

Ad Infinitum 741

Chapter 741: Connection

Ding ring ring! Ding ring ring!

Amidst the crescendoing ringtone, Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School teachers and students—who were returning home after school—raised their phones at the same time and brought them to their ears.

This matched Genova's call to the mysterious number perfectly!

Even though they couldn't figure out the reason for the sudden change, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen instinctively felt fear when they saw this. Unlike Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao, they had already heard Genova mention Dajiang City's Elite Middle School. They knew that Du Shaochong, Xu Qiao, and Deng Tong happened to come from this school, and they actually didn't know each other previously.

This was completely impossible. If it were any ordinary student, it would be normal not to know a schoolmate from the same middle school and grade. However, Xu Qiao, Du Shaochong, and Deng Tong were either outstanding in their studies or had a notorious reputation; they would stand out anywhere.

Even if some of them only became like this when they entered high school, it was impossible for all three of them to be the same. Such a coincidence could only prove that it wasn't a coincidence at all and that there was definitely a deeper reason.

Upon hearing Shang Jianyao's evaluation that Master Zhuang's condition was worse than his and considering how his illness was a split personality, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen naturally made some connections upon combining the scene in front of them.

Could it be that everyone in the dream—or rather, the entire set of thoughts that represents a person—originates from Master Zhuang and were different personalities that he had split off? Therefore, although it seems like everyone has their own name and background story, they would answer with 'Dajiang City' or 'Dajiang City's Elite Middle School' when asked questions about where they transferred from or their previous school.

Upon realizing this, Long Yuehong's legs went limp when he realized that they were surrounded by Master Zhuang and that 'They' were simultaneously answering a call suspected to be made by Genava.

At that moment, the ringing stopped.

The call connected.

Jiang Baimian couldn't stop Genava in time.

The light around them dimmed significantly, and the sky was so dark that it seemed like there was just a tiny glow left after sunset.

The other sounds completely vanished from Shang Jianyao and the others' ears. They could only hear their hearts thumping.

The air around them froze like sticky liquid, and the 'water pressure' made it difficult for them to breathe.

Almost at the same time, the red glow in Genava's eyes suddenly shrank and collapsed into two faint 'black holes' that seemed to connect to another world.

We're just calling for help, not making an enemy of Master Zhuang... We're just calling for help, not making an enemy of Master Zhuang...? Feeling Genava's gaze, Jiang Baimian constantly repeated this sentence in her heart to soothe the fear that suddenly rose in her. She tried to put up a normal request for help and inform Master Zhuang on the other end of the line to see if there was any room for negotiation.

Just as Jiang Baimian was about to speak, a voice interrupted her. "Great Kalendaria, help us escape the predicament we are in! Man is selfless; the New World is in front of us!"

Shang Jianyao didn't blush at all, nor was he embarrassed. Having ten times thicker skin was used for such situations.

With a click, Genova's neck slowly turned, and his two eyes—which had become black holes—looked at Shang Jianyao.

In unison, the students and teachers—who had raised their phones to their ears—turned around or turned their heads to look over quietly.

Under the silent gazes of hundreds to thousands of people, Long Yuehong had a layer of goosebumps all over his body, and his back was covered in sweat.

The next second, the entire world turned completely dark.

Badump! Badump!?

Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, Shang Jianyao, and Jiang Baimian's hearts raced uncontrollably as if they were about to jump out of their throats. At this moment, they felt like they were about to die from a heart attack.

Suddenly, a gentle light lit up, and the darkness retreated like a receding tide. The sky quickly returned to its original brightness.

In front of Jiang Baimian and the others, the students and teachers who had finished school vanished into thin air. Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School returned to its original desolate and abandoned state.

Huff, huff...

Long Yuehong took a deep breath and felt his heartbeat slowly return to normal.

Jiang Baimian looked around and realized that there were tire marks left behind by cars driving around the school. This made her certain that Bai Chen's previous actions of driving away from Tai City had only resulted in them circling around No.1 Senior High a few times.

"Things are back to normal?" Bai Chen's forehead was covered in a layer of cold sweat.

Just as she said that, Shang Jianyao suddenly pounced, hugged Genova, and cried, "Old Ge, don't die!"

A red glow lit up in Genava's eyes as they flickered a few times. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Shang Jianyao stood up and smiled. "From now on, I'm the carefree one."

Are you joking, or did you split out another personality??Jiang Baimian frowned. She exhaled deeply and said, "It seems like we've escaped danger. That 'call for help' was really useful."

They had directly pleaded with the person in question.

The red light in Genava's eyes flickered a few times. "The string of random code has disappeared, and there's nothing in my backup database."

Shang Jianyao suddenly laughed out loud. "It's fine. Big White still has a handwritten copy."

Jiang Baimian shot him a glance. "After Oray called this number and spoke to Master Zhuang, the number didn't disappear from the phone and was preserved until now. This means that Master Zhuang deliberately erased Old Ge's stored number. It probably means that there won't be a next time and that we've been put on the 'do not disturb' list. If you call again, I'm afraid everyone around us will become Heartless."

Anything that a New World powerhouse could do, the Kalendaria could definitely do the same.

"I can sincerely worship 'Him.'" Shang Jianyao felt rather regretful.

At this moment, Long Yuehong—who had recovered—sighed. "I never expected that Oray would go from nothing to an Awakened who had explored the depths of the Mind Corridor. He considered himself First City's emperor because he obtained Master Zhuang's blessings."

Representing the entire year, Master Zhuang was the most special Kalendaria.

"That's right, that's right," Shang Jianyao echoed.

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a moment before saying, "It seems like there were more or less Kalendarium behind the establishment of the various large factions. I wonder if the Salvation Army

—which was established the latest—and the company that has been underground the entire time have one...”

“I don’t think so,” Long Yuehong replied without much confidence.

In the current environment, it was not suitable to discuss this topic. Bai Chen looked at the abandoned Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School and asked, “Are we still exploring?”

“There’s no need, right?” Long Yuehong took a deep breath as if he had a headache.

It wasn’t easy for them to escape the hopeless situation. How could they tempt fate again?

There was no Master Zhuang number to call again! Furthermore, repeatedly doing so might anger Master Zhuang.

Jiang Baimian glared at the eager Shang Jianyao and agreed with Long Yuehong. “Being adventurous is worthy of a compliment, but being suicidal deserves criticism. We have to balance that fine line well. Let’s go...”

She wanted to say, “Let’s go to Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center to take a look.” However, she felt that the team members—who had experienced such a harrowing exploration—needed some time to process their experience.

“Let’s get some R&R outside Tai City first.” Jiang Baimian finally chose to wait until afternoon.

As Shang Jianyao followed Geneva to the jeep, he revealed a thoughtful expression. “I’m wondering...”

Why does this tone sound so familiar?? Jiang Baimian turned her head and asked, “What are you wondering about?”

“I’m wondering if Xiaochong and Master Zhuang are related. Could he be ‘His’ split personality?” Shang Jianyao’s eyes were bright. “Otherwise, why would the white light I obtained at the Holm Fertility Center rush straight to the rift that represents Xiaochong the moment it entered my Sea of Origins? Why didn’t it entangle with others like enemies and never scatter?”

Long Yuehong subconsciously wanted to deny this terrifying possibility. “You already said ‘like enemies.’”

“It’s very common for different personalities to be enemies!” Shang Jianyao said confidently.

How is that common??Long Yuehong argued inwardly.

“Besides, Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School has Du Shaochong,” Shang Jianyao added.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly. “There’s a certain possibility. There’s also a way to confirm it.”

“What way?” Shang Jianyao asked excitedly.

Jiang Baimian looked around. “If we can determine that Swamp Ruin 1 is Dajiang City, the answer is self-evident.”

Swamp Ruin 1 was the ruin where the Old Task Force had encountered Xiaochong.

“We can get the information from the company later,” Bai Chen suggested.

As they spoke, they had already gotten into the jeep and sat down.

At this moment, they heard a bird chirping. They saw a bird come from not far away and enter Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School. After circling a few times, it left in another direction.

This was a scene that had never happened before.

From the outside, Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School looked dead silent as if there were no living beings.

Shang Jianyao muttered to himself, “Our call woke up Master Zhuang, and the dream naturally subsided when Master Zhuang woke up?”

Chapter 742: Since We're Already Here

Shang Jianyao's good partner-in-crime, Genova, accurately grasped the key point in his words: "Are you trying to say that Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School isn't enveloped by a dream and is no longer dangerous, so we can carry out some level of exploration?"

"That's right, that's right." Shang Jianyao acted as if he were echoing Genova. "Since we're already here!"

Jiang Baimian wanted to facepalm.

This fellow was often rash and bold; he didn't care about the consequences and didn't consider how much risk was needed. He did things spur of the moment, but it could only be blamed on his mental illness. She couldn't bring herself to lecture him.

Furthermore, Jiang Baimian often felt conflicted. Logically, she knew what she should and shouldn't do, when to step back and when to attack. But emotionally, she couldn't help but feel that she should do something when facing certain situations. There seemed to be a voice in her heart telling her not to be afraid of the risks and to do what she wanted to do.

This was also the reason that despite clearly instructing Shang Jianyao not to do anything, she would still choose to indulge him and help wipe his ass when he really did it. This was essentially the tug of war between her reason and emotion.

It was impossible for people without a sense of adventure or romanticism to take the initiative to establish an investigation team for the cause of the Old World's destruction.

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Jiang Baimian cast her gaze at Bai Chen and Long Yuehong in the front row. "From the current situation, theoretically speaking, it's not dangerous to explore Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School for a certain period of time. Since Master Zhuang is awake, it's unlikely that 'He' will fall asleep again so soon. First City's previous unrest involved a tussle between the Kalendarium. It's impossible for 'Him' not to take this opportunity to do something. How about this? Hey, Old Ge, and I will go in and do a quick exploration. Stand guard at the door to prevent any accidents and provide support."

Bai Chen—who was driving—calmly asked, “There has to be a reason for taking such a huge risk. What do you plan on finding or what answers would you like to receive during the exploration inside?”

Jiang Baimian replied seriously, “Ignoring the secrets hidden in this Buddhist Holy Land, there’s a simple question that’s worth entering again: Why did Master Zhuang dream of this place—high school life—and not anywhere else or in another stage of life?”

“After ‘His’ descent, we can currently confirm that ‘He’ had a complete childhood and adolescence. Apart from Dajiang City’s Linhe Village—which represents an unknown stage in the dreamscape—‘He’ should’ve lived in many other places and had sufficient experience. Why did ‘He’ only dream of Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School? Is there anything special here or something with a special meaning to Master Zhuang?”

“Maybe the other dreamscapes have yet to be discovered by the Buddhists and are considered holy lands.” The honest Shang Jianyao didn’t care that Jiang Baimian was now on their side.

Jiang Baimian replied without hesitation, “This is also a direction of exploration. To us, a Kalendaria had descended before the Old World was destroyed. ‘He’ lived as a human for many years, so this is definitely a key point worth investigating. This might involve the New World’s secret and its influence on the Old World. Only by figuring out these problems can we perhaps know why the Heartless disease suddenly erupted that day and brought about a great danger to humanity.”

Bai Chen fell silent for a few seconds. “Then, I’ll go in with you. The more people searching, the more efficient it is. We’ll also save time. Old Ge will stay outside and avoid the first wave should the dreamscape get rebooted. He will then enter the school to save us. He’s a smart bot and the last thing we can rely on; it might be better to have him as backup.”

Long Yuehong pondered for a moment before nodding in agreement. “That’s right, that’s right. Let’s go in together and leave Old Ge outside.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment. “Alright.”

None of them knew when Master Zhuang would fall asleep again, so they naturally had to race against time.

The jeep stopped and turned back to Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School. Jiang Baimian and the others pushed open the door, alighted, and walked to the automatic extendable gate.

They didn't carry assault rifles or other weapons, nor did they wear military exoskeletons or bionic artificial intelligence armor. On the one hand, they were capable, believing that they could finish off any mutated creatures or Superior Heartless they encountered in the school with their Awakened abilities, items, mechanical arms, biological prosthetics, genetic modification results, and pistols. They could also hold out for a period of time until Geneva came to their rescue. On the other hand, they wanted to show their respect for Master Zhuang. In Shang Jianyao's words, they had to be sincere.

Jiang Baimian didn't give another reason: They were to reduce their strength, especially when compared to Geneva's.

This way, it would be much easier for Geneva to save them if they fell into the dreamscape again, and the resistance he would encounter would be much simpler.

The four carbon-based Old Task Force members carefully passed through the automatic extendable gate and walked to the teaching building ahead.

After walking for about ten meters, they looked at each other and happily confirmed that they were still rational and hadn't become a character in the dreamscape.

Jiang Baimian turned around and waved at Geneva—this was one of the preset hand gestures for communication.

Geneva also waved his hand, indicating that he could see them.

"Master Zhuang isn't asleep yet. Let's make the best use of our time," Jiang Baimian quickly ordered.

They first walked to the teaching building opposite where Du Shaochong, Xu Qiao, Lin Yan, and Zhang Huadong attended classes.

As soon as they approached, their gazes froze to a certain extent.

On every seat in the classroom was a white skeleton. They were either lying on the table or on the ground beside them, and they wore tattered blue and white school uniforms.

This scene made Jiang Baimian and the others increasingly certain that Tai City was different from other places. All humans died in an instant and didn't become Heartless.

Although they had already expected to see this scene in front of them, they still felt heavy and conflicted when they saw the students—who were supposed to represent the future, the rising sun—die in droves. Some even had an attentive posture.

Jiang Baimian exhaled, allowing her rationality to overcome her emotion. "Start the search."

They didn't go through every corner of every table like how Genova had previously gathered data. Instead, they roughly scanned the area and chose two to three items with words to flip through. When they felt that there was nothing else, they went to the next classroom.

Time was limited!

In Grade 12, Class 1, they didn't find Du Shaochong. In Grade 12, Class 5, they also didn't find anyone named Xu Qiao. This confirmed that the Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School in the dreamscape wasn't the one from the Old World's destruction but a reflection of something that happened a decade or two before the juncture in time.

This could be further confirmed by the fact that the school uniforms in reality and dreamscape were the same but had different styles.

"That's troublesome." Jiang Baimian frowned slightly at this.

This meant that Master Zhuang cared about Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School and that there was a high chance that the reason the dreamscape reflected this place couldn't be found in reality.

"Everything that can be found counts." Shang Jianyao's disappointment vanished in an instant.

Long Yuehong nodded in agreement. "That's right."

This way, they should be able to evacuate this dangerous place quickly.

Jiang Baimian didn't waste her breath. She led her team up another floor and ended the search of the teaching building.

After they turned into the building on the left and entered the teacher's office, their expressions more or less changed.

Among the corpses sitting in their respective seats, one still had a lot of rotten flesh on his body. He wore a black uniform that didn't match his peers!

"Am I seeing things..." Long Yuehong muttered.

If he wasn't mistaken, it was the Salvation Army's uniform!

Almost at the same time, Bai Chen saw a Red Maple assault rifle—a specialty of the Salvation Army—on the ground beside the corpse.

Jiang Baimian's heart palpitated. "Could it be a member of Ding Ling's husband's scientific team?"

The Salvation Army's scientific team definitely had a military detail to provide protection.

Previously, when she knew that the scientific team was heading in this direction, she had a slight suspicion that they had entered Tai City. However, she later realized that without a 'keepsake,' all they could see was the fake Tai City. Hence, she dismissed this guess.

To her surprise, they encountered corpses suspected to be the scientific team members in Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School, a dangerous Buddhist Holy Land.

"Search him," Jiang Baimian quickly ordered.

After some work, the Old Task Force preliminarily confirmed that he was from the Salvation Army. He died two to three years ago—which roughly matched the time when the scientific team that Ding Ling's husband, Ji Qiang, was in disappeared.

“There are no external injuries, and the cause of death is unknown. Apart from weapons, bullets, and a few biscuits, there’s nothing else on him.” Bai Chen stood up and walked back.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “Let’s search elsewhere.”

They completed a quick search of Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School by noon. They only found the Salvation Army corpse that had died in recent years. Apart from that, they didn’t discover anything else.

Genava analyzed the situation. “This person might’ve accidentally entered Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School after being separated from the rest of the troops. He ended up lost in the dreamscape and died bit by bit.”

“What about the rest of the troops?” Shang Jianyao asked.

Chapter 743: The Change Behind the Door

Genava replied honestly, “It’s very likely somewhere in Tai City. They likely encountered danger back then, which resulted in a member being separated from the bulk of the troops.”

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “The corpse in the school didn’t have any items related to Buddhism. He should’ve entered the true Tai City with the person holding a Buddhist keepsake, and there’s a high chance that someone is in the scientific team.”

In other words, the possibility of nobody escaping after the entire scientific team accidentally entered the true Tai City and encountered danger was rather high.

“Maybe the Buddhist ‘keepsake’ on the corpse fell elsewhere and is not missing,” retorted the honest Shang Jianyao.

“That’s another possibility,” Jiang Baimian replied calmly.

Bai Chen nodded. “The Salvation Army soldier—who was lost in the dream—came here on foot from elsewhere.”

Her reason was: “We previously checked the surroundings and didn’t discover any relatively new vehicles.”

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words. “Since he was on foot, the possibility of him coming in with the bulk of the troops is a little higher.”

It was at least 20 kilometers from Tai City’s periphery; it was definitely not a wise choice to come on foot.

In other words, the possibility of the corpse encountering danger outside Tai City and entering the real Tai City in a panic to walk to this place was very low.

Jiang Baimian then looked around. “Let’s go out first. It feels a little worrisome to discuss here. I’m afraid that an accident will happen again.”

Long Yuehong was in full agreement.

The Old Task Force managed to retrace their route relatively smoothly and left Tai City.

After arriving at the camp near the water source, they each washed their faces and freshened up. Geneva also wiped the dust from his metal-skeleton face.

Long Yuehong secretly heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that the surroundings remained the same. He asked Jiang Baimian, “Team Leader, what should we do next?”

After such a harrowing and dramatic adventure, he only wanted to empty his mind, lie down, and stay with Little White while waiting for the return trip to Pangu Biology.

Shang Jianyao replied before Jiang Baimian could. “Only Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center is left. We’re already here!”

Upon seeing Long Yuehong’s solemn expression and ignoring him, he revealed a methodical and patient expression. “What’s there to be afraid of? Our strength is still relatively intact; we only lost a

phone number that can connect to Master Zhuang. Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center has a New World node at most. We have sufficient ways to deal with it!"

Be it Jiang Baimian or Genava, they could release high-voltage electric currents. Similarly, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen could also use the simple discharge device they had previously created.

"What do you mean by 'New World node at most?' You've never been there, so how would you know?" Long Yuehong didn't believe it at all.

Shang Jianyao shook his head and smiled. "There are ways."

At this moment, Jiang Baimian thoughtfully said, "If the scientific team Ding Ling's husband, Ji Qiang, was in did enter the true Tai City, where will they most likely encounter danger and have their team members scatter?"

"Renhui Hospital," Bai Chen replied in a slightly low voice.

From the current situation, the living beings in Tai City had instantly died the moment the Old World was destroyed. There were no Superior Heartless or powerful mutated creatures.

In other words, apart from the fact that they harbored secrets and that the danger came from certain places in the 'outside world,' it was unlikely that any other place in Tai City could destroy a scientific team protected by professionals.

The Old Task Force only knew of Harbour Homeland, Renhui Hospital, and Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School as places that harbored secrets.

They had already been to Harbour Homeland and Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School. The former wasn't dangerous, and the latter only had a foreign corpse inside.

With the information they currently had, there was a high chance that Ding Ling's husband—Ji Qiang's scientific team had an accident at Renhui Hospital.

Of course, the Old Task Force couldn't temporarily rule out the possibility that there were other dangerous places in Tai City. After all, the situation here was rather special. It didn't suffer

bombardment during the Old World's destruction, nor was anyone infected with the Heartless disease on a large scale. The citizens died silently on the spot.

Upon hearing Bai Chen's answer, Shang Jianyao became increasingly anxious. "Therefore, it makes it even more imperative for us to head there!"

The Old Task Force still owed Ding Ling a favor. In addition, it was equivalent to them indirectly obtaining a nuclear warhead through Ding Ling.

They really felt a little guilty.

Jiang Baimian raised her hand to stop Shang Jianyao's urging and smiled. "Prepare some food. It's already noon! I'll report our recent experiences to the company and see if they have any suggestions for any subsequent arrangements."

"Alright." Shang Jianyao instantly returned to being a model employee.

He, Bai Chen, and Long Yuehong prepared lunch. As Genova patrolled and guarded the area, Jiang Baimian deliberated and wrote a telegram.

She attributed the reason for her team's entry into the real Tai City to the Six Senses Beads. There was no problem with that; the Six Senses Beads could indeed allow the wearer and the people 50 meters around them to see through the fake Tai City.

At the same time, she concealed the encounter when all the carbon-based humans in the team were collectively lost in a dream. She said that they had split up and relied on the auxiliary chip to barely find themselves and escape.

About calling the mysterious number provided by Avia, Jiang Baimian described how she had successfully stored the number into a phone with the help of a robot in Ubei.

As she embellished the corresponding details, Jiang Baimian suddenly heard Shang Jianyao yelp. Long Yuehong and Bai Chen were also taking long or short gasps.

She looked up and asked warily, "What's wrong?"

Shang Jianyao pointed in the direction of Tai City and said, “Look!”

Jiang Baimian turned her head and saw the relatively well-preserved true Tai City in the distance.

This was no different from the previous scene because the Old Task Force carried the Six Senses Beads and the small jade Buddha.

“Is there a problem?” Jiang Baimian asked.

Shang Jianyao pointed behind him. “I threw my backpack 50 meters away.”

The Six Senses Beads and the small jade Buddha were in his backpack.

Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but draw a light breath. “The fake Tai City has disappeared?”

Shang Jianyao smiled smugly. “In order to slack off, I was there thinking. Since Master Zhuang has already woken up and the dream of No. 1 Senior High School has disappeared, will the fake Tai City disappear as well? I tested it, and the answer is yes.”

Do you have to make your cunning intentions sound so open and aboveboard...? Long Yuehong muttered.

Jiang Baimian nodded in admiration. “Good idea.”

It was meaningless, however.

Shang Jianyao quickly said, “Do you still remember? I previously saw Master Zhuang’s dream in Room 102 in the Mind Corridor—it was Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School.”

“Yes.” Bai Chen, Long Yuehong, and Genava nodded in unison.

Jiang Baimian’s heart palpitated. “Master Zhuang is awake now.”

Shang Jianyao smiled in satisfaction. “Therefore, I’m very curious about what I’ll see when I enter Room 102 now. The Kalendaria’s psychological trauma?”

“Isn’t that too dangerous?” Long Yuehong blurted out.

Shang Jianyao casually said, “I’m just looking from the door and not going in. Don’t worry. Most of us are careful.”

Is that so? I don’t believe it...

Long Yuehong didn’t voice out his thoughts.

Jiang Baimian deliberated for a moment and said, “Go in and take a look then.”

She then reminded Shang Jianyao repeatedly not to cross the line.

...

In the Mind Corridor, the Shang Jianyaos came to Room 102 again.

Standing in the aisle covered in thick, dark-yellow carpet, he stretched out his right palm, twisted the brass handle, and gently pushed it forward.

The door opened to pitch-black darkness. It was difficult to see the exact scene.

Shang Jianyao skillfully took a step in.

Light suddenly appeared in front of him as a river meandered not far away.

At the riverbend, a village with ancient-styled buildings was hidden under the dark sky. A large pagoda tree stood at the entrance.

The pagoda tree’s branches and leaves gently swayed as if it were beckoning Shang Jianyao.

The Shang Jianyao that sought novelty and the rash and brainless Shang Jianyao split out on their own. They were just about to stride forward and visit when they were pulled back by the other Shang Jianyaos. They were tightly bound and carried out of the room.

...

“The old pagoda tree at Linhe Village in Dajiang City?” After hearing Shang Jianyao’s description, the name of the Buddhist Holy Land flashed across Jiang Baimian, Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Genava’s ‘minds.’

Shang Jianyao had an excited expression. “There’s Master Zhuang’s psychological trauma there?”

“Maybe.” Jiang Baimian unconsciously lowered her voice, afraid that she would be struck by lightning. She then exhaled and said, “We’ll discuss this later; there’s no rush. I’ll send a telegram first. Get the meal done.”

Before long, she sent out the entire telegram and waited for Pangu Biology’s reply.

As they waited, the Old Task Force had a simple meal to fill their stomachs.

Food could soothe one’s emotions. Long Yuehong felt much more relaxed than when they evacuated.

He looked in the direction of Tai City and suddenly laughed. He then said in relief, “We didn’t destroy the Holy Land this time either. The monks from the Asceticism Department can’t say ‘the omen has appeared; a great calamity is imminent.’”

Shang Jianyao chuckled. “It’s not like we aren’t going in anymore. Maybe we will trigger a chain reaction when we explore Renhui Hospital, causing Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School to collapse.”

Just as he said that, Genava suddenly said, “Incoming missile strikes detected! I repeat, incoming missiles detected! Take cover!”

Jiang Baimian and the others were shocked. They didn't dare to delay and found cover to hide themselves.

Before long, they saw missiles flying overhead from a distance and landing on the true Tai City.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

As the mountains shook, flames rose, producing an ear-splitting sound.

The missiles didn't seem to target the Old Task Force but the Tai City ruins..

Chapter 744: Destruction

Although he had seen bombardment scenes from the Old World's entertainment, Long Yuehong still felt puny and insignificant when he really encountered one.

The technological creation that seemed comparable to the mighty force of the world burgeoned in different parts of the city, making the area seem like it was welcoming the end of the world. Even a steel will and mechanical arm would be blown to pieces.

The thick smoke and dust that rose up illuminated the blazing flames. The constantly trembling ground and the deafening booms made Long Yuehong and the others—who were hiding behind cover—truly understand what a large-scale, intense war was.

This was more spectacular than the salvo Jiang Baimian had previously seen, and it shook one to the soul at a deeper level.

After an unknown period of time, the missile strikes finally stopped. All that was left was the surging storm and the imminent downpour.

Whoosh!

Raindrops the size of beans fell, stained with countless dust.

Long Yuehong wiped his face and sighed with emotion. “Fortunately, we aren’t the target.”

Fortunately, the Old Task Force had evacuated Tai City in advance for R&R.

Recalling his team leader’s decision back then, Long Yuehong only wanted to hug Little White tightly and shout, “Banzai!”

Jiang Baimian revealed a rare confused expression and allowed the rain to hit her face.

“Why is there a sudden missile attack?” she asked in confusion.

Furthermore, it was a carpet bombing that targeted a city ruin regardless of the cost or the consequences!

It had to be known that apart from large-scale wars between top factions like First City, it had been countless years since a missile strike on a target had been launched in the Ashlands.

This was comparable to the Old Task Force encountering the loss of a nuclear warhead. Furthermore, it was even more sudden and without warning. It was even more incomprehensible.

Even with Jiang Baimian’s intelligence, she felt the subtle absurdity of encountering a mechanical deity’s descent at that very moment.

“Do you even know how to write a script!?” Shang Jianyao threw a rock he was holding to the ground. While he was temporarily taking cover, he started playing a game of throwing and catching rocks since he had nothing to do.

Jiang Baimian realized that she easily understood what Shang Jianyao wanted to say: Destiny’s ‘screenwriter’ felt that they had goofed up on Tai City and couldn’t resolve it. Therefore, they used missiles to wrap things up!

Genava had already calculated the trajectory he had observed and pointed northwest. “It was fired from there. The exact coordinates require further data gathering.”

Bai Chen rubbed her short hair that was drenched by the rain and guessed, “A change in Tai City triggered a preset missile strike?”

Even though she had been a wilderness nomad for many years and had seen all kinds of things that exceeded her understanding and common sense with the Old Task Force, her heart still palpitated from the missile strike. She couldn't control herself as if she had returned to her weakest and most helpless period.

“That's possible,” Jiang Baimian replied.

Long Yuehong stopped the subsequent conversation and glanced at Bai Chen in concern. “Why are we discussing it in the rain? Let's return to the car first or put on our raincoats.”

Although the Old Task Force had outstanding physiques and weren't even normal humans, there was no need for them to be drenched in the rain.

Genava tried to soothe Long Yuehong. “I've already tested it. The explosion just now didn't contain any radiation or chemical pollution.”

“Fortunately, thankfully.” Long Yuehong heaved a sigh of relief.

Jiang Baimian got her team members to pack up the items that had been scattered outside and returned to the car.

The rain caused by the missile strikes lasted for a while before slowly stopping. Although the sky was still gloomy, it wasn't enough to stop the Old Task Force from looking at the distant Tai City.

Many of the buildings there had already collapsed, with only a portion barely standing. It looked more apocalyptic than before.

Jiang Baimian—who was leaning against the window in the backseat—stared at it for a while. “Let's retreat a little further to prevent any subsequent attacks from implicating us.”

“That's right, that's right!” In the passenger seat, Long Yuehong was just short of raising his hands and feet in agreement.

For some reason, he was a little grateful for the missile's bombardment. This forced the team's subsequent explorations to be terminated early.

I might be able to return to the company soon, and with Little White, register our...

Long Yuehong's thoughts wandered.

The Old Task Force retreated more than ten kilometers in the direction they came from until they reached the broken highway.

They didn't set up camp again. They sat in the jeep and waited for the company to reply.

About an hour later, Pangu Biology finally gave the latest instructions: "Be careful of the New World node when exploring Renhui Hospital."

Jiang Baimian gave a simple evaluation. "It seems like the company also suspects that there's a New World node in Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center."

Shang Jianyao sighed. "It's too late. The company doesn't know that Tai City has been blown up."

With that said, he suddenly became excited. "I've never explored cities bombarded by missiles—the kind that just got blown up."

"Let's wait a little longer. Who knows if there will be a next round of attacks?" Jiang Baimian calmly stopped Shang Jianyao.

She didn't forget to report the latest situation to the company.

Pangu Biology's attitude toward this was: "Observe for a few days and confirm if the target location has been destroyed."

Upon seeing the words 'confirm if the target location has been destroyed,' Jiang Baimian thoughtfully said, "Could the goal of this missile strike be to blow up Renhui Hospital and Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School?"

“This sounds like what the Eighth Research Institute wants to do.” Shang Jianyao slapped his thigh.

One of the Eighth Research Institute’s missions was to stop humans from investigating the reason for the Old World’s destruction and the Heartless disease’s origins. For this reason, they often destroyed the various buildings with hidden clues. For example, the secret laboratory in Swamp Ruin 1.

Jiang Baimian nodded in agreement with Shang Jianyao. “From the information we’ve gathered so far, there might indeed be valuable clues hidden in Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center.”

Long Yuehong asked in confusion, “Then, why didn’t the Eighth Research Institute destroy it earlier or later but chose to fire the missiles at this moment?”

Bai Chen recalled what they as a team had encountered when they first came to Tai City and gave her guess. “Previously, they could only find the fake Tai City. They probably thought that the target location had long been destroyed.”

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly and said, “We woke up Master Zhuang, causing the dreamscape in Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School to shatter. The fake Tai City that protected the real Tai City vanished. Therefore, the Eighth Research Institute realized that the place they wanted to destroy the most was still standing in the Ashlands.”

“But how did they discover it so quickly?” Long Yuehong asked in confusion.

The Eighth Research Institute didn’t station anyone in this area.

Genava moved his metal neck and pointed at the sky. “They might have ‘eyes’ in the sky.”

Satellites? The Eighth Research Institute has satellites that can still be used??Long Yuehong quickly understood what Old Ge meant.

Jiang Baimian made a terse grunt. “Therefore, we’ll wait a few more days. We’ll confirm if the target location has been blown up when nothing happens.”

...

They waited for two days, but the Old Task Force didn't encounter any follow-up missile strikes. Therefore, they drove the jeep, took a detour, and entered Tai City from another spot.

The further they went in the direction of Renhui Hospital and First High School, the worse the roads' damage became. The buildings on both sides of the road were in utter ruins.

Toward the end, it was already difficult for cars to drive. Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao could only push open the door and go down. They changed into their military exoskeletons and crossed the layers of obstacles to head to Renhui Hospital.

Long Yuehong, Bai Chen, and Geneva stayed behind and waited to provide support.

Before long, Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao arrived at the street where Renhui Hospital was. They looked over and realized that it had almost been leveled.

This was clearly the main target of the missile strikes.

"The clues are gone..." Shang Jianyao said in disappointment.

Jiang Baimian also felt a sense of loss and experienced the taste of failure. She composed herself and said to Shang Jianyao, "Let's go to Tai City's First High School next."

The two places weren't too far apart. Otherwise, the scientific team member wouldn't have entered by mistake in his panic.

The outcome was self-evident—Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School had also been leveled.

"Aren't they afraid of infuriating Master Zhuang?" The rash Shang Jianyao was amazed by the Eighth Research Institute's courage.

Jiang Baimian exhaled and said, "It likely involves a New World dispute."

She waved her skeletal metal palm and sighed. "Let's go; we're heading back."

Jiang Baimian fell silent after getting into the jeep. Although Long Yuehong was secretly happy, he didn't dare to say anything at this moment.

As the jeep drove back, Jiang Baimian suddenly looked up and thoughtfully said, "I'm thinking that it's impossible for Ding Ling's husband's scientific team to all die at Renhui Hospital, right? Since someone could escape and accidentally enter Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School, there should be other survivors. Yes, there's a chance."

"That's right." Long Yuehong didn't understand why his team leader was suddenly discussing this topic, but he felt that there was nothing wrong with this inference.

Jiang Baimian looked out the windshield and said, "Where will the survivors go after they escape Renhui Hospital and get over their panic?"

Bai Chen—who was driving—and Genava in the backseat said at the same time, "Return the way they came. Leave Tai City and seek help."

Jiang Baimian nodded. "But they clearly couldn't leave Tai City."

At this moment, Shang Jianyao laughed. "Maybe they lost their Buddhist 'keepsake' at Renhui Hospital and realized that they couldn't find a way out. Therefore, they loitered at the edge of the city and searched for an exit as they gathered food."

This...? Long Yuehong suddenly realized that this was really an investigation direction.

Chapter 745: Light at the End of the Tunnel

Bai Chen followed Shang Jianyao's train of thought and said, "Perhaps the person with the Buddhist 'keepsake' died in Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center. The survivors either don't know how they entered the true Tai City or managed to guess it but don't dare to go to Renhui Hospital again. They hoped to use other methods to escape."

Jiang Baimian tersely acknowledged her words and said in an inspired tone, “Humans are creatures of habit. After the survivors escaped Renhui Hospital and recovered from their initial panic, there’s a high chance that they chose to evacuate along the path they were most familiar with.

“When they reached the edge of the city, they should’ve realized that the exit had disappeared and was buried by the landslide scene. Then, where’s the corresponding exit, or which edge of the city did the survivors return to?”

Genava was the first to answer: “If this group of people really belongs to the scientific team that Ding Ling’s husband—Ji Qiang—was in, then from the information we previously obtained, they came from the southwest like us.”

This was the information the Old Task Force had obtained from the Salvation Army rest stop when they encountered the Asceticism Department monks.

Long Yuehong’s heart palpitated as he blurted out, “They entered the real Tai City from the place we entered? And their route of return is also the same?”

The honest Shang Jianyao scoffed. “Have you forgotten that our trip wasn’t that smooth either? We encountered a broken belt on our trip here. We relied on the military exoskeletons, Old Ge, and Big White to enter the city from that direction without taking a detour.”

Why did you label me alongside the military exoskeletons and Old Ge? You make it sound like I wasn’t wearing a military exoskeleton back then...? Jiang Baimian suspected that Shang Jianyao was slandering her for being stronger than a smart bot or a military exoskeleton and that it was backed by evidence.

Long Yuehong admitted his mistake in frustration. “That’s right.”

He then suggested, “Then, let’s return to the disconnected belt and see where we can enter the city from by taking a detour.”

Jiang Baimian shook her head and said, “There’s no need to make things so complicated. Think about it. Think about it from the logic of a normal person, not Hey. What will you do when you return the way you came and discover that the exit has been destroyed and is insurmountable?”

Long Yuehong took a deep breath and calmed down. He thought for a moment and said, “Then, we will definitely choose to leave the city using another exit. How can there only be one exit in such a large city?”

At this point, his train of thought gradually became clear. “After discovering that none of the exits can leave the city, they will likely choose the one that shows the most promise. They will attempt to build a bridge by paving the road and crossing the natural divide. At the same time, they will search for nearby supermarkets and other places to gather food.”

The ‘build a bridge by paving the road’ he was referring to wasn’t literal. Instead, he was referring to a series of actions like blowing up obstacles and setting up planks to cross the trenches.

Jiang Baimian took over Long Yuehong’s words and ordered, “Therefore, what we need to do now is circle the edge of Tai City Ruin and search for a place with traces of bridge building. The survivors might very well be nearby, and there’s a chance that they are still alive.”

The Tai City residents had instantly died when the Old World was destroyed. At present, nobody seemed to have survived, so the food here wasn’t depleted.

Of course, most of the food had long rotted and was no longer suitable for human consumption thanks to the lack of electricity most of the time after decades. However, the canned food that could be preserved for a long time was enough to last a small team for two to three years.

Bai Chen turned the steering wheel and made the jeep drive to the edge of the city.

At this moment, Shang Jianyao—who abhorred evil and was responsible for ‘saving all of humanity’—said hatefully, “If it weren’t for the Eighth Research Institute’s missiles, it would be much easier for us to find them.”

Although those missiles were mainly targeted at Renhui Hospital and Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School, deviations couldn’t be discounted. This might destroy the traces of the survivors paving roads and building bridges.

“We haven’t confirmed that it’s the Eighth Research Institute,” Jiang Baimian casually retorted. “This is only our guess. Although we believe that the possibility is very high, we can’t rule out the possibility that it was someone else.”

Shang Jianyao—who had switched personalities—chuckled. “In any case, their base is somewhere in Icefield; it happens to match. Just treat it as if they did it. Piling another crime on them doesn’t hurt.”

As he spoke, Shang Jianyao became excited. “It’s just like how they can be blamed for the destruction of Buddhism’s Holy Lands!”

Upon hearing this, Long Yuehong turned his head to look in the direction of Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School. His emotions instantly became very complicated.

This Buddhist Holy Land ultimately didn’t escape the fate of being leveled.

Fortunately, Shang Jianyao didn’t mock him and say he was a jinx and how he had to shoot off his mouth. Instead, he pushed the blame to the Eighth Research Institute.

Yes, they did it. They were the ones who fired the missiles to destroy Renhui Hospital and Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School! Long Yuehong slowly believed that the Eighth Research Institute was behind this.

Tai City covered a large area. Coupled with the many seriously damaged roads, the Old Task Force spent the entire morning before circling the periphery.

Apart from the parts that had been accidentally blown up by missiles and were unrecognizable, there were no traces of bridges at the other exits.

“There’s a problem with our deduction? Which part did we get wrong?” Long Yuehong retracted his gaze in disappointment.

He would rather believe that the missiles had destroyed the clues.

Jiang Baimian smiled. “It’s fine. The previous deduction was built on a few assumptions, so it’s perfectly normal for there to be mistakes. Don’t I always say that? Make bold assumptions and verify them carefully. We’ve at least eliminated some possibilities now.”

“Could it be that there were no other survivors other than the one who escaped Renhui Hospital and entered Tai City’s First High School?” Bai Chen muttered to herself.

Jiang Baimian thought for a moment and said, “It’s also possible that the other survivors encountered an accident midway and lost their lives one after another before they could attempt to build a bridge.”

“That makes things tricky,” Geneva commented.

This was because finding traces of survivors in Tai City—which had been bombarded by missiles—was no different from searching for a needle in a haystack. It was possible for them to be anywhere.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Shang Jianyao echoed. “It’s possible that something happened to the survivors on their way back from Renhui Hospital, or it’s also possible that they encountered an accident while searching for another exit.”

Jiang Baimian pondered for a moment and replied, “We’ll leave it to fate. We’ll use a clumsy method now: leave Tai City and return to the disconnected belt. We’ll then take the only detour choice and drive to Renhui Hospital to see what we can discover on the way. If there’s still nothing, report to the company tomorrow that the target location has been destroyed. At the same time, inform the company that we are returning.”

“Alright!” Long Yuehong replied very bluntly. He immediately felt like he had a goal in life.

About two hours later, the Old Task Force circled back to the edge of Tai City as planned.

When the buildings that remained standing reflected in their eyes, Jiang Baimian and the others’ pupils dilated at the same time.

On the surface of a grayish-yellow high-rise building, a window and the outer walls around it were dyed red. Even from a distance, this was abnormally eye-catching.

The Old Task Force had actually been to this entrance before, but they had only checked if there were any traces of paved roads or bridges without looking at the corresponding buildings from the direction one took when entering the city.

“It was splashed red with paint.” Geneva made a slightly synthetic sound a few seconds later.

If it was blood, it was impossible for it not to oxidize and turn black unless it had just splattered.

Bai Chen thought for a moment and said, “It feels like a signal for help...”

When some wilderness nomads were trapped somewhere, they often chose to use red and purple to attract attention because they didn’t know words or because they weren’t sure if people who passed by could understand words.

Long Yuehong’s heart palpitated. “Did the survivors do it? They entered the city from here, believing that the people who come later will also enter the city from here.”

Therefore, they chose to create a distress signal here.

Clap! Clap! Clap!?

Shang Jianyao clapped for Long Yuehong, something he rarely did.

Jiang Baimian thought for a few seconds and said, “Let’s go take a look. Be careful—prepare according to the standards of us possibly encountering a New World node, powerful mutated creatures, or Superior Heartless.”

Before long, the Old Task Force arrived below the building. Jiang Baimian, Shang Jianyao, and Bai Chen wore military exoskeletons. Long Yuehong and Geneva wore bionic artificial intelligence armor.

Bai Chen and Long Yuehong then went to the opposite building and found a spot suitable for sniping and providing cover.

Geneva remained downstairs. On the one hand, he guarded the jeep while preparing to provide support to his teammates.

The fully-armed Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao climbed the stairs and successfully arrived at the 32nd floor where the red window was.

The corresponding door was ajar, and a putrid smell wafted out.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao looked at each other and shook their heads at the same time. From their perspective, they confirmed that there were no humans inside—living humans.

With the military exoskeleton helmet having antitoxin filters, the two of them boldly pushed open the door and entered the room.

This was an ordinary residence; there were tables, chairs, a sofa, and a television.

Beside the red window was a computer table, and on the table was a computer covered in stains.

On the chair facing the door opposite the table sat a corpse in dark-colored clothes. He lay on the computer table, his neck and head reduced to bones.

Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao moved over step by step. When they approached, they realized that a dark-green canvas backpack was between the corpse's thighs and waist. On the ground beside it was a Ubei 7.

Apart from this one, there were no other corpses around.

Chapter 746: Letter

Jiang Baimian didn't immediately pick up the dark-green canvas backpack on the corpse and carefully said to Shang Jianyao, "Check the surroundings and see if there are any dangers that need to be eliminated."

The two of them split up and quickly confirmed that the bedroom, kitchen, living room, bathroom, and other places were sufficiently normal and that there was no other corpse. Furthermore, they deduced that he wasn't a Tai City resident from the traces of rotten flesh on the corpse. He was likely a member of the scientific team that Ding Ling's husband, Ji Qiang, was a part of.

After doing this, Jiang Baimian put on her gloves and raised the dark-green canvas backpack from the corpse's chest and thighs.

After unzipping it, she saw many documents and information. Among them, a few pieces of paper were neatly folded and placed at the top.

Jiang Baimian placed the backpack on the computer table, picked up the pieces of paper, and unfolded them.

It was written in Ashlandic. Every stroke was neat and abnormally clear as if it were worried that people of the future wouldn't understand.

As Jiang Baimian signaled for Shang Jianyao to be on guard, she quickly scanned through it.

"I don't know who you are, where you come from, or which faction you belong to when you read this letter. These aren't important. What's important is that someone has finally entered this mysterious city and found us.

"My name is Lu Fuxing, a researcher from the Salvation Army. I should've died by the time you are reading this letter.

"I'll simply explain the entire matter and why I wrote this letter to you. Believe me, this is rather important. It might affect how you and your companions escape this mysterious city.

"More than two years ago, a notable earthquake happened in Icefield's northeast. After the earthquake, a weather station our Salvation Army uses to observe Icefield's weather realized that some objects belonging to the Old World civilization had drifted over from the river. Our Salvation Army had long surveyed the area; there were no city ruins or abandoned towns further up the river.

"As a scientific research institute in charge of investigating Icefield's geological situation, ruins, and resource distribution, my colleagues and I came to Icefield under the protection of a detail of soldiers. We planned on reconnoitering the area.

"Our scientific team's captain is called Chen Mingqiang. Not only does he have high academic achievements, but he's also an Awakened.

"On the third day after entering Icefield, I didn't feel well. My stomach hurt at night, and I wanted to get some medicine from the team doctor. After I walked out of the tent, I realized that Chen Mingqiang was silently pacing back and forth in the shadows between the two tents at the edge of the bonfire under its illumination.

“I was shocked back then. Fortunately, I recognized him in time. Otherwise, I definitely would’ve shouted to the patrolling soldiers.

“Chen Mingqiang also discovered me. He explained that he was suffering from insomnia, so he came out to get some air and think about some problems.

“I didn’t suspect anything. For scientific researchers like us, such things often happen.

“After that day, Chen Mingqiang became stranger and stranger. He was originally a cheerful person who liked to chat with the team members. However, he became quieter and quieter. He often tailed the team as if he had become our shadow.

“When we passed by Beian Lake’s rest stop, he actually ordered us to camp in the wilderness instead of going in to enjoy a clean bed and warm shower.

“Although our mission does have confidentiality requirements, it wasn’t so strict that we couldn’t even enter our faction’s rest stop and couldn’t make contact with anyone. Back then, many of my colleagues were confused, but they were forced to obey Chen Mingqiang’s orders.

“Finally, the outcome we fought for was to send three people to the rest stop to exchange for supplies and replenish the supplies we previously expended.

“After leaving Beian Lake, we continued heading to our designated location.

“For some reason, I began to feel that something was amiss with many people in the team. Like Chen Mingqiang, they didn’t like to talk and liked to walk behind the team.

“I tried asking them, believing that it was my responsibility to do so. The answer I obtained was that they had been in the wilderness for too long and were down.

“This was indeed a problem that scientific teams often encountered, but it happened especially early this time.

“After going upstream against the river for less than two days, we realized—no, we saw a city, the ruin where you and your companions are in.

“In our original records, this area was an area that suffered the most damage when the Old World was destroyed. This resulted in the entire terrain being warped. The corresponding city should’ve long sunk into the ground, buried by soil and boulders.

“But now, a well-preserved city ruin strangely appeared in front of us.

“To confirm that this wasn’t a mirage, we circled around the disconnected belt and arrived at the edge of Tai City. Yes, it was called Tai City before the Old World was destroyed.

“That night, we sent a telegram to Ubei to inform them of the situation and awaited further instructions.

“The next morning, everyone was suddenly woken up. Chen Mingqiang—who held the radio—told us that the higher-ups wanted us to enter Tai City and explore a place.

“Many of my colleagues and I were very confused. Our specialty wasn’t exploring ruins. This ought to have been left to a specialized team.

“But as a qualified Salvation Army member, following orders had already fused into my blood. After Chen Mingqiang showed the telegram sent by our superiors, and with the testimony of two colleagues and a warrior, I no longer had any objections.

“In hindsight, I suspected that the telegram was forged because the three people who proved the entire matter had previously become strange. Their silence and self-marginalization made them almost invisible.

“He actually dared to forge our superior’s orders.

“After entering Tai City, we went to a hospital. Chen Mingqiang seemed very familiar with this place and led us straight into the nine-story building on the right.

“It was called Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center.

“That was a very terrifying place. Chen Mingqiang seemed to use us as minesweepers, getting me and many of my colleagues to enter different rooms.

“Some people went crazy, some became vegetables, and some people contracted the Heartless disease and were shot to death on the spot. Some became as strange as Chen Mingqiang and the others. Some suddenly rushed to the window, jumped down, and fell to their deaths...

“I don’t want to recall any further; it’s a very cruel memory. In short, if you enter Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center, don’t randomly open the doors and enter the rooms.

“While suffering losses, we also gained something. We found some very important documents that exceeded my imagination.

“The remaining people were unwilling to enter those rooms again and had a conflict with Chen Mingqiang. This included some warriors, and there were Awakened among them.

“The people who had become silent and strange stood on Chen Mingqiang’s side. An intense battle broke out between the two parties.

“We were at a disadvantage, and many people died. Finally, we found an opportunity and hurriedly escaped the building.

“Chen Mingqiang actually didn’t chase after us and chose to stay in the Vegetative Rehabilitation Center.

“Two of us were separated during our escape, but the rest still gathered and found our original vehicles. We planned on leaving Tai City and returning to camp to seek help from our superiors.

“But when we returned to the edge of the city, we were surprised to discover that the road out of the city had been destroyed. The entire city was completely separated from the outside world.

“We wanted to try elsewhere, but we gradually realized that our minds were deteriorating bit by bit. We became more and more exhausted. Before long, the first Heartless among us was born.

“The second and third followed.

“We began to suspect that everyone was infected with the Heartless virus and that it would happen sooner or later. Everyone fell into despair as if they saw Death walking toward them.

“I wasn’t young anymore, and I was mentally prepared for this. I told them to write their last words before the illness acted up. They might still have a chance to show it to their families in the future.

“I also took the opportunity to write this letter and organize the documents we obtained from Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center.

“In the subsequent period, the people who were still conscious were in charge of finishing off our colleagues and teammates who turned. The last person who remained lucid would commit suicide.

“I never expected that I would be the last one to live. I thought that my other colleagues would write the rest.

“Before that, we had already found paint and painted this window and the surrounding walls red so that the people who entered Tai City could see it at a glance and discover the problem here.

“If you are colleagues, you can go to the other rooms on this floor to search for the corpses of my colleagues and teammates. If not, read the rest.

“The documents in my backpack are very important. I don’t care if they are obtained by our Salvation Army or some other faction; they belong to all of humanity.

“My friend who’s reading this letter, please spread the contents of those documents if you have the choice, no matter which faction it is for.

“The mastermind behind Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center is the Old World’s Eighth Research Institute. They are conducting a very dangerous and terrifying experiment that involves the forbidden boundaries of deities and the New World!

“I know that those documents lack more detailed and important information, but they can unite all the factions in the Ashlands to seek out the secrets buried by the Eighth Research Institute.

“Finally, there are still some last words left behind by my colleagues and teammates in my backpack. If you aren’t willing to trouble yourself, leave them behind. If you are willing, please pass them to a Salvation Army member and get him to deliver the letters to the corresponding person.

“I’m very grateful that you and your companions have read to this point. If you are also trapped in Tai City, you can go to Renhui Hospital to search for Chen Mingqiang’s corpse. I suspect that he has a secret that allows us to enter Tai City. This is also the key to leaving.

“I previously mentioned in my letter that Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center is very dangerous. You should probably choose two to three people who are willing to sacrifice themselves and dare to do so.

“Alright, I feel like my mind is becoming more and more unfocused. My rationality is also unable to control the urge. I plan on ending my life with a pistol.

“Please spread the contents of those documents so that humanity’s beautiful future can be realized.

“For all of humanity!”

Jiang Baimian finished reading it silently and handed the letter to Shang Jianyao.

Chapter 747: Wills

As Shang Jianyao read Lu Fuxing’s letter, Jiang Baimian casually pulled out the documents and information in the backpack while guarding against any accidents.

Among them, some of the paper was clearly yellowish and showed signs of turning brittle due to the lack of moisture. Some were relatively well-preserved, but they had a faint moldy smell.

The former consisted of documents that Lu Fuxing and the others had taken out of Renhui Hospital’s Vegetative Rehabilitation Center. The latter consisted of wills left behind by the survivors.

These wills didn't have envelopes, but they were neatly folded. Facing up was the recipient's name.

As she flipped through them, Jiang Baimian saw a familiar name from the corner of her eye: "Ding Ling."

She immediately focused half of her attention on the backpack's interior as a line of words appeared in her eyes: "Ding Ling from Ubei's border settlement."

Is this Ji Qiang's will? Jiang Baimian didn't know whether to be happy or sigh. She originally imagined that there was a high chance that Ding Ling's husband, Ji Qiang, had died at Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center because he was only a researcher. He was neither an Awakened nor a capable warrior. At most, he had undergone the combat and firearms training that the Salvation Army forced all members above the age of 12 and under 60 to participate in every year.

Even if Ji Qiang was lucky and didn't become strange or silent, wasn't forced to enter the rooms, or the room he entered wasn't dangerous, after the scientific team split up, he had virtually zero hope of surviving the intense battle and escaping Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center.

Unexpectedly, he persisted to the end and left behind a will.

Jiang Baimian couldn't help but sigh with emotion at how lucky he was back then. But no matter how lucky he was, he couldn't help but be trapped in Tai City and be infected with the Heartless disease. Only a will proved that he had been here.

With her curiosity, Jiang Baimian relied on her abilities and the military exoskeleton's comprehensive warning system to take in her surroundings. She used the corner of her eye to observe the nearby situation as she stretched out her left hand, picked up Ji Qiang's letter, and shook her wrist to shake it open.

There were several pages.

Jiang Baimian quickly scanned through it.

“Ling Ling, This might be the last time I’m calling you that. I’m already infected with the Heartless disease, and my head is slowly feeling heavy.

“Although I’ve never encountered any early-stage symptoms or a slightly serious bout of the Heartless disease, my colleagues’ performance confirms that this is really the Heartless disease. When I wrote this letter, three people had already contracted the disease and were executed by us on the spot. If I didn’t last to the end, this should be my outcome.

“The difficulty I originally told you about is that I would be spending a few months in Icefield surveying a large area. I might face a blizzard and a winter that’s several times worse than Ubei’s winter.

“Given such a season and such a mission, there are inevitably sacrifices for the cause every time. This is what I was worried about in the beginning.

“However, the development exceeded my imagination. This was an encounter that was filled with bizarreness, gore, madness, and despair.

“We discovered a strange city that we didn’t notice at all when we passed by two times in the past. We then entered a building that didn’t seem to belong to this world.

“I can’t tell you the exact process. First, there are confidentiality rules. Second, I don’t want you to have nightmares because of this, nor do I want you to bear a grudge for the rest of your life and end up wanting to investigate the truth and avenge me.

“What I can tell you is that the culprit of the entire matter has already died in that building—in the intense battle that happened after the team fractured. The only thing I’m confused about is why he and that group of people did those things. Don’t worry; the organization will investigate. We have the ability to do so.

“When I was young, I heard my grandfather and grandmother tell me stories from the early years of the Salvation Army’s establishment. I actually didn’t understand why the love between a loving couple couldn’t persist after they were separated due to war, disasters, and the organization’s orders, only to have another lover when they reunited again. Now, I kind of understand.

“Ling Ling, let me call you that again. Behind this will, I specially wrote an application to transfer you back to Ubei. As a sacrifice for the cause, I have the right.

“When you return to Ubei, remember to visit my parents. I didn’t leave them any last words, nor do I want the organization to inform them. I’m afraid that they won’t be able to take the shock because of their age. When you visit them, you can slowly hint to them about my sacrifice. Tell them when they are fully prepared mentally.

“Ling Ling, remember to find another partner when you return to Ubei. You like children so much. Your eyes glowed when we talked about the future. I still remember that you said you fell for me because I patiently helped a child repair her toy the first time we met. I still remember that beautiful smile of yours.

“Ling Ling, when you find another partner, you have to choose someone who works in Ubei and won’t be assigned outfield. It doesn’t matter even if he receives a little less negotiables every month.

“Ling Ling, it’s better to be a dog in times of general peace than a man in the midst of war.”

It’s better to be a dog in times of general peace than a man in the midst of war... Jiang Baimian slowly exhaled.

Shang Jianyao had also finished reading the letter Lu Fuxing had left behind. He raised his right hand—which was covered in metal bones—and pressed it to his left chest with his palm. He then solemnly bowed at the skeleton in front of him. “For all of humanity!”

After he completed the ritual, Jiang Baimian said, “Fold the letters and put them back in the backpack. We’ll hand it to the Salvation Army on our return trip.”

Shang Jianyao nodded and asked curiously, “This letter of yours is?”

Jiang Baimian fell silent for a second before saying, “Ji Qiang left it behind. Ding Ling’s husband, Ji Qiang, left it behind.”

The Shang Jianyao that valued relationships stretched out his hand immediately. “Let me read it.”

Jiang Baimian handed Ji Qiang’s will to him, planning to take this opportunity to go through the documents simply to prevent any loss of information due to subsequent accidents.

At this moment, she realized that there was a will with just one piece of paper.

Out of curiosity, she unfolded it.

“Son, your father is dying!”

After reading the two lines, Jiang Baimian felt the slightly sad atmosphere almost break.

She calmed down and read it again.

“Fortunately, you’re already an adult and have been assigned a job. I’m not worried about you. As for a partner, the organization will introduce one to you.

“Haven’t you been saying that I’m old and stubborn? That I refuse to make exceptions and scold my high-ranking relatives—who resell supplies every day—resulting in me becoming marginalized in the unit. Why am I actively participating in missions that take months to survey the most remote and harsh climates? I’ll answer you now.

“When your grandfather was still alive, he often told me a saying from the Old World: do your utmost. Those people didn’t bother with doing good and chose to degenerate. They abuse their public office for personal gain and refuse to work seriously. It’s their problem. I can’t scold them while making all kinds of excuses to slack off.

“I have to live up to the oath I made back then.

“As for you, I never thought of you having my dream of saving all of humanity. I only hope that you can be a down-to-earth person and do things diligently—that you won’t associate yourself with those people or degenerate.

“Let those people continue doing it. Everyone’s eyes are open. The selfish benefit themselves for a moment, but those who serve the cause leave their names in history for all eternity. You young people will come to a realization sooner or later and understand.

“When the time comes, humanity’s beautiful future will definitely be realized!”

Jiang Baimian folded the letter again and stuffed it back into the backpack. She then picked up the stack of documents and gently flipped through them, afraid of causing any damage.

These documents were roughly divided into four categories: letters of contact, experimental records, orders from the higher-ups, and doctor's notes.

Among them, three were the most important. Lu Fuxing marked them and greatly saved Jiang Baimian time.

One was an order to transfer one-third of the patients in the Vegetative Rehabilitation Center to Base 2. The person who issued the order was signed by the Eighth Research Institute, a week before the Old World was destroyed.

One was an experimental record that involved the brain conditions and physical reactions of many patients. It repeatedly mentioned the use of a certain stimulus, but it didn't say what the stimulus was.

One of them was a doctor's notebook. Written on one of his pages was: "We're about to set up the stairs that will lead to the forbidden zone of deities. We can already vaguely see the so-called New World."

Base 2... Jiang Baimian muttered and stuffed the document in her hand back into the dark-green canvas backpack. She then said to Shang Jianyao, "Let's go down. We'll read it in detail after we leave Tai City."

Shang Jianyao—who had been reading Ji Qiang's suicide note—looked up. His eyes under the visor were red and filled with tears.

Jiang Baimian's first reaction was shock and surprise because this didn't seem like something Shang Jianyao would do. She then vaguely understood the reason.

The current Shang Jianyao was the one who valued relationships and was mentally young. He recalled his father from Ji Qiang's will, wondering if his father would've left a message for his mother and him before he died.

Jiang Baimian sighed and patted Shang Jianyao's shoulder. "Put away the will, and let's go down. The corpses in the surrounding rooms will be collected by the Salvation Army."

After such a round of missile strikes, the fake Tai City probably wouldn't appear again. The Salvation Army could directly enter the real Tai City.

Shang Jianyao quickly changed his personality and smiled.. "Alright."

Chapter 748: Everyone's Dreams (End of Volume)

After dismantling the computer storage equipment on the table and walking out of the room with the red window, Shang Jianyao turned his head to look at the tightly shut wooden doors around him.

He didn't attempt to open them, retracted his gaze, and followed Jiang Baimian—who was carrying the dark-green canvas backpack and wearing the military exoskeleton—down the stairs.

When they returned to the jeep, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen also received a signal to return to the team.

After a while, Long Yuehong—who was sitting in the passenger seat—finally finished reading the letter Lu Fuxing had left behind.

He sighed sincerely. "Fortunately, we didn't go to Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center. Otherwise, we might've been wiped out. Uh..."

He hesitated because Geneva might not die.

In short, the horror of Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center exceeded his imagination. Just by entering different rooms, one might encounter different dangers, and it seemed like there was no amount of preparation that could produce a solution.

Jiang Baimian nodded slightly at Long Yuehong's sigh. "This can also be considered a blessing in disguise."

Although she and her team members attached great importance to the Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center and believed that the danger there was greater than that of Tai City's No. 1 Senior High School, placing it last for exploration, she felt that she had still underestimated the risks they might encounter after reading the letter left behind by Lu Fuxing.

Just pushing open a wooden door and entering a room could lead one to madness, become a vegetable, contract the Heartless disease, or commit suicide. Furthermore, there was no warning; the anomalies couldn't be detected!

This was extremely terrifying for any team.

Even if the Old Task Force had Mind Corridor-level Awakened, smart bots that weren't carbon-based creatures, and powerful humans that had undergone genetic modification and had biomechanical limb transplants, there was a high chance that they would only discover the problem after losing one to two lives.

Of course, Jiang Baimian suspected that the anomalies in the different rooms were related to different New World nodes.

They were connected to different areas of the New World, so the effects were naturally different.

The Old Task Force had the Six Senses Beads and the Life Angel necklace—items that could sense New World nodes. In other words, it was still possible for the Old Task Force to sense the problem in advance and avoid the dangerous rooms.

However, Jiang Baimian didn't have much confidence in this. After all, she couldn't determine if the core problem with Renhui Hospital's Vegetative Rehabilitation Center was the appearance of multiple New World nodes.

In such a dangerous environment, a single misjudgment might really result in a wipeout.

After a brief silence, Jiang Baimian—who had flipped through all the documents—concluded, “From the looks of it, all clues point to the Eighth Research Institute. Before the Old World was destroyed, they widely gathered vegetables for a very dangerous experiment. It seems like they were trying to make contact with the forbidden zones of the gods.

“This might very well bring about the Heartless disease outbreak, causing the Old World to be destroyed. Their organization also suffered a certain influence and became darkness-serving traitors in an attempt to erase the corresponding clues.

“Their Base 2 seems to be the source of all problems—if Fan Wensi, Li Jinlong’s son—Li Hui—and Jiang Xiaoyue were transferred there.”

Shang Jianyao replied in depression, “But we don’t know where the Eighth Research Institute is hidden.”

With that said, he turned his head and looked at Geneva before asking in anticipation, “Old Ge, can we really not deduce the Eighth Research Institute’s exact longitude and latitude coordinates from the trajectory of the missiles?”

“It was possible if we gathered enough data, but it was already too late by the time we discovered it.” The honest Geneva extinguished Shang Jianyao’s hopes.

Jiang Baimian said, “Besides, I suspect that the missile base isn’t the same place as the Eighth Research Institute’s headquarters. How can normal research institutes get so many missile silos during their construction?”

“A reasonable deduction would be that the Eighth Research Institute obtained a few secret missile bases and raised a large number of people to maintain them after the Old World was destroyed. Hmm, the defense measures of those missile bases might be stricter. We can’t rule out the possibility that the Eighth Research Institute later moved its headquarters to such places.

“The next direction of our investigation is to figure out where the Eighth Research Institute is. We can then get the company and the Salvation Army to surround and kill it. But before that, we need to return to the company to rest and gather more information.”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Long Yuehong was the first to agree.

“What about these documents and wills?” Shang Jianyao—who valued relationships—asked in concern.

Jiang Baimian nodded. “I originally wanted to stay a few more days. There was a missile strike here, so the Salvation Army observation station nearby should’ve detected it. When the time comes,

the Salvation Army will most likely send a team to search all the way up to here for abnormalities. We just need to hand the items to them.

“But we have a nuclear warhead in the car, so it might be problematic to encounter the Salvation Army in such a sensitive place. Therefore, let’s return now and find an opportunity to photocopy all the documents. When we leave the Salvation Army’s sphere of influence, we’ll hand this backpack, along with the documents and wills inside, to Ding Ling.”

“I think this plan is pretty good.” Bai Chen voiced her opinion.

Shang Jianyao thought for a moment and sighed. “That’s all we can do.”

Jiang Baimian didn’t waste her breath and said to Bai Chen, who was driving, “Let’s set a return course.”

As the jeep gradually left Tai City, Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but turn her head and look out the window.

The Old World ruin had truly become a ruin. A large number of buildings had collapsed, and only a portion survived. It was as if they were tombstones erected in a cemetery.

A summer breeze blew. In an environment like Icefield, it was warm and peaceful, lacking heat.

...

After many days by foot, the Asceticism Department monks followed Paranga to the vicinity of Tai City.

They motionlessly looked at the collapsed buildings and the charred marks left behind by the fires for a long time in silence.

After a few minutes, Paranga sighed. “The omen has appeared. A great calamity is imminent.”

...

On the border between the Salvation Army and First City, in the derelict road on Cloud Mountain, Jiang Baimian drove the jeep out of the lofty mountains with the help of the manual navigator, Shang Jianyao.

“Why did you leave after giving the backpack to Ding Ling?” Shang Jianyao expressed his regret that he couldn’t stay behind to freeload on food.

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “I don’t want to see others sad.”

The honest Shang Jianyao said after careful thought, “Indeed, that’s rude.”

In the middle of the backseat, Long Yuehong held Bai Chen’s right hand and looked ahead. “Are we heading straight to the company next?”

“Yes.” Jiang Baimian nodded.

Of course, they would definitely replenish their supplies and charge many times along the way. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to last until they reached Pangu Biology.

“When the time comes, Old Ge, stay in Weed City or the Blackmarsh Wilderness and watch over the nuclear bomb...” Jiang Baimian rambled.

Genava didn’t raise any objections. “No problem.”

Shang Jianyao quickly reminded him, “You have to do a good job watching it! It might come in handy some time in the future. We didn’t use it to blow up Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School and Renhui Hospital this time, so we can give some people a surprise in the future.”

Why do I feel like you’re very regretful?? Jiang Baimian criticized inwardly.

As they chatted, Long Yuehong suddenly stammered, “I had a discussion with L-Little White last night. When we return to the company, we’ll register our marriage at the Order Supervisory Bureau and treat our relatives and friends to a meal at home. Team Leader, can you come?”

As for Shang Jianyao, he definitely wouldn't let go of such an opportunity to have fun and freeload on food. Long Yuehong definitely would invite him.

As Jiang Baimian drove, she laughed. "I have to consider what gift I should give you."

"There's no need for a gift," Bai Chen said.

"That's right, that's right," Long Yuehong echoed. He then sighed with emotion again. "This is like a dream..."

Shang Jianyao scoffed. "Is this your dream? Find a partner, form a family, have a few children, and eat meat every day?"

"That's right." Although Long Yuehong was embarrassed, he still bravely admitted it.

Shang Jianyao didn't make things difficult for him. He looked back at Bai Chen and said, "What about your dream?"

Bai Chen organized her words and said, "Have companions who I can entrust my back to and a partner who I can hold hands with while facing death together."

Long Yuehong quickly tightened his grip on her hand.

Shang Jianyao looked at Genava. "Old Ge, what about your dream?"

The red light in Genava's eyes flickered a few times. "I already have a certain understanding of what humans are. What's next is to search for the meaning of being human."

Clap! Clap! Clap!?

Shang Jianyao clapped. He then asked Jiang Baimian, "What about you?"

“Me?” Jiang Baimian laughed and said, “Of course, it’s to figure out the reason for the Old World’s destruction and the Heartless disease’s origins. It’s to find a way to eliminate the sword that’s hanging over the heads of humanity.”

Shang Jianyao retracted his gaze and continued, “As for me, my dream is...”

“Nobody’s asking!” Jiang Baimian was exasperated and amused.

Shang Jianyao straightened his back and forced out his words. “Saving all of humanity!”

Jiang Baimian rolled her eyes at him and switched on the small black speaker with a blue bottom by the side.

The song she had often listened to in the past few months sounded.

“Do you remember the dreams of your youth?

“Like a flower in eternal bloom;

“Accompanying me through the wind and rain;

“Watching the impermanence of the world;

“Watching the vicissitudes of life[1.Price of Love, Lee Tsung-Sheng.]...”

Amidst the music, the jeep drove out of Cloud Mountain. In front of them was an endless wasteland.

(End of Volume 5—Heroic)

Chapter 749: A Leisurely Life

Pangu Biology, underground building entrance.

Liu Chengkun led his team of Security Department employees and guarded behind the silver-white door. They were all a little languid.

They brought over a large number of chairs, slumping over them or sitting on them while either daydreaming or having a chat. Only four colleagues stood beside the two new security scanning machines with guns, guarding them seriously.

This wasn't because they were skiving and slacking off, but there was a relatively limited number of people entering and exiting the underground building every day. Liu Chengkun and the others had nothing to do most of the time. If they were forced to maintain a highly vigilant state, it would only result in fatigue in both body and mind. They would only appear focused on the surface, but they would actually become unfocused. Therefore, it was better to assign a roster when nobody entered or left. There were four people in each team for an hour at a time.

Liu Chengkun sat in his high-back chair. He swept his gaze across all his subordinates and nodded in satisfaction.

He was satisfied with the four duty guards' concentration and seriousness, and he was also satisfied that although the other employees were resting and relaxing, they didn't completely abandon their duties. They were still tense.

These days sure aren't bad...?Liu Chengkun leaned back slightly, picked up the iron-black thermos he had picked up from the Ashlands, unscrewed the cap, and took a sip.

There was little to do and plenty of contribution points. There was no danger—it was a true reflection of his current position. Countless people snitched on him out of jealousy.

Every time he heard his superior give him a warning to not be too lax when guarding the entrance, he would always scoff disdainfully in his heart when he heard that it was easy for the snitches to catch him red-handed.

That bunch of bastards. I'm what I am today because I risked my life back then. Do they really think that a D8 captain can make it this far at such a young age because of his connections and qualifications? Do you really think that the company will entrust such an important matter like guarding the entrance to me without more than ten years of experience?

It had to be known that the casualty rate of employees on duty in the Security Department was still not low. Even with additional subsidies, better food, and the harvests that they could keep when chanced upon, not many people volunteered. After all, everyone had the same basic salary when they were at the same rank.

The subsidies and food discounts weren't high enough to make people risk their lives. They could survive fine by being frugal, and they wouldn't starve or freeze to death. At most, they would eat one or two meals without meat a week.

As for the Security Department's outfield employees' best benefit—promotion—there was indeed such a thing. However, the problem was that every employee who was quickly promoted stood out due to them surviving raining bullets and various dangerous tests. Behind every such employee were the limbs or even corpses of their fellow colleagues.

For the remaining employees, their promotions were only that fast. The best was that they could be directly promoted when they were transferred internally. Therefore, there were still some ambitious employees who wanted wealth and status to take the initiative to participate in the Security Department's selection. Most of the others could be promoted simply from their qualifications and age. Their families had the elderly, the young, and their partners, so there was no need to take the risk.

Liu Chengkun inexplicably felt his heart palpitate and his bones ache when he recalled his battle with bandits, mutated monsters, other large factions' troops, and the dangerous environment and special ability users with them.

Many years ago, he and his colleagues were trapped relatively deep in a swamp by a group of White Knights that had disguised themselves as Ruin Hunters. Back then, it had been raining for several days. They tried searching for a way out, and people often fell into the mud and quickly sank. They couldn't be dragged out, and all he could do was watch helplessly as the familiar and lively faces were drowned bit by bit in despair.

From then on, Liu Chengkun's calf would ache every rainy day. He often had nightmares when sleeping.

The pain didn't subside until he was transferred to an internal post.

Massaging his knees, Liu Chengkun was increasingly satisfied with his current job and lifestyle. He hoped that he could continue like this until he reached the age limit, quit the Security Department, and transferred to another job.

When the time came, he could be promoted to D9—the level of a battalion commander—from a D8-rank OC level. This corresponded to the high-ranking managers of other departments, second only to the executives who started at the M grade. They could be a floor's PIC, a factory's supervisor, or a large district's Order Supervisory Bureau Chief.

At such a rank, the contribution points were enough to feed a large family. There were also additional benefits like being assigned large rooms. Furthermore, they had real power and could determine the fate of many people.

As his imagination ran wild, Liu Chengkun felt a little sleepy.

At this moment, he heard a notification: "Outfield employees are returning and have passed the system's preliminary inspection. Please arrange for someone to do a second round of inspection to determine if the door should be opened."

Liu Chengkun stood up immediately and said to his subordinates on both sides, "Dong, Ke, you guys do the check."

As he waited, he rubbed his face, hoping to energize himself so that he wouldn't be snatched on again.

Before long, he saw a grayish-green jeep drive past the open silver-white door. He then saw a tall woman push open the door and get out of the car.

Said woman took off her sunglasses and revealed her familiar beautiful face.

"Mian..." Liu Chengkun had just shouted when he suddenly recalled something and quickly corrected himself. "You guys are back?"

He no longer acted too familiar with her just because he was Jiang Baimian's brother's good friend and called her by her childhood nickname. He already knew that Jiang Baimian was a D9-rank employee before her mission and was on par with his superior.

This made Liu Chengkun blush with shame and also become a little restrained.

According to Pangu Biology's regulations, Jiang Baimian might directly transfer over to be in charge of them. After all, for the other party to be able to rise from D6 to D9 in just over two years, she definitely had enough contribution points from being a field agent. As long as she didn't want to strike while the iron was hot and squeeze into the management in one go, she could change positions at any time.

Jiang Baimian smiled and said, "That's right. We've been out for almost six months."

It was late autumn.

As she spoke to Liu Chengkun, Shang Jianyao, Long Yuehong, and Bai Chen alighted. They opened the trunk, took out all their items, and underwent the examination.

Liu Chengkun knew that their elite team had two military exoskeletons when he encountered them on duty last year and was mentally prepared. However, his eyes couldn't help but widen when he saw crates being lifted and opened one after another.

"One, two, three... one, two..."

There were three military exoskeletons and two sets of bionic artificial intelligence armor!

For a team of only four people, this was no longer a luxury. It was a waste!

Liu Chengkun couldn't help but ask, "These are?"

What kind of mission is such a team in charge of outfield? Such a setup is enough to deal with an unprepared company!

Shang Jianyao replied in all seriousness, "It's just like how cars need to have spare tires. Our equipment also has to be replaceable."

Back then, it was already pretty good for a company to have two sets of bionic artificial intelligence armor unless it was a specialized, targeted dispatch company...?Liu Chengkun criticized inwardly.

He watched Jiang Baimian and the others pass the security check with complicated gazes and let out a long, silent sigh.

This team was a special exception among exceptions. It was the first time Pangu Biology had a team that underwent such an exaggerated promotion speed without suffering any losses.

Other promotions that could exceed them were for those who had awakened powerful abilities—the kind that reached a certain rank in one promotion. It was an individual improvement, not a result of the team missions.

Therefore, what did they do in the Ashlands to deserve three military exoskeletons and two sets of bionic artificial intelligence armor? What made them worthy of being promoted several times in the past two years that exceeded the ten or twenty-year contributions of other field employees??Liu Chengkun watched Jiang Baimian and the others drive into the parking lot in envy and confusion.

He even suspected that the four of them would be promoted again.

No, it shouldn't be possible for Mianmian. If she is promoted again, she will be promoted to management. Apart from those genius scientists and powerful Awakened, she will be the youngest at the management level. In management at only 25 years old...?Liu Chengkun's heart suddenly palpitated. He impulsively wanted to submit an application and return to the field to fight for glory and wealth.

Of course, it was only a passing thought. After sighing, he sat back down in his high-back chair. He then narrowed his eyes and watched the employees around him relax one after another as he listened to them chat about Jiang Baimian's team's extravagant equipment and various rumors.

Yes, such a life is pretty good...?Liu Chengkun leaned back and thought.

...

On the 647th floor, Room 14.

Jiang Baimian—who had undergone disinfection, drawing of blood, and washing—threw herself into the chair behind her team leader’s desk as before and assumed a half-slouch.

“How comfortable!” She smiled and sighed with emotion.

This was the feeling of returning home.

Bang!?

Shang Jianyao also threw himself into his seat, almost smashing the chair into pieces.

Long Yuehong happily looked around and said to Bai Chen, “I’ll tell my parents about us when I get back today. I’ll try my best to bring you to meet them tomorrow night.”

“There’s no rush, right?” The person who replied was the bystander, Shang Jianyao. “It makes Little White appear desperate!”

Bai Chen—who originally felt that it didn’t matter—immediately hesitated.

She still hoped to blend into Pangu Biology’s internal society. She didn’t want to be pointed at and criticized.

In this regard, she actually didn’t care about it—she had a strong mental fortitude. She was just worried that Long Yuehong would be depressed because of this.

Long Yuehong thought for a moment and said, “That’s right, that’s right. We have to choose a good day.”

Pangu Biology wasn’t that particular. The so-called good days were weekends when the family wasn’t working.

This way, Bai Chen wouldn’t be neglected when visiting for the first time.

“Alright.” Bai Chen didn’t object.

Upon seeing this, Jiang Baimian clapped and smiled. “Alright, alright. Stop showing off your affection in front of us. Think about what we should eat in the canteen after the test results are out.”

People like them—who had been wandering outside and returning underground—would definitely be examined for any infectious diseases.

Long Yuehong and Shang Jianyao replied in unison, “Something that doesn’t exist in canned food!”

With that said, the four of them laughed.

Chapter 750: Returning to Normal

After laughing for a while, Shang Jianyao wiped his mouth and said with a yearning expression, “It’s almost winter. There should be mutton soup in the canteen.”

“That’s right, that’s right.” Long Yuehong’s eyes lit up. Just hearing the food’s name made him feel like he could taste that unique and strong aroma.

Bai Chen said, “You can also add stir-fried mutton.”

These were all dishes that weren’t in the canned food they had previously eaten. They had to be made on the spot to be delicious.

Upon hearing them list down a tableful of dishes, Jiang Baimian couldn’t help but pick up her cup and gulp it down. She then cleared her throat and said, “There’s still some time before the results of the test are out. I plan on using it to write a report. Do whatever you want, but you can’t leave the office unless it’s for the bathroom.”

“The computers have been taken in for review, so we can only work.” Shang Jianyao didn’t hide his grievance.

He picked up the printed information that belonged to the Old Task Force and casually flipped through it. This information was mainly regarding the Icefield area in the present day before the Old World was destroyed.

Long Yuehong wanted to just chat with Little White, but under the watch of everyone, it really wasn't suitable for them to display their affection with each other, especially when Long Yuehong was a conservative and introverted person.

He also sat back in his seat and flipped through the information he hadn't finished reading before setting off.

Bai Chen chose to follow the crowd.

As time passed, Long Yuehong gradually felt exhausted, and he began to fight his heavy eyelids.

He had experienced such an experience before. Back when they returned to the company from Redstone Collection, the entire team fell asleep and missed the cafeteria's operating hours.

This was something that couldn't be helped. In the Ashlands, one would always be tense no matter what; it was impossible to relax completely. Over time, physical and mental fatigue took a toll on them.

Only when he returned to this underground building and didn't have to worry about sneak attacks, accidents, or being infected did he have a sufficient sense of security. His body and mind felt liberated bit by bit.

To be honest, he didn't even sleep well in the Ashlands in the beginning. Even with Jiang Baimian and Shang Jianyao on duty, he was still worried and often woke up.

After a long time, perhaps it was because he was indeed too exhausted, or perhaps it was because he had thought it through and felt that he should trust his companions. After all, they were teammates who could trust each other with their backs. Only then did he truly sleep more soundly.

At some point in time, Long Yuehong and Bai Chen had fallen asleep on the table.

Shang Jianyao tried to stay awake and slid to the sofa in a totter before collapsing.

Jiang Baimian moved her gaze away from the computer screen and scanned the area before smiling.

Time passed minute by minute. She suddenly raised her left palm, bent her finger, and rapped the table.

Shang Jianyao stood up with his eyes closed and shouted, “Mealtime! Mealtime!”

Long Yuehong and Bai Chen straightened their bodies, swung their arms, and cast their gazes at Jiang Baimian.

Jiang Baimian glanced at Shang Jianyao. “I’m informing you guys that the test results are out. We’re all clear.”

At this point, she paused and smiled. “Since there’s no problem and it’s about time, we can go to the canteen.”

“Hooray!” Shang Jianyao finally opened his eyes. “I need an additional serving of sheep intestine in my mutton soup!”

This was very extravagant, but it didn’t matter. They had enough contribution points now.

After eating their fill in the small canteen on the 647th floor that warmed their insides, the four Old Task Force members split into pairs and headed in different directions.

...

495th floor, Zone C, Room 11.

Long Yuehong—who received his parents and sister’s worried concerns—looked around and straightened his back. “Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?” Gu Hong immediately became vigilant. “Don’t tell me he’s going out again in the next few days? He’s been gone for more than half a year!”

Long Yuehong replied shyly and proudly, "I have a partner."

"Huh?" Gu Hong, Long Dayong, and Long Aihong exclaimed in surprise.

Gu Hong muttered in perplexment, "You just came back. I haven't arranged a blind date..."

As for this year's central assignment, Long Yuehong gloriously missed it again.

Long Yuehong suppressed the embarrassment that suddenly surfaced in his heart and said, "It's my teammate."

"Isn't your teammate Brother Yao?" Long Aihong blurted out.

Long Yuehong's expression almost froze as he quickly replied, "It's not like I only have one teammate!"

Sister, use your brain more when you encounter something! No, I have to strictly control her Old World entertainment hours. I can't let it affect her studies. She will have to take the university entrance exam next year!

Gu Hong was excited. "Which floor is she on? What's her rank? What's her name? Which family is she from? Maybe I know her parents or relatives."

Long Dayong also had a gratified expression.

His eldest son actually knew how to take the initiative to pursue girls and even succeeded!

Long Yuehong organized his words and said, "She's a foreign employee. She lives on the 622nd floor now."

"Foreign employee..." Gu Hong's expression froze before she smiled. "You guys are in the Ashlands every day, so it's normal for you to develop feelings for each other. When are you bringing the lady back for us to take a look at?"

“I’m thinking of this Sunday.” Long Yuehong had long considered this problem. “When our team’s rewards are distributed, I’ll register our marriage at the Order Supervisory Bureau. When the time comes, we can be assigned a better room.”

He wasn’t asking for his parents’ permission but to inform them of his decision and hope to receive their blessings.

After experiencing so much, although his nature remained unchanged, his confidence and courage had undergone a qualitative change. He was no longer a timid child who obeyed his parents.

Long Dayong glanced at Gu Hong and deliberately showed his curiosity before taking the initiative to ask, “Your team seems to be promoted pretty quickly. What rank is your partner now?”

“D6. She should be promoted again this time.” Long Yuehong didn’t hide the truth.

“D6!?” Long Aihong exclaimed. “What about you, Brother? Will you still be promoted?”

She remembered that her brother had previously been a D7.

Long Yuehong scratched his head in embarrassment. “That’s possible.”

“Wow! Will you be our family’s first management level in the future?” Long Aihong helped her brother liven up the atmosphere as she fantasized excitedly.

“It’s not that easy to reach management!” Gu Hong glared at her daughter before saying to Long Yuehong, “It’s Sunday, right? I have to prepare some food in advance.”

After discussing this matter for a while, Long Yuehong walked out of his house and planned on going to the 622nd floor to tell Bai Chen the news.

As she watched his back disappear around the bend, Gu Hong sighed and said, “Why is it a foreign employee... Her genes won’t be too good.”

Without waiting for Long Dayong and Long Aihong to comfort and persuade her, she continued, “It works anyway. After all, children can undergo the latest generation of genetic enhancement. After they get married, they have to consider pregnancy according to the company’s rules. Once they are pregnant, they don’t have to carry out missions on the surface. In a year or two, their team probably won’t have a spot for them and can only transfer them out.”

Mom is far-sighted...? Long Aihong—who was influenced by the Old World’s entertainment—gave a thumbs up inwardly. She then reminded them softly, “Actually, there’s no need to get pregnant. You don’t have to carry out missions on the surface from the moment of marriage until the child is a year old.”

“That’s right! I forgot!” Gu Hong slapped her forehead. “Then, I have to keep an eye on them and get them to register as soon as possible!”

Long Dayong scratched his head. “Sure, sure.”

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622nd floor, Zone B, Room 59.

After Bai Chen returned to her room, she didn’t turn on the laptop and watch shows like she usually did. Instead, she sat in the chair, her gaze blank as her eyes gradually lost focus.

This was mainly because her computer had been handed over for review.

After a while, Bai Chen opened the drawer, took out pen and paper, and quickly drew all kinds of lines. Gradually, a few small figures appeared on the piece of paper—two large, one small—and a robot.

Although Bai Chen didn’t have much drawing skills, she still outlined the characteristics of different people. The male adult looked at the child affectionately, the female adult looked gentle, the robot was wooden, and the child had a bright smile with a hair clip.

As she looked at the drawing, a smile slowly appeared on Bai Chen’s face.

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On the 647th floor, Room 14.

“Done!” Jiang Baimian saved the document and stretched her back. She then looked at Shang Jianyao—who was sitting on the sofa. “Why are you still in the office?”

Shang Jianyao replied righteously, “I’m afraid you’ll get lost!”

“Whoa,” Jiang Baimian replied angrily. “Although the price I paid has worsened, it’s not to the point of not being able to return home.”

After the matter regarding Tai City’s No. 1 Senior High School, she finally cleared the island of fear of death after a few attempts. Her abilities had increased by 50% in all aspects, and the corresponding price had worsened.

Shang Jianyao smiled. “Is that so? I don’t believe you.”

Jiang Baimian chuckled. “Take a good look then!”

She packed her things and walked to the door.

In order not to embarrass herself in front of Shang Jianyao, she thought for a moment and identified the area for a few seconds before choosing which direction to turn in.

She walked to the corresponding elevator with a steady gait while Shang Jianyao followed behind her at a moderate pace with his hands in his pockets.

After entering the elevator, Jiang Baimian made repeated confirmations before pressing ‘349.’

“How was it? I didn’t get lost, right?” she asked Shang Jianyao smugly as she pressed the button to open the door.

Shang Jianyao smiled brightly. “That’s right.”

He then waved his hand. “Goodbye!”

Uh...?Jiang Baimian released the button and allowed the elevator door to close in front of her.

After the numbers began to jump, Shang Jianyao turned to another elevator and returned to Room 196 in Zone B on the 495th floor.

After cleaning up simply, he lay on the bed and raised his right hand to pinch his temples.

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In the Mind Corridor, ten Shang Jianyaos were squatting, leaning, or standing around Room 102 as they glared at each other.

The rash Shang Jianyao and the one seeking novelty would be eager to rush over and open the door from time to time, but they were held back by their peers in time and pressed down.