jiang Baimian’s body slightly trembled as if she were using all her strength to resist the fear. Shang Jianyao slightly cowered as if he were still a child. However, he quickly returned to normal. No, not exactly normal either.

Shang Jianyao smiled and looked excited. His mind seemed to skip the word ‘fear’ and turned to ‘excitement.’ Of course, it was mostly because the loud, hoarse, and desolate roar had stopped, leaving only the roar that undulated and echoed throughout the city ruin endlessly.

At this moment, Qiao Chu chuckled without any hint of humor. “That laboratory is where the sound came from.”

Jiang Baimian and the others were shocked when they heard this, and their imaginations ran wild.

A mysterious laboratory that produces a loud roar... A hydropower station that has been operating since the Old World was destroyed... A city ruin that is regularly maintained... Some of the wires and equipment can still be used today... A feline monster that can force people to sleep... A Nightmare Horse, which can create real nightmares that result in all kinds of serious consequences... A creature suspected to be a Superior Heartless. There are certain areas in the swamp’s depths that have no radioactive pollution but are filled with monsters...

When this information was combined, the truth seemed to be at hand, but it was also extremely terrifying.

Amidst her horror, Jiang Baimian felt a little excited. This was one of the reasons why she formed the Old Task Force!

“I wonder if the research in that laboratory is related to the Old World’s destruction...” Jiang Baimian muttered to herself.

Qiao Chu ignored this question and took a stride with his black metal skeleton’s feet. “It’s time to connect the power.”

Jiang Baimian chased up to him and quickly asked, “Do you have a map layout of this place?”

“Let’s go to the underground engine room to restore the power supply to this building. We’ll then go to the 17th floor’s power grid center and connect the power.” Qiao Chu seemed to have long figured out the situation of the city’s Intelligence Network Control Center.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others didn’t say anything else. They followed Qiao Chu—who was wearing the exoskeleton—through the door’s left side and entered the courtyard.

This place was very spacious, and there was plenty of greenery. All kinds of abandoned cars were neatly parked in their corresponding spots without forming any blockades.

Clusters of dark-green plants—tall, short, fluffy, and messy—were scattered around. They were everywhere, like monsters hiding in the darkness. This made Long Yuehong—who was already scared—tense up; it was as though he would act up at any moment.

From his point of view, the team shouldn't have entered the City Intelligence Network Control Center at all. They shouldn't restore the power or attempt to open all the doors to the mysterious laboratory.

Ignoring the fact that this would bring a new round of disaster to the already fragile human society in the Ashlands, Long Yuehong felt that it was impossible for them to survive the dangers brought about by the mysterious laboratory and the strange city ruin.

He didn't want to sacrifice himself at all. He didn't want to turn to an 80-month bereavement compensation. Nôv(el)B\jnn

There was a pool in front of the building where the City Intelligence Network Control Center was located. The water inside was dirty, and plenty of junk floated in it, but not as much as one would expect.

Under the weak moonlight and starlight, Long Yuehong suddenly saw a black figure flash in the water.

"There's something!" He aimed the Berserker assault rifle at the pool in horror.

Qiao Chu turned around and glanced at him. "An ordinary fish."

Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief, but the residual stimulation finally ignited the fear in his heart.

"No, it's not normal! Don't Heartless eat fish? I-I don't want to go in! I give up! I'll wait for you at the jeep!" Long Yuehong voiced all his thoughts in one breath. At this moment, he actually felt that Qiao Chu was not that charming.

Qiao Chu—who was wearing a helmet—was stunned for a second before narrowing his eyes. He silently raised his exoskeleton-covered arm and aimed the strange-looking silver rifle at Long Yuehong.

Jiang Baimian and Bai Chen simultaneously opened their mouths, prepared to stop Qiao Chu, but they were a little hesitant. They didn't know if they should make a move, and a fierce struggle seemed to ensue in their hearts.

Qiao Chu did not give them a chance to react and prepared to pull the trigger. He suddenly realized that he couldn't pull his finger back! In addition, his fingers could flexibly move in any other direction. All he lacked was the action of squeezing the trigger!

Qiao Chu's gaze subconsciously moved past Long Yuehong and landed on Shang Jianyao, who was a little further behind.

Shang Jianyao had slightly bent over as if he was breathing heavily. His eyes darkened as he returned Qiao Chu's gaze. With some difficulty, he said very seriously, "My mother said that one shouldn't condone someone's bad habits, no matter how much one likes them."

...

When Jiang Baimian fired the grenade at the Slumber Cat, she caused quite a loud explosion.

In the city ruin's square with many sculptures.

Jingfa—who was wearing a yellow monk robe and a red kasaya—stopped what he was doing and looked back in the direction of the sound.

In front of him were several female Heartless corpses—in pieces.

Before long, a roar—which sent reverberations through the clouds—sounded from the direction of the explosion.

As the red light in his electronic eye flickered a few times, Jingfa abandoned the corpses around him and ran in the direction of the sound.

...

In the dark city ruin, on a certain street's certain building.

Du Heng—the middle-aged man in a black robe, with long hair of the same color and a beard around his mouth—muttered to himself in confusion, "Not here?"

Just as he said that, an explosion sounded from not far away.

Du Heng didn't react much to this, but a desolate, hoarse roar soon sounded from that direction.

Could it be over there? Du Heng thought for a moment and walked towards the stairs.

...

A shop by the street in the city ruin.

The blond Daoist priest, Galoran, was lying in a very soft, black leather chair. She looked sleepy, but unfortunately, she couldn't fall asleep. She was woken up by successive explosions and roars.

“Sigh, my cultivation level is still not high enough. Master can even peacefully sleep beside a factory... Forget it, forget it. Since I’m awake, I’ll just go over. I wonder if I’ll be able to hitch a ride on the way...” Galoran elaborately blamed herself.

She was even muttering to herself in the Ashlands language.

Then, Galoran slowly got up and walked toward the roar’s source.

...

On the other side of the city ruin, in a square with many pieces of equipment.

A convoy of five cars was parked here. One of the five cars was a grayish-green armored car.

Next to the armored vehicle, a muscular man wearing a grayish-green beret looked at his harvest and nodded in satisfaction.

A man with a shaved head came over and said happily, “Brother Li, it hasn’t been long since we filled up all the cars. Why don’t we search for vehicles that can still be driven and repaired? Each of us can get one.”

‘Hyena’ Lin Li—who was called Brother Li—looked around and slowly swept his gaze across the 13 core members’ faces. He saw that everyone was equally happy and excited.

Lin Li had a high nose, and his forehead was a little protruded. His looks were rather unique.

“Sure.” Lin Li nodded in agreement with the bald man’s suggestion. “The main reason is that we haven’t found a weapon that can effectively enhance our strength or technological information that can be exchanged for good items from large factions. We have to prepare for the future. There must be a large faction backing Blackrat Town. We have to deal with them before they figure out what happened.”

He was just about to continue when explosions and roars sounded in the same direction.

After quietly listening for a while, ‘Hyena’ Lin Li smiled and said, “Looks like there’s something good over there. Let’s go take a look. We’ll take action if there’s a chance. If not, we’ll find something else.”

This had always been the style of bandits like them. They were like hyenas that rushed over after smelling rotten meat but did not take the risk to approach. They only waited for an opportunity from afar.

“Yes, Brother Li!” His gang’s core members were just about to take turns sleeping when they stood up energetically.

...

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao’s words, the corners of Qiao Chu’s mouth twitched indiscernibly.

It was only then that Long Yuehong realized that Qiao Chu wanted to kill him. All the beautiful fantasies Long Yuehong had imagined collapsed suddenly, allowing him to truly return to reality.

“H-he...” Long Yuehong realized in horror that Qiao Chu was not his companion at all. He was not a charming person worth following.

Along the way, Long Yuehong felt as if his heart had been clouded by fat. This is too strange!

Before Long Yuehong could finish speaking, ripples appeared in Qiao Chu’s golden eyes.

Jiang Baimian—who had already decided to stop Qiao Chu—suddenly felt a strong sense of depression. She clearly wanted to lead Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong away from the dangerous area, but she ended up leading them to the dangerous ruins.

It was the team leader’s mistake for an ordinary field training session to have developed to this stage. Her former dream had to be abandoned because of a mistake, and her body had almost collapsed...

She should just die...

At this moment, Jiang Baimian was completely disheartened. She gave up on struggling and only wanted to await death.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao had the same reaction. They were too depressed to do anything or say a word.

Qiao Chu did not attack. Instead, he put away the silver rifle and spoke with a cold and gentle voice. “Don’t worry; it’s all in the past.”

Long Yuehong and the others—who were deep in a gloomy and depressing world—seemed to hear the comfort of an angel.

Chapter 73: Imagery Destroyer

The sudden depression quickly vanished, and Jiang Baimian and the others quickly returned to normal.

Although Long Yuehong was still terrified and did not want to venture deeper into the City Intelligence Network Control Center, he felt that he could take the risk for the angel-like Qiao Chu.

As Qiao Chu needed to wear the military exoskeleton, he had long taken off his mechanical watch and placed it in his pocket. But this did not stop him from knowing the time because the corresponding time was displayed on the goggles.

He looked at the goggles' bottom-right corner, calculated the time before his Bewitching Charm would mutate, and quickly urged them. "Let's go to the underground engine room."

This time, Shang Jianyao and the others didn't have any objections. They followed the Eighth Research Institute's commissioner around the pool and arrived in front of the city's Intelligence Network Control Center.

The door here was made of glass. It was unknown when it had been opened—or rather, it had not been closed since the Old World was destroyed. In short, the wide and dark hall inside was directly revealed.

Qiao Chu was in no rush to enter. He used the comprehensive warning system and scanned the exterior for about 20 seconds.

He then bent down slightly and rushed to the elevator.

Jiang Baimian and the others followed closely behind, maintaining their tactical formation.

During this process, the only sounds in the hall were the sound of metallic bones colliding with the ground and their light, echoing footsteps. There was no other sound but dead silence.

They soon arrived at the elevator area.

There were three grayish-black elevators on each side. Of course, they couldn't be used because there was no electricity.

Qiao Chu's target was not the elevators, but the door to the emergency access by the side.

The vermilion wooden door had decayed a little. It was closed, but it was unknown if it was locked.

Bai Chen was just about to take a few steps forward and open the door for Qiao Chu when she suddenly had a strange realization—Behind that door was an abnormally precious item that had to be obtained!

This gave her an uncontrollable urge and desire to open the door immediately, rush to the designated spot, and pick up the item.

Qiao Chu, Long Yuehong, and the others also had the same feeling. They couldn't wait to approach the door.

Jiang Baimian frowned slightly and shouted, "Do you remember what Wu Shoushi's teammate described?"

Jiang Baimian was referring to the matter of the Superior Heartless creating a temptation and setting up a trap. It was precisely because Jiang Baimian remembered this that she had not been completely blinded, allowing her to resist the baffling feeling to a certain extent.

Her feet eagerly moved forward, and her body had already assumed a charging posture. However, she remained firmly rooted to the ground and did not take a step forward.

Her words snapped Qiao Chu and the others to attention, making them struggle momentarily without opening the door.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who was at the back—had already run over, but he didn't continue forward. Instead, he stopped beside Jiang Baimian.

"I think there's a secret in there that can save all of humanity," he said seriously. "However, such secrets are definitely protected by layers of protection. There will be many dangers hidden around it."

For a moment, Jiang Baimian didn't know whether to roll her eyes or praise Shang Jianyao.

"We have to be careful; we can't be rash." Shang Jianyao followed this train of thought and thought for two seconds. He then jumped in front of an elevator and used the metallic surface as a mirror—along with the moonlight and starlight shining in through the window—to see his blurry reflection.

While looking at himself, Shang Jianyao said, "Jiang Baimian has long legs, and so do I. Jiang Baimian is amazing, and so am I."

“So?” His eyes had turned dark at some point in time. Shang Jianyao opened his mouth and muttered to himself, “So, we’re the same.”

During this process, Qiao Chu originally wanted to stop Shang Jianyao. But on the one hand, he had to resist the baffling and strong desire, so he was unable to divert his attention. On the other hand, he felt that Shang Jianyao could create some different changes and break the impasse. He felt some anticipation, so he finally chose to be prepared and watch coldly.

After deceiving himself, Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at Jiang Baimian.

His eyes turned darker.

A strong thought suddenly surfaced in Jiang Baimian’s mind: Although I really desire the item behind the door and want it, I definitely can’t appear so desperate. I can’t say it out loud; it will only embarrass me!

With this thought in mind, Jiang Baimian turned around and gently stomped her foot. “If you guys want to go, go ahead. I’m not going.”

Shang Jianyao turned to the same spot and gently stomped his foot. “If you guys want to go, go ahead. I’m not going.”

Upon seeing this, Bai Chen and Long Yuehong found it strange. They were stunned and amused. For a time, the strong desire in their hearts had attenuated significantly.

Jiang Baimian—who was still in a corny state—glared at Shang Jianyao. “Why are you mimicking me?”

“Why are you mimicking me?” Shang Jianyao mimicked her gaze, language, and microexpressions perfectly.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian’s corny emotions vanished. Recalling the scene from before, she couldn’t help but laugh. “Do you want us to die from laughter to resist the baffling realization and desires?” Nôv(él)B\\jnn

“Do you want us to die from laughter to resist the baffling realization and desires?” Shang Jianyao laughed as well.

The corners of Qiao Chu’s mouth slightly twitched when he saw this. He subconsciously wanted to give them a stern warning to be more serious.

This was the city ruin’s Intelligence Network Control Center. Danger was everywhere here. The silence here ought to give one the creeps. How could they be bantering and laughing?

Jiang Baimian thought for two seconds before holding in her laughter. “My hair is very long, but yours is very short.”

“My hair is very long...” Shang Jianyao repeated Jiang Baimian’s words, but he suddenly couldn’t continue speaking.

His eyes returned to normal, and Shang Jianyao immediately said, “Seize this opportunity,”

Jiang Baimian suddenly came to a realization. She took advantage of the gap before the baffling desire could affect her again to reach the vermilion wooden door quickly.

“Keep close to the sides,” she instructed Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and the others as she gripped the rusted metal handle.

After waiting for a few seconds, Jiang Baimian suddenly turned the doorknob and pushed open the door.

Without any pause, she jumped and rolled, hiding at the side of the elevator.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Da! Da! Da!

Consecutive gunshots sounded from the bottom and top of the stairs. A bullet storm enveloped the space at the emergency access’s entrance.

If Long Yuehong and the others had opened the door rashly, they would have been peppered with holes.

That strong, intense desire had controlled Qiao Chu, so he completely forgot to use the comprehensive warning system that came with the exoskeleton.

Amidst the gunshots, Jiang Baimian took off a tactical grenade hanging from her belt and prepared to pull off the ring before throwing it at the emergency access’s door. She had calculated the trajectory and wanted the rebound afforded by the wall to let the grenade fall down the stairwell.

At that moment, the shooting stopped.

Jiang Baimian silently attached the tactical grenade. She held the grenade launcher in one hand and the United 202 in the other as she focused on sensing the various electric signals in the emergency access.

“The Heartless above have already retreated. There’s interference below. The signal isn’t too clear, but there are two left at most...” Jiang Baimian quickly provided the information.

At this moment, the baffling realization and desire to quickly obtain the precious item—which was hidden in the emergency access—had vanished.

Qiao Chu returned to normal. With the exoskeleton and the comprehensive warning system, he rolled and entered the emergency access.

Deep in the stairwell that led to the underground engine room, a figure was looking up.

It was a woman with a relatively young appearance. Her facial features were relatively neat, but her eyes were more white than black. They were rather turbid and bloodshot. She was about 1.65 meters tall and wore a deflated white down jacket. From top to bottom, she was cleaner than the other Heartless.

She quietly stood in the darkness like a ghost that wandered the night, silently watching the targets she wanted dead.

If not for the comprehensive warning system, Qiao Chu wouldn't have been able to see her clearly.

Before Qiao Chu could fire the grenade, the Heartless pressed down with one hand and jumped down, disappearing into the stairwell's depths.

Jiang Baimian approached the entrance and asked, "Is it the Superior Heartless that Wu Shoushi and the others encountered?"

Qiao Chu nodded slightly and said, "Yes."

"Phew, as expected." Jiang Baimian exhaled.

At this moment, Long Yuehong sighed as if he had just survived a disaster. "Fortunately, the Heartless don't have much intelligence. If they had just fired directly, at least half of us would've died before we could open the door."

The vermilion wooden door couldn't block the bullets. But in the eyes of the Heartless—who followed their instincts—obstacles were obstacles. Obstacles had to be removed before anything was effective.

"Don't say such things now. It's inauspicious." Bai Chen turned her head and glanced at Long Yuehong.

Long Yuehong was always especially sensitive when he heard the words 'lucky,' 'unlucky,' 'inauspicious,' and 'fate.' Hence, he shut his mouth tightly.

Qiao Chu glanced at the dark stairwell ahead and said in a deep voice, "Let's go down."

He paused and instructed, "You guys take point."

It is time to use them to play the role of bait.

Chapter 74: Underground Corridor

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao immediately led the way. Holding the Berserker assault rifle, he walked past Qiao Chu to the stairwell, which led to the underground engine room.

At this moment, an arm appeared in front of him.

“I’ll take point,” said Jiang Baimian in a low voice. Of course, no matter how hard she tried to suppress her voice, it was still not soft enough due to her lack of reference.

“I’m an Awakened.” Shang Jianyao remained very persistent, and his expression was serious and solemn.

“Why? Saving all of humanity starts with us?” Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Can you sense attackers in advance?”

Shang Jianyao nodded. “Yes.”

“...” Jiang Baimian never imagined that she would receive such an answer. Her subsequent words were left stuck in her throat. After a few seconds, she inquired, “How large is the range?”

“Ten meters,” Shang Jianyao replied frankly.

Jiang Baimian heaved a sigh of relief. “Then, my sensing range is greater than yours. In such an environment, the earlier we discover the attacker, the better. Therefore, I’ll take point.”

At this point, she smiled. “It’s not that I don’t want you to shoulder the responsibility, but there are specialists in every field. Professional matters should be left to the most professional ones. If there comes a day when our team encounters a more dangerous situation, and your ability is most suitable for resolving the situation, I won’t hesitate to send you out.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything else. He nodded, took a step back, and made way.

Jiang Baimian adjusted her holster and slung the grenade launcher over her shoulder. Then, she gripped the Ice Moss with one hand and kept the other free.

The stairwell interior was a very cramped environment; it had limited dodging space. Therefore, there was no room for mistakes.

Due to this consideration, Jiang Baimian temporarily gave up on the United 202 pistol—which easily suffered stoppages—and the grenade launcher that could easily backfire

on her. Although she often maintained and calibrated her United 202 and knew that it was unlikely for there to be any problems, one could never be too careful in the environment they were in. If she was truly unlucky and encountered a stoppage, there was no place to dodge even if she wanted to.

Of course, her grenade launcher was also slung in a manner that allowed her to use it with the greatest ease. As long as the Heartless gathered at the bottom of the stairwell, she had the guts to choose a firing trajectory to wipe them all out.

As for herself, she would definitely issue an order to take cover.

The free hand was preparation for holding a flashlight. Jiang Baimian could sense the enemy's electric signals, but she couldn't see the stairs in the dark.

There was not even a hint of moonlight or starlight in here.

With the flashlight in hand, Jiang Baimian bent her waist slightly and looked at the yellowish light ahead as she walked down the stairs. She didn't dare walk too fast, afraid that she wouldn't have time to react if she were attacked.

After Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong entered the elevator lobby, she turned around and reminded them, "Take a prone position when I say so."

She was worried that the Heartless would fire a grenade from the bottom or throw a hand grenade.

Although it was quite possible for Qiao Chu to blow up the grenade in advance with the comprehensive warning system and the precision aiming system's help, she still had to be wary of shrapnel.

If the other party's grenade or hand grenade had toxic gases, Jiang Baimian had no other choice but to make everyone hold their breaths while they rushed back to the first floor. When the time came, apart from Bai Chen, everyone could rely on their genetically enhanced physiques to last until they used the company-produced 'Universe Biological Antidote' that they carried with them. Qiao Chu's exoskeleton came with an 'anti-poison filter system,' so he didn't need to be considered.

She couldn't be sure if this plan would eventually work. If the Heartless even had thermobaric rounds, Jiang Baimian could only resign herself to fate.

However, she was not too worried about the latter two situations because she felt that the Heartless could not maintain firearms and ammunition well. After the Old World was destroyed, almost nobody had entered this place. Only a few batches of people had come this time, and they did not have that much equipment.

Jiang Baimian felt a headache coming on when she thought about the Superior Heartless's strangeness and the fact that they could use all kinds of weapons.

Upon hearing Jiang Baimian's instructions, Long Yuehong subconsciously replied, "Yes, Team Leader!"

His breathy voice immediately echoed in the stairwell, echoing down the stairs with a buzzing sound.

Long Yuehong came to his senses and realized that he had made another mistake.

"Not bad."

"Very good."

"Very spirited."

Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao praised him almost simultaneously.

Qiao Chu watched coldly. He switched on the flashlight attached to the exoskeleton and used the light beam to signal the four people in front not to waste time.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and confirmed that there was nothing else she needed to remind or emphasize. She then turned on the flashlight, held the Ice Moss, and walked down the stairs step by step.

The wind here was a little chilly. The right wall was already discolored, and the left handrail was mottled black with rust.

Under the yellowish beam of light, the stairs circled deep into the darkness as if they were entering a behemoth's mouth.

This deepened Long Yuehong's anxiety and fear uncontrollably. All kinds of thoughts raced through his mind as he once again suspected the need for this operation.

As they walked down the stairs, the stairwell was extremely quiet as if the entire world had died.

If it weren't for the fact that he could still hear their light footsteps, Long Yuehong felt like he might've had a mental breakdown because of the environment and atmosphere. Even so, he felt like time passed abnormally slowly.

After an unknown period of time, Qiao Chu—who was tailing the team—suddenly said, "We're here."

"Phew..." Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief.

It was great that they weren't attacked while in the stairwell!

After leaving this cramped and sealed environment, there was at least room to run, roll, and jump. They could execute effective dodges.

"They actually didn't take the opportunity to attack us..." Bai Chen muttered to herself.

Jiang Baimian subconsciously replied, "The Heartless shouldn't be preventing us from entering the underground engine room. They don't have the motivation or intelligence to do so unless this is their lair.

"As hunters, when they discover that their prey is too strong and difficult to deal with, the best choice is to observe in the dark, wait for an opportunity, and summon more companions to provide help. These are generationally-advanced Heartless. They don't lack such instincts or intelligence when hunting."

Long Yuehong worriedly looked around after hearing what he was most concerned about. "In other words, they are hiding in the darkness around us?"

"That's right, that's right." Shang Jianyao smiled and echoed, "Once someone acts nervous, weak, and lacks vigilance, the Heartless will target them."

Isn't this referring to me? Long Yuehong was alarmed. He instantly overcame his fear and tensed up, preventing himself from revealing any flaws.

"Alright, I've confirmed that there are no electric signals in the area behind the door." Jiang Baimian didn't stop here just to speak. "However, we should still follow procedure and be careful."

They immediately took cover and prepared to provide suppressive fire. None of them relaxed.

Jiang Baimian then controlled her strength to slam into the emergency access door leading to the underground engine room. She used the rebound to turn around and hide to the side.

After confirming that no one was attacking, they continued forward in tactical formation and rushed out of the stairwell, heading into the underground floor.

As the flashlight beam swept the area, they saw the layout clearly.

They were at a junction. There was a corridor to the right and left, and there were many rooms on both sides of the corridor.

Jiang Baimian asked Qiao Chu, "Where's the underground engine room?"

Qiao Chu looked around and said, "I'm not sure either."

He then added, "Walk straight and scout the way. If you find it, tell me directly. If there isn't, come back, and we'll change directions."

He barely thought about it as if he had already made up his mind.

Jiang Baimian and the others didn't find anything amiss. They entered the corridor straight ahead according to their previous formation.

At this moment, Qiao Chu took two steps forward and emphasized, "When you reach the end, don't be in a rush to turn elsewhere. Come back and report first."

"No problem." Shang Jianyao seemed to be answering on Jiang Baimian's behalf. He even waved his hand with a smile.

"Alright." Jiang Baimian focused her attention toward the front again.

The quartet followed the flashlight down the corridor and entered deeper into the building.

On either side of them, some rooms were open, and some were tightly shut. A few doors were made of wood, and some were cast from grayish-blue metal. From time to time, they would see a square table, a long table, chairs, and various machines inside.

However, none of them looked like a power supply room.

As they walked, Jiang Baimian suddenly raised her hand and fired a shot at a room to the side.

With a bang, a figure staggered through another door and lunged into the corridor opposite them.

As the flashlight beam swept over, Shang Jianyao and the others saw a figure in a white shirt's back.

The figure's right arm was tilted toward the shoulder, and the redness rapidly spread. The figure had clearly been shot. However, his speed didn't slow down at all. He disappeared from their line of sight before Jiang Baimian and the others could fire a second time.

Bai Chen retracted her gaze and said, "There's something wrong with his injury."

"What's wrong?" Long Yuehong asked anxiously.

Bai Chen glanced at Jiang Baimian. “Although the Ice Moss’s strength can’t compare to the United 202, it’s nothing to scoff at. It shouldn’t have only dealt this tiny bit of damage when it hits a person.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “Could it be that the Heartless’s muscles have evolved to such an extent that they can effectively reduce the spinning or tearing of bullets?”

“We can’t confirm the reason, but we have to be careful in the future. We can’t misjudge their injuries.” Bai Chen reminded everyone with a serious expression.

“I hope their heads are hard enough,” replied Shang Jianyao with a smile.

Long Yuehong silently remembered this point.

The Old Task Force continued forward. On the way, they didn’t encounter any Heartless again.

They soon arrived at the end of the corridor.

Jiang Baimian used the flashlight to illuminate the open room on the right, wanting to determine what was inside.

The first thing they saw was a person!

It was a hunched old woman—with a wrinkled face—in a dark beanie and a black cashmere dress. The hair straggling from the old woman’s beanie was completely white. Her hands were holding swaddling clothes that were red and blue.

She looked up at Jiang Baimian and the others with her turbid eyes and paused before saying, “You guys... disturbed... Xiaochong...”

Chapter 75: Expectant Mother

The old woman did not appear to be a centenarian, but she was definitely over 80 years old. She looked as if she had lived from the Old World’s destruction until now.

She had lived in this city that was long dead. Furthermore, her eyes were turbid, and her gaze was fierce like a beast’s. She had the typical Heartless characteristics.

A Heartless actually opened her mouth to speak. Even though the words were spoken with great difficulty and in a staccato manner, she was still speaking!

This was a sign of human intelligence!

For a moment, Jiang Baimian felt panic, fear, and intense interest. One of her goals was to figure out the Heartless disease's pathology and spreading patterns.

At this moment, the wrinkled old woman in a dark beanie and a black cashmere dress took two steps forward.

The swaddling clothes in her arms spun a quarter of a circle outward. It went from facing her chest to facing upward.

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and the others subconsciously looked over. With the flashlight's help, they saw what was in the swaddling clothes.

The first thing they saw was a small, white skull. More white bones seemed to be connected to the base of the skull, but they were just barely visible due to the red and blue swaddling clothes.

It was a baby's skeleton.

The old woman had been hugging this skeleton for countless years.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian felt her heart being tightly gripped by a hand named 'Fear.' It was about to stop beating.

She, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao stood in their spots. Their faces were pale, and their bodies were stiff. They couldn't move at all.

From the corner of her eye, Jiang Baimian suddenly saw Shang Jianyao's expression instantly return to normal, even becoming very serious.

Shang Jianyao ignored the old woman and looked at Jiang Baimian before seriously asking, "Why aren't you firing?"

"Why am I not firing?" Jiang Baimian ruminated over these words as if she had grasped something amiss.

In just a second or two, she came to a realization.

In such a dangerous place with such a repressive environment, it was impossible for her to determine if the Heartless around her had any intention of attacking. Once she sensed an electric signal or saw a figure, she would've immediately fired to eliminate the latent danger.

She had clearly sensed the electric signal in advance, but when she saw the old woman's figure, she didn't reflexively raise her hand and fire. She even allowed the old woman to take two steps forward.

What did this mean?

Jiang Baimian was shocked when she thought of this and instantly retracted her attention from the old lady. Almost at the same time, she sensed another electric signal approaching them at high speed.

When she looked over, there was no one there.

Jiang Baimian was no longer plagued by fear. Without hesitation, she raised her Ice Moss-holding right hand and pulled the trigger at the spot she had predicted.

With a bang, the strange, old woman and the terrifying baby corpse in front of Bai Chen and Long Yuehong vanished as if they had never appeared.

Under the flashlight's beam, they saw that several tables were stacked deep in the room. On them lay a woman—who wore short, red winter clothing.

This woman's black hair was messy, and her locks looked greasy. Her eyes were turbid and bloodshot. Her gaze was abnormally fierce as if only her bestiality remained.

She was a Heartless.

Her short, washed-out, winter clothes were unzipped. It hung open, revealing her bulging, hairy stomach. She didn't wear any clothes on the lower half of her body. Only a tattered cotton blanket covered her slightly. Her legs were separated and spread out in a posture that ordinary people would find a little strange.

Long Yuehong was a little confused about this. Shang Jianyao—who had participated in many gatherings and eaten many rounds of Holy Communion—made the judgment after a single glance.

The Heartless was giving birth.

Heartless also had the instinct to reproduce.

There was a man in the direction of Jiang Baimian's hurtling round. He wore a white singlet, and his skin was bronze in color. A small portion of his body had thick hair. Above his head was knotted black hair. He had a thick beard, and his eyes were also turbid and incomparably fierce.

The scene of the old woman—which the Old Task Force had seen and encountered—was actually an illusion!

Jiang Baimian's shot did not hit the male Heartless. He seemed to have sensed the danger in advance and had jumped up by exerting strength with his feet.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao and Bai Chen reacted and raised their muzzles simultaneously, pulling the triggers.

The male Heartless seized the precious second and kicked the corridor wall to change his position forcefully. He rebounded upward, grabbed the edge of the hole in the ceiling, pulled up with his arms, and swung his body inside.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian did not stop firing as they continuously fired upward.

This Heartless could always correctly respond in advance as if he had a strange premonition.

Although Long Yuehong—who was beside them—reacted a little slower, it wasn't like he did nothing after that. He held his assault rifle and monitored the female Heartless in the room with a tense expression, preventing her from attacking.

He didn't fire because he could now tell that the other party seemed to be giving birth.

At this moment, Bai Chen—whose eyes flickered slightly—suddenly turned around and aimed her gun at the expectant female Heartless in the room.

She was as quiet as ever, and there was no pity on her face.

The next second, the ceiling in the room suddenly fell and smashed into Bai Chen's head.

The male Heartless in a white singlet jumped down with it and pounced at the woman on the table.

His back muscles bulged as they stretched upward. He was like a butterfly that had completely spread its wings, almost tearing apart his singlet's restraints.

Bai Chen seemed to have expected this as she rolled to the side before the ceiling could smash onto her.

Jiang Baimian had already understood Bai Chen's thoughts when she turned to face the room. At this moment, she didn't waste the opportunity to swing her hand and pull the trigger.

With a bang, a glistening yellow bullet flew across the short distance and struck the male Heartless's lower left shoulder.

The other party bent down in time to avoid the bullet hitting his heart.

The wound created by the bullet was not as large as Jiang Baimian had imagined. The superhuman muscles seemed to restrict and reduce the damage effectively.

Jiang Baimian—who had experienced many battles—did not allow her surprise to affect her. She followed up with another shot.

The bullet hit the back of the male Heartless's thigh this time, splattering fresh blood.

With a thud, the male Heartless collapsed.

The female Heartless on the simple wooden bed struggled to look over and let out a shrill cry.

Amidst her tragic cries, Jiang Baimian saw the male Heartless rapidly collapse into a pool of squirming flesh and blood.

This flesh exuded an unimaginable aura of fear, making Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen's legs tremble. Their legs became so weak that they were unable to support themselves.

They knelt down quickly and slowly, contracting their bodies tightly, unable to react.

During this process, Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen tried their best to resist the fear that could break all humans. However, they only slowed down their bending.

This left them in uncontrollable despair.

Shang Jianyao's brain had a spasm at this moment, and he couldn't help but jump up. He then sat down cross-legged with an abnormally serious expression, looking as if he were considering a philosophical question.

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated as she asked with difficulty, "What... are you... thinking about?"

Shang Jianyao nodded and replied seriously, "I'm wondering why I find Qiao Chu not so charming in this illusion."

Chapter 76: Exchange in the Illusion

After hearing Shang Jianyao's words, Jiang Baimian grasped the crux of the matter. Yes, I also don't find Qiao Chu's charm that great.

Although Qiao Chu was indeed very handsome and tall, he wasn't the sort that could make people fall head over heels for him at first glance. Furthermore, he was cold and had a terrible personality. Not only did interacting with him not make people have a good impression of him, but it also made her increasingly hate him.

All of these feelings had previously been buried in Jiang Baimian's heart and could occasionally be discovered. Now, they were directly exposed to her mind like a receding tide of sand.

She muttered to herself, "No wonder I've always felt something was amiss based on my chip. I instinctively tried my best to arm myself and distance myself from Qiao Chu..."

Bai Chen also heard Shang Jianyao's words. Her expression changed several times before she said, "The more I think about it, the stranger I find it... Why would we want to gain Qiao Chu's favor that much? We followed him to this incomparably strange and dangerous city ruin."

There were Superior Heartless, terrifying mutated creatures, an incomprehensible regular maintenance mechanism, an abnormally mysterious laboratory, and an unknown object that let out deafening roars. They were more terrifying than any city ruin Bai Chen had ever been in.

"That's right, that's right." Long Yuehong nodded repeatedly. "I'm so straight, but I actually occasionally feel that it wouldn't be bad if it were Qiao Chu. Eurgh..." As he spoke, he felt disgusted.

"Are you pregnant?" Shang Jianyao glanced at Long Yuehong. It was unknown if he was being serious or pretending. Without waiting for a response, Shang Jianyao continued, "Maybe this is some kind of ability?"

Jiang Baimian clicked her tongue. "Are you trying to say that Long Yuehong has the ability to get pregnant or that Qiao Chu has the ability to bewitch people?"

"Bewitch. Yes, that should be the case. All abilities definitely have their limits. As long as one doesn't become the Kalendarium—according to superstition—there is a limit to their range, target numbers, and corresponding degree.

"Ah yes, I remember that Qiao Chu adamantly refused when I wanted to go downstairs to relieve myself. He only allowed us to relieve ourselves on the other side of the same floor and block. He also just said that we shouldn't rush to turn at the end of the corridor. Instead, we should first report to him when we reach the end of the corridor.

"This means that his ability range can't exceed 30 meters. In terms of target numbers, it's clearly not a single human target—no, a single creature. One will be automatically bewitched once they enter the corresponding range?"

After hearing Jiang Baimian's analysis, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen felt increasingly horrified. They deeply understood their previous actions' anomalies. Back then, they actually felt that it was only right and proper as if they had been possessed.

"Terrifying. Truly terrifying." Long Yuehong had just sighed when he suddenly realized a problem. "Eh, didn't we still feel very terrified about how we couldn't straighten our bodies just now?"

Why are we holding a discussion now?

Shang Jianyao replied in all seriousness, "Because what we saw and felt was only an illusion. Once you take this point to heart and ignore it, you won't be affected."

"An illusion..." Long Yuehong recalled that Shang Jianyao had previously mentioned this. He panicked a little and quickly asked, "Shall we escape the illusion first? What if the Heartless take the opportunity to attack?"

"That's true." Jiang Baimian raised her flashlight-holding left hand, wanting to slap herself to wake up.

She seriously thought about it for a second and felt that it might hurt a little. She decided to fire at the pool of squirming flesh above, making it difficult for the Heartless—who was creating the illusion—to maintain the ability.

The pool of flesh—which they could see—suddenly collapsed at that moment, restoring itself to the male Heartless that was struggling to stand up.

At the same time, they heard a soft clang.

The female Heartless tried to get up and attack the Old Task Force members with a sharp dagger that she had taken out of nowhere. But before she could leave the crude 'wooden bed,' she fell back due to the pain in her lower body. Even her dagger fell to the ground.

Her expression became abnormally warped. She forced her upper body up and stretched her hands into the tattered cotton blanket.

She soon carried out a wet and dirty baby from between her legs.

A pale, flesh-colored umbilical cord was also attached to the baby's navel.

"Wa!" A clear cry echoed in the room.

Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and the others—who were supposed to fire immediately—held their guns, but none of them pulled the triggers. Nôv(él)B\\jnn

The female Heartless quickly snapped the umbilical cord and hugged the baby. She then half-turned her body to keep the 'baby' away from the intruders.

Her expression was fierce and vigilant, and her turbid eyes had unknowingly moistened with a surprising hint of emotion.

"Wa! Wa! Wa!" The baby kept crying.

The female Heartless repeatedly bowed as she constantly made whimpering sounds. It sounded as if she was begging for something.

The four Old Task Force members fell silent. They didn't respond, but they didn't fire either.

After a few seconds, Shang Jianyao turned his head and looked at Jiang Baimian. "Team Leader..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Jiang Baimian let out a long sigh and said to the female Heartless, "Leave."

With a thought, Jiang Baimian then pointed at the air in front of her, ignoring whether the other party could understand her. "Can you create another illusion for us?"

As she spoke, she took a few steps forward and kicked the dagger away.

Shang Jianyao and the others followed her into the room, but they did not show any intention of attacking.

The female Heartless was stunned for a moment. It was unknown if she understood Jiang Baimian's words or if she was creating better conditions for her departure, but she actually let out a deep roar again.

Green trees and abandoned cars appeared in front of Shang Jianyao and the others. It was as if they had been transported out into the streets.

Jiang Baimian felt the changes in her heart and spoke with a solemn expression. "Indeed... As soon as we return to reality, we will automatically find Qiao Chu extremely charming and want to follow him."

"If it is automatic bewitchment, why aren't the two Heartless affected?" Bai Chen raised her doubts. "Didn't Qiao Chu say that even non-human creatures like the Nightmare Horse want to f*ck him?"

Shang Jianyao immediately emphasized, "I said that."

Bai Chen realized that she had been 'brainwashed' by Shang Jianyao and quickly changed her words. "I mean, even a non-human creature like a Nightmare Horse was bewitched by him, much less a Heartless human?"

"Maybe all her emotions are focused on her labor process," guessed Long Yuehong.

Jiang Baimian nodded. "From the looks of it, there's a limit to Qiao Chu's charm. Therefore, he didn't dare appear too vicious or hostile along the way. He was afraid that the bewitchment would fail."

Without waiting for the others to speak, Jiang Baimian said, "We can't waste any more time. The main thing now is to think of a way to stay unaffected by the bewitchment after returning to reality. After all, we haven't left the corresponding range yet."

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, "Let me try."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian also hoped that, as an Awakened, Shang Jianyao would come up with something new.

Shang Jianyao then turned his head to look at Bai Chen. "Lend me your mirror."

Although Bai Chen was puzzled, she still took out the palm-sized mirror box she carried with her and handed it to Shang Jianyao.

Shang Jianyao opened the mirror box and looked at his reflection. His eyes gradually turned dark. "You like Qiao Chu. Many people like Qiao Chu. You can't get him. So?"

Shang Jianyao's expression instantly warped and became extremely gloomy. Then, he quickly answered his question. "Therefore, I can only kill him. If I can't have him, nobody else can either."

Shang Jianyao's words were filled with killing intent. He was also abnormally firm when he said those two sentences.

"..." Jiang Baimian opened her mouth slightly, speechless.

"You can do that?" Long Yuehong blurted out a question. He inexplicably felt a little terrified of Shang Jianyao, afraid that Shang Jianyao would one day lie to him and make him do something disgusting.

Bai Chen was also a little stunned. It was only when Shang Jianyao returned the mirror to her that she subconsciously asked, "Why didn't you use your abilities on us?"

"I can only affect myself in an illusion," Shang Jianyao replied with a smile. "After I escape the illusion, I will use my abilities on you in sequence to prevent you from stopping me."

“Woah, even the perspective has changed.” Jiang Baimian didn’t say anything else, afraid that a random sentence would snap Shang Jianyao out of his trance and stop him from being affected by Inference Clowning.

She raised her right hand and fired at the wooden chair in her memories.

With a bang and the resulting changes, the four people from the Old Task Force escaped the illusion.

The male Heartless and the baby had disappeared at this moment, leaving behind only a row of bloodstains that led to the room’s other exit.

The female Heartless stood at the exit, having not gone far. Upon seeing Shang Jianyao, Jiang Baimian, and the others wake up, the turbid-eyed woman bent her back again as if she was bowing to them.

She then turned around and ran out of the room, disappearing into the corridor opposite the room.

“She has great recovery speed...” Jiang Baimian’s focus would occasionally be somewhat off, just like Shang Jianyao’s.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao walked to her side and said, “Team Leader, look: You like Qiao Chu. Many people like Qiao Chu. You can’t get him. So?”

Jiang Baimian’s expression changed a few times before she finally replied fiercely, “Therefore, I have to knock him out and drag him back!”

Shang Jianyao did not agree or object. He used the same method to make Bai Chen and Long Yuehong have the urge to attack Qiao Chu.

Of course, their desire to attack came from different sources. One wanted to f*ck him by force, and the other had a warped mentality due to his inferiority complex.

After finishing the preparations, Shang Jianyao patted the assault rifle’s side and smiled. “Our current team can be called the Out of Love Alliance.”

Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him and emphasized, “We can’t let Qiao Chu come too close later. He’s also an Awakened, so he definitely has other abilities. As soon as he appears at the corridor entrance, we fire. Yes, everyone will target different areas so that we can form an intersecting net.”

“Alright.” Shang Jianyao and the others didn’t respond loudly.

After another round of inspection, Jiang Baimian picked up the walkie-talkie hanging from her belt, pressed the button, and said, "We've already reached the end of the corridor and encountered one Superior Heartless and two ordinary Heartless.

"The Superior Heartless was giving birth, so she didn't excessively attack us before fleeing."

After a few seconds, Qiao Chu's cold voice sounded from the walkie-talkie. "Wait for me to come over."

Chapter 77: Separation

After ending the conversation, Jiang Baimian put away the walkie-talkie and nodded at Shang Jianyao and the others.

She didn't say anything else and left the room first, returning to the corridor.

Shang Jianyao, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong filed out and entered their previous tactical formation.

Without Jiang Baimian's additional instructions, they knew which direction to fire. This was one of the main points during training, something they had long mastered. In other words, there were precedents regarding the way to form a crossfire net in such a tactical formation. They did not need to discuss who was shooting where. There was a corresponding area of responsibility by virtue of the positions they stood in.

Under the flashlight's yellowish beam of light, Qiao Chu—who was wearing a military exoskeleton—walked in from the corridor's entrance.

Long Yuehong couldn't help but feel a little nervous, and his body trembled slightly. This... Qiao Chu acutely discovered this with the comprehensive warning system's help.

He frowned and slowed down.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian didn't wait for the other party to enter the designated firing range. She immediately raised her right hand and shouted, "Fire!"

At the same time, she aimed at Qiao Chu's helmeted head.

If the other party jumped up and dodged the shot, the Ice Moss pistol's bullets would firmly burrow into his neck—which lacked sufficient protection.

This was the exoskeleton's weak spot and vital spot.

With a bang, Jiang Baimian pulled the trigger first.

Bai Chen and Shang Jianyao—who were beside her—had been waiting for orders. At this moment, they each raised their weapons and fired at Qiao Chu's left arm and hip.

They had also reserved space for the target to dodge in their direction. Once Qiao Chu dodged to the Old Task Force's right—which was his left—Bai Chen's rifle round had a high chance of hitting the area where his arm and shoulder were uncovered by armor. It was even possible that it would hit his neck. If Qiao Chu chose to roll around, Shang Jianyao's assault rifle's short burst would destroy his soft abdomen.

Although Long Yuehong was nervous, he did not completely lack experience. He had already followed his team leader's orders reflexively and completed the mission without any hesitation.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

He fired a long burst at Qiao Chu's right arm.

When Jiang Baimian raised her right hand, Qiao Chu reacted. As he raised his right arm—which was holding the silver rifle—he let the metal skeleton cover the area in front of his neck. He placed his left arm across his lower abdomen and also aimed the black metal skeleton at Shang Jianyao and the others.

During this process, he exerted strength with his legs, driving the auxiliary joint and jumping to the corridor on the right.

Right on the heels of that, a clang sounded amidst the scattered sparks, echoing in the extremely quiet underground floor.

Jiang Baimian's wrist slightly moved as if she was prepared. She predicted Qiao Chu's dodging trajectory and fired.

At this moment, many white gases spewed out of the holes in the military exoskeleton's powerpack.

They propelled Qiao Chu diagonally upward, allowing him to accelerate suddenly and avoid Jiang Baimian's bullets.

With a bang, Qiao Chu propped himself up with one hand on the ceiling. He then rebounded into the right corridor, disappearing from Shang Jianyao and the others' line of sight.

Bang!

The ceiling Qiao Chu hit fell off and smashed to the ground, shattering into hundreds of pieces.

“What a pity...” Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but sigh.

If not for the military exoskeleton, they could have seriously injured Qiao Chu just now and do whatever they wanted.

...

In the right corridor, Qiao Chu rolled twice. He leaned against the wall and stopped. As he used the comprehensive warning system to monitor his surroundings, he raised his left hand and wiped his chin.

The back of his hand was quickly stained red with blood.

“How can this be...” Qiao Chu looked down with the help of the flashlight attached to the exoskeleton. He clearly sounded puzzled and confused.

According to his experience, it would take at least another day for the favorable impression—which came from his charm—to evolve into a warped sense of possessiveness and aggressive ‘admiration.’ Who knew that the four people opposite him would change so quickly?

They weren’t beasts, animals, or Heartless—who only had instincts left—creatures that only wanted to mate and possess. These creatures typically didn’t take long before they went berserk.

As he muttered to himself, Qiao Chu reached out and took out the sky-blue mirror box before opening the lid.

He then looked into the mirror and saw a bloody wound on his beautiful chin. This was the result of being grazed by a bullet.

“How dare they...” Qiao Chu’s pupils dilated, and his tone was filled with unconcealed anger. He took a deep breath and pitifully looked at his reflection before putting away the sky-blue box.

After sealing his wound with a medical bandage, Qiao Chu coldly looked at the corridor where Jiang Baimian and the others were.

He thought for two seconds, gave up on taking immediate revenge, turned around, and walked to the end of the corridor. He didn’t forget that his destination was the underground engine room.

Furthermore, he had also achieved his initial goal by using Shang Jianyao and the others. He had them scout out the Superior Heartless or mutated creature here that could make him lose his charm.

He had always known that many dangerous creatures were in this building. He had previously encountered the Nightmare Horse here.

...

“A military exoskeleton is really difficult to deal with...” Long Yuehong felt rather disappointed when he saw that he couldn’t kill Qiao Chu and prevent others from obtaining him.

This was not the first time he had sighed with emotion and marveled at a military exoskeleton’s skeleton.

Bai Chen also lightly sighed as if she felt very regretful.

Jiang Baimian nodded and looked at the corner. “Let’s go that way.”

This was diagonally opposite Qiao Chu’s location.

“Aren’t we going to chase after him?” Long Yuehong asked in surprise. Nôv(el)B\jnn

Shang Jianyao smiled at him. “Are you trying to test how strange his Awakened abilities are?”

It was very difficult to maintain a distance in a building with many walls if one chased after a target without entering the Awakened’s range of influence.

Even Jiang Baimian’s ability to sense electric signals was greatly weakened in such an environment.

“That’s true.” Long Yuehong thought of Shang Jianyao’s Inference Clowning and gave up the idea of chasing after Qiao Chu without hesitation.

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “Our goal is to circle to the stairwell as soon as possible and return to the first floor.”

She quickly explained, “Qiao Chu’s goal is to find the underground engine room and restore the power supply to this building. He will then go to the power grid center and reconnect the power to the entire city ruin.

“This also means that he will definitely leave the underground floor in the short term. He will then leave this building and head to that laboratory. Since we know this, we should be able to think of a way to snipe Qiao Chu—be it in the elevator lobby, stairwell, or high spots where we can monitor the surroundings.

“There’s no need for us to stay in places with complicated terrain, numerous obstacles, and strange Heartless.”

Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Long Yuehong had no objections to this. They immediately held their weapons and turned to the right aisle.

In the dark environment—where only their flashlights flickered—Long Yuehong guarded his surroundings and carefully walked forward as he asked, “Team Leader, what do you think Qiao Chu’s Awakened abilities are?”

“I was just about to talk about that.” Jiang Baimian nodded slightly.

Getting to the bottom of this problem as soon as possible could effectively help them avoid half the danger they would face when they encountered Qiao Chu.

“Bewitchment?” Bai Chen raised the most obvious possibility.

Shang Jianyao added, “Make others crazily in love with drawing?”

He remembered the time when he was about to f*ck Qiao Chu in the jeep. However, he was dismissed by the other party with a piece of paper, a pen, and a rhetorical question.

“No.” Shang Jianyao immediately denied his theory. “It should be the ability to create a hobby or ignite passion...”

“You have experience in this regard, so you call the shots.” Jiang Baimian didn’t argue with Shang Jianyao and said, “When he wanted to kill Long Yuehong, we seemed to become abnormally depressed and didn’t want to do anything.”

“Causing depression? This is the third Awakened ability... What price does he pay? That bewitchment is terrifyingly powerful.” Long Yuehong suddenly came to a realization after saying that. “Why can we discuss Qiao Chu’s bewitchment so naturally? Wait, why did I want to kill him and make him into a specimen collection?”

Shang Jianyao glanced at Long Yuehong. “You’re sick.”

“Isn’t it all because of you...” Long Yuehong suddenly paused. “Did your Inference Clowning lose its effects?”

Jiang Baimian nodded thoughtfully. “It seems like we have already escaped Qiao Chu’s bewitchment range and are no longer affected by him. The premise of our previous ‘inference’ was that we liked Qiao Chu. Without this condition, the conclusion will naturally fail.”

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, “Then, should we still stop Qiao Chu?”

“Of course!” Jiang Baimian replied firmly. “I’ve always been a very petty person. He put us in such a dangerous situation and even ate our energy bars, compressed biscuits, and military canned food. We definitely have to exact revenge!”

Why does that sound so familiar... Long Yuehong subconsciously replied, "But..."

Although he also hated Qiao Chu, Long Yuehong felt that there was no need to stay and take the risk. It was better to leave as soon as possible.

Jiang Baimian glanced at him and Shang Jianyao before tersely acknowledging his idea. "The main reason is that we have to stay here for a while to see if there will be any changes after the entire city ruins regain power. Heh heh, or if we don't allow the power to be restored.

"We can't rashly return along our original route. In that case, why don't we wait for Qiao Chu in the meantime? It won't be a waste of time." After saying that, she suddenly asked, "Have you ever seen squirming flesh that exudes an extremely terrifying aura, an old woman in a beanie, or a baby skeleton wrapped in swaddling clothes?"

"No." Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Shang Jianyao shook their heads in unison.

"Me neither." Jiang Baimian nodded. "So where did the illusion created by the Superior Heartless come from? There has to be a source, right? Considering their low-level intelligence."

Shang Jianyao immediately replied, "Maybe the Superior Heartless has seen squirming flesh, an old woman in a beanie, and a baby skeleton wrapped in swaddling clothes—in which she sensed an extremely terrifying aura."

He paused at this point, and his voice instantly became rather gloomy. "She might've even heard the old woman say, 'You guys... disturbed... Xiaochong...'"

Under the flashlight's illumination, Shang Jianyao's face flickered.

Chapter 78: The Source of the Illusion

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao's description, Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine. His fear also intensified, and he couldn't help but interrupt Shang Jianyao. "Stop, stop! Can you not be so terrifying?"

"Helping you deepen your memories," Shang Jianyao explained seriously. "You'll be able to react immediately when you encounter them later."

"D-don't say that. It's better not to encounter that!" Long Yuehong was terrified of Shang Jianyao's stupid mouth because he believed himself to be the unlucky one and that whatever his good friend said would come true.

Shang Jianyao tersely acknowledged Long Yuehong's comment before turning to look at Jiang Baimian in front of him. He then nodded sincerely. "Thank you."

While he was describing the situation, Jiang Baimian took the initiative to flash the flashlight backward, producing a very good effect.

Among the four of them, only Jiang Baimian held a flashlight. As the others had to carry their weapons to allow for immediate firing, they only switched on the flashlight hanging from their belts. They let the flashlights vertically shine at the ground, illuminating a small area around them.

Jiang Baimian smiled and turned the flashlight forward. “What you just said is similar to my guesses. Since the illusion we saw didn’t originate from us, it must have come from the Superior Heartless who created the illusion. With her intelligence—which is only slightly higher than that of a beast—it’s impossible for her to process and handle overly complicated information.

“Therefore, we can make a preliminary judgment that everything we saw was something she had encountered in the past. However, there might be a certain degree of simple displacement and restructuring. That’s interesting.”

After hearing her team leader’s words, Bai Chen thoughtfully said, “That terrifying aura—which makes one unable to stand stably—really seems to exist... I wonder where the Superior Heartless encountered it... and what the aura’s owner looks like...”

At this point, she and Jiang Baimian said in unison, “That mysterious laboratory! The one who let out that loud roar!”

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Shang Jianyao slapped the Berserker assault rifle’s side as if he were giving a round of applause.

“Thank you,” Jiang Baimian replied, peeved. She then sensed the electric signals around her and observed the area illuminated by the flashlight. She organized her words and said, “Maybe the Superior Heartless approached the laboratory once and even entered via some tunnels that normal people wouldn’t discover. She then sensed that extremely terrifying aura...”

“What about the pool of squirming flesh?” asked Long Yuehong subconsciously.

Bai Chen thought for a moment before answering, “It might be a failed specimen in the laboratory. However, the Old World has been destroyed for almost 70 years. It’s impossible for a failed specimen to survive until now.”

“Maybe the Superior Heartless saw flesh and blood that had been blown to smithereens before and often used squirming worms as food. Therefore, she combined the two together when creating her illusions.” Jiang Baimian tried to understand the scene’s nature. “The wrinkled old woman and the baby skeleton in swaddling clothes should

actually exist. However, I'm not sure if the former is still wandering somewhere in the city ruin.

"In short, the old woman had an even stranger ability, or her encounter triggered some of the Superior Heartless's instincts, leaving a deep impression on her. The Superior Heartless naturally uses what she has seen and heard in the illusions she creates."

Bai Chen immediately guessed, "That old woman might also be a Superior Heartless, but the child she gave birth to was stillborn? She kept hugging the child's skeleton in her arms and refused to accept the child's fate? This will definitely trigger something in other Superior Heartless with reproductive and maternal instincts."

"But the problem is that Superior Heartless shouldn't have the ability to speak. Why can they say things like 'you guys disturbed Xiaochong?' Could this be a special trait of Superior Heartless? She also doesn't look like she can give birth at her age. Unless..." Jiang Baimian pondered as she spoke and gradually found an answer.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao beat her to it as he said with a smile, "Who hasn't been young before? Maybe the old woman was only in her twenties when the Old World was destroyed? She became a Heartless back then, and her child died on the spot."

"This was also a huge blow to the Heartless with reproductive and maternal instincts. It resulted in her firmly remembering what she said when her child died. After that, she carried the child and repeatedly whispered, 'you guys... disturbed... Xiaochong...' as she hunted."

"Just like that, she kept repeating this until the baby was reduced to bones, and her face was covered in wrinkles. To this day, she might still be somewhere in this city ruin, hugging the swaddling clothes that hold the baby's skeleton and constantly whispering, 'you guys... disturbed... Xiaochong...'"

"Man, don't use the tone of telling a ghost story to make speculations on such a serious matter!" Long Yuehong felt a chill run down his spine when he heard this. His ears seemed to echo with the words 'You guys... disturbed... Xiaochong...'

"Don't you think it's a great theme?" Shang Jianyao felt rather wistful.

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Long Yuehong with a slightly warped expression.

Jiang Baimian interrupted their 'argument' and nodded slightly.

"That's about what I imagined. Alright, let's stop discussing. We just need to figure out the situation. Let's leave the area underground as soon as possible and return to the first floor. When the time comes, we will have plenty of time to do an after-action review."

“Yes, Team Leader!” Long Yuehong suppressed his voice.

As they spoke, they had already reached the end of the corridor.

“Turn left,” Jiang Baimian said without hesitation.

After turning left and walking to the end before making another left, they would return to the corridor where the stairwell entrance was.

After giving the instructions, Jiang Baimian subconsciously turned her head and looked to her right.

It led deeper into the building.

“Sigh, what a pity. I really want to find the underground engine room and restore the electricity to this city ruin. I want to open the door to the mysterious laboratory and see what secrets are hidden inside and what kind of research they were doing.”

The voice was not female, but a masculine one.

Jiang Baimian quickly turned her head and rolled her eyes at Shang Jianyao. “Heh, you even helped give me a voice-over? Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.

“Can you guess what I’m thinking now?”

Shang Jianyao replied seriously, “I really want to blow up Shang Jianyao’s dog head.”

Before Jiang Baimian could respond, Bai Chen sighed helplessly. “Team Leader, we have to return to the first floor as soon as possible.”

“I know, I know.” Jiang Baimian glared at Shang Jianyao. “It’s all this fellow’s fault. He’s simply a mood destroyer. I’m talking about you; be serious!”

With that said, she ignored Shang Jianyao and walked into the corridor on the left.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao followed closely behind.

In this corridor, the rooms on both sides were also open. One could see the opposite corridor with some rooms tightly shut. It was unknown what was inside.

Jiang Baimian only sensed the electric signals and did not attempt to open all the closed doors to search for possible secrets.

As they walked forward, Jiang Baimian’s eyes focused, and she shouted, “Duck!”

She had already pounced diagonally ahead as she spoke and rolled into the room beside her.

Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Shang Jianyao had full faith in her and immediately dodged.

The first person jumped into the room beside them, and the room closest to Shang Jianyao had a tightly shut wooden door.

This did not stop Shang Jianyao. He slammed through the door and rushed in.

The next second, a grenade flew over from nowhere and landed where they were.

Boom!

The surrounding doors shattered, and the ground caved in. The flames left black marks around the area.

After the grenade was released on them, nobody else attacked, nor did anyone appear.

Jiang Baimian, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong continued hiding in their original spots, not daring to come out rashly.

At this moment, light shimmered in the room Shang Jianyao had crashed into.
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Shang Jianyao saw a lit LCD screen. On it were some strange, inhuman creatures moving about.

In front of the LCD screen was a black machine. A black-haired boy was originally sitting in front of the machine. He had thrown away his controller in fright due to the sudden intrusion. He hid behind a table not far away.

Shang Jianyao's reaction was completely different from what the boy had imagined. He didn't attack or dodge. Instead, he looked at the LCD screen seriously and asked, "What's this?"

The boy was stunned for a few seconds before he replied in fear, "I-it's a game. A very old game... I didn't find a virtual reality capsule, so I can only... can only play such games..."

Shang Jianyao nodded. "Is it fun?"

"Pretty fun," replied the boy subconsciously.

Shang Jianyao sat down and sincerely asked, "How is it played?"

The boy observed Shang Jianyao for more than ten seconds before timidly leaving his hiding spot. He slowly and weakly sat beside Shang Jianyao and picked up the controller.

“Oh right, what’s your name?” inquired Shang Jianyao very politely.

The boy was about seven or eight years old. The moment he held the controller, his chubby face seemed to glow.

He casually replied, “Me? My name is Xiaochong.”

Chapter 79: Friends

Upon hearing the boy’s answer, Shang Jianyao suddenly turned his head and looked at him.

After silently staring at Xiaochong for two to three seconds, Shang Jianyao suddenly laughed and cast his gaze at the LCD screen in front of him.

“So you’re Xiaochong.” He asked excitedly, “Then, do you know an old lady in a dark beanie? An old lady with a face full of wrinkles and a black cashmere dress.”

Xiaochong seriously operated the controller and played the game as he casually replied, “Yes. She’s a nice person. When she was still alive, she would always help guard my door and not let anyone disturb me. Hehe, I told her that I like to play games in peace and read all kinds of books. I didn’t want others to disturb me, so she really did as I said.”

Shang Jianyao looked at the game screen in confusion. “She can understand you?”

“Can’t you understand her too?” Xiao Chong found the other party’s question strange.

“That’s true.” Shang Jianyao nodded and agreed with the boy. “Has no one been guarding the door for you since she died?”

“There is...” Xiao Chong shut his mouth as soon as he replied. His attention was focused on the game in front of him.

Shang Jianyao saw the scene seemingly become a little more intense.

After the sudden ‘battle’ ended, Xiaochong continued, “There are also a few uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters guarding the door for me. They also periodically clean and maintain the area. They will take me out on horseback so that I can breathe some fresh air. Ah, did you see my cat? I picked up a stray cat and even raised a pool of fish for it. Impressive, right?”

“That’s your cat?” Shang Jianyao slapped his thigh. “The one without fur?”

“Yes, yes, yes. That’s a special breed. You can’t discriminate against it.” Xiaochong nodded repeatedly.

“But it keeps making me sleep,” Shang Jianyao grumbled.

“It likes to play pranks.” A clear smile appeared on Xiaochong’s chubby face. “I’ll tell it not to put you to sleep when it returns.”

“You know how to speak cat?” Shang Jianyao was very curious.

Xiaochong replied, “No, but it’s very smart and can understand human language.”

Shang Jianyao immediately adjusted his sitting posture to make himself more comfortable. He then asked, “What do you usually eat then?”

Xiaochong suddenly fell silent and turned to look at him. His chubby face was cast in moving shadows under the LCD screen’s flickering light.

Shang Jianyao looked at Xiaochong in the eye, unconvinced. He was very calm.

Xiao Chong quickly focused his attention back on the game. “I eat very little. Sometimes it’s canned food, sometimes it’s the birds, rats, and insects they catch, and sometimes it’s frozen meat and wild vegetables they find. Sometimes it’s the fish I raise myself.”

“You’re so young. It’s not good for your stomach to eat it raw, right?” Shang Jianyao seriously discussed this academic question.

Xiaochong chuckled and said, “I taught them how to roast and cook. Impressive, right?”

“Impressive!” Shang Jianyao clapped.

With him clapping, Xiaochong felt embarrassed. “They actually knew how to use a lighter. I only told them that they could use fire to roast and cook things. Do you want some?”

Shang Jianyao didn’t mind at all. “What is there?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see what they bring back. I’m not picky with food—really!” Xiaochong emphasized.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment, raised his hand, wiped the corners of his mouth, and forcefully changed the topic. “How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know.” Xiaochong thought for a moment. “I don’t have a calendar. In any case, it’s been a long, long time. The old lady from before has gone from being an auntie to an old granny.”

“Does staying here affect your growth?” Shang Jianyao asked in concern.

Xiaochong frowned. “You’re so annoying. Don’t ask such a question.”

Without waiting for Shang Jianyao’s response, he said happily, “Actually, isn’t it good to be a child all the time? You don’t have to consider many things or have any worries. You only need to play games and read books. Besides, there are no parents to stop me or control my playtime.”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a moment before saying, “Don’t you miss them?”

Xiaochong pursed his lips for a few seconds. “I do. But what’s the point? They died long ago.”

Shang Jianyao fell silent for a long time.

Xiaochong played the game seriously, ignoring Shang Jianyao’s abnormal behavior.

After an unknown period of time, Shang Jianyao looked at the LCD screen in front of him and questioned, “Why is there electricity here?”

“They specially pulled a wire from the underground engine room. Hehe, I supervised them!” Xiaochong was very pleased with himself.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment, looked at the flashing game screen, and picked up a controller beside the black machine. “How is this played?”

Xiaochong’s eyes lit up. “Come, let me teach you. This key is jump, this key is roll, and this key is block. After blocking, you can counterattack...”

...

In the corridor.

After waiting for a long time and not finding any signs of a second wave of attacks, Jiang Baimian returned to her original spot. She carefully sensed the electric signals and said loudly, “Come out. The assailant has already left.”

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong left their original hiding spots and carefully walked to Jiang Baimian’s side.

“This place is very strange. We have to leave as soon as possible.” Bai Chen didn’t hide her thoughts.

Long Yuehong looked around and said, “Where’s Shang Jianyao?”

Jiang Baimian was also confused. “There’s clearly an electric signal here... No, two nearly-overlapping electric signals. Shang Jianyao was forced to sleep?”

This was the most reasonable explanation she could come up with based on the environmental factors and her previous encounters. Other than being controlled, Shang Jianyao—who was still alive—shouldn’t have zero response.

Long Yuehong understood Shang Jianyao better and nervously said, “It’s also possible that he encountered ‘danger’ and is currently staring at ‘danger’ in the face. Whoever blinks and speaks first loses.”

“I believe Shang Jianyao would do this, but why should ‘danger’ entertain him?” said Jiang Baimian as she walked toward the wooden door with the human-shaped hole.

After approaching, she saw a blinking light inside.

Bai Chen suppressed her voice and said, “Maybe it’s the Inference Clowning ability...”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged it. “No matter what the situation is, save him first.”

The one who needed to be shaken awake had to be woken up, and the ‘no blinking competition’ that needed to be interrupted had to be interrupted.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong immediately provided cover for their team leader according to their training.

Jiang Baimian raised her hand first and fired a shot at the ground through the hole in the door.

Amidst the reverberating bang, she slammed into the door lock and leaped back when she heard a click. She leaned against the wall to avoid any attacks.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen were diagonally across her, aiming inside. They would immediately fire if there was any commotion inside.

However, there were no responding gunshots in the room, nor was there any indication of Shang Jianyao’s figure. There was only a faint, strange sound of boxing strikes.

As they watched the constantly blinking light leak out of the room, Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen became increasingly confused about Shang Jianyao’s current situation.

Without any delay, Jiang Baimian rolled into the room under her two team members' cover. She then jumped behind a table and sized up the situation far away from the door through the gap.

The first thing she saw was the focused Shang Jianyao and a seven-year-old boy. She then saw two controllers, a black machine, and a lit LCD screen. Finally, there was a strange scene that occasionally changed on the screen.

Jiang Baimian's gaze instantly froze. She had already imagined many ridiculous scenes, but the scene in front of her still exceeded her expectations.

Jiang Baimian didn't show her head and asked loudly, "What are you guys doing?"

"Playing a game," replied Shang Jianyao without turning his head.

The corners of Jiang Baimian's mouth slightly twitched as she stood up with abnormal vigilance. However, nothing happened in the room.

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen slowly came over when they saw this. They were then shocked speechless by the scene in front of them.

"... Is it fun?" Jiang Baimian deliberately chose a less sensitive question.

"It's fun!" replied Shang Jianyao without hesitation.

Jiang Baimian's expression froze for a moment before it bloomed into a smile. "Who's this beside you?"

"Him?" Shang Jianyao stared at the character in the game with shimmering eyes. "My new friend."

Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen did not let down their guard because of this. They still maintained a posture that allowed them to dodge and attack at any moment.

What a joke. In such a city ruin and such a building's underground area, even an adult man—who claimed to be a Ruin Hunter—should be suspected and guarded against, much less a seven-year-old boy.

How did he survive?

At this moment, Shang Jianyao continued his introduction. "His name is Xiaochong."

Xiaochong... Long Yuehong was first stunned before he felt a chill run up his spine, right to his head. His hair stood on end as the old woman's whisper echoed in his ears. "You guys... disturbed... Xiaochong..."

At that moment, Long Yuehong almost pulled the trigger.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao indignantly spoke the next second. "Sigh, I died again. Xiaochong, I'm leaving. Let's meet again if there's a chance."

Xiaochong turned his head, his face filled with disappointment. "Stay a little longer? It's been a long time since someone played games with me. They can't learn it, no matter what."

Jiang Baimian was wondering if this was a shared dream or illusion when she suddenly sensed several electric signals approaching.

"Be careful!" She quickly gave a warning and raised the grenade launcher with one hand.

While Long Yuehong and Bai Chen were on guard, Shang Jianyao looked at Xiaochong and thoughtfully said, "Why don't you follow us out and play games together with me over at my place? You can also have some fresh air."

Xiaochong thought for a few seconds before smiling. "Alright!"

Just as he said that, Jiang Baimian realized that the electric signals approaching her had stopped moving forward before moving further away.

This... Jiang Baimian carefully shut her mouth and didn't say anything else.

Xiaochong took out a red school bag from somewhere and put the black machine, game controllers, and other items inside it.

Dressed in yellow clothes, Xiaochong quickly carried his school bag and looked up at Shang Jianyao—who had already stood up. "Let's go."

Shang Jianyao looked at him and suddenly smiled. "You look like tomato scrambled eggs."

"..." Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen were speechless. They did not expect Shang Jianyao to say such a thing to such a strange little boy in such a situation.

Chapter 80: Blockade

Xiaochong looked down at his clothes and muttered, "I haven't eaten tomato scrambled eggs in a long time."

"Me too..." Shang Jianyao revealed an expression of reminiscence. He raised his right palm and wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Jiang Baimian's expression gradually turned a little odd as she listened to their conversation. She then tried to join in. "I know how to cook this dish. It's still relatively easy to find eggs in the wilderness as long as we don't insist on having chicken eggs. However, it's a little difficult to find tomatoes."

Xiaochong thought for a moment and said, "I remember that there's a cold storage warehouse in the Tianxing District. There's quite a number of tomatoes stuffed inside, but I don't know if they've been finished or if they can still be eaten."

"We can go take a look if there's a chance." Jiang Baimian steered the topic back on track. "Let's leave this place first."

"Alright." Xiaochong was the first to respond. He carried his red school bag and skipped to the door.

As he stared at Xiaochong's back, Shang Jianyao took the initiative to say, "I'll walk in front."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian didn't stop him.

Thus, they changed their tactical formation—mainly because Shang Jianyao and Jiang Baimian had swapped positions.

The Old Task Force once again walked along the silent and dark corridor. Most of the light was provided by Jiang Baimian—who was at the end of the team. As the others couldn't hold their flashlights, they could only illuminate a small area below them.

"Walk faster!" Xiaochong—who was carrying a red school bag—turned around from time to time to urge the adults, but Shang Jianyao and the others remained unmoved and maintained their pace.

"Sigh." Xiaochong sighed after repeatedly urging the team. "When the school organized parent-child sport meets in the past, my parents were the same. They always slowly trailed behind as if they would embarrass themselves as adults if they ran."

"What's a parent-child sports meet?" Shang Jianyao and Long Yuehong asked in unison.

"It's... It's..." Xiao Chong organized his words. "Forget it. You won't understand even if I explain it to you."

As they spoke, they safely returned to the stairwell.

This made Jiang Baimian show an expression that confirmed her guess.

On the way back to the first floor, they didn't encounter any more attacks. They smoothly passed through the emergency access door—which had been slammed open—and saw the elevator lobby.

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment before speaking to Xiaochong in a gentle but slightly loud voice. "Can you wait here? We still have something to do."

She did not forget her plan to snipe Qiao Chu here.

Before Xiaochong could answer, Shang Jianyao added, "We want to play a real shooting game. It means that we're moving the earlier game into the real world."

Xiaochong's eyes lit up as he muttered, "I'm only a child; I shouldn't be playing such a dangerous game. However, I can be an audience!"

As he spoke, he had an expectant expression. He looked as if he hoped that Shang Jianyao would give him a pistol.

Shang Jianyao ignored Xiaochong's unspoken words. "Remember to cheer and clap!"

"Alright..." Xiaochong looked around in disappointment. "Where should I stay?"

Jiang Baimian pointed at the stairs leading to the second floor. "You can sit there. You can see the situation from there, and it's also relatively safe."

"Okay! Okay!" Xiaochong carried his red school bag and skipped over. He sat down without any fear of the dirt.

Jiang Baimian then said to Bai Chen, "Go to Xiaochong's side and lie there. You will be in charge of the three elevators facing you. When the time comes, we will press the upward button and stop the elevator on this floor. When the elevator door opens, immediately snipe Qiao Chu, who will be inside."

"Yes, we have to be careful. Qiao Chu will very likely be on guard, and he will probably use an abnormal posture to avoid the attack. For example, he will lie on the ground, jump up, grab onto the top of the elevator, hang there, and shrink his body."

Although Bai Chen had plenty of combat experience in city ruins, there were no elevators in those places. Therefore, she spent some time imagining the corresponding scene before saying, "Got it."

She seemed to associate such a scene with a particular experience in the past. Her expression slightly changed as she raised her hand to tug at her scarf.

At this moment, Jiang Baimian had already glanced at Shang Jianyao and pointed at the three elevators that couldn't be seen from the stairwell.

“Go to the button’s position and lean your back against the wall. You have two missions: The first is to help Bai Chen in case Qiao Chu thinks of a way to prevent her from locating him or if she fails to hit a vital spot.

“The second mission is to press the upward button after an empty elevator passes.”

Jiang Baimian then pointed at herself. “I will go to the middle of the three elevators that Bai Chen is in charge of and stand with my back against the wall. Yes, it’s best to choose a high kneel at a time like this.

“I’m in charge of sniping the three elevators on Shang Jianyao’s left and right. At the same time, I can press the upward button again if anything unexpected happens and Shang Jianyao doesn’t have time to react. I’ll also do my best to sense the changes in the electric signals and determine which elevator Qiao Chu is within in advance.”

Upon seeing his team leader stop speaking, Long Yuehong couldn’t help but ask, “What about me?”

“Not bad. You have team awareness,” Jiang Baimian praised. She pointed at the stairwell and said, “Survey the stairs that lead underground. Be prepared to fire at any moment. Qiao Chu has a high chance of giving up the elevators and choosing the stairs.”

“Yes, Team Leader!” Although Long Yuehong felt nervous and uneasy, he was still rather happy that he was contributing to the team and receiving his team leader’s praise.

...

In the building’s power supply room beside the underground engine room.

Qiao Chu cast his gaze at the dark room illuminated by the flashlight in surprise. He didn’t expect to find his target so smoothly.

Smoothly did not refer to the matter of ‘finding.’ After all, he had spent a lot of time doing so. Instead, he was referring to the fact that he had not encountered any attacks from his fanatical ‘admirers’ along the way. Nothing unexpected happened during the entire process.

This was completely different from what he had expected. He knew very well that there were many dangerous creatures in this building. Therefore, he changed his approach after his first failed attempt at clearing the underground floor. This time, he got the Old Task Force’s people to do so in his stead. Otherwise, according to his habits and preferences, he didn’t want to bother with anyone else. If anyone else insisted on approaching, he didn’t mind killing them.

Although Qiao Chu didn't understand why such a development had occurred, he didn't think too much about it since success was just around the corner. He strode into the room in front of him with his metal skeleton-covered legs.

...

"There's another problem." After Jiang Baimian finished arranging everyone's missions, she said with a solemn expression, "Qiao Chu's bewitching ability has a relatively large range. According to the arrangement just now, even Bai Chen—who is the furthest away—will be affected. Therefore, we have to make some preparations in advance."

She directly looked at Shang Jianyao. "Any solutions? If you don't have any, we'll give up on this place and go to the top of the building. When Qiao Chu leaves, we'll snipe from afar. Yes, when the time comes, part of the city's lights will definitely be restored."

Shang Jianyao smiled and replied without hesitation. "Yes!"

He then said, "However, I need everyone to come alone. Otherwise, the effects will be greatly reduced when we witness each other's actions. It might not even be effective."

"But you didn't ask anyone else to leave when we were underground?" questioned Long Yuehong in confusion.

"Back then, you were under the influence of Bewitchment. You would take the initiative to ignore certain matters and emphasize other matters. Furthermore, the conditions I used were what you took for granted back then—likewise for the conclusion," explained Shang Jianyao seriously.

Jiang Baimian expressed her understanding. "Let's begin then. As soon as possible."

Shang Jianyao pointed outside the elevator lobby. "Team Leader, come with me."

"Alright." Jiang Baimian strode forward and followed Shang Jianyao to a spot where Long Yuehong and Bai Chen couldn't see or hear anything.

Shang Jianyao stared into Jiang Baimian's eyes, and his eyes instantly turned deep. "Team Leader, look: 80% of us in Pangu Biology have our spouses centrally assigned. Among them, many families lead good lives. The couple gets along well and relies on each other.

"So..."

Jiang Baimian was stunned for a moment before blurting out, "Love only exists when it's a company-assigned partner. Love at first sight is definitely a farce!"

Shang Jianyao nodded and smiled. “That’s why we have to blow up a swindler’s dog head.”

“Where did you learn the term dog head from?” Jiang Baimian shot a glance at Shang Jianyao.

Within Pangu Biology, how could ordinary employees afford a dog? Even if they could, dogs were used as food.

“From the radio.” Shang Jianyao looked at Jiang Baimian suspiciously. “Haven’t you heard of that serial story?”

“No,” replied Jiang Baimian and sighed. “I feel like I might not have had a childhood.”

Shang Jianyao didn’t say anything else. He returned to the elevator lobby with his team leader and said to Long Yuehong, “Your turn.”

Long Yuehong nervously followed and whispered, “How do you plan on tricking me—no, affecting me?”

“It’s very simple,” said Shang Jianyao casually. “Look, you’ve always wanted a beautiful female spouse and have a few children so that they can eat meat three times a week. Will men do?”

Long Yuehong’s expression slightly changed as he said in a deep voice, “No way!”

He quickly distanced himself from Shang Jianyao. “You’re so disgusting. It’s so disgusting being with men!”

At this moment, they had not reached their designated spots.

Shang Jianyao smiled and patted the assault rifle’s side before turning to Bai Chen and saying, “Your turn.”

“I-I’m done?” Long Yuehong was confused.

Shang Jianyao replied very seriously, “You don’t have to. You’re fine.”

“What...” Long Yuehong walked back to his original spot in confusion.

Bai Chen—who was walking towards Shang Jianyao—glanced at him and said nothing.

Shang Jianyao led Bai Chen to the spot from before and sincerely inquired, “Can you tell me about the people or objects you value? The more I know about you, the better the final result will be. There’s no need to go into too much detail. Just give me a brief introduction.”

Bai Chen thought for a moment, tugged the scarf around her neck, and said in a slightly hoarse voice, "I once had a robot that accompanied me through the most difficult ten-plus years in my life. Later, it died to save me..."

Shang Jianyao's eyes had turned deep at some point in time. "Look, that robot grew up with you and has always protected you. It even sacrificed itself to save you.

"So..."

Bai Chen's eyes suddenly moistened. She fell silent for a moment before saying firmly, "Only robots are true partners. Humans are not worth loving!"

Clap!

Shang Jianyao clapped. "There's no need to be so extreme. Alright, you can go back now."

Bai Chen resisted the urge to think and went to her sniping position.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao walked to the grayish-black elevator and looked at his reflection under the flashlight's illumination. He muttered with an abnormally serious expression, "The humans in the Ashlands are still affected by famine, pollution, disease, abnormalities, and war. They are still living with the trauma of the Heartless disease. This is something that everyone has to face. There are no exceptions.

"So..." Shang Jianyao paused and said in a deep voice, "Lovers will only affect me from saving humanity!"

He then turned around and said to Jiang Baimian, "It's done."

Jiang Baimian did not hear Shang Jianyao's whisper, and she did not react. She directly said, "Take your positions!"

The Old Task Force members quickly adjusted their positions and postures, patiently awaiting any changes.

About a minute or two later, the elevator lobby suddenly lit up.

The entire hall on the first floor lit up.

Bright white light dispersed the darkness and took rule over the area.

The power supply in the building was restored.